

Internet sidebar to “Baja Inside and Out”:
THE ABCs OF MEXICAN CRUISING
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by

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Anchorage details. Even the best anchorages on the west coast of the Baja peninsula are not totally weatherproof. Ensenada is protected by a breakwater that is open to the south, so swell does work its way into the anchorage and sometimes sets up a surge in the marinas. In the designated anchorage, the bottom is fouled with all manner of garbage and the soupy mud makes for poor holding. Boats tend to start wandering as the afternoon breeze picks up – make sure your anchor sets well and keep an eye on your neighbors. Mooring buoys are available, but their quality varies. Turtle Bay and Mag Bay are large harbors where a wind shift can put boats on a lee shore in a significant chop in short order. Both have alternative anchorages that can be used in the event of a wind shift, and cruisers should be prepared to move, even at night, if they get whitecaps in the anchorage. All of the guides show the alternative anchorages in Turtle Bay. In Mag Bay, shelter can be taken at approximately 24°43.9'N 111°58.3'W, about 10 miles northeast of Man-O-War Cove on a flat 12-foot shelf that extends out from the yellow cliffs for close to a mile. Plot your course from Man-O-War Cove well to the south of the shallow sand banks around the entrance to the channel leading up to Puerto San Carlos.

Boat/equipment. A boat for cruising Mexico need not be large, but it does need to be offshore-capable, which means seaworthy, strongly built and offshore equipped. It must carry a full suit of sails including light air sails, a proper preventer and a pole for downwind sailing, at least two (preferably three) properly-sized anchors and rodes, a dinghy, some sort of self steering, a VHF radio, a compass, a depth sounder, some charts, a cruising guide and two GPS units. If your boat is 40 feet or more, you are 40 years old or more or you have back problems, add a windlass. If you will only be cruising for six months and are on a budget, stop there. Otherwise, if you absolutely must stay in touch on a regular basis, add an SSB or Ham radio and a Pactor modem. If you plan to cruise the Sea of Cortez for more than six weeks, add a watermaker. Optional equipment includes an outboard, refrigeration (make sure your icebox has at least four inches of high-quality insulation and preferably six), instruments and radar. Once you have the boat set up the way you want it, make sure to upgrade your battery bank and charging sources to meet your electrical requirements.

Chartering. The Moorings has a charter base out of Marina Palmira in La Paz. Check the Moorings website for more information (www.moorings.com). The northerly gales in the winter can make it difficult to get anywhere if you're on a schedule. Chartering in late April to early June or mid-November to mid-December will minimize the risk of a three-day northerly gale or a hurricane ruining your vacation.

Charts and guides. The charts for the Sea of Cortez are not accurate, and in many places are off by a mile or more starting with the approach to La Paz. Double-check positions regularly with compass bearings, soundings and, at night, the radar. Several people we met had downloaded maps from Google Earth of each anchorage, and these made a valuable addition to the charts. Two guides cover the entire coast of Mexico: *Mexico Boating Guide* by John E. Rains and Pat Miller and *Charlie's Charts of the Western Coast of Mexico* by Charles and Margo Wood. Gerry Cunningham's three guides to the Sea of Cortez cover additional anchorages and the chartlets are GPS-accurate (www.gerrycruise.com), but shoreside information is dated. The Lonely Planet's

Baja & Los Cabos guide was invaluable for additional insights into the culture and history of the area as well as good maps of the major towns.

Communications. Phone calls are expensive in Mexico compared to many other countries, but cell phone coverage has been improving. You can purchase a North American plan from your US provider which will offer some coverage in Mexico, but make sure you will be covered in the areas where you intend to travel. Alternatively, you can buy an inexpensive Mexican cell phone when you reach Ensenada and “pay as you go” using a phone card or credit card. International phone calls are expensive from Mexican pay phones. Avoid the brightly-colored phones advertising international calls as their charges are far higher than using a public phone with a phone card purchased at a convenience store. These cost \$20 and gave us about 45 minutes of calling time. Internet cafés were by far the cheapest way to do Internet, and Skype (or other VOIP providers) by far the cheapest way to call home. By avoiding the tourist areas and looking for an internet café a few blocks away from the more glamorous parts of town, we could often find rates as low as \$2 per hour. Wi-fi or broadband was available for a fee in the La Paz marinas and for free in coffee shops and some Internet cafés.

Events. The Mexicans celebrate their holidays with an incredible array of street spectacles, parades, beach parties, dancing and religious ceremonies. To get the most out of it, try to be in a small city like La Paz or Zihautenajo for Christmas, New Year’s Eve or Semana Santa (Holy Week), the week before Easter. Mazatlán’s Carnival celebration is reputed to be the third largest in the world, behind Rio de Janeiro’s Carnival and New Orleans’ Mardi Gras. If you plan to stay in a marina during these holidays, make reservations at least a month in advance. In addition, Mexico has an incredibly vibrant cruising community with organized activities going on almost year round. The Baja Ha-Ha has become an annual institution, with hundreds of crews participating in the annual sailing regatta and floating party (www.baja-haha.com). The Club Cruceros in La Paz manages to put together some sort of a shindig for everything from Thanksgiving to St. Patrick’s Day (www.clubcruceros.org). The calendar of events also includes cruisers’ Thanksgiving in Mazatlán, La Paz Bay Fest in April and Loreto Fest in Loreto in May. Further south, Sailfest in Zihautenajo (www.zihuasailfest.com) takes place in the beginning of February, and in March the action moves north to Puerto Vallarta with the Banderas Bay Regatta (www.banderasbayregatta.com).

Formalities. Clearance procedures changed as of April 2005, thanks to the tireless efforts of a group of cruisers to end the clearance in and out at every port that had been required until then. Ensenada lies just 60 miles south of San Diego, and it will be the first port of call for most yachts entering Mexican waters. A well-designed facility houses all of the port officials and a bank under one roof, and it took us about two hours and around US\$100 to clear in. We had to present our boat documentation and passports, and we had to fill in a crew list which was supplied to us by Immigration. Liability insurance from a Mexican company is supposed to be required, but the officials were satisfied with our US policy. We were issued “tourist cards” – a Mexican visa good for six months – and a 10-year boat importation which is necessary if you want to leave the boat unattended or have any work done on it. For those interested in fishing while in Mexican waters, separate fishing licenses must be purchased for the boat, for the dinghy, and for each person aboard. These are not inexpensive, but you can be fined if you have fishing gear aboard and no fishing license, even if you are not caught fishing. When we cleared out from Ensenada, it took us an hour to obtain a national zarpe or cruising permit which allowed us to cruise throughout Mexican waters for six months. While it is still possible to clear in at most other major ports, it is far less convenient, so we would recommend stopping in Ensenada even for those who had intended to sail nonstop from San Diego to Cabo or points south. After clearing in at their first port of entry, cruisers need only “inform” the Port Captain of their arrival and

departure from successive ports until they clear out of Mexico completely. Marinas will take care of this for their guests; otherwise a call on the radio to the Port Captain was all that was necessary in most harbors.

Fuel and water. Water and fuel can be obtained in marinas throughout Mexico. In some places, industrious Mexicans also supply fuel to yachts from large plastic containers they transport in their pangas. In Turtle Bay on the Pacific coast of the Baja peninsula, fuel pangas will meet you as you come in the entrance. In Mag Bay, the Port Captain in the settlement at Man-o-War Cove will deliver fuel to yachts in the anchorage from Puerto San Carlos, ten miles away up a winding sand estuary. Water can be more problematic, especially in the desert environment of the Baja peninsula. Most boats that cruise the Sea carry a watermaker.

Language skills. You will enjoy the trip much more if you learn even a smattering of Spanish. But being able to converse will provide you with real insights into the Mexican culture and lay the groundwork for lifelong friendships. Most people don't get serious about learning Spanish until they realize how handicapped they are trying to operate without it. Luckily, there are a number of schools and private individuals offering language instruction in all of the Mexican towns where cruisers congregate. I highly recommend the intensive programs at the Centro de Educación Continua in La Paz (www.ceclapaz.com). For less than \$300, cruisers can choose from programs for beginners and intermediates that run four hours a day, five days a week for three weeks.

Marinas. Contact information for Mexican marinas is summarized at www.baja-haha.com/Guide/Marinas.html.

Provisions. You'll be able to find just about anything you might need, often in the large chain stores you shop in at home, in larger communities like Ensenada, La Paz, Guaymas, Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo at prices similar to what you would expect in the US. Smaller communities will always have some sort of supermarket and a market where fresh produce is sold. Only in the tiny pueblos along the Pacific Coast of the Baja peninsula and in the southern cruising ground in the Sea of Cortez will it be difficult to buy basic supplies, so cruisers should stock up before heading into these areas.

Security. We had no security problems though we left both boat and dinghy unlocked throughout our stay in Mexico. There were some thefts from boats in the anchorage in La Paz over the winter, and even a few from boats in the marinas when their owners were not there. So it does make sense to take the normal precautions. But in general, we found the Mexicans to be friendly, helpful, honest and hard-working. Do not even consider bringing a gun into Mexico – not only do you not need it, but it will quite likely land you in jail.

Yacht services/chandleries. Almost anything basic that you might need can be found in cities like La Paz, Puerto Vallarta or Zihuatanejo, and the cruisers nets will help you to find it. Professional haulout facilities can be found in Ensenada, La Paz, San Carlos/Guaymas and most of the larger mainland cities. Prices will not be significantly cheaper than in the States for most work. Warranty work and replacements can be more problematic, with high customs fees and import duties charged even on items marked "yacht in transit." Many cruisers spending time in La Paz flew or bussed back to the States and returned hand-carrying their equipment. San Carlos and Guaymas are the only other places in the Sea where some yacht spares and equipment can be found.

Weather forecasts. At least five daily nets provided weather information throughout Mexico via SSB/Ham. Updated times and frequencies can be found at Don Anderson's website: www.csus.edu/indiv/f/foxs/Summer%20Passage/sumpas_index1.html. Spanish-language forecasts are broadcast on VHF several times a day from different ports. The forecast will be announced on VHF 16 with a channel to switch to. We found these forecasts to be quite accurate, but they only gave a 24 hour prognosis.

Wildlife experiences. If you're interested in close encounters with wildlife, the Baja peninsula offers two unique experiences. First, a sea lion colony makes its home off the northern end of Isla Partida, one of two large islands about 20 miles from La Paz, in a set of sea stacks known as Los Islotes. On calm days, tour boats bring tourists from La Paz to swim with the sea lions. It is possible to anchor a cruising boat off the islands in settled weather with little swell, or, if your boat is equipped with a large dinghy and outboard, to leave the boat in the northernmost anchorage on Partida and go over in the dinghy. Second, the gray whales that make their way down the coast of California each year arrive in January to calve in three sheltered lagoons on the Pacific coast of the Baja Peninsula, one of which is Mag Bay, the only one accessible to keel boats. You will not be allowed to get close to the whales in your own boat, but tour operators will take you out in large pangas. Many of the whales seem to enjoy their interactions with people and actively seek the boats out. Some cows will come right alongside the boat with their calves on their backs, allowing visitors to pet their offspring; others will maneuver carefully and then whip their tail across the surface of the water, drenching everyone in the boat. The best time to see the whales is from mid-January to the beginning of March, after most crews have made their way down the west coast, but tours also operate out of La Paz, taking tourists across the peninsula to Lopez Mateos, on a daily basis throughout the season. I highly recommend Espiritu and Baja Tours (www.espiritubaja.com). The owner, Jose Luis Martinez, speaks excellent English and only takes small groups when he knows the whales are accessible.