

# Chesapeake Paddler



Publication of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc. Volume 19, Issue 1

January-February 2009

## Baja Dreams

By Rick Wiebush

Three of us from the Baltimore area—Hank McComas, Joel Beckwith and I—recently completed a 30 day, 400 mile self-supported sea kayaking trip in the northern section of Baja's Sea of Cortes. We put in just north of San Felipe and ended at the village of Mulege. We all had previously been to Baja and part of our motivation was to do something new and to link the northern section with trips we had already done, thereby completing over 600 continuous nautical miles of the Sea of Cortes coast.

The trip was divided into two basic segments: from San Felipe to Bahia de Los Angeles and from there to Mulege. We also spent a couple of days exploring the islands of Bahia de Los Angeles (LA Bay) and included two-day breaks in LA bay and Santa Rosalita. We used two Tempest 170s and a Tsunami 165 - rented from Aqua Adventures in San Diego (<http://www.aqua-adventures.com/>). All other equipment was either our own, rented from the outfitters, or had already been shipped prior to the trip.

The northernmost section of the trip was just so-so in terms of dramatic scenery and wildlife, since much of the coast is relatively flat and populated by innumerable gringo 'campos' (communities) that stretch sometimes for miles along the coast. The other 350 miles is a desert and mountain wilderness, broken up only by sporadic villages. Other than the pescadores (fishermen) found near the villages, and the town residents, we saw almost no one for the entire rest of the trip.

We were generally on the water by sunrise and usually made camp by 3:30, were in bed by 7, and up most mornings by 4:30. Generally the weather was cooperative; sunny, cloudless, mid to upper 80 degree days—very typical Baja conditions. There were 3 days when we were forced off the water by strong winds (20-30 knots) and big seas, and two days we couldn't get on the water at all. These interruptions were the result of the infamous El Norte winds, which can blow at a sustained 25-30+ knots for up to three days. Our worst experience was the winds blowing at that rate for about 36 hours.

### Planning Ahead

Primarily, there was the ominous prospect of dealing with the infamous "Wall"—a mass of virtually uninterrupted 500 foot cliffs that stretches 40 some miles from Punta Final to Punta Remedios. The word about this stretch is that there is no place to land, that kayakers have resorted to doing it all in a non-stop 20 hour push, and that at least one kayaker took Immodium to help him do it all without the inconvenience of having to figure out a way of going to the bathroom.

The common wisdom about the "Wall" seemed to be pretty overblown. We covered this section in two days. There is no doubt that it is huge and imposing. However, we found a large number of potential campsites. They were very exposed, with rocky landings and small camping areas, but they were there. The winds also cooperated—if we had had strong winds while negotiating the



Baja California, map courtesy of <http://www.cabobob.com/>

wall, I might be telling different stories and have a totally different assessment of the difficulty of this section.

Another challenge involved the strong tidal currents, standing waves, boils and eddies that are associated with big tides getting squeezed through narrow channels. This happens in the 100 mile stretch just to the north and south of LA Bay. In this area there is approximately a 16 foot tidal range. All that water running in and out gets squeezed by a series of islands that lie about 5-8 miles off the coast. Between the coast and these island are two very deep (4,000 ft) channels that created upwelling currents in addition to those running in and

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out. Moreover, these channels—Canal de Ballenas (Whales) and Canal de Salsipuedes ("Get out if you can")—rise dramatically in elevation at their southern and northern ends. Water that was running through a 4,000 foot deep trough is suddenly squeezed through areas that are only 900-1,000 feet deep.

We read, and were warned by experienced kayakers, about the conditions—4-5 knot currents, standing waves, whirlpools. One sailing log referred to an area called the "standing wall of death", while others warned about whirlpools and tide races. That was the kind of stuff we were apprehensive about as we set off on the trip. While we experienced some of these, none rose to the degree of predicted high drama (well, one was pretty shaky). We encountered whirlpools, but nothing dangerous; we saw some standing waves from a mile away; we had some fairly strong eddy lines in places, but there were negotiable.



**Ledge Lodging on the "Wall" photo by Joel Beckwith**

About the only place in this section that got me unnerved was Punta Remedios, which was probably the tightest constriction we faced the whole trip. About 2 miles before we hit Punta Remedios the current started picking up big time. That was a fun ride. However, by the time we got to the point, Joel measured us doing 6 knots on his GPS and I felt like I was on a white water river. It didn't help that a 15-20 knot tail wind had just sprung up and was also pushing us along. Although rounding this point probably lasted no more than 25

minutes, it was one of those shallow-breathing, constantly-on-guard experiences that seemed to last an hour.

That we didn't experience more problems going through this section was part luck—we hit Punta Remedios within an hour after slack—and part planning—we timed going through Salsipuedes so that we were doing it on neap tides, when the currents were much less strong.

#### **Headlands, Ledges & Coyotes**

Although we routinely rounded large headlands, there were several occasions that severely challenged our nerves and skills. At times, the confluence of swells, high winds and strong currents produced confused seas and 6-7 foot waves. Total focus and mounting concern would slowly replace the pure adrenaline of it all. On the next to the last day at Punta Chuvato I recall thinking, "this is the way people die out here," and I felt



**Kayak Caving photo by Joel Beckwith**

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as though I had run up against my limits as a sea kayaker and was glad finally to be out of it. On one occasion we found ourselves holed up in a crumbling, abandoned fish camp, trying to escape 2 days of a full blown El Norte windstorm.

Another day, after rounding Punta Chuvato, we sought refuge from the high winds and huge swells by pulling our boats onto a rocky ledge. While we rested, the tide receded to a point that it was impossible to relaunch. And since the next significant tide would be coming in the middle of the night, we had to hoist all the boats and equipment to an even higher ledge, and sleep on a two foot wide rock outcropping.

Of the many highlights of the trip—wildlife, rock gardens, caving along the coast—it was the omnipresent desert mountain ranges and cliffs running down to the sea that formed the backdrop for everything else. Every day's paddle, every meal break and every campsite took place in the context of a truly spectacular wilderness setting—soaring mountain ranges, chiseled cliffs, rocky outcroppings, hardy desert cactus and fascinating wildlife all converging at the interface of land and sea. It is what makes Baja the special place that it is.

When we pulled into Mulege on the last day, my sense was "well, ok, that's done. Not really a big deal." Now that I think about what was involved my attitude is more like: "Whoa!!!"

Abstracted from Rick's full trip report at <http://www.cpakayaker.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=3545>

For more pictures, see <http://sports.webshots.com/album/568749945rrKYDk> and <http://community.webshots.com/album/568816410aWapRn>

Edited by Lynn Erwin

## Breaking beyond Beginner Paddling

by Cyndi Janetzko

As a long time sea kayak instructor I frequently tell my students that the key to becoming a better paddler is "time in the boat". Lately though, I've begun to wonder if that is quite accurate. Certainly all seat time is valuable, but are some types of paddling more valuable than others when the goal is taking your skills to the next level?

I think the answer is yes and that "just paddling" really is not the key. I take as evidence of this all those paddlers who seem terminally stuck at the advanced beginner level. They start out eager, perhaps renting a boat a few times. They take a class or two and then purchase their own kayak. From there the sky should be the limit in terms of acquiring new skills. However too often, after getting their basic strokes "mastered" (if there is such a thing), many paddlers stop learning and just keep paddling.

So why do people get "stuck"? There are likely a myriad of reasons but I think there is one primary culprit – our desire for comfort, ease, or the "routine".

Whether out of habit or necessity, we often paddle in the same area with the same conditions for the same amount of time just about every time we are in a boat. Nothing about these paddles challenges our skills, technique or fitness levels. Sure we're enjoying the view, paddling with friends, getting a little fresh air and escaping our 9 to 5 lives, but are we becoming better paddlers?



To progress as a kayaker you need to challenge yourself and move beyond that comfortable, familiar paddle trip. I like to think of these paddles a bit like, to borrow an idea for the latest exercise theory, interval workouts. An interval workout consists of bouts of high intensity work alternated with periods of lower intensity or rest. Research shows that intervals work. By working intensely, even for short periods of time, you place a greater demand on your system which in turn prompts greater physiological change. Working out at a constant level burns calories but doesn't require your body to get stronger to accommodate higher workloads.

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