

The scenic anchorage at Isla San Francisco has great snorkeling and hiking



Charter News + Information

By Emily Fagan

Wild Winds of the West

Chartering on the Sea of Cortez

We scrambled over the last few craggy boulders and ran breathlessly up the windswept ridge where Mexico's stunning Sea of Cortez stretched out before us. Shimmering blue in the bright morning sun, the sea seemed to open its arms to us as we listened to the shrill cries of a lone osprey soaring overhead. Looking back down the hiking trail beyond the giant green cactus and baking sandstone boulders, my husband, Mark, and I could see the sheltered cove of Ensenada Grande, where our chartered Hunter 44DS Groovy lay at anchor.

Our week on the Sea of Cortez revealed just how unpredictable and rewarding this region can be. Here rugged desert mountains meet a moody sea: one moment it offers the best of Mother Nature's beauty; the next it unleashes the worst of her fury.



For five years Emily and Mark Fagan have been cruising full-time in boats and RVs. Follow their adventures at www.roadless-traveled.us

It's the kind of cruising ground in which for every two days of magnificence, the sea takes its toll on the third.

Two nights earlier we had paid our dues. Anchored in Bahía San Gabriel, with its white sand beaches and colonies of noisy birds roosting in the nearby mangroves, we watched a tranquil sunset turn into a raging windstorm. Twenty-five-knot winds and a 5-foot chop pinned us onto a lee shore until noon the next day. Once free to run for shelter, we pulled into Puerto Balandra, where the sea again changed her tune. Anchored in a spectacular cove of crystal clear water, surrounded by soft white sand beaches and jagged cliffs, we spent two days luxuriating in the beauty of the wild desert.

The Sea of Cortez plays with its sailors, and it lured us farther in with one of the best sailing days I can remember. A brisk wind, glittering water and a few

hours on a blistering close reach had us grinning from ear to ear. Knowing now that the night wind might turn hostile, we tucked up against the towering cliffs of Ensenada Grande and kayaked and snorkeled to our heart's content before taking a hike among the cactus.

Another lively afternoon sail took us to the most famous of the sea's anchorages, Isla San Francisco, where a rim hike offered views into the hook anchorage below. We were now out of reach of the worst of the night winds that menace the La Paz area, and the sea changed tactics once more.

The next morning we sailed for hours dead downwind at a mind-numbing 2 knots, when suddenly a line appeared in the water ahead: glassy undulations followed abruptly by whitecaps and powerful headwinds. We barely had enough time to reduce sail in anticipation of the onslaught.

Later that day we pulled into San Evaristo's little cove with wild hair, wilder eyes and a boat covered in salt spray. We were still licking our wounds at dusk when a family pulled alongside in a *panga* fishing skiff. A pair of teenage brothers, their mother and a baby sister sold us some of the tastiest sea bass we have ever eaten, all for less than five dollars.

Four miles across the channel at tiny Coyote Island we met Manuel, who has

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lived his entire 50 years on this quarter-mile wide rock. At one time, 30 family members and friends shared this miniature community with him, but today his only companion among the cluster of bedroom-sized buildings is his dog.

The cheek-by-jowl chapel, schoolroom and outdoor “museum” of whalebones stood vacant, but Manuel’s eyes were filled with the mystery of the sea. He comes from a line of fishermen whose blood is far more indigenous than the Spanish who stormed across Mexico in the 1520s to crush the Aztec empire. Independent and resourceful, fishermen like Manuel eke out a life barely tethered to the modern world, with its airplanes, electrical power, cell phones and VHF radios.

The Sea of Cortez is a treasure of a charter destination not meant for the faint of heart. Sailing these remote waters and trekking this unique landscape offers a getaway unlike any other. It can be a challenge, to be certain, but like a multi-faceted gem, as hard and unforgiving as a diamond, it can be equally as brilliant. *A*

Cruise Notes

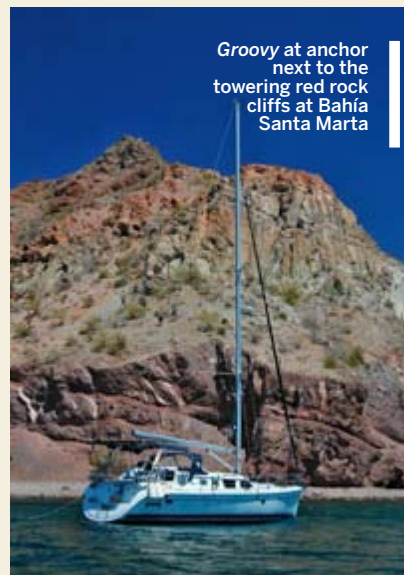
WHERE TO START: The narrow Sea of Cortez runs for 600 miles between the Baja California peninsula and mainland Mexico. Charters start with a flight to La Paz in Baja, California.

CONTACT: The Moorings, Costa Baja Marina, moorings.com

WHEN TO GO: The best months to visit are October, November, April and May. Summer days hit a humid 100 degrees with 90-degree water. Winter nights can dip into the 40s with water in the 60s.

ROUTE PLANNING: Wind funnels around the mountains, making predictions difficult. During spring and summer, nighttime Coromuels blast the La Paz area with high southwest winds. Northers are powerful multi-day storms that run from November to April. Study sailflow.com before leaving; there is no Internet access between La Paz and Puerto Escondido. A daily cruisers’ net on VHF 22A at 0800 gives La Paz area marine weather forecasts.

GUIDES: *Sea of Cortez: A Cruising Guide* by Shawn Breeding and Heather Bansmer is the most comprehensive cruising guide. John Steinbeck’s *Log from the Sea of Cortez* is a delightful (at times hilarious) account of a marine biology research trip he made to the Sea of Cortez in 1940.



Groovy at anchor next to the towering red rock cliffs at Bahía Santa Marta