

# The Chesapeake Paddler



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## Solitude and scenery mark Baja paddle

*Far from the madding crowd, paddlers enjoy snorkeling, changing visual feast*

By Lois Wyatt

"I am viewing Southwest-type scenery from a kayak." I kept marveling at the unlikely juxtaposition as I paddled south along the coast of Baja on the Sea of Cortez in late October. I had no idea that volcanic outflow came in so many colors and shades. The layers, uplifts, foldings, and eroded shapes presented a feast for my eyes, changing several times a day over the ten-day trip. Each beach where we set up camp for the night was distinct from every other.

Our trip was run by the Mexican outfitter Paddling South in partnership with California-based Seatrek. They offer this itinerary from Loreto to La Paz, ten days of paddling and primitive camping along a very sparsely populated and largely inaccessible stretch of coastline, only twice in a paddling season, which runs from late

October to early May. Helen Dawson asked if I would like to join her and paddling buddy Bill on this trip, and I jumped at the opportunity. She and Bill had been in Loreto in the spring for the coast and island itinerary three years prior. To return they eyed the fall for warmer water and the linear route for a more remote adventure. The maximum for this trip is 12, but we three and two women friends from Sausalito were the only paying customers, so I felt lucky that it had not been cancelled, as I think most U.S. companies would have done.



*View from a hike above last campsite.*

Photo/Lois Wyatt

One morning flight a day departs Los Angeles for Loreto, so connecting from DC required a night layover. We gave ourselves an additional day as insurance against any problem with that single flight. The first afternoon in Loreto, I walked the length of the town waterfront and took lots of photos. With no natural sheltered harbor, manmade barriers on three sides formed a box to protect the fishing fleet of pangas. Pelicans laid claim to many of the pangas. My first dinner was shrimp-stuffed chiles rellenos, which I thought were so delicious that I ordered them twice more--that is, all of my three restaurant dinners of the trip. The next day I enjoyed a long swim north. Later Helen and I shopped a couple blocks inland. Away from the sea breezes, that evening of October 20 was hot, so I knew why our trip was the first departure of the season.

At our initial evening meeting, we met our leader, Jorge. We threw him a curve when all five of us were unequivocal that we wanted single kayaks. Concerned, he explained that at least two tandems were important for carrying our food supply and in case of injury as we were to be far removed from any emergency assistance and almost always without cell phone coverage. We appreciated Jorge's quandary, yet in the end he accommodated our request. I think he would have preferred to be more nimble in a

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single, but, instead, he and his assistant, Adrian, were in the only tandem. With five experienced paddlers, the trip went smoothly, but again, I think most U.S. companies would have insisted on two tandems. I was grateful he did not.

The first day began with a two-hour drive south to Puerto Agua Verde and test-sitting in the assorted kayaks. The biggest one went to the only male, Bill; Suellen went for one identical to hers at home, while Michelle, Helen, and I chose easily among the three remaining. My boat was a Huachinango model, or Red Snapper.

In fiberglass, it was a lot heavier than my kevlar, but otherwise I was happy with it for the duration. There was concern the night before that the wind might make launching that day impossible, but we embarked into the surf about 2 p.m. It felt great to be underway, and we covered about 5 miles. Rounding a cliff point in which was a sea cave, we saw that another group had claimed the large section of our intended beach, but our group was fine on a smaller, semi-separate section. When I realized all of them were in tandems, I was not even slightly envious.

Oh, how the winds did howl that night and into the next day, so we stayed put. The other group departed, so then we had the whole area to ourselves. We hiked and snorkeled, relaxed and chatted, and I got more familiar with the routines of primitive camping. The layover was no problem because, wisely, two two-night stays are built into the schedule. We later concluded it was for the best because the planned stopover three days later was the least pleasant of all our camp locations. A lot of palm tree debris from Hurricane Lidia a month before had not been cleaned up and the water there was cloudy, in contrast to the water we were snorkeled in and paddling on the rest of the time. Truly, I've never seen such an expanse of clear and apparently clean water anywhere else I've paddled. Rain from the hurricane had awakened the usually parched landscape; everyone else, who had been there before, remarked on how green Baja was.

On our second paddling day, we were encouraged to hold a more direct line well away from the coast, but that was hard to do with

spectacular scenery beckoning. The shoreline was straight and exposed; surf would have meant a challenging landing and launch, but the day was long, and as Jorge later conceded, "I forgot how far it was," the result, I suppose, of an itinerary followed only twice each year. The next morning began with a brief paddle to a sheltered landing and a short, steep hike over cross-bedded sandstone formations to a razorback section of trail and a spectacular view. Our lunch break included a walk from the beach to an old ranch and outbuildings, the walls of a once-fine two-story hacienda, four tiny old shacks, and some modest environmentally-aware new construction. We refilled dromedaries and continued on to a lovely campsite with red lava ledges offering tide pools and fine snorkeled. Special care was needed to guide the kayaks through the narrow channel to that beach.

Subsequent campsites were also different one from the other. One was an oasis with characteristic palm trees to the edge of the beach littered with dead palm fronds, another a small cove covered with so many rocks that there were few sandy spots for setting up tents, the next a wide and long beach of soft sand and shrubs where we really spread out. Sometimes we paddled beside huge sand dunes or high vertical faces of black rock plunging straight into the water or countless layers of green, red, and white; other times



*Sergeant major and Baja angelfish. Photo/Lois Wyatt*



*A colorful cliff face. Photo/Lois Wyatt*

we savored wide vistas. We stopped at one tiny fishing village tucked against steep rock, accessible only from the water and another sprawling village where we saw their community dirt soccer field, bought snacks at mini-store, and refilled at their tiny desalination

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plant. We crossed that harbor to a four-table restaurant where we had a midday meal and chatted with the owner and an expat couple living on the sailboat anchored just out from where our kayaks rested. Apparently one popular activity for the women in these remote locations is embroidery; at each stop they came to spread out their handiwork; sea scenes and characters from Ariel



*Helen Dawson aims her camera at cross-bedded sandstone. Photo/Lois Wyatt*

and Finding Nemo were common subjects. Snorkeling every day, I was able to see past the familiar, colorful cast of characters to a number of well camouflaged bottom feeders. I saw my first sea turtle and kept my gaze riveted on a wary octopus for long time. Intact seashells were everywhere. There were short hikes to overlooks and up ravines. I marveled at the determination of the tiny plants to survive in their parched and rocky environment. Most days after landing, the first task for Adrian was spear-fishing for our dinner. One afternoon Adrian and Jorge instead went diving for chocolate clams, the name suggesting not the flavor but the color of their shells. Each night the Milky Way popped soon after sunset, vivid and magnificent overhead. We began with nights hot enough that I slept on top of my sleeping bag. Each night I would wake a bit earlier to move from top to inside until the last night when I was in my sleeping bag the whole night.

The second layover day was planned for our last campsite, and the paddle that final morning was a short distance to a larger fishing village north of Punta Coyote. In total we covered about 70 miles. When we landed, we stacked all the equipment and waited for the vehicles to arrive, van for us and truck with trailer for the gear and kayaks. But where were they? No cell phone service, no information. More than an hour later, Jorge spotted someone approaching on foot on the road between the vertical rock and the rocky shoreline. The van was stuck on the sandy road which had been damaged by the hurricane. What to do? People and personal gear were loaded into an available panga. Because we were mellow after ten days of functioning at paddling and camping speed, it was startling to race across the water, sea spray flying. Vehicles from the village followed the road, maneuvered, struggled, and eventually freed Paddling South's van. Once loaded, we appreciated the AC as we drove two

hours south to La Paz. After our farewell dinner, including another serving of shrimp chile rellenos for me, we encountered many witches and ghosts, pirates and princesses, small and grown, on our walk along the malecón. U.S. Halloween, with some modifications, has blended with Day of the Dead observances in Mexico. Whole families in costumes were out walking. Rather than walking door to door, children said "trick or treat" and open their bags to the adults and

the businesses along the malecón. An early morning airport shuttle carried us on an hilly inland route through a landscape dense with yellow flowers blooming on tree poppy bushes. A fellow passenger commented on how much greener it looked from her arrival two weeks earlier. From SJD Los Cabos Airport, we were homeward bound after two weeks packed with great experiences and with memories to savor for years to come. ♦



## Paddlers!

### The Potomac River Swim Needs You!

The 2018 Potomac River Swim (7.5 miles) needs support kayakers to accompany individual swimmers on **Saturday June 2, 2018**. You can really make a difference!

Kayakers accompany individual swimmers on their crossing and get: - pre-swim supper/briefing on Friday, June 1. - camping at Pt. Lookout State Park on Friday, June 1 and Saturday, June 2. - post-swim picnic at Pt. Lookout State Park on Saturday, June 2. - commemorative t-shirt

More info: <http://www.potomacriverswim.com>

Sign up: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TQ9HYG3>

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