

Garbage in Mexico

Our North American sensitivities are appalled by the extent of garbage in the water and on the beaches of Mexico. We've been cruising the outside of the Baja peninsula, down to Banderas Bay, up to Mazatlan and through the Sea of Cortez for the past 9 months and are continually astonished by the volume of garbage everywhere. We've spent time trying to clean up remote beaches by filling garbage bags with plastic bags and bottles, only to have it replaced on the next high tide. We've witnessed families enjoying a fiesta on the beach only to find their beer bottles, food wrappers and diapers left behind, usually within walking distance of a garbage can. Idyllic looking small coves that we've shared with the occasional fishing boat get littered by the refuse tossed overboard by the fisherman. I don't get their attitude towards garbage. Is this an out of site - out of mind concept, or it's not my beach so I don't give a shit?

If the Mexican tourist ministry, FONATUR, is serious about promoting the Sea of Cortez as a pristine marine environment for tourists to explore, shouldn't there be some attempt at education, programs sponsored to cleanup areas, or other means of dealing with the situation? I understand that some communities, such as La Paz and Escondido, have made their own attempts to clean up beaches and keep them clean through proactive garbage pickup programs. Actions like this may not be possible everywhere in Mexico but could be the first step in changing attitudes toward garbage disposal.

I have travelled extensively overland through developing nations in eastern Europe, Asia and west Africa, so I have experienced how garbage is handled in these various places. Perhaps the worst shithole I was ever in was the Cambodian border town of Poipet where amputees and Aids victims slept amongst piles of plastic and household refuse. The extent of garbage I've witnessed in some locations along the coast of Mexico, like Bahia Catalina near Guaymas, rivals this scene. Some countries, such as Thailand, have successfully made the transition from the banana leaf wrapper to modern plastics and have learned to properly dispose of the garbage.

The Gringo hangouts aren't immune to garbage accumulation either, although the popular anchorages that we've been to such as Matanchen Bay, Caleta Partida and Conception Bay are decidedly cleaner. In Bahia San Carlos oil covered Coke bottles floated through the anchorage, at Los Gatos we found cruisers' garbage buried ashore and we witnessed cruisers discarding their cans into a bay only a few hundred metres from the anchorage. Burying or throwing garbage overboard is at odds with the concept of cruising in unspoiled, clean surroundings. We've heard, but not experienced, that water in anchorages such as Barra de Navidad and Zihua get so tepid and the fecal coliform count so high that cruisers are reluctant to go swimming to cool off. Is this the dream cruise people envisioned?

I'm not exactly a greenie-weenie, but we've always tried to have a minimal impact wherever we go and I thought sailing fit that concept. We try to reduce the amount of garbage produced on board, but since nearly everything except fruit and vegetables is pre-packaged we end up with one bag full of garbage nearly every week. When we take

this ashore, we anticipate that the 10 pesos we give to the local entrepreneur ensures our garbage is properly dealt with. Given the attitudes we've seen, this may not always have been the case. If we had more storage space I'd pack the garbage with us until reaching a major center with adequate garbage disposal facilities. Instead I just have to hold my fears and try not to feel guilty about contributing to the situation.

As relative newbies to the cruising scene, I've got some questions that I hope you or your experienced audience may provide answers to. Can we expect to see this extent of garbage throughout the coast of Mexico? If so, how do they deal with it - accept it as part of the "experience", attempt to clean up areas or leave? Does this same degree of disrespect for the environment exist all the way into Latin America?

I do not think that negative responses to these questions would stop us from continuing on with our cruise, but it may help us avoid some areas and be mentally prepared for other unavoidable situations. When we are on passage and the warm wind is pulling us comfortably along, images of garbage strewn beaches are the last thing on our minds. Maybe there is a message there.

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