

## Chartering in the Sea of Cortez

by Mike Rickman



Most of the time you get a report from groups that charter. This is a report from someone who takes people out. My name is Mike and I am one of the part-time skippers at Moorings in La Paz, Mexico.

We never know who the people are or where they are from before the trip starts. This is a report of a nine-day trip from La Paz north to Puerto Escondido and back. I first met the family of three at the end of the briefing given by Fred, one of the other skippers. They were a family

from Switzerland and they came primarily to see whales and dolphins.

The Sea of Cortez is loaded with marine life but producing it on demand can sometimes leave you a little empty. This trip surprised me especially and sent the family home with more than enough pictures and memories to cover the distance they flew, not to mention the expense of the trip.

**Day One:** We left the base at close to noon and headed out the channel. Just after clearing and approaching Roca Lobos, we saw sea lions cavorting and feeding. As we proceeded north and off Balandra, we saw our first humpback whales.



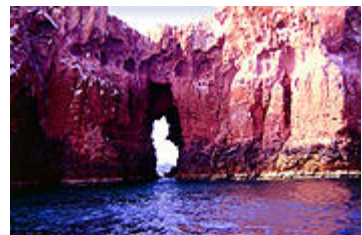
They started off slightly astern of us and to our port. They gradually drifted across our stern and passed us as they headed up to Bahia San Gabriel. As we approached San Gabriel, the show began. Spy hopping and breaching were the order of the day. We drifted for probably an hour watching them and then moved north when they slowed the show. As we moved toward Isla Ballena they seemed to follow us again and went out into deeper water to put on another show for both us and for some dive boats that were returning from the islands.



As this show slowed, a large group of dolphins less than one-half mile away were playing, so these were our next feature. They were into jumps and flips and the family could not believe their luck; and neither could I. We ended up in Caleta Partida for the night and all went to sleep happy.

**Day Two:** We got up early and had breakfast. First thing

up was a dinghy ride through the sand spits at the east end of Partida and out into the other side. I showed them the osprey nest and on the way back in found a large number of whalebones in about ten feet of water. They then explored the cave above the fish camp on the west side of the bay. We then upped anchor and headed off to Los Islotes to swim with the sea lions. It was a little choppy with the wind from the



south so once there, I dropped them on the north side of the island. The mom and daughter went in with both still and underwater video cameras while Dad took pictures from the boat.



The females and pups almost always give a great show and this time was no exception. They spent over three quarter of an hour in the water, taking pictures the whole time. Apparently their plan was to later mix the above- and below- water scenes for their family video. We do not anchor

here at Islotes, as it is too deep, so I just idled around until they were finished.



Next up was Isla San Francisco for the night. We had some good wind of 10-12 knots so we sailed along nicely while lunch was being made. About ten minutes after we sat down to eat we thought we had the whole area to ourselves... WRONG! Sylvie, the mom, looked right ahead of us and saw a sleeping humpback directly in our path. They all jumped to the rail with cameras as I tried to miss the critter and not gibe the boom, which would have put the whole family into the water. As it was, we did miss it but the dinghy and fishing line went over the whale's nose. The dinghy did wake it up and it sounded. I never want to get that close again!.

**Day Three:** We got up early and had coffee and rolls. Anchor was up by 7AM with our next anchorage to be Puerto Gato. We had a little wind so up went the main and the jib went out. I decided to go outside San Jose for a different view, as most people go between the Baja and the island.

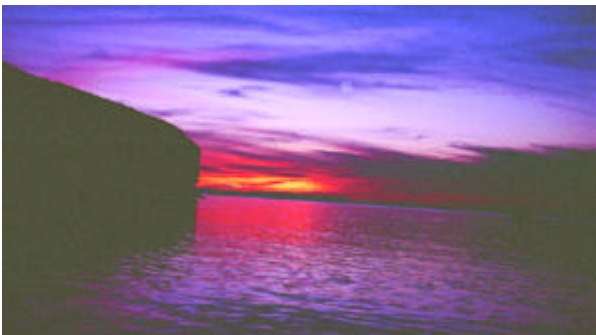
About two-thirds of the way up to the island, we were surrounded by spouting whales. We were in the middle of a really large group of blue whales. We had been motor sailing by this time so we turned the motor off and we had three-hundred-sixty-degree surround-sound of whales. Some were close, within one hundred yards or so, and others were within a mile. All you could hear were whales spouting. You could hear the ones way off by time-delay from the spouts. We must have spent a good two hours drifting, with just the main up and watching. The family was taking pictures. Priceless!

Some of the pairs would swim in a circle of approximately 100 yards for three or four times before diving. There was at any one time over thirty whales on the surface. As the sun got higher in the sky they slowed down and we had to move on, so it was off to Puerto Gato.



We arrived mid to late afternoon and my amigo Manuel was waiting for us. Manuel is the local lobster guy. He took Mom and Dad out in his panga and they came back with nine lobsters. Dinner was solved. We were also the only boat in the anchorage. Simply one of the most amazing days I have ever spent on the water.

**Day Four:** During breakfast, feeding dolphins in the anchorage joined us. Just outside, a whale spouted. Four for four in the whale department and I think the family thinks this is normal.



It was time to up anchor and head north. We did not have all that far to go so just before we got to Agua Verde we decided to try for Honeymoon Cove on Isla Danzante. It was full with a beautiful black schooner named "Raven". The other spots there were too deep for us to anchor. I decided our only shot was to go into Cocktail Cove. We got there and anchored near friends on "Debutant" for the night.

One thing about Puerto Escondido is that you can count on the sunsets and sunrises being some of the most beautiful in Baja.

**Day Five:** We were once up again early. We took a short tour around Puerto Escondido, out the entrance and around the north end of Isla Danzante. We had not a whisper of wind so we motored towards Agua Verde. At approximately two-thirds of the way there we were surrounded by a huge pod of dolphins. Camera stations were in order as they stayed with us for almost forty-five minutes.



We arrived in Agua Verde and anchored on the north side. We did get the “cruisers-inspecting-the-charter-boat-anchoring-drill”. There was room but not a lot. After the anchor was down, we were invited to a beach potluck that night at the Agua Verde Yacht Club, (actually an overhang from one of the fishing sheds). The family had time to go into the village first and took the dinghy to explore. I knew some of the other boats there and the family had a great time meeting people.

The cruisers were great and asked them about Switzerland and their trip. We all returned to the boat well after dark and had a great night’s rest.

**Day Six:** My original plan was a straight run to San Evaristo, straight through the San Jose Channel. I questioned whether another look at the blue whales was in order and they agreed. We made a straight course through Isla San Diego and Isla Santa Cruz.

On the way, what should appear but a sei whale (we had to look it up in our book) on our starboard side. At almost the same spot as before, we saw more blues. Not as many as before because it was later in the day. There were still many of them doing their circle drill and we constantly heard them blow. I had turned off the engine and after about fifteen minutes, off to our port surfaced the largest thing I have ever seen! It was headed straight for us and was easily double the size of our forty-foot boat. No one said a word but got busy taking pictures.

It got within a boat length and dove to reappear on the other side. The water was clear enough to watch it the whole way. We stayed still for the next fifteen minutes or so waiting for them to clear before we headed south again.

Just like clockwork as we cleared the blues, another pod of dolphins took it upon themselves to travel and play with us. We headed back to Isla San Francisco with the daylight left to us.



**Day Seven:** We were off to Amortajada Bay at Isla San Jose to see the Cardon Cactus forest and the lagoon there. We took the dinghy up the river leading to the lagoon where we spent a little time in the cactus forest.

We proceeded to Isla Coyote where we anchored for lunch. This place is not to be missed. It is the second-most populated island in the Sea of Cortez. There are several families on the large rock and it is very picturesque. It is well worth going shore and they welcome visitors. Rumor has it that there

lobsters available there as well. We cleared on the west side with a nice fifteen-knot breeze. It kept building to the point that I eventually reefed and rolled the jib in a little. We anchored in Ensenada Grande for the night. At this point, Murphy's Law set in and the swell from the west made it a very bumpy night.

**Day Eight:** We visited Isla Islotes again for more pictures and then anchored at El Embudo for lunch. Since that means "The Funnel", it's only good for one or two boats and in daytime only. A lazy motor-sail down through the anchorages on Partida and Espiritu Santu finally took us to Lobos Cove for the night. And by the way, we saw another whale in the distance.



**Last Day:** Back to the base by ten AM. This was by far my most amazing trip for seeing sea life. Not only were the customers great people, but also they were extremely lucky to have traveled from Switzerland and be able to see the number of whales, dolphins, sea lions and rays that they did. They went home very happy and I am still shaking my head in amazement.

After having done this for two years, this trip takes the prize. I think my wife is a little envious but there will be another day when you're cruising. That is the beauty of it.

Hasta Luego, Amigos.

**Mike Rickman**  
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