

## Log of Finisterre in the Sea of Cortes



Mike and Kay Heath, aboard the sailing vessel Finisterre have been sailing in Mexico for the 2004-05 season. We came down in November with the 2004 Baja Ha-Ha group, traveled from Cabo San Lucas to Banderas Bay and on down the mainland coast of Mexico as far as Manzanillo. We then returned north to Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan and then into the Sea of Cortes for the late spring and early summer.

In this series of articles, we first share some of the exciting anchorages along the eastern Baja shores, which you may visit either by charter or in your own boat. The city of La Paz and the smaller towns of Santa Rosalia and Loreto (anchorage/moorings at Puerto Escondido) are all suitable land-based places to find a place to leave your boat, provisioning and links to land or air transportation. We arrived in the Sea of Cortes by sailing directly from Mazatlan (two day passage) to San Evaristo, an anchorage north of La Paz. Once you are in the Sea of Cortes it is possible to move from anchorage to anchorage either in short hops of three to four hours, or day-long passages. We used two cruising guides, but were also open to scouting out anchorages not listed in the guides, relying on local knowledge of people we met along the way. We made use of single-sideband radio weather reports and Skymate to determine the exposure of an anchorage to predicted wind directions and speeds.

Anchorage are found both along the eastern shores of Baja and in the islands of the Sea of Cortes. Islands and some mainland coastlines are protected national marine sanctuaries and there is little or no habitation by man on most of the islands. Areas we explored between La Paz and north to Caleta de San Juanico are lush desert and mountainous, resembling the colorful cliffs of Arizona and New Mexico.

**Water sports, fishing, hiking, mountain biking and exploring small towns are our daily recreation activities!**

- We love to snorkel and have explored almost all the anchorages we visited. There is a wealth of sea life to observe from the giant whale sharks to urchins and starfish of every type and color. Schools of colorful tropical fish, eels, rays and colorful patches of coral can be seen in many of the snorkeling spots. Many visitors bring scuba diving gear to explore deeper and further. We also kayaked many of the anchorages using our inflatable kayaks. Often, we could see all the way to the bottom of a bay, a snorkeler's view without the mask and fins! We like to explore the shoreline and bays in our dingy, also. The second time we came to Agua Verde we were using our dingy to get to shore when a "baby" whale shark swam under our dingy and all around the anchorage. Whale sharks can be around 30' long so this one, being only 15' or so, definitely hadn't reached its full size. They are very dark with white glowing spots and have the typical outline of a shark, but when they open their mouths, which is often, you see something that looks rather like a grill. Whale sharks are plankton eaters and they sift out their food much like whales do. They are not the least afraid of the dingies above and we got a good look at him before he went on.
- With Mexican fishing licenses for ourselves and all our boats (Finisterre and her dingies), favorite lures (light colored squid-type), a handline and a fishing pole, we have caught a variety of delicious fish including yellow fin tuna, Mexican bonito, dorado and triggerfish. Some of our catches have tested the strength of our equipment and the size of our refrigerator, so we have had ample filets to share with fellow cruisers. Nothing is more tasty than dorado caught and cooked the same day! Mike has rigged up a small fish finder to the dingy, so we can fish around the rocks at anchorages, finding the fish is more than ½ the battle, since they do seem eager to take the lures once we're in the right area. While on a passage, we often look for schools of fish being chased by larger fish or dolphins to scout out an area to troll.
- Our hikes have enabled us to take pictures of the boat at anchor with a higher point of view, to see the incredible variety of flora in the desert, and to get needed exercise. Two hikes we enjoyed were the hike up the dry riverbed out of the town at Agua Verde and the hike up Steinbeck Canyon at Puerto Escondido. The Agua Verde anchorage is a very popular spot with cruisers. There is a small village there and you can follow the riverbed from the town, past grazing goats, yellow flowering trees on up into a box canyon. The canyon cliffs are steep and reminded us of hikes we have taken in Zion National Park. The mountains of Baja are home to the Cimaron big horned sheep, we looked, but we never saw them (neither did Steinbeck). We did see and hear rattlesnakes on our hikes, so

hiking boots and caution are advised. We often take hikes with a group of people who we meet at the anchorages. The Steinbeck Canyon is across Hwy 1 from Puerto Escondido, past the electric plant and up into the canyon following a dry riverbed. This hike was reputed to have been the same place Steinbeck visited on his hunting trip inland when he came to the Sea of Cortes with Doc Ricketts in the 1940's. There are palm trees up in the canyon and some pools of water remain into the spring. The rock scramble up the creek is beautiful and a bit challenging, with an easy return.

- Exploring towns in Baja has been interesting for us. We get to practice our limited Spanish, learn about local history, eat out and travel off the boat for awhile. One of our goals in coming to Mexico was to visit places which are inland and less impacted than the major tourist destinations like Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlan. Two places in Baja we visited are Loreto and Santa Rosalia. We first visited Loreto by anchoring off the town (day anchoring, only, due to afternoon winds) to the north of the fishing boat marina area. The day before we had anchored at Isla Coronado, north of Loreto, making for a quick trip to the town. We were able to provision and have lunch there. A week later we re-visited the town by traveling up Hwy 1 from Puerto Escondido, staying overnight in Loreto and were able to see the first mission built by the Spanish in all of the Californias. The central square is lovely with trees trimmed to cover the walkways in shade. Loreto is a center for fishing and some ex-patriot development, but it is first and foremost a Mexican town, with friendly people going about their work. Our hotel was right across from the mission and we observed the citizens using the huge stone church. We also listened to children and teens staging a play and musical program in a large central area. The town is colorful and alive with culture. We also took the bus on up Hwy 1 through Mulege to Santa Rosalia for another overnight stay. Santa Rosalia is a very interesting town, a center for fishing giant squid, terminus of the ferry to Guymas on the mainland and former copper mining area. In the 1850's the Boleo (French) mining company established the town of Santa Rosalia, building company buildings, businesses and homes from wood which was shipped into the port. The mines operated until the 1950's. Today you can take your boat to a small marina in Santa Rosalia, where huge sailing ships once anchored. We stayed at the Hotel Frances, the company hotel, up on a hill looking out to sea. The hotel is a large two-storey structure of wood and there are many photos and exhibits of equipment there and in the museum a short distance away. Exploring the town, we felt like we were in a California mining town, except for the metal church designed by Eiffel (of Parisian Tower fame), shipped to Santa Rosalia and erected here by the mining company. This town has such a different look to it from all the Mexican towns and cities making it an interesting place to walk the streets and explore.

Baja Anchorages we have enjoyed the most from northernmost to southernmost are:

Caleta de San Juanico

Bahia Salinas on Isla Carmen

Puerto Escondido

Isla Monserrat, north anchorage

Los Gatos

Isla San Jose, south end

**Highlight on Caleta de San Juanico:** This anchorage is a day's trip north from the Loreto area. Caleta means "cove" in Spanish and the area includes a number of coves inside a rather large indented bay. The rock formations are rugged with pinnacles and eroded formations of sandstone encrusted with fossils of clams and scallops. The sandstone is distinctly yellow and other areas are grey, ochre and terra-cotta in color. There are also crystals in the cracks of volcanic rock areas. Around the coves are beaches with blindingly white sand. The pinnacle diving area near our boat included 4 huge osprey nests currently being used by osprey. We even saw them catch sea snakes to bring back to the nest. On one of the beaches, cruisers have left hand-made signs proclaiming the names of their boats, home port, crew and year visiting the area. These works of art are hung from a tree on the shore. There is a resort on the hill above the anchorage, but little activity goes on as we only saw a caretaker there. Mike was able to ride his mountain bike on a long dirt road through the blooming cordon cactus and mountains and past the rancho headquarters to Highway 1. Over the hill from our anchorage we hiked a well worn path to a kayak camp, neat and closed up, waiting for the next visitors to arrive. Our favorite wildlife there were eared grebes in large flocks who would dive and become large underwater schools, as sleek as penguins, fishing for crustaceans on the bottom. A cruising friend thought they were a reef upon entering the bay, but they would disappear so quickly, the reef idea didn't float! We could watch and listen to these active little birds for hours.

We had a very difficult time leaving this beautiful place and after biking, swimming kayaking, having an evening campfire on the beach, hiking, dingy exploring, visiting friends on their boats, creating our cruiser's sign for the tree, and doing just a few boat maintenance chores-- we had been there for 5 days. We have jointly selected Caleta de San Juanico as one of our favorite anchorages in a year of cruising. Upon leaving, we realized we had never gone snorkeling, so we have a great reason to return someday!

**Highlight on Bahia Salinas, Isla Carmen:** We heard that Carmen had once been a place where salt flats covered a large area at the north end of the island. Bahia Salinas gets its name from the abandoned salt flats and salt collecting operations there. This large bay is on the north eastern side of the island and is quite protected from the wind coming either from north or southwest. Right in the middle of the bay is a wreck which is almost completely covered at high tide. We snorkeled from our anchorage to the wreck and saw many schools of tropical fish. Fishermen in their pangas come from a long distance to fish here near the wreck.

When we took the dingy to shore, we asked the watchman there if we could hike and he said to stay on the roads and not go into the mountains. There are abandoned mines in the mountains of Carmen, and more rattlesnakes! So, we hiked around the salt flats with a friendly dog belonging to the watchman. From the kayaks stored in one of the buildings, we deduced that this was an eco-tourism spot where people come in to kayak in groups. We only had company a few days in the huge bay with some small sailboats that people had brought by trailer down to Baja from Arizona. The old salt operation was very interesting, making a little town, including a small church which was still in use. It had the appearance of an old ghost town. The bay seemed to be a great place to harvest clams and we saw fishermen working the shorelines while we were there. This place was naturally beautiful, very open and also interesting due to the collection of salt.

**Highlight on Puerto Escondido**, or Hidden Port: This is a wonderfully sheltered anchorage and mooring area on the mainland of Baja just south of Loreto. The outside anchorage is known as The Waiting Room and is a very deep anchorage with many boats that stay there for long periods of time. The inner area contains mooring balls set up by Singlar and is a very large sheltered area with two “windows” or openings that look out to the sea and toward Carmen Island. Tall mountains ring the area and the changing light on the sea and mountains makes this place very special. There have been controversies about the moorings and the development of the marina and housing here, with much of it abandoned, but the place has a charm that continues to bring visitors. The Hidden Port Yacht Club puts on a cruiser’s get-together each year known as Loreto Fest, raising money to help isolated school children attend school. This year the Loreto Fest was somewhat down in attendance following negotiations with Singlar which ended up reducing the mooring rates at the last minute. Still, there were over 65 boats in the area and the event was well attended and not crowded. Many former cruisers who live in the area work hours and hours to make this happen and we met many dedicated folks, chipping in to do our part with the Loreto Fest. The music is wonderful as cruisers who are musicians practice for weeks prior to offer a huge variety of types of music. Kay got to put on a watercolor workshop, so that was a highlight for her and her cruiser students!

**Highlight on Isla Monserrat**: Monserrat is just south of Isla Carmen and Puerto Escondido. Some of the mountains are serrated along the top, giving the island its name. The anchorage is exposed to winds from the northern quadrant, which had been non-existent for quite awhile. Some cruiser friends from Puerto Escondido were anchored there when we arrived. There was space for a number of boats and we tucked in the eastern corner of the bay. The beach of sandstone and volcanic cliffs, dry creek outlets and glistening sand stretched from where we anchored to the western tip of the island. One evening our friends called to us to get in our dingy and as the evening light darkened we zipped around trying to see more of a 30 foot long whale shark. The anchorage and offshore twin islets: Las Galletas were teeming with life. One sheltered a sea lion haul out with gregarious and noisy sea lions fishing and barking. The other was a treasure trove of things to see when snorkeling. We saw many brilliant fish, an eel, huge sea

urchins and numerous starfish of blue, red, many rays, 5-6 rays.... On the way back, Mike got to try out his dingy mounted fish finder and caught two fish one right after the other.

Monserrat was especially beautiful and once again we had a nominee for favorite anchorage. Mainly, it was the changing light and the views back toward Islas Carmen and Danzante. One of the special events of every day at anchor in the Sea of Cortes is the evening and nighttime sky. Monserrat is a special place for skywatching. The gradual changes of color can go on for hours after the sun sets behind the rugged mountains of Baja. The sky goes from yellows to pinks to reds to purples and then fades into semi-darkness with the first stars. Everywhere we have traveled away from large cities we have always been able to see at night because the light of so many stars, even without moonlight, makes the night light up. There are other lightshows to watch as well. The phosphorescence in the water from numerous small plankton and other sea creatures sparkles in the water around the dark hull of the boat, then the stars reflect down into the sea, so that you lose track of the horizon where the sea meets the sky. When you are on a boat this happens all around you and it is not a static show, for at night the creatures in the sea get active, the breeze ripples the reflections, you see silhouettes of other boats, their anchor lights and reflections, sometimes a shooting star and the constellations rotate behind the mountains as you watch. This is the most magnificent show!

Monserrat was a great place to hike up high and one of the most interesting things we heard was the repeated slap of a manta ray way down in the sea below us. The silence is golden and when a sound happens you hear it with great clarity. We were able to see our next destination, Agua Verde from the top of our climb. We had heard there were over 1,000 kinds of cactus in Baja and we saw many more kinds we had not seen before on Monserrat as we hiked back down through the abundant cactus fields along the mesas of the island. This lovely island anchorage is one place you won't find in the cruising guides.

**Highlight on Los Gatos:** This anchorage south of Agua Verde is the most colorful place we have ever anchored. The red rock surrounds a lovely small bay and includes some rock that is much like the "slick-rock" of Moab. The whole place simply glows in the light and it becomes magnified with a colorful sunset, which we did enjoy there! We also hiked the area and found a road inland through abundant plants, many stunted but lush and blooming. The ocotillo cactus grows here in Mexico, but not as tall and willowy as in the Southwest, the spines and the colorful bright red flowers are the same.

**Highlight on Isla San Jose:** San Jose is a very large island and we were delighted to see it from its eastern side as we motored (not much wind) on our way toward La Paz. The layer colorful rocks from Los Gatos, are also directly east in the formations of this rocky mountainous island. Punta Colorado is a magnificent eroded cliffs of oranges and reds punctuated with chocolate colored volcanic formations as well. We rounded the tip of the island and found our anchorage along the southern shore, near the entrance to a large lagoon. The grebes were here, too. We explored the lagoon the following morning by dingy, running smack into some "no-see-um's" on the beach that ignored our citronella

lotion and bug spray. Luckily, they disappeared as we went further into the lagoon. The lagoon was so clear we could see everything living there including urchins, fish and shore birds. Egrets and herons danced around hunting in the schools of fish. This lagoon has two entrances so we were able to make a loop through the lagoon, coming out on the west side of the island and returning along the shore to Finisterre. On the way back we passed a small island inhabited by fishermen and their families. It is a very small place, sort of just a rock, but people have lived there for years.

The Sea of Cortes is a cruiser's paradise, hard to leave, and high on our list of favorite places we will visit again.

