

Chesapeake Paddler



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California (Baja) Dreamin'

By Rick Wiebush

I recently led a group of CPA paddlers on a two-stage, two-week trip to Baja that included:

- A self-supported week-long 90 nautical mile (NM) expedition from just south of Loreto (Ensenada Blanca) to just north of La Paz (Punta Coyote); and
- A separate 55 NM circumnavigation of Isla Espiritu Santo and Isla Partida.



Overview of the trip

Loreto to La Paz—We rented boats and got a shuttle to the put-in from Baja Outdoor Activities (BOA) in La Paz. Most of the boats were Prijon rotomolded Kodiaks and Seayaks. They were in excellent shape and had a lot of storage space, but had rudders (gasp!).

The routine the first week was similar each day: up at dawn, paddle 15-18 NM while pretty much hugging the coast and seeing no other people, stop around 4 PM at a great campsite, eat and talk, have a little tequila, go to bed right after dark around 8; get up the next day and repeat. We carried all our water with us (about 20 liters each to start) and got one small resupply at the village of San Evaristo.

The trip was run by Cross Currents Sea Kayaking and included CPA members Jan Sheehan (MD), Kevin Black (VA), Mike Thomas (MD) and Glenn Schlippert (PA). James Kesterson, a long-time paddling buddy from North Carolina, was also part of the group.

Although I had been to Baja five or six times previously, I was again stunned by the scale of the place, the jaw-dropping beauty, and the isolation. Jagged mountains drop directly into the sea; camping is on spectacular beaches; the conditions on the Sea of Cortez change from mild to wild day-to-day; and interesting wildlife abounds, especially on the second part of the trip. In my mind, Baja is paddling at its best. Here's a scene typical of the massive scale of the landscape (note the kayaker, bottom right):



Here's a scene typical of the massive scale of the landscape (note the kayaker, bottom right), photo by Rick Wiebush

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There is no place else to get water along this route. It is extremely remote and isolated. If you were to get into big trouble (i.e., someone seriously sick or injured), the only way to get help would be to hope that some fisherman came by in his panga.

Conditions most days were pretty benign on the Loreto-La Paz leg. We typically had about 10 knot winds and pretty calm seas. However, on the third day we had to deal with 15-20 knot winds (gusting to 25) out of the northeast that had been blowing all the previous night and which resulted in fairly steep (but not breaking) waves that were typically six feet high and frequently got as high as eight feet. Picture sitting in your boat and looking up at a wave that is five feet over your head! This went on for four or five hours and was a little dicey. We took a lot of pictures, but none on that day. We were too busy concentrating, with hands firmly on paddles. Everyone handled these conditions with grace and style and there was unanimous agreement that this day was absolutely the most challenging and best part of the trip.



The beach at Punta San Telmo has been a highlight of every trip I've done in Baja photo by Mike Thomas

I mentioned camping on beautiful beaches. For my money, the prettiest campsite I've ever been to is at Punta San Telmo, where we stayed the third night, about 40 miles into the trip.

Another highlight of this part of the trip was on the next-to-last day, when we did a five mile crossing from San Evaristo out to Isla San Jose, an island that dominates your view to the east for about half the trip. It is huge (20 miles long, 4-5 miles wide) and extremely rugged. On our arrival, we were greeted by a whole pod of dolphins who were feeding in the fast moving currents at the edge of San Jose. Two of them subsequently put on a show, repeatedly leaping completely out of the water in tandem. We then paddled 7 NM back to the mainland. Two great crossings!

With the exception of that San Jose dolphin encounter and a lot of cool birds (e.g., pelicans, cormorants, the occasional booby and frigate), one of the most disappointing aspects of this first leg was the absence of wildlife sightings. There are lots of whales in Baja, but they usually take off by the end of March. We saw none. There are also usually a lot of sea lions and dolphins but we saw only a few of each. This was to change dramatically when we got to Espiritu Santo.

Espiritu Santo, Isla Partida and Los Islotes—After completing the first trip, we all returned to La Paz, stayed in a hotel, got cleaned up and properly fed. Half the group had to return to the U.S. the next day, while Kevin, Glenn and I used that day to recuperate a little and re-supply for the next phase of the trip.

The Espiritu Santo group of islands is just off the coast from La Paz. It is a 4.5 NM crossing to get out to them and they represent a very different scene in Baja paddling. The islands are not as rugged as the Loreto-La Paz coastline. And, because of their proximity to La Paz, all the commercial outfitters run most of their three- and five-day tourist trips out there. In fact, we ran into about three or four such groups, so there was much less of an isolated and wilderness feel to these islands.

That's about the only drawback. The water is crystal clear. There are really pretty pocket beaches, mangroves, and smaller islands scattered all around. There are lots of caves, stacks and arches, and tons, tons of wildlife. In fact the highlight of this bit of the trip—in sharp contrast to the first part—was the wildlife. During a four-day period we saw:

- A whale and her "baby" on day 1 and four whales crossing in front of us on day 3;
- Hundreds of frigate birds soaring, gliding, riding the thermals every evening;
- 5-10 gigantic sea turtles every day;
- A daily late afternoon display of dozens of mobula rays leaping and flapping their way three feet into the air;
- And, best of all, the huge sea lion colony at Los Islotes.

Mobula Rays are related to manta rays, but are generally smaller (maybe 2-3 ft. from wingtip to wingtip). They get going under water, flapping their wings and then launch themselves into the air before belly flopping back down onto the water surface, landing with a crack that sounds like a gunshot. In any given area, there may be 20-30 of them doing this all at the same time. Some of them prefer to do twists and back flips before landing. It is a behavior about which different scientists have varying theories, but no one knows for sure why they do this. It appears to be primarily for fun. A video of the rays is here:

<http://www.facebook.com/crosscurrentskayaking>

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One of the things I discovered (after Kevin pointed it out) is that for every one of those rays that is leaping, there are about 50 others that aren't leaping. It was a real eye-opener to see these massive numbers of rays traveling all in the same direction about 10 feet under the surface. Think about a tightly-knit group covering an area about the size of a basketball court.

The sea lions at Los Islotes (two small rocky islands about a half mile off the coast of Isla Partida) are absolutely fabulous. There are several hundred of them, alternating between sunning themselves on the rocks and sliding into the water. In the water, they wrestle with each other, swim and dive or just lay on their sides relaxing while holding their flippers out of the water (for balance?). There's another video here:

<http://www.facebook.com/crosscurrentskayaking>

When a kayaker or snorkeler shows up, the fun really starts. Many of the sea lions are extremely curious and they will swim all around your boat, periodically popping their heads above the surface to check you out. Then if they want a different view, they dive down and come flying directly at you about three feet under the water. Just before reaching the boat, they will turn over on their backs and streak beneath you upside down. The really inquisitive ones—we hypothesize that they are juveniles—will pop up right next to the boat and start inspecting things. One sea lion actually had her flippers wrapped around the stern of Kevin's boat, like a hug. He then reached up and started nibbling on the rudder. (She is also rumored to have mumbled: "Kevin, please. WTF? How come you don't have a skegged boat?")



A sea lion came up to Kevin and started nibbling on his paddle! And this one found my deck lines very interesting, photo by Rick Wiebush

Comments by Kevin Black, A Participant

It is very hard to wrap your consciousness around a landscape so big. A number of times I asked Ivan, from BOA, how far away a particular rock or headland was, thinking that it was perhaps two miles, and he would say, "Oh that's eight miles easy." I finally gave up trying to comprehend it and just let myself float in the bigness as a very tiny and grinning speck.

We had great weather throughout the trip—no bugs, no rain (hasn't rained in two years) a little wind one night, warm temps during the day and cool ones that were perfect for sleeping at night. We always camped on a beach, and were always pretty active once the sun came up in the morning because it started to get hot pretty quickly. That and the fact that Jan thought that when Rick said, "we need to get going by 8:30", he really meant it. Jan was the strongest female paddler in the group by far, but she did exhibit a few "female territoriality issues" when we would land for the night. Of course, being mostly gentlemanly paddlers, the guys always (I mean always) gave Jan the pick of the spots so she could do whatever it was she was doing over there. This behavior occurred early on, when we were still being polite and civilized.

I like to poke around beaches while kayaking. I discovered a lot of totally new shells and dead fish and coral bits and a lot of burro poop, and less manmade trash than I have ever seen in all my paddling. Paddlers before us had left what I call campsite shrines of shells and stones and beach glass and such, all placed in some way to indicate that they were there. I got a huge kick out of those for some reason.

I loved the sense of knowing you are in wilderness in a place like this. We only saw a few fishermen in their pangas (24' open boats with outboards) and a couple of remote fishing villages that were just clusters of one room cabins made from plywood or cinderblock with flat roofs, and occasionally a photovoltaic panel and satellite dish sticking up from the roof line. Most cabins have a palapa (palm thatched roof with no sidewalls) where the fishermen spend most of their time lounging in the shade while not fishing.

A highlight for me was spending a night on the beach at Rancho Dolores, a privately owned ranch that only exists because of a hand dug well (I don't know how old) from which water is pumped into a cistern that is used to irrigate small crop plots and trees on the farm. About eight folks lived at the ranch, and had no problem with our camping on their beach and using a bit of the cistern water to rinse the salt off our bodies for the first time in days. There was livestock about—horses, cattle and goats on tethers to trees, chickens, and burros. As we were walking away from the ranch hacienda (all concrete with a flat roof and Mexican arches and open porches) we watched one of the farmer's daughters sharpening a machete to use for the next day's work on a stone that had obviously been used for that purpose for a very, very, long time.

We camped one night on the beach at San Evaristo, a very small village on a natural harbor that is popular with the live-aboard crowd. The boat folks were a good source of weather info. In fact, they were our only source. We visited the very small store to get a few supplies (like canned salsa and chips), and resupplied with some fresh water from the desalination plant (for lack of a better word). Someone said that there was a bar and restaurant across the bay, but that the beer would be warm because they had no ice. Warm beer sounded just fine at that point, and James and I paddled across to the palapa bar/restaurant to discover that there was no food, no customers, and two warm canned beers in a refrigerator that had been placed on its back to be used as a cooler of sorts. Not what we were looking for, exactly. *more next page*

We had a great group of paddlers for this trip. Everyone pitched in and helped one another or not and traded camping tips and a lot of lies. Glenn, however, did have this thing about wearing silk during the evening hours. I never did figure that one out.

We finished our paddle at Punta Coyote and threw our gear in the van and trailer and endured an awful long and hot ride back to La Paz, much of it on a dirt road that redefines pothole.

The Espiritu Santo circumnavigation was the perfect end and chill-out from the 100 mile open coast trip we had just done. The West side of Espiritu is more protected, with deeper bays to pocket beaches and not as much swell and wind chop so we could see into the depths of the clear water. But the days were getting HOT, as in land, find the closest boulder with shade and lie down behind it. We spent most of two days paddling to Los Islotes and watching the sea lions, which was mesmerizing. They are total klutzes on land, but beautiful to watch in the water. Glenn quickly learned to imitate the calls of the male sea lions, and soon had several females swimming about his boat. These islands also contain a nesting rookery of Boobys (look 'em up). From a distance the islands appear to be white from all the Booby poop all over them.

The East side of Santo was all about huge cliffs and arches and caves and boulders under water with a lot of fish swimming about. We were starting to feel beat up by the sun about this time, and were ducking for shade whenever we could find it. We spent the last night on a two-mile long beach sleeping under the stars.

The final day we spent simply lounging at El Moro, our hotel- among palm trees and bougainvillea in full bloom and a pool that took up most of the grounds with two built in hot tubs and a poolside bar—very nice accommodations for the end of a paddling trip.

Some details/If you go—First, there are a lot more photos here: <http://outdoors.webshots.com/album/582739780AxMmSg>

Doing the Loreto to La Paz trip takes a lot of work and time (and some money), but is well worth it. We flew into Cabo San Lucas (SJD) for about \$750 round trip. We went there because flying directly to La Paz is now pretty expensive (\$1,100). We then took a limo (\$250 one way) from Cabo to La Paz, mostly for various reasons of convenience. It is possible to get a bus for just \$35.

Then you have to get from La Paz three hours north to the put-in near Loreto. To get the whole group, the boats and our equipment there cost \$800. The shuttle to get picked up at Punta Coyote and returned to La Paz was an additional \$400. But the real pain about flying to Cabo is that you essentially spend two days traveling before getting on the water. (It's still worth it.)

The boats cost us about \$32/day and were in good shape. We all brought our own paddles, PFDs and paddle floats, but BOA normally supplies them with the rental. We all also brought radios and tow lines.

I've stayed in several hotels in La Paz, but the El Moro was clearly the nicest (see photos) and very affordable. We got rooms that comfortably slept three people (one with two bedrooms) for about \$130/ night. Split three ways, that's what you'd pay for a single room at one of the cheaper hotels. The bonus about El Moro is that it is right next door to both the BOA shop and a great restaurant that is frequented primarily by locals.

There are food stores in La Paz where you can get just about anything you would need for a camping trip. The only exception to that I can think of is freeze-dried food. Several of our group brought almost all their food with them and, after seeing the grocery stores, regretted it.

You can bring stoves and (empty) fuel bottles on planes. Just make sure they are clean and have no fumes. You can get white gas and canister fuel in La Paz.

This trip probably sounds really expensive, but I don't think so. People in our group paid less than \$900 for everything (boats, hotels, shuttles, etc.) except airfare and their camp food and in-town food. That's for the week-long Loreto to La Paz trip. The outfitters charge about \$1,300 (+ airfare) for the same trip.

I think the people who left after a week may have made a bit of a mistake. It seems to me that if you are going to spend \$750 to get to Baja, you should maximize your time there. By that same reasoning, I think I was dumb to think that some people might come to just do the Espiritu Santo portion of the trip: why spend all that money on airfare and just go to Baja for 4 or 5 days? My recommendation is to go for about 10 days.

If you are thinking about doing a trip to Baja, I'd be happy to help with any information, resources, contacts, tips, etc.



Chris Beckman and Jack Martin at CLC Okumefest May 12, 2012, photo by Ralph Heimlich