

Bare Boating in the Sea of Cortez

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My stomach felt like it traveled from my ankles to my throat throughout the night in Bahia El Candelero. The Corumel winds that were known to come in the late afternoon in the Sea of Cortez of Baja, Mexico were right on time. It was a little like riding in a clothes dryer with rumbling tennis shoes. But aside from that one occasion, we experienced a wonderful voyage for our first bareboat charter.



We have been members of Tradewinds for about four years and had never sailed more than an overnight on SF Bay. We decided it was time to venture out. After researching sailing venues and talking with Butch, Brandy, and Matt, the logical first step for our bareboat charter seemed to be Baja. April into May for 8 days of sailing was the chosen time for line of sight navigation, relatively calm waters, warm climate, excellent maintained boats from The Moorings charters, and an easy flight from SF to LA to La Paz, Baja. We chartered a fully provisioned Beneteau 352. It was a brand new “Exclusive,” which has a desirable window port that opens in the aft cabin.

Part of our thinking was, “would we like the lifestyle aboard for eight days” For those who haven’t chartered before with their mate, there were all sorts of considerations. 1. How would we work together in a small space? 2. Would we get in each other’s way? 3. What were our team working skills? 4. Did our sailing abilities prove themselves in this self-sustaining environment? 5. Was our sense of humor going to stay in tact? Well, all these questions had positive outcomes and created deeper bonds between the two of us, beyond our expectations. Choosing a sailing experience of quietude, living aboard, and sailing in unspoiled tranquil waters is what the Sea of Cortez offers. It tested our self-confidence, sailing skills, and most of all allowed us the freedom of sailing “off the grid.”

The islands and coves in the southern portion of the Sea of Cortez are essentially uninhabited and beautiful. When you pull into a cove, it’s just you, the boat, and the untouched landscapes and pristine waters to commune with. In spending our days sailing with the dolphins and jumping bat rays, numerous sea birds, and a few sea lions, we seemingly became apart of the marine life sometimes without ever seeing another boat all day.

With names like Pichilingue, Balandra, Caleta Partida, Bahia El Candelero, Los Coyotes, Los Isoltes, Isla San Francisco you can’t help but appreciate the history of these islands along with the serene surroundings that frame the blue green waters of these isles and bahias. It’s a rugged landscape that may seem inhospitable to some but primordial and fascinating to others.



When we left Marina Palmira from La Paz that Sunday morning heading out into the Sea of Cortez for 8 days, we had a feeling of great anticipation and eagerness. We headed for our first night at Pichilingue, a small harbor that 16th century Dutch pirates laid in wait to pillage and plunder ships passing in the La Paz channel. Because we knew some of the history of the area we easily imagined what it was like “lying in wait” in the very spot that the Dutch had weighed anchor 450 years earlier. That night we were so thrilled to be spending our first night of bare boating, we jumped off the transom and swam with the diving pelicans who were looking for food.

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One of my trepidations was anchoring and holding for the night, especially when we were with other boats. The bottom is sand and mud and we never anchored deeper than 20 feet. Norma and I had practiced our verbal and non-verbal anchor communications skills many times in Marina Bay and around Angel Island, and that proved to be invaluable on our charter. We never had an anchor drag on us and often checked our position during the nights of wind. Once confident that we anchored into the wind it was holding, we slept well.



On our fifth day we sailed into a small bay harboring a fishing and salt processing village called San Evaristo. Arriving in the bay around 6:30 pm we anchored among eight other boats. The air and water were as calm and tranquil as we had ever experienced. When the full moon rose over Isla San Jose it revealed itself as an enormous fiery red ball that even ET would have embraced. Magical! The next morning we motored our dingy to the beach and walked through the hills and homes (about a dozen) until we came upon some men sitting on a porch and the women looking from the kitchen window at us. The temperature was about 90 degrees and everyone was hot. They spoke no English and our Spanish was very weak. But they were so welcoming. We cobbled together a universal conversation for 20 minutes until we asked about their bare bones church standing across the field adorned with 5 turkey vultures flying around and sitting on the 12' crucifix. Felix, el jefe, came down to show us around and we became "amigos con mucho gusto." I took photographs of him and made a small album, which I sent to Felix when I returned to San Francisco.

That same afternoon we sailed out of San Evaristo over to Isla San Francisco. It was the most beautiful of sailing days with favorable Southeast winds giving us 4.5 knots close hauled. Sometimes we set our autopilot, sat back and rode the rhythms of the wind and sea, free and unencumbered. After spending another velvety red sunset at Isla San Francisco we barbecued garlic shrimp washing them down with Negra Modelos while laughing at the pelicans nose diving into the water off of our stern with so much determination and force trying to catch their own shrimp while making loud sounds of kerplooshing. We slept well again.

Setting sail the next morning from Isla San Francisco to Los Islotes, a distance of about 14 nautical miles, is a small island outcrop inhabited by many sea lions. We spent about an hour watching the sea lions slipping on and off the rocks and decided it was time to take a little shower for ourselves. We motored between Los Islotes and Caleta Partida (our next destination) and stood on the transom washing with Bronner's biodegradable soap with seawater and then rinsing off with fresh water from the fresh water tanks through a hose on the back of the boat. Invigorating and refreshing. There are some elements in bareboat chartering which feel as if you're camping. It's an absolute pleasure to get away from all the traditional comforts we get so accustomed to and realize we really can survive very well without telephones, TVs, iPods, loads of food at our disposable, counter space, daily showers, etc. Yet at the same time, the boat is a very comfortable environment indeed.



One problem that occurred twice was that our main halyard wrapped around a deck light halfway up the mast and we weren't able to reach it. So we ended up duct taping our gaffing hook to a broom handle to create a six-foot telescoping rod to reach the caught halyard. Brilliance, genius, and common sense prevailed! Onward we sailed!

One thing I should mention is that even though we could always see the island (s) we were sailing towards, the amount of time to sail there usually took longer than expected. Even when figuring out time, distance and speed equations there were always many variables constantly affecting our time of arrival. So we ended up allowing enough time for those variables that would lengthen our days' sail. Our longest day of sailing was 11 hours, which was from the Bahia El Candelero to San Evaristo a distance of about 25 nm. Lack of wind, heading into the wind, raising sails, motoring, sightseeing, all of these variables should be taken into consideration in planning.

Whether we were sailing from island to island or spending our time aboard or taking the dingy into a beach this was a sailing experience that has whet our appetite for more bareboat sailing. The second night after arriving home we were already planning a charter for next year.

The locals we met in La Paz, The Moorings personnel, the villagers of San Evaristo, and the two fishermen who pulled along side our dingy in El Candelero to help us with it's motor are all apart of a generous culture.

If you plan to bareboat from La Paz there are numerous websites and resources about sailing in the Sea of Cortez.

Websites: www.cruisecortez.com, www.latitudemexico.com, www.latitude38.com, www.moorings.com

Books: Charlie's Charts of the Western Coast of Mexico

Resources: Tradewinds Sailing (Butch, Matt, & Brandy)

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