

Baja in July

by Marianne Wheeler

“Baja in July? You’re gonna fry in hundred-degrees-weather!” That’s what a lot of people said, shaking their heads, before we set out on our charter from La Paz, Mexico. Making our way from the La Paz airport across the sweltering asphalt runway and then in heated taxis to our hotel, it seemed as if they would be right. If not frying, we would at least be baking under the sun.

But, our Tradewinds group was happy to be on vacation and to be boarding three Moorings charter boats soon for a week of sailing the Sea of Cortez.

Tony Hitchings and his wife Judy, Ann and Kent, and Tom had reserved a fine Beneteau 42, named “Stowaway”.

Mike Morrow and his wife Cheri brought family and friends to spend quality time on the 42 ft catamaran “Fire Cat”.

And I was looking forward to stowing my bag on the 43 ft catamaran “Gato de Cortez” with Cristina, Natasha, Nelly, Oiching and Aaron, and David Kory, who organized the entire trip.



To get into Baja time, we spent our first night at Hotel Los Arcos, downtown and across from the Malecon, a wide walk-way curving along the Bay of La Paz. We received our room keys and a coupon for a free margarita and moved into cool, spacious quarters surrounded by purple bougainvillea, red coral trees and swaying palms. We relaxed. This felt like Mexico. The Moorings boats came fully provisioned since there is little shopping away from the city. Our water and beverages had been pre-ordered. That left us free to check out restaurants and souvenir shops, and stroll along the Malecon for the first stellar sunset of the week.

Next morning at the Moorings marina, the skippers went to a chart briefing and boat check out and the crews selected snorkel gear and packed away the ton of food that had been delivered to each boat. The salon of “Gato de Cortez” looked like a mini super market, with loads of fresh fruit and vegetables, breads, pasta, rice, tortillas, canned goods, snack foods . . . The freezer was full of thick packages of meats and fish and the refrigerator was stuffed with all sorts of goodies. Were we expected to stay more than a week?

In addition to the big salon with the cushioned settee and large dining table, the catamaran had a galley and four cabins, each with private head and hot shower, plenty of space for all. Outside, the wide open cockpit and, forward, the trampoline between the two bows, were large enough for the entire crew to salsa dance.

We left the marina towing our panga dinghy, following the channel markers out into the big, blue Sea of Cortez. The wind was light, but enough to sail with, so we raised the main and unfurled the jib, figuring out lines and winches and clamps. With six people on the trampoline hauling as if in a tug-of-war, the huge mainsail slid up the mast easily and we winched the luff tight. Good job, team! Soon, the wind blew in our hair, the air felt cool against our skin, and grins broke out all over. The sky was high and clear as we headed for Puerto Ballena, with tumbling seals showing the way.

We anchored in 15 ft of turquoise water using the electric windlass - easy as “pan comido” - and jumped into the water. If this is how the days would be, no worries about heat! The sea was cool and refreshing. We could do this!

We poured a round of margaritas and played our favorite CD’s getting dinner ready. Life was good. David barbecued a heap of scallops on the transom-mounted charcoal grill. The rest of us chopped green and red and yellow vegetables into salads, salsas and side dishes. We ate in the deep glow of the setting sun, sharing stories, getting to know each other. “Gato de Cortez” crew hailed from all over the world and could have flown a colorful string of flags: Cristina from Argentina, Natasha from England, Nelly from Poland, myself from Germany, Oiching and Aaron from Hong Kong, and for David from Southern California, we could have hoisted a bright beach boy surfer burgee.

When we looked up, it was dark. Venus stood ablaze in the west, Jupiter was on his way in the east, and Scorpius lay like a diamond necklace across the black, velvety sky. We brought up cushions and towels and stretched out on the trampoline gazing into the night. Soon the world above was a carpet of stars, mirrored perfectly in the calm sea below.

Our three boats had agreed on a VHF radio net, 8 8 78, to check in at 8AM and 8PM on channel 78, and we heard from “Stowaway” and “Fire Cat” in the morning. Our cruise would take us around the islands of Espirito Santo and Partida, Isla San Francisco and San Jose, and the nearby Baja mainland, destinations an easy day-sail apart. Each boat decided their own way and schedule, knowing that we were in range of each other and meeting up here and there.

After an early morning dip and leisurely breakfast, we set course for Los Islotos, a craggy rock pile north of Isla Partida and a national wildlife sanctuary with many birds and a colony of sea lions. The animals are friendly and don’t seem to mind visitors. They greeted us with a howling sea lion concert.

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Huge males were posturing on guano-covered rocks, belching, barking and grunting at their females, who shouted back or yawned, turning up their flippers in the sun, or slipping away into the blue water. Cute, furry pups snuggled next to each other, blending in with the grays and browns of the stone. We positioned the catamaran by a big rock arch that juts out of the sea and took turns swimming through it, finding even more sea lions on the other side. Some swam with us, coming close, curious if we would flinch. One brushed against Nelly, another took David's flippers in his mouth and tugged on them playfully. It seemed as if we were entertaining and they let us be in their realm and we knew who was boss.

Moving on with our hearts still beating high, we sailed toward Isla San Francisco to find a quiet cove for the night. The winds were light, the sea was flat, large fish jumped in the distance, and the "Gato de Cortez" was tracking fast and sleek. We leaned back and enjoyed the ride. Suddenly, a cry: "Dolphins!" Dozens of dolphins came chasing after us, surrounded us, crossing our wake, racing ahead, the sun reflecting off their silvery backs. We rushed to the bows as they swam with us cutting in and out of the water effortlessly. Some reached far out and took a good look at us. Neptune's messengers, saying hello! Then, as quickly as they had come, they headed off and disappeared, leaving us smiling and in awe.

Isla San Francisco looks like a big, brown wedge, a high mountain ridge sloping down to the shore and curving into a long, white crescent beach. The water is shallow and light turquoise, fading to pale beige near the land, ideal for snorkeling and swimming. A cruising sailboat and a big motor yacht were already in the anchorage and by evening all of our boats were tucked in as well. When the sun sat low in the sky, we hiked up the mountain ridge to the very top, carefully avoiding prickly cactus and loose rocks. Here, we felt the burning heat of the day soaked up by the hostile desert terrain, with even the lizards looking for shade. It was a stifling hot, sweaty climb, but what a view from high above!

We hurried back and into the water, and a light wind kept us comfortable as we grilled our steaks and corn on the cob. Eating al fresco, talking and laughing, we watched another gleaming sunset and waited for the stars to come out and shine on us in the crystal clear night.

Isla San Jose was covered by huge cacti spreading right down to the edge of the sea, a cactus forest. How could it grow so tall and dense in this barren land? The Cardon Cactus, we read in the cruising guide, is the world's tallest and is different from its smaller cousins in Arizona, as it can grow many arms, some up to 60ft high. It was an amazing sight. Near the cactus forest, a small stream lined with mangroves empties into the sea.

We nudged close to shore in shallow water, found good anchoring, and set out in the dinghy. We steered up-stream along the jungle of soggy mangrove roots and floated in the shade of lush mangrove leaves. It was hot and still, and the water swarmed with fish big and small. A tall heron and elegant white egrets had easy pickings. We continued up our "Amazon" to a long, emerald green lagoon, crossed it and landed on a bank of polished smooth stones. We discovered lots of pretty shells and skipping stones, but also countless skeletons of birds and fishes, taken and bleached white by the fierce environment.



Returning to the boat we must have disturbed a floating family of bat rays nearby. They left in a huff skittering away and out to sea. We got underway for San Evaristo, a small fishing village on the Baja mainland. The cove of San Evaristo turned out to be another perfectly round shaped bay, ringed with fine, white sand and yellow hills strewn with tumbleweed. Beyond the hills, brown wrinkled mountains rise up into the sky.

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A few low, flat-roofed buildings and palapas by the water are home to fishermen and their families. It must be hard to survive here in such isolation and with so little rain. By the time we anchored, the fishermen's pangas were pulled up high on the beach and children played, laughing and running. Frigate birds drew smooth circles high above. Pelicans chattered and sea gulls cawed crowding the shore, hoping for scraps from the catch of the day. When the men and their families sat at their tables in the golden light of the evening and the last rays of the sun lit up the wine in our glasses, day-to-day business and hectic stress dwelled far away, a hazy memory. Our minds were at ease in this simple, but relentless world.

A southerly wind started to blow in the night and continued as we made our way to Caleta Partida. Every day had been calm with only light breezes and we were surprised to see white caps and the knot meter pointing into the twenties. We left in the cool morning feeling the chop of the sea, making sure the bucking dinghy held securely, and arrived early afternoon in the sheltered cove of Partida, where the water was flat. The best part of this anchorage was that we could dinghy between Partida and Espiritu Santo to reach a bluff of incredible rock formations, looming two thousand feet high. Created millions of years ago when the Baja peninsula split away from Mexico, they weathered and eroded into fantastic shapes and deep caves hollowed out at sea level. The longer we gaped, the more shapes we saw: a super-sized turtle, a sleeping lion, a giant camel, even the profile of Alfred Hitchcock, nose, cheek and chin of the film director in life-like cinemascope. The length of the bluff displayed a multitude of geological layers and sediment in hues of red, brown, beige, gray and sage green, the colors of Baja.

We drove close to the caves where schools of fishes cut through strong currents swirling into dark openings. Under the watchful eye of a booby bird standing guard, we pointed the bow of the dinghy into a cave and went spelunking past moist, rocky walls curving up into dark, jagged ceilings. The dinghy promptly got stuck on some rocks and the crew stepped out onto a ledge to lift it over the tight spot. The moment we were out of the boat, the cave came alive with hordes of crab scampering spider-like up the walls around us. We gasped, heaved hard and quickly climbed back in, shoving off into deeper water. Fortunately, there was a navigable exit at the other end of the cave.

Our cat was swinging freely on the hook, with extra chain let out and we settled in for the evening. Every night after dinner, we shared our left-over morsels with the sea life around us and washed the dishes in salt water by the light of the stars. Before rinsing in fresh water and putting everything away, we'd shine our flashlights onto the water and admire the happy fishes darting this way and that. We didn't know the proper names of most of the species, but we recognized the puffers, the damsels, and the pargo. So, when a school of royal-blue sticks about two feet long was milling about the transom, we asked: "What are those?" And Nelly, quick as lightning, thrust her hand into the pack and pulled one out, grabbing it tightly, holding it up for all to see. It was a pipefish, we learned later, with a long, yellow-lined snout mouth and independently moving eyes which stared at us in surprise. She let it go and we laughed for hours at her fishing skills, no fancy rods required. That night the stars seemed even more plentiful and the bio phosphorescence (light-emitting algae and plankton) created miniature fireworks every time the surface of the water was disturbed. The anchor chain glowed ghostly whitish green the length of its scope whenever the boat moved with the current and pulled on it. It was beautiful and mesmerizing.

We knew our fun in the sun had to end soon, but savored one more night at anchor before giving up the boats at the Moorings base.

We will miss the Sea of Cortez, the land's stark natural beauty, the camaraderie of the crew, and living in our bathing suits for a whole week. The days were long and sunny, just made for sailing in gentle breezes and playing in un-crowded anchorages. The nights were never wet or chilly.

We had a wonderful time in Baja in July, swimming and snorkeling, shelling and sunbathing. We didn't fry, sizzle, or bake. We were just nicely done at the end of our trip.

