

Misperceptions about Sailing in Mexico

Before we left for Mexico last fall we undertook a fairly extensive refit and purchased specific equipment to ensure Curare was as best prepared for our cruise as possible. We installed a watermaker (invaluable!), fridge (nice to have cold beer), liferaft, EPIRB, SSB/Ham radio, windvane (our third crew member), solar panels, radar and chartplotter and inner stay for a storm jib. We had new sails made and recut our old sails to provide for a range of light air hulls, electrical rigging, and a through heavy winds. We replaced a number of hoses, thru wiring, added some electronics (AIS is great), new running heavier anchor and Islands testing anchor and provisions to last us three months, including Jessie's dogfood. I put on enough spares to hopefully cover any eventuality from starter motor failure to spare rigging stays. We had absorbed as much as we could from all of the literature available on cruising in Mexico and presentations from other sailors who had been there. Even though departure day came rapidly upon us, we felt as ready as we could possibly be so on September 11 we cast off from Victoria for our 1400 mile trip to Ensenada, Mexico.



Once we got to Mexico we had visions of beautiful days spent under sail to arrive at sunset in a cozy little tropical anchorage that would protect us from the seas, where we could snorkel or dive off the boat and explore the isolated beaches. Poof! It hasn't happened. Sure we've had our share of secluded anchorages, probably more than most cruisers judging from how plugged up the marinas are, and the beaches look beautiful from the boat with gorgeous white sand being gently caressed by waves. But when you get ashore, the waves can actually be a swell that tosses the dinghy around and the beaches are almost always covered with an incredible amounts of plastic garbage, (we've filled garbage bags full, only to have the beach littered again by the next high tide). The water has not been warm enough to comfortably go swimming, even with our 3mm wetsuits, and generally the anchorages only provide protection from one direction. When the wind switches, usually at 2AM, you're exposed to a lee shore with swell rolling in and your idyllic anchoring spot becomes very uncomfortable. This all may sound like a bunch of whining from someone who has nothing better to complain about because after all we haven't worked for over a year, the sun shines almost everyday and we're moving at our own pace (and that of the weather). It's not meant to be a whine as much as a reality check. Those days and evenings spent planning and reading about cruising in Mexico didn't really present the same picture as the one we've experienced. So here are a few of the misperceptions, both good and bad, that we've experienced while cruising from the outside of the Baja peninsula to Banderas Bay and north up into the Sea of Cortez over the past nine months.



Anchorage

On our passage down from Victoria we elected to make the trip in one jump rather than harbour hop down the coast as most cruisers do, so our first stop was a marina in Ensenada, Mexico. And a very nice, comfortable marina at that. After leaving Ensenada in late October we experienced our first Mexican anchorage at Isla San Martin where we arrived at 0400 after an overnight passage. The recommended "anchorage" was nothing more than a minor indentation on the south side of the small island in the lee of the prevailing



north winds. After a couple hours sleep and a quick trip ashore for Jessie the winds picked up and we left for a more sheltered anchorage at Bahia San Quintin 8 miles east. This anchorage provided substantially more protection from the north but was also completely open to the southwest. It was here the next morning that I learned how little surf is required to flip a dinghy. This scenario of recommended anchorages has been repeated throughout our travels in Mexico. In the dozens of anchorages that we have explored, I think there have only been three or four (like Bahia Catalina near Guaymas where we are presently anchored in strong winds) that have offered good protection from all prevailing wind quadrants. I don't ever recall being at anchor in the Pacific northwest when a forecast for "light and variable" winds produced over 30 knots in the anchorage, and that scenario frequently occurs in Mexico. Which brings up the next subject...



Weather

Before leaving, we had this concept of lots of downwind sailing (hence the three light air sails) with the occasional contrary beat. On the trip down to Ensenada and again on the outside of the Baja peninsula this was definitely the case. We had some very memorable spinnaker runs with the full moon setting beneath our multi-coloured spinnaker. After Cabo San Lucas, we've only had the spinnaker out twice



for a couple of hours each time. The majority of our travels have been either beating into heavy winds and seas or motoring. We've actually done very little sailing even though we will hoist the sails at any opportunity. Sources for weather forecasts include internet sites such as Magic Seaweed, NOAA or Weather Underground when we have internet access (that's



another topic!) and SSB/Ham radio broadcast from Don Anderson of Summer Passage on the Amigo Net and/or Rick on the Sonrisa net. These forecasts fairly accurately predict the general weather for the Sea of Cortez and down the mainland coast to Puerto Vallarta. During the winter the prevailing winds are out of the north pushed by highs in Colorado area to the lows off the Mexican coast. As the Sea of northwest to southeast, this is the prevailing wind direction and the wind can be determined from the isobar gradient - simple enough.



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local winds can be nearly completely contrary to the to topography dragging the wind around headlands, peninsulas that funnel the wind into bays. Then there are katabatic effects from the heating of the land and sea which causes the winds to blow perpendicular to the coast.

All of these factors add up to highly variable wind conditions. The general trends remain the same but locally (as along a 20 or 30 mile passage) conditions are just not predictable and this has made selecting passages and anchorages difficult, with the result that we have had to suddenly change destinations during a passage or leave anchorages. None of this reflects the serene images of travelling in Mexico that was portrayed in our guidebooks. Maybe the talk of an El Nina year are true?

Water Temperature

We brought along all of our dive and snorkel gear with the great expectation of diving at every anchorage. Our main concern was how we would be able to refill our dive tanks. We've been diving exactly once - in Ensenada where we rented 7mm suits to put over our 3mm suits. It was cold! We've tried snorkelling four or five times, and although this is enjoyable and scenic, we can only swim for 45 minutes or so before turning blue. What happened to the bathtub temperature water everyone talked about in the presentations and cruisebooks? Another



phenomenon caused by el Nina, perhaps. Actually we found out from speaking with some whale researchers that our cold water experiences are real as the water temperature is a whopping 3 degrees

colder this year! We're hoping that the water temperature will increase over the summer so that we can enjoy some diving in the fall.

Parts and Supplies

On the positive side, with all of the boats that are now cruising or at marinas in Mexico, there is a good supply of both marine parts and experienced marine repairman. It seems that only major items that would not normally be stocked need to be ordered in, and for northern Mexico at least, these parts arrive within a week. The same with food. The main centers such as Cabo, Mazatlan and PV all have mega-shopping centers with a large selection of fresh and canned products. Unless we had drifted out to sea for three months, we wouldn't have needed the extensive provisions that we brought on board.

Crime

Another perception, one that has been ingrained into us since childhood, is that Mexico has a high crime rate. Maybe this is true, but in the areas we've cruised there haven't been any reports or discussions of crime. Most people take rudimentary precautions such as putting binoculars below, but we've also seen boats with cameras, radios and binoculars lying in the cockpit while the crew left the boat in a marina for the whole day! Richard Spindler, editor of the informative monthly magazine Latitude 38, mentioned that he hasn't locked his dinghy up in Mexico in 15 years. Mexico does have crime and in some areas there are gang wars going on for control of drug distribution but it appears that these wars are kept between the police and the criminals and that the average tourist/cruiser in Mexico is not affected. Of course, proper travelling precautions need to be applied, just as they would in any foreign country.

We have been having a fantastic time cruising around the north Pacific coast of Mexico. It's a wonderful way to get around, to meet the friendly local people and in general to experience the cruising lifestyle. I can't imagine that there are many other places in the world that are as easy to get into and around and that offer the diversity and beauty that Mexico has with such minimal fuss and hassle. It is relatively inexpensive to travel here (\$1500 to \$2000 per month, twice that in marinas), there is a good variety of scenery, people and food and it is safe. We just wish that we had known more about what cruising here was like so that we could have planned our trip a bit differently. In the end, it has all been good.

