

# A Visit to Isla San Benitos

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December 8, 2002. Although we've been past Isla San Benitos four times on our way up and down the Baja, we've never stopped. It's located just West of Isla Cedros, about in the middle of the West Coast of the Baja between San Diego and Cabo San Lucas. It's a tiny island with a tiny village that has maybe 20 or 30 residents only during fishing season. Their primary source of income is abalone, which they gather and put aboard a supply boat that comes periodically from the mainland.

The anchorage is small and full of kelp. The amount of kelp varies with the water temperature, there being more during colder years and less during "El Niño" years, which this is. Normally I would never willingly anchor in kelp, being afraid of getting the prop fouled in it, or the anchor not holding. But other boats were there, already anchored, and after observing and talking with them we were confident that it was safe. There is a path that is kept clear by the coming and going of the supply boat and the local pangas, so we found that and followed it into the main anchorage, anchoring beside Jim and Jane Fleming on *Anticipation* just at sundown. Other boats there were *Anticipation*, *Andy*, *Swallow* and *Grasal*, all sailboats. It turned out to be a wonderful, calm, quiet place, good holding for the anchor, and not as much kelp as expected.

Jim and Jane on *Anticipation* had graciously stayed over an additional day to show us the place, and so the next morning we took a tour of the island. First stop was the Elephant Seal beaches just across the island about ½ mile from the anchorage. There we met Alan from Paris, France, who is a photojournalist living in a pup tent on the beach to photograph, study and write about the Elephant Seals. He plans to spend about six months doing this, on contract to a major publication. The Elephant seals were birthing new pups nearly every day and there were several dozen of them on the beaches and just off shore in the water. Alan was in need of a 6-volt bulb for his flashlight, having burned out his only one a few nights before. During the long nights, his only recreation is reading. We happened to have a number of spares, so we gave him two and wished him well.

This is a mountainous island, and it has a lighthouse on the farthest Northwesterly point. There is a trail leading up from the village to the lighthouse, and also to the site of a new lighthouse being built at the very top of the highest point on the island, just above the existing light, where it can be seen from all around. There is also a large white cross on the nearest mountain, directly above the village. It looks to be a long way up to the cross and a very steep climb.

Jim, Donna and I decided to climb up the trail to the lighthouse. This is no easy task. It's 2 or 3 miles from the village to the lighthouse, and it is really steep. The only vehicle that can negotiate this is a Honda 4-wheel ATV. A jeep or larger vehicle wouldn't stand a chance because the trail is only about 4 feet wide in many places with precipitous sides so steep you can't stand up on them. The island has only one Honda ATV, and no other vehicles. This ATV is used to haul materials up to the site of the new lighthouse, and it's the ONLY way to get stuff up there.

Here's how it works: The ATV goes to the Elephant Seal beach where there are two guys with shovels and burlap bags. They load up about 5 or 6 bags with maybe 75-100 lbs of sand in each bag, then they load these into the carry box on the front of the ATV. The driver starts clawing his way up the mountain with this load, and there are places where the ATV just barely makes it. Many of the grades exceed 45-degrees. This is the reason that the carry box is on the front; if it were in back, the ATV would tip over backwards on these grades. He reaches the top, where there are six guys mixing cement and pouring foundations for the new lighthouse. He unloads the bags of sand, rests a little, takes the empty bags and starts back down the mountain for more. This whole process takes about 1 hour per trip. The six guys can use about that much sand in one hour, so they stay more or less even. This is apparently a federally funded project in the amount of about 1.5-million Pesos. This is a huge sum for a small village. "Luis", whom we met later on, told us they plan to finish the new lighthouse by February. I have my doubts.

While I visited the new site, Donna and Jim went on down the road to the old lighthouse. They reported that it was a tower attached to a small building with a set of doors and barred windows on each of the four sides, reminiscent of a jail or a very, very cheap motel. There were stairs inside the tower to get up to the light, but Jim and Donna declined to do that. Inside the house were two diesel generators and a tank of fuel to power the light. Outside was an outhouse.

We started back down, and realized that the mountain with the cross on it above the village, the one that looked so high from below, was very far below where we were. We were probably at 1500 feet altitude. We walked through the village, meeting some of the residents and giving out some of the crayons and paper we had brought with us for the niños. There were about six of crayon-age, and they seemed pleased to get them. We also met Luis and Julia. Jane had stayed behind while we went on our trek up the mountain and had learned that Luis is a sort of straw boss for the village. He is, among other things, responsible for communications and taking care of the lighthouse. Upon learning that I was a "radio guy", Luis showed us his radio shack. It is a small building, about the size of a large outhouse, with an old, dusty Icom 700 Single-Sideband radio and a VHF Marine radio side by side on a table. On the wall was a marine antenna tuner grounded to a stake driven into the dirt floor. Outside was a wire dipole antenna and a vertical whip. He uses the SSB to communicate with Ensenada twice daily, since the island has no phones.

Luis is the lighthouse tender. This means that he gets on the ATV just before sundown, drives all the way out to the lighthouse and hand-cranks one of the diesel generators to power the light. He carries fuel with him to top off the tank, and returns to the village before dark. The fuel supply is timed so that the generator runs out of fuel just after sunrise. This is at least an hour and a half trip. To attempt that trail on an ATV or even on foot after dark would be suicidal!

The new lighthouse will be solar powered.

They lead a simple life here. They do have some sort of power, probably solar panels, and I saw at least one TV satellite dish, but I don't know if it actually works. They have propane gas for cooking, but they also do a lot of outdoors cooking over steel-drum halves with mesquite fires. Most of the houses have blankets hanging down for doors. The villagers over the years have built a tiny, tiny church with two steeples on it. The whole building is about 10 feet on a side and about 12 feet high to the top of the crosses on each steeple. There are two tiny windows near the back. You could get maybe 12 people in there seated, and maybe 20 standing, but they would be packed.

That afternoon, after we rested up from our long hike, Jane came over to our boat and taught me some things about fishing. We (I) actually caught some fish in the kelp that surrounded the boat, but they were too small and too few to make dinner out of, so we released them back to the briny deep. We discovered that it's more fun to watch Jane fish than it is to actually fish yourself. We stayed that night, and then we all left the next morning in fairly calm seas, most of us bound for Turtle Bay. This was a fantastic visit, and it will go down as one of the highlights of the trip for us, thanks to Jim and Jane on *Anticipation*, who encouraged us to come.

***The End***