

The Islands and the Sea of Cortez

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Summary of Our First Time In La Paz and the Islands, January 27 to April 1, 2001

We arrived at Marina de La Paz on Saturday, January 27, 2001. It was windy and cloudy and a little cool. Bob and Carol Mullen on the Union 36 sailboat *Apophoge* talked us down the channel. It's very helpful to have someone on the radio who has been down this channel before. They were tied across from Marina de La Paz in Marina Santa Cruz, sometimes known as the "virtual marina" because of the pilings that are set with no docks. We initially took the berth that Kady-Krogen 39 *Number One*, Mike Ford, had been in. We expected to find him in the marina, but he had left for an island cruise a day or so before we got there. Marina de La Paz "hot-berths." When a boat leaves for a time, their berth is immediately given to someone else. When they return, they may or may not get the same berth back. Don Halsey from the 40' Island Gypsy, *Vittoria III*, whom we had met in Ensenada, came by to say hello.

The Cruiser Lifestyle: When we arrived, we found that there is an identifiable, pervasive culture in the La Paz cruising community. Many of these folks have lived here for years, or have visited year after year. Some have both boats and houses in La Paz. There is a radio network at 8 am on VHF channel 22 every morning except Sunday. They start out with emergency traffic, then do weather, tides, new arrivals or departures, local assistance, swaps and trades, announcements, and any other information the community deems valuable. There is a great willingness to help and it's very much a community.

There are all types of cruisers from those in 25 foot sailboats who are getting by on \$300 per month, to mega-yachts like *Ozark Lady*, a 110-footer which never seemed to leave the marina, but was being polished and shined up by the resident crew every day. You can tell by the condition of the bottom of the boat who has been there the longest. Some have fur and barnacles that nearly reach the bottom of the marina. Of course, these folks are not really cruisers, since their boats never leave the dock; they are residents who ran out of gas here and never left. But they are boaters, too.

The cruising life is a great social leveler. You will find millionaires sitting in the Dock Café alongside those getting by on a single social security check, all dressed in T-shirts and chatting away about boats, neither particularly aware of the other's financial status, or caring.

Cruisers bring mail to and from the states, and there is a sort of a club, Club Cruceros, at Marina de La Paz that we joined. The club does good works around the La Paz area, for example, clothing drives for kids, cleaning up beaches, school supplies, etc. It also has a paperback book exchange and sponsors the mail pickup and delivery to the U.S. We found the club to not be of much interest to us, but others find it useful.

The Bureaucracy: We found the constant check-in, check-out process at every port we came to somewhat onerous. You are even supposed to check out of the marina in La Paz if you're going to the Islands for a few days, and check back in when you return. They don't enforce this, and you can do a verbal check in over VHF radio (in Spanish), but it's still a nuisance. We don't object to the fees -- they are reasonable, about \$25 U.S. in fees at each port. But it takes the better part of a day in some cases to go to Immigration, then the Port Captain, and finally the Bank. We, and other cruisers, would like to see the Mexican Government institute a Cruising Permit like is done in other parts of the world, where you pay a fee based on your boat size and your length of stay, then go anywhere you want.

Fishing licenses are another story. If you fish, or have any fishing gear on board with which you MIGHT fish, even if you don't intend to, you must have a license for the boat, the dinghy, and every person on board. Getting a fishing license takes most of a day and a trip to at least three different agencies.

The First Trip to the Islands: On February 4, after a week of waiting for the wind to subside, we decided it wasn't going to, and we left with *Apophoge* for Isla La Partida. On Monday, Don showed up on *Vittoria III*. Also, the small trimaran *Slick* anchored in the harbor. We found this to be a fun place. There are fish camps along the western side and along the eastern side. The fishermen came out in a panga one day and asked us for water. Since we have a watermaker, we were happy to oblige. They did not offer us fish, as they said the fishing was lousy. We had dinner with Bob and Carol on our boat, then we had a major pancake breakfast on Wednesday morning with Bob and Carol, and Don.

Isla Partida is the first really protected anchorage out of La Paz heading north. It's fairly well protected from everything but southwest winds. It is common to have northwest to northeast winds of 15-20 knots during the day, then southwest winds of about the same after 6PM until midnight. Occasionally, there comes a Corumel, a strong wind from the southwest, and storms usually come from that direction. In these conditions, La Partida can get snotty, but most of the other anchorages can be even worse. The bottom is mostly sand, very little grass, so the holding is good.

On Wednesday, there was a storm predicted, and about 8 pm it finally got there. The winds shifted to the southwest and kicked up to over 40 knots by 10 pm. I slept in the pilothouse and stood anchor watch all night until it finally let up about 4 am. I could see Bob on *Apophoge* out checking his anchor line every hour or so. There were about 14 boats in the cove that night. Amazingly, nobody had any problems, though these were the strongest winds we've encountered in any anchorage, along with 4-6 foot wind waves.

We left Thursday, February 8, to go back to La Paz with *Vittoria III*, and *Apophoge* headed for Mazatlan. Winds were strong all the way back and in the marina, and Don and Mike helped us dock. In spite of the rough night, we counted this trip as a win, because we really enjoyed the island.

Nordhavns Everywhere: We were surprised and delighted upon arriving to find a Nordhavn 46, *Gold Eagle*, just in front of us in the Marina. We were even more surprised to find that there were a total of six Nordhavn 46's in La Paz at the same time, counting ours: *Arcturus*, hull #25, owned by Fred and Chris Caron (whom we thought were long gone to the mainland, but that's another story, see below); *Gold Eagle*, hull #40, owned by Marty and Brita Goldsmith; *Venture Forth*, hull #52, owned by Mac and Carole Baade; *Gray Spirit*, hull #15, owned by Ralph and Sharon Howlett; and *StormHaven*, hull #40, owned by Cynthia and Bob Smith. Donna arranged a dinner for five couples of us at the French restaurant, *Gray Spirit* having not yet arrived. Visiting these other boats made us aware of just how unique all of these N46's can be. They all have different layouts and individual touches that are great fun to see. Just before we left, the 57 Nordhavn, *Evrrik*, pulled in and we got a quick tour of their boat. Erik and Evelyn are former owners of a N46 as well.

There's also a Nordhavn 46 in the Navy shipyard, just a couple hundred yards west of Marina de La Paz. The Navy (according to stories we heard on the dock) confiscated this boat a couple of years ago in a drug case, then later, allowed it to sink. They resurrected it, but it's a mess and probably not worth anything at this point. Too bad, because it is really a unique boat; one of only a few that were built with a foremast.

The Arcturus Story: We met Fred and Chris Caron in Dana Point when they had just bought *Arcturus* in the fall of 1999. They had sold their house and moved onto the boat. Fred proudly pointed out to us the little yellow arrows on the bow of the boat. "That's for when Senility sets in," he explained. "We know to just follow the arrows." They went to Mexico for a short time, then up to Alaska, then back down to La Paz in December. To say Fred is enthusiastic about this boating adventure is an understatement. Fred is like a first-grader telling his mom about his first day at school.

We had brought some parts down for them, and they drove over to Cabo San Lucas when we were there to get them because they were in a hurry to leave La Paz for Mazatlan. Imagine our surprise when, shortly after we arrived at Marina de La Paz, we got up one morning and looked out toward the channel. "That sure looks like a Nordhavn 46," I said. There was *Arcturus*, right out in the middle of the channel behind Marina de La Paz. They hadn't left after all. They in fact had been to the islands and had come in in the middle of the night (similar to what we did later) and had run aground on El Mogote, a muddy, shallow spit of land along the Northwest edge of the La Paz channel. They were tired, it was very early in the morning, before sunup, and in getting free of the mud, they backed over the dinghy they were towing and put a hole in it. They had finally anchored, but after they went to bed the boat had quietly dragged anchor and drifted almost a mile southwest through dozens of other anchored boats to mid-channel in front of Marina de La Paz. So there they were, trying to get the dinghy back up on the boat, with the Mexican Navy yelling at them on VHF to move out of the channel.

Well, it took them some considerable time to get repairs made, then other things came up, and they were leaving “any day now”. It became a standing joke whenever we would talk to Fred: “Haven’t you left yet? You keep threatening to leave but you never do!”

We met Dan and Jay aboard *Yacht-a-Hey* in Ensenada in December. Dan is a sculptor and Jay is a potter. They lived in Arizona. Their parents both died within months of each other, and so they settled the estates, sold their own property, and came to San Diego to look for a boat. Having never owned a boat before, they bought a 48-foot Californian and took off for the Sea of Cortez. They were in La Paz when we got there, having left Ensenada a month before us.

Dan and Jay have a dog named Kodie who traveled with them. Kodie has never gotten used to potty breaks on the boat, however, and he would go days without going. When we were in Ensenada, Jay was trying to train Kodie to go on the boat using a mat. We explained how we had done it, and showed her the *Four Seasons* version of the “poo box”. She then brought over Kodie’s mat for our Cody to “initialize,” but it still didn’t take.

A Work Break: Donna left to go up to the office in Sunnyvale for a week, so I was able get some work done that I had been postponing. I had been worrying all the way down from Ensenada about what would happen if the steering system or the autopilot failed. I had had a second steering cylinder installed in the lazarette, and I had a second autopilot pump, but neither of them were hooked up to anything. I spent two days cutting and bending copper tubing to connect them, creating a second, completely separate and redundant steering system that could be driven by the autopilot. This works beautifully. By changing two valves and one switch, I can be operating on a separate steering system.

Then the clothes dryer failed, and right after finding and fixing that, (a bad fuse holder in the back of the dryer), the generator overheated and stopped. So I took the salt water pump apart and found a damaged impeller. It had also used up all the coolant for some as yet undetermined reason, so I refilled it and it was fine.

Back to the Islands: Donna returned and we left Saturday, February 24, to go back out to the Islands, this time for a little longer. We anchored at Isla Partida the first night, then went on up to Isla San Francisco on Sunday. Just after we got there, Marty and Brita on *Gold Eagle* showed up and anchored next to us.

This anchorage is windy, with a really grassy bottom. It’s not protected at all from the West or Southwest, and we found it hard to get a good hold here. *Gold Eagle* pulled up a couple of bushel baskets of grass with their anchor when they left on Tuesday. We left later in the day and decided to pull into Ensenada Grande on Isla Partida. It’s a beautiful spot, and the cruise ship *Sea Bird* was anchored there as well. There were people in kayaks and people sitting on the beach soaking up sun. The wind died about 6 pm, then shifted to the East at about 10 knots. By midnight, the winds had again shifted to the West, and were kicking up to 25 knots. Seas were rolling into the anchorage and we were beginning to drag. It was an absolutely moonless night, pitch black, and we decided to pull up the anchor and head south. Our first choice was to go

around the corner and anchor in La Partida, where we had been once before, but it was absolutely dark in there, we could see no anchor lights, and were fearful of going in with only radar, so we continued on.

The seas were rough, but as dark as it was, we couldn't really see how rough. I'm guessing 6-8 foot seas, mostly on the bow. We were comfortable out in the open sea, but every potential anchorage presented problems because of the darkness. We ended up going all the way back to La Paz, down the channel at 3 am, and into *Gold Eagle's* side tie, which we knew to be empty since we had just left them at the islands. Let me tell you, going down the La Paz channel at night is not fun. Especially making the turn into Marina de La Paz. There are sailboats anchored everywhere in this part of the channel, some right in the path of the Marina approach. As dark as it was, Donna, out on the bow, could not see them until we were within 20 feet of them. They have no anchor lights, as they don't have battery power enough to run them. She would scream, "There's a boat right in front of you!" and I would throw it in reverse and try to avoid hitting it. But we made it, and got to bed about 4 am.

We rested all day Tuesday, but decided we really hadn't had enough of the Islands, so we left again on Wednesday, February 28, to go back out. This time we just went to Partida Cove and anchored until Saturday, then returned to La Paz.

Visitors: Fran and Byrl Williams joined us on Saturday, March 3, and we went to dinner at Carlos and Charlies in La Paz. The next day, we left for the Islands again, to show off our newly found cruising grounds. We headed directly for Isla San Francisco, and encountered *Gold Eagle* and *Venture Forth* headed South, between Isla San Francisco and Isla Partida. We had encouraged Mike Ford on *Number One* to come along, and he joined us at Isla San Francisco. Later, *StormHaven* came in and anchored. Monday night, we had high winds and started to drag anchor because of the grass on the bottom here. We relocated in the middle of the night to a more suitable spot in the middle of the cove. Several boats dragged that night, but we felt secure after our reset, so we stayed. But we stayed up until the wind subsided.

Sunday/Monday night we were kept awake by the sound of the fresh water pump working ever harder to maintain pressure. Finally, when daybreak came, the water pump gave it up. We went into emergency host mode, getting buckets of salt water to flush the heads with (they are normally fresh water flush), and filling jugs from the watermaker for the morning's needs. Fran was still sleeping, and since I needed access to the engine room, which is in the guest room, I had to wait for her to arise before I could determine what had gone wrong. The pump's diaphragm had sprung a leak, rendering it useless. I had a salt water washdown pump that I had just installed, so I de-installed it and hooked it up in place of the fresh water pump. By noon, we had water again.

Tuesday morning, we pulled up anchor while Fran was still sleeping and went North, around the end of Isla San Francisco and around Isla Coyote, the third most populated island in the Sea of Cortez. That really isn't saying much; the island only has about 50 residents on it. We headed back South and anchored at Ensenada Grande on Isla Partida, the same cove we had been run out

of by Southwest winds a week earlier. This time, the only major event was Mike on *Number One* lost his favorite John Deere hat. It was a very restful night, dead calm and beautiful.

Wednesday morning, again while Fran was still sleeping, we pulled up anchor and departed Ensenada Grande and went to Partida Cove, just about a mile away. Once there, we had our famous specialty breakfast, beer pancakes, bacon and scrambled eggs. Mike joined us. We had great fun that evening watching hundreds of pelicans diving on fish.

Thursday morning, we left Partida Cove to find very lumpy seas. We had to put out the paravanes for the first time during the trip, and that settled things down. We arrived back at Marina de La Paz at a little before Noon and walked down to Senor Gonzales' Fish Taco stand for lunch. This is an institution in La Paz. Everyone knows Senor Gonzales' Fish Taco stands. There are several. Tacos are 6, 12, or 24 pesos, depending on whether you have fish, shrimp or lobster in them. They have a marvelous selection of salsas, salads and other accoutrements to go with them. All in all a wonderful experience. Friday morning, Fran and Byrl left to fly home.

And Friday afternoon, the temporary salt water pump I had installed for the fresh water supply on Monday also gave up. Back to square one on the water. Since we were in dock, I was able to buy a replacement at the local chandlery and install it.

Back Once Again: We never seemed to get enough of the islands. Even going back to the same place was still wonderful. This time, though, we decided to make a much longer trip of it. On Tuesday, March 13, we left the marina headed for the town of Loreto, about 150 miles up the Sea. We talked *Number One* into joining us, but he started one day later. We spent the first two nights at Partida Cove, becoming one of our favorite places. On Wednesday, we heard from *Number One*, Mike, who told us he had decided to go past Partida to San Evaristo. He would wait for us there.

So Thursday, March 15, we left Partida for San Evaristo, about 28 miles up the coast and just opposite Isla San Francisco. It only took 4 hours and we were anchored next to *Number One* in a beautiful, well protected cove with a fairly large fishing village along the shore. We left the next morning at 0640 and went to Puerto Escondido. This is a beautiful place. As you approach Puerto Escondido, you go between the main land mass of Baja and Isla Danzante. There are three giant rocks there that you must thread your way between. The charts are more than ½ mile off to the East, so you have to go by visual and radar reckoning. When you arrive at Puerto Escondido, you first come through an anchorage called "The Waiting Room". *Number One* decided to anchor in here, while we went on into the main anchorage. Along the western edge of the anchorage, only a few miles inland, the Gigante mountain range rises almost perpendicularly to several thousand feet.

As we were traveling between San Evaristo and Puerto Escondido, a large dolphin came to visit. Cody noticed him first and barked at him. I was sitting out on the bow, the boat on autopilot at about 7 knots. The dolphin swam directly in front of the bow of the boat for several minutes, and

rolled over to the side to look at us. Cody and I looked down at the dolphin, the dolphin looked back at us. It was extraordinary!

Puerto Escondido is very large, and has a number of more or less permanent residents. It's one of the few totally protected all-weather (with some caveats) anchorages in the Sea. People anchor here for months, even years. There is a sort of club made up of R/Vers and boaters, and they have a regular radio net on channel 22 every morning, just like La Paz. The bottom is mud, and about 40 feet deep. It's 22 miles from Puerto Escondido to Puerto Loreto, the town where you must go to check in. You have left the jurisdiction of the Capitan de Puerto of La Paz, and are now in the jurisdiction of the Capitan de Puerto of Loreto, which extends a hundred miles or so north. We arrived late in the day on Friday, so we put this off until the following Monday.

Saturday, we took a cab into Loreto and found a delightful little town with a number of nice little hotels, one of which has a swimming pool on the roof that you could look through from underneath in the lobby. I wonder how much building inspection they do there.

We joined in a pot luck lunch put on by the "club" on Sunday, but found little to recommend it. They were in the process of clearing out the "club house" which they had been using, having gotten an eviction notice from the Capitan de Puerto of Loreto. Later, we learned that they have changed the name of Puerto Escondido to Puerto Loreto, and that of Puerto Loreto to Marina Loreto. Evidently the Capitan de Puerto of Loreto is going to establish a presence there, and possibly a institute a fee per day, in order to better control the "squatters".

We had Mike over for dinner that night. He came by dinghy, and on the way back to his boat in "the Waiting Room", in the dark, he encountered a fishing net that had been stretched across the channel, which fouled the prop on his dinghy. He had no knife, no flashlight, and no life jacket. It took him 20 minutes and a cut hand to get free of the nylon net. We learned later that fishermen in pangas come after dark and string the nets, then pick them up before daybreak. Clever.

Monday, we left Puerto Escondido and went 15 miles North to Puerto Loreto (using the old names that were in effect when we were there) and anchored in order to do our in-and-out paperwork with Migration and Capitania de Puerto. The anchorage is an open roadstead in front of the town in 10 feet or less of water. There is a marina of sorts, but only for panga size boats. We left a very nervous Donna on *Four Seasons* with *Number One* anchored nearby, and Mike and I took his dinghy into the marina, then walked to Migration and Capitania de Puerto to do our business. Of course, they are at opposite ends of town, but at this port they apparently trust the port captain to collect money, so you don't have to make a third stop at a bank like you must do in most of the other ports. This went fairly smoothly, only taking 2 hours total. On the way back, we got the final payoff of Mike's previous encounter with the fishing net. Just leaving the marina, the prop sheared the pin, obviously a result of hitting the net. Fortunately, there was a small boat coming in who offered to tow us back out to our boat.

We had lunch, then Mike paddled the disabled dinghy back to *Number One*, and we set off for Puerto Ballandra, about 10 miles East on Isla Carmen. It was 6-8 foot beam seas going across, really roly, and we deployed the paravanes half way across. *Sundance*, a motor vessel we knew from Marina de La Paz, came up from Puerto Escondido and joined us at Ballandra for two nights. *Yacht-a-Hey*, was supposed to join us also, but left Puerto Escondido late and didn't make it. But *Slick* was there! They turn up everywhere! Jack and his friend joined us for breakfast on Tuesday morning, along with Dave and Deborah of *Sundance* and Mike from *Number One*. It was a crowd, but we managed and had a good time. The usual, pancakes, sausage and bacon, and Donna's special eggs.

We left Ballandra on Wednesday, March 21 for Aqua Verde, 22 miles South. On the way, we saw whales. There were several of them, and one crossed so close in front of us we had to slow down. There was only one other boat there, *Martha Rose*, a cute little trawler with sails owned by Dean and Coti who we were docked next to for a couple of weeks at Marina de La Paz. There's just room for three or four boats in there, so we took up all of it.

The next morning we headed for San Evaristo again. On the way, we heard *StormHaven* and *Gray Spirit* talking on VHF, both Nordhavn 46's, and they were anchored at La Amortajada, just across from Evaristo. The large sailing vessel *California* from the San Francisco Bay Area was also anchored there, so we diverted course and went over to join them.

Just as we changed course, the GPS began complaining of "Low Voltage". It had never done that before. Investigation showed that the house battery bank which runs all the electronics was down to 10.5 volts! This was something unexpected. Donna took the helm while I went into troubleshooting mode. It turned out that one half of the battery bank, the half that powers the electronics, is fed through a cut-off switch. The switch had melted and failed open, so that half-bank wasn't charging. Tying the two wires together behind the switch fixed it.

We saw a great field of porpoises, probably several hundred of them, traveling about 4 to 6 abreast in a long line that probably stretched a half mile. They looked very porpoisful, as they porpoised along. (sorry)

We took a circle around the *California* and took some pictures, then went and anchored near *Gray Spirit* and *StormHaven*. That night, we heard breathing right outside the boat. It was a dark night, and we couldn't see anything, but we determined that there were four large whales, in two pairs, right off the stern of the boat! They would blow and then inhale this great whistling breath. They stayed there for an hour or so, then we heard them moving off into the main channel.

We shined a light into the water to see what else we could find, and saw a "Yellow Bellied Sea Snake" about 3 feet long swimming under water. These things are very poisonous and generally are found near the mouths of rivers, one of which is in La Amortajada.

On Friday, March 23, we raised anchor for the last time and headed back to La Paz. In the time it took to get the anchor up and stowed, I was chomped on by "no-see-ums" to the point that my legs took two weeks to heal.

On this trip, we covered about 245 miles. The furthest North we got was Loreto, which was our goal in the beginning. Mulege is only about 70 miles further, and I wish we could have gotten there, but time didn't permit. Donna had to make another trip to Sunnyvale, and when she returned on March 30, it was to have one and one-half days to provision the boat for our return to Ensenada – The dreaded Baja Bash.

The End