

Sailing south from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas, two coastal sailors become a fulltime cruising couple. **BY EMILY FAGAN**

# Baja Aha!

Every October, cruising snowbirds from the northwest flock to Southern California's San Diego Bay, their eyes trained on Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, some 750 miles to the south. Many will participate in the Baja Ha-Ha, a cruising rally and race of sorts that ushers 150 or so boats on a two-week downwind run along the west coast of Baja California, stopping twice on the way. Although we've heard this is a rollicking good time,

when my husband, Mark, and I decided to embark on this same voyage aboard our Hunter 44 DS, *Groovy*, we chose to travel more slowly and minimize the overnight passages.

A weather window opened for everyone headed south in early November, and we joined an informal fleet of boats spilling out of San Diego Bay bound for Cabo. For 10 months, every aspect of our lives had been devoted to this mo-

ment, preparing our boat and ourselves for our first long-distance cruise, and we eased into it gradually. Our first stop was Ensenada, Mexico, just 70 miles south of San Diego, where we'd previously lived aboard for six months. Pulling into the Baja Naval marina ([bajanaval.com](http://bajanaval.com)) felt like coming home, and we exchanged smiles of recognition with our dockworker friends. "Welcome back!" they shouted as they cleated off our dock lines.

BOB GRIESER





Surrounded by hills, Turtle Bay is a favorite stop for sailors headed north or south along the Baja coast.

In town, the faces of the port captain and immigrations officers were familiar, and we sought out our favorite haunts for one last visit. Our friend Peter, who sells his wife's mouthwatering brownies to tourists and is known as the Brownie Man, had cruised along the Mexican coast for years before retiring. As we relished a few last brownies in his company, he explained how to anticipate a coming storm in Bahía Sebastián Vizcaíno by sniffing

the air for hot, dry land breezes.

"If you smell dirt, it's gonna blow, and you've got just a few minutes to get ready!" he said.

With inexperienced noses and no SSB radio, we'd be relying on the Internet for our weather forecasts, so we picked up a 3G USB modem card from Mexico's cellphone company Telcel. In the end, it turned out that we were able to get online from our boat at every anchorage

down the coast except San Quintín and Isla Cedros.

We left Ensenada on a glorious morning and motorsailed past the last familiar landmarks; we felt excited yet nervous. To our left, along the shore, mountains rose up brown, parched, and towering. Our goal was an easy daysail to a tiny anchorage at Santo Tomás, but when we arrived that afternoon, the entire cove was filled with kelp paddies. Dodging them was im-





Once they were under way down the coast of Baja (see map), it didn't take long for the Fagans (above) to become suited to the cruising life. Stopovers in such harbors as Bahía Santa María helped them acclimate, as did the treats they found in Mexico's colorful markets.

possible. Our options were to continue on for a midnight arrival at Punta Colonet or to sail overnight to San Quintín. Night arrivals were out of the question, so we shrugged our shoulders and exchanged lopsided grins. This was it! Get out the jacklines, tethers, and harnesses and hunker down for our first overnight passage.

No moon rose that night, but as darkness fell, the air was clear, and the black sky was softened by a gossamer veil of stars. We motored on windless, flat seas, our bow carving a fine line. We were supposed to stand watches, but sleep was the last thing on our minds. For hours we both stood in the cockpit, wide eyed and awed into silence by the majesty of our surroundings.

Suddenly, the VHF radio crackled to life, and we realized we were being hailed. A nearby Nordhavn 76 bound for Puerto Vallarta wanted to chat with us to pass the time. How strange and reassuring it was to hear a voice on the radio and see the boat's lights on the horizon. The captain told us that he'd been in our shoes 10 years ago, beginning his first passage south on a serene night just like this. Now he delivers boats for a living. We'd love Mexico, he

assured us, and we'd love the cruising lifestyle. It felt good to know that we weren't alone, either on this vast black sea or in our quest to try something outside the confines of conventional shoreside living.

We arrived at dawn in San Quintín with barely a wink of sleep between us. Passing the masts that lined the more popular anchorage, we went a few miles farther and dropped the hook where the cruising guide, *Charlie's Charts: Western Coast of Mexico including Baja*, said that we'd likely be out of the swell. Sleep knocked us out almost before we lay down, and we awoke just long enough to make dinner before turning in again for the night. We learned later that the other anchorage had been cursed with a wicked swell that kept everyone up all night. A touch of beginner's luck must have been with us.

Waking to a misty morning feeling groggy but refreshed, we motored out of the anchorage in a world of gray on gray. A vast swath of what we took for black seaweed blocked our path, and we dodged it—only to watch it rise up and become thousands of birds on the wing above an undulating silver sea. Our goal for this second day was an overnight trip to Islas

San Benito, three small islands known for their rugged beauty. Reportedly great for hiking, they're a bit of a detour from the normal passage across Bahía Sebastián Vizcaíno, as they lie west of Isla Cedros. Most cruisers aim for the east side of Cedros instead. As the day progressed we found ourselves farther and farther from the ad-hoc fleet as we reported our positions to each other on the radio.

The wind built steadily, and the swell grew along with it. We kept our noses to the air but never smelled dirt. By nightfall, our unsteady rolling had become a bone-jarring pitching in big quartering seas. We flew along at 7.5 knots under jib alone in 20 knots of cold wind, and we watched in amazement as huge waves overtook us from behind, looming with scary power until they suddenly slipped beneath us and moved on. The VHF radio was filled with complaints from everyone on the water that night. No one was comfortable, and some were experiencing gear failures, ranging from broken whisker poles to cracked davits. Where was the balmy tranquility of the previous night?

When day finally dawned, the angry gray seas seemed to strike out at the even

COURTESY OF EMILY FAGAN (INSET), EMILY FAGAN, BOB GRIESER (OPPOSITE PAGE), MAP BY DAVID NORTON





angrier gray sky. In the distance, the anchorage at the San Benito islands looked downright menacing. A shaft of red sunrise pierced the dark clouds over Cedros to our east, making its silhouette look like Tolkien's Mount Doom. Shivering in the damp air, we knew we'd never go ashore to explore or hike. The treasures of Islas San Benito would have to wait for another time.

Instead, we headed toward the southern anchorage at the base of Cedros, a place that's less frequently visited by cruisers. The storm clouds cleared, and bright sunshine filled the sweeping bay just as we pulled in. A group of dolphins greeted us with enthusiastic leaps and bounds, leading us into the anchorage. A few lone fishermen in open, outboard-driven *pangas* drifted quietly here and there. On shore, the only sign of humanity was a cluster of fishing shacks at the far end of the wide bay. We dropped the hook and relaxed into another deep slumber on flat seas.

Little did we know that around the corner on the east side of Isla Cedros, our cruising companions who'd taken the more traditional route across Bahía Sebastián Vizcaíno were having a miserable



night rolling in a relentless swell. The anchorage there is a narrow shelf that drops off quickly, and one singlehander got a scary surprise when he awoke sensing trouble and came up on deck to discover that his anchor had dragged off the shelf and he'd drifted a mile from shore. When we heard these tales the next night while anchored in the very secure harbor at Bahía Tortugas, better known to Americans as Turtle Bay, we were grateful that our beginner's luck was still holding.

But not all was peace and serenity at Turtle Bay. Next to *Groovy* we saw two bows that had been burnt to a crisp poking up from under the water. Asking around, we discovered that a catamaran had gone up in flames just a few days earlier and the owner had barely escaped with his life. Seeing them, I felt truly vulnerable for the first time since leaving San Diego. We were now some 350 miles from home, and we'd skated a fine line on our passage south without incident. But disas-





ter could strike at any moment, even in the protected and well-known harbor of Turtle Bay. The charred catamaran bows were a grim reminder that although cruising can be carefree and fun, the frivolity can end in an instant.

We left Turtle Bay on November 11, bound for Bahía Asunción, a long day-sail south. The wind put us on a sprightly close reach, *Groovy's* favorite point of sail. We seemed to take flight, moving easily at well over 8 knots as the bow neatly sliced the waves. Watching our speed over ground increase, it wasn't until we hit 9.2 knots that we looked at each other wide-eyed and mouthed, "Reef!" At that moment a gust threw us on our side, and we jumped into action to reduce sail. But within 15 minutes the wind had died, and we found ourselves wallowing in nothingness. A few cruisers breezed by, having chosen to let things flog during the gusts only to tighten them back up again when the wind lessened, easily sustaining their momentum. Arrgh.

We'd planned to stop at Bahía San

Hipólito, but the wind had been such a thrill that we passed it up and aimed instead for Bahía Abreojos, which translates roughly as Open Eyes Bay. A small town hugs this anchorage, and reefs and rocks reach far out from shore. Navigation requires close attention and wide-open eyes. We threaded our way around the reefs to join the boats anchored beyond the town. Pressing onward toward Bahía Santa Maria the next morning with hopes of being able to shed our jackets soon, we were shocked when a tiny finch landed in our cockpit some 20 miles from shore. It flew down into the cabin to check out our living quarters and landed on the television. We offered it our best hospitality with bread crumbs and water, but within moments it returned to the cockpit, paused on a pile

of line, and flew away.

This little bit of companionship was heartwarming, but it was the camaraderie of our fellow cruisers that made the deepest impression. We hadn't anticipated cruising down the Baja coast in the company of other boats, and it was a surprise to find that even though none of us had known anything about each other besides the names and shapes of our boats back in San Diego, we were now becoming friends as we traveled south. We sailed in tandem with another boat overnight to Bahía Santa Maria, finding reassurance in their lights just a mile from ours all night long. They successfully trolled a fishing line, and the next evening we hosted a bonito-based potluck dinner aboard *Groovy*. After years of reading about cruiser friendliness, potlucks, and impromptu gatherings on boats, we couldn't believe it was actually happening to us. We were really doing it.

As we sailed around to Belcher Cove, a small cove just inside the lip of enormous Bahía Magdalena, there was a violent splashing in the water just off our starboard beam. "What's that?" we asked the other cruisers via VHF. "Leaping rays," came the answer. These huge rays flew into the air and belly-smacked the water with abandon, throwing spray in all di-

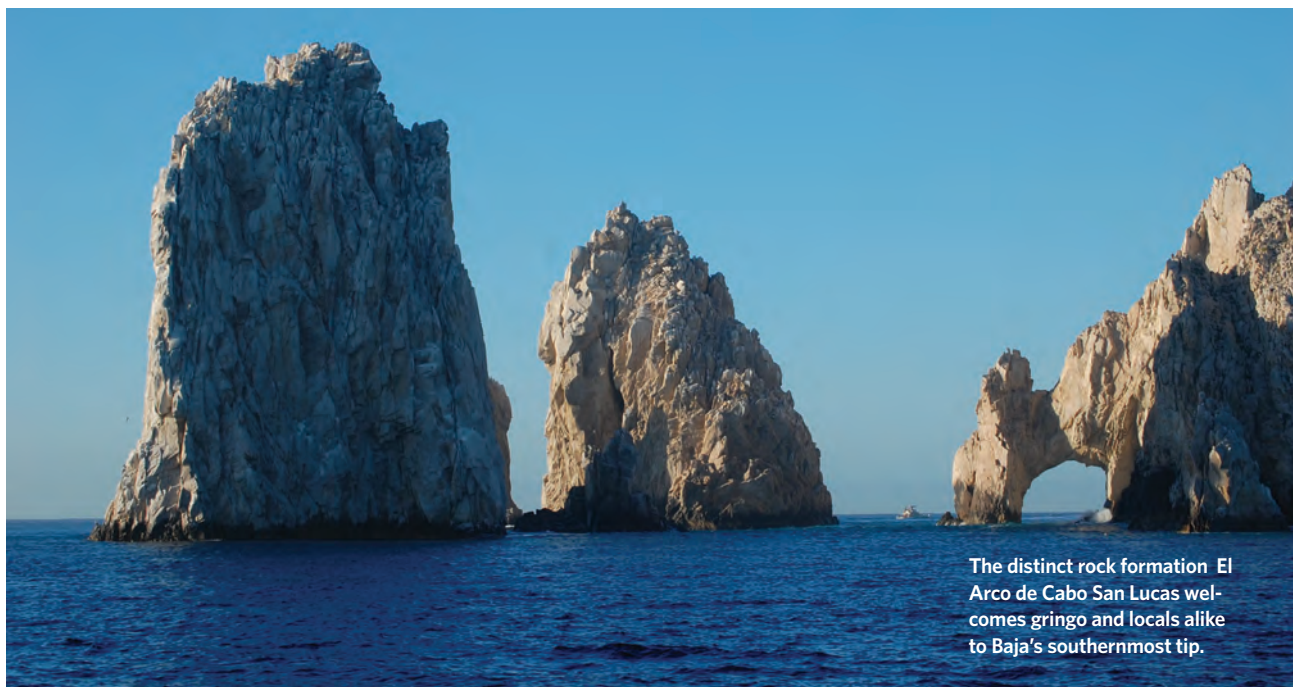
Fuel is readily available at the dock in Turtle Bay (above). In Magdalena Bay, a boy shows off the day's catch, an octopus.



rections. Shiny black backs glinted in the sun as they somersaulted in the air. They looked alien, like some kind of weird amphibious craft with two protrusions off the front end where the eyeballs are.

After anchoring, we took a stroll ashore and realized that it'd been 12 days since our feet had touched land. The walking felt good. We paused for a moment in front of some rickety shacks and Coleman tents to

BOB GRIESER



The distinct rock formation El Arco de Cabo San Lucas welcomes gringo and locals alike to Baja's southernmost tip.

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contemplate the unbelievably simple lives that the fishermen lived there. This land was so remote. Their community must be very tight. A fishing *panga* suddenly pulled up and anchored just steps off the beach. The captain set up an umbrella and popped open a cooler. Soon another *panga* arrived, rafted up to the first, and set up an umbrella, too. In no time, a large group of *pangas* was rafted to each other, each sporting a brightly colored umbrella. The fishermen enjoyed a quiet lunch together while the pelicans and gulls waited patiently nearby for the fishing to resume.

We had one final overnight run, as there's nowhere to stop between Magdalena and Cabo San Lucas. A huge, thick fog bank engulfed Magdalena Bay the morning we left, and our hair and jackets were soon covered in a sparkling, crystalline mist. The fishing *pangas* darted about on the radar screen, moving out of our way at the sound of our engine and horn, but all we could see was the inside of a cloud. Once we passed out of the mouth of the bay, the fog shrank back, the sun shone through, and a pair of frigate birds kept us happily entertained as they took turns trying to land on the top of our swaying mast.

By now, the long days and overnights of sailing had become almost routine. Having advanced beyond beginner status, however, our luck slipped down a notch.

An errant box of noodles purchased in Ensenada months earlier sprouted weevils, and we spent several hours eradicating them from the depths of lockers while cursing ourselves for not being more careful about using fully sealable containers. Then one of the vertical battens in the mainsail pierced a hole in the bottom of the batten pocket and fell partway out. No sooner did we get that taped up than a back-flush hose connection on our watermaker disconnected itself and emptied an 80-gallon water tank into the bilge. At least the bilge pumps were working!

We wiped our brows and tried to push the frustrations of these setbacks aside. We'd known that cruising wouldn't be exclusively about tropical anchorages and exotic new sights, and we'd expected to experience this other side of the cruising life. What was totally unexpected was the sheer, stunning beauty of our arrival in Cabo San Lucas at dawn. We'd never liked Cabo as a land-based destination, but we were left speechless when we arrived by boat. Gorgeous villas hung off the cliffs above the ocean, and each home was unique and beautiful. The rich morning sun lit the turrets, decks, and plate-glass windows of these houses, and we wondered about the opulent life that must be lived behind their walls.

The thick smell of land and humanity tantalized our nostrils as we neared the

harbor. Even though we'd been coastal cruising for 17 days—and not crossing oceans—the sudden smell of densely inhabited land was pungent and profound. Rounding the point, the sight of Cabo's famous rock arches had us lunging for our cameras, and we soon found ourselves surrounded by the sportfishing fleet as it headed out for a day on the water.

When we pulled into the bay, our view of the shore was momentarily blocked by three enormous cruise ships that were lined up to anchor. How ironic that several thousand cruise-ship cruisers would arrive in Cabo at precisely the same moment we did. But their exhilaration couldn't have compared to ours. We snuck past all the mayhem and found a place in the anchorage to set the hook.

The water was turquoise and perfectly clear, and the anchor was visible 25 feet below the boat. Wow! That was what we'd come here for. We both dove in, laughing aloud. What a sense of accomplishment. Two and a half weeks in transit from San Diego, and we'd arrived intact on our own small boat. Over the next few days, we caught up with all the other boats with which we'd sailed, swapping stories about our travels south. In the coming months, we'd see these new friends again and again at anchorages all over Mexico.

Beginners no longer, we'd graduated into a new life of adventure as true cruisers.

Emily Fagan and her husband, Mark, continued on aboard *Groovy*, exploring the Mexican coast and the Golfo de California.