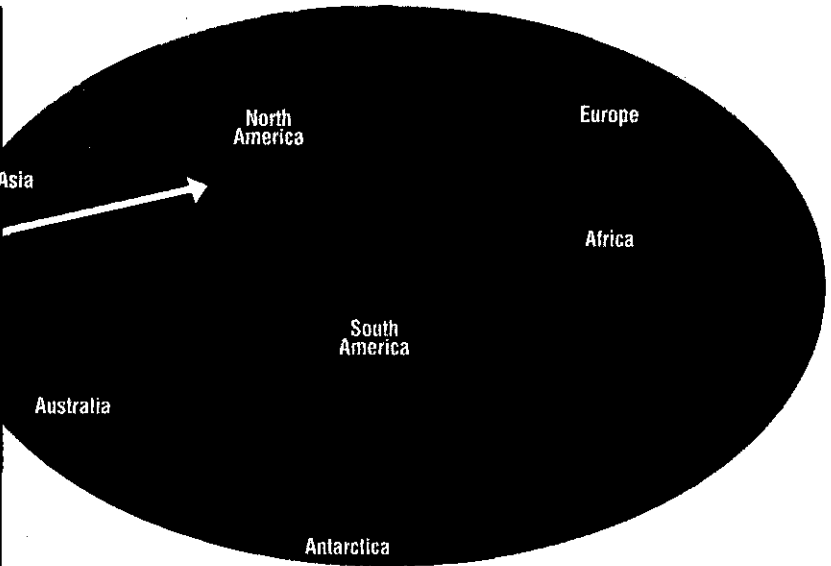


AN OASIS IN THE DESERT

Baja California and the enchanted Sea of Cortez

KEN AND COLEEN BONDY



Trying to remember the Gulf is like trying to recreate a dream. This is by no means a sentimental thing, it has little to do with beauty or even conscious liking...there is always in the backs of our minds the positive drive to go back again. If it were lush and rich, one could understand the pull, but it is fierce and hostile and sullen. The stone mountains pile up to the sky and there is little fresh water. But we know we must go back if we live, and we don't know why.

— John Steinbeck and E. F. Ricketts
Sea of Cortez

Things have changed since Steinbeck scribbled that passage on a 1940 expedition into the Sea of Cortez. The Baja Peninsula's population has swollen to



Loreto's town hall

KEN BONDY PHOTOS

2.6 million. Foreigners have discovered its potential as a vacation and retirement destination. Cities have flourished from tourism, and many of the quaint villages found by Steinbeck and marine biologist Ed Ricketts are long gone.

But things have also remained the same — most notably, the undeniable attraction visitors feel to this stark and spectacular land, to its stunning white beaches, desolate brown mountains, harsh deserts, and emerald bays. Divers are best equipped to appreciate the great contradiction of Baja — a dry and hostile land beside a warm, inviting sea.

The area we call “Baja” is the peninsula situated between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California. California and Arizona create its northern border. Two Mexican states make up the peninsula, Baja California Norte (northern portion) and Baja California Sur (southern portion). The states of Sonora and Sinaloa are found along the eastern shores of the Gulf.

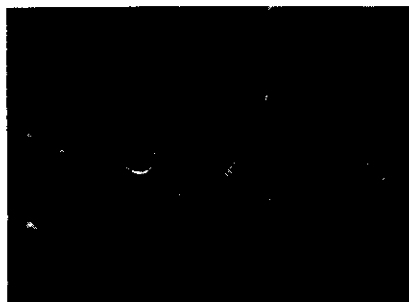
The people who wrest a living from the land and the Sea of Cortez generally are hard-working, industrious, intolerant of crime, friendly, and willing to share their often meager possessions with those in need. Fishermen work from dawn to dusk to cull a living from the sea, while farmers, merchants, and tradespeople work hours unheard of in the U.S.. Crime south of the tumultuous border area is almost nonexistent.

The people of Baja descend from European explorers and the natives who inhabited Mexico prior to their arrival. People who migrated from Asia in prehistoric times were the first to settle the peninsula. They became the natives who met the first Spanish explorers sent by Hernán Cortez from mainland Mexico in the early 1500s. The conquistadors introduced smallpox, syphilis, and other diseases foreign to the natives' immune systems, and today, only about 1,000 indigenous Baja Californians remain.

Pearl-bearing oysters in the Bay of La Paz and legends of greater treasure drew the Spaniards again and again while harsh conditions repulsed them.

Spanish missionaries followed in a quest to “civilize” the peninsula, and they established the first successful European settlement at Loreto. In 1698 Father Juan Maria Salvatierra, a Jesuit priest, founded the first Baja California mission, which still stands at Loreto.

Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, and Baja California became a federal territory in 1824. Its northern half was granted statehood in



A blenny peeks out of its polyp home.

1952. The peninsula's southern half — the area of greatest interest to divers — remained too isolated to do much with. But in 1973, the Mexican government opened a 1,050-mile-long highway that runs the peninsula's length. Baja California Sur sprang to life and within a year was named the 30th Mexican state.

Baja California's human history is not nearly so violent as the land's and sea's history. The peninsula cleaved from mainland Mexico along the San Andreas Fault 10 to 15 million years ago, creating the world's longest peninsula. The Pacific Ocean rushed into the rift to form the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez.

Islands erupted from the depths as volcanoes and earthquakes roiled, and the evidence of this violent birth can be seen underwater. Unlike the coral reefs of the tropics, huge boulders spilling from the land above comprise much of the diving landscape. Thousands of species of tropical and subtropical marine life thrive in the crevices, caves, and channels formed by the rocks. Sea fans, sponges, and encrusting corals give the rugged seascape a soft veneer. The Sea of Cortez is subtropical, and the water is warm enough during the summer and

FACTS AND FIGURES

Location: Baja California is an 800-mile-long peninsula extending from the border of California along the west coast of Mexico as far south as Mazatlán. The Sea of Cortez, or the Gulf of California, lies between this peninsula and the mainland of Mexico.

Capitals: The capital of Baja California Norte is Mexicali. La Paz is the Capital of Baja California Sur.

Language: Spanish. English is spoken widely, but the people at Baja California are especially helpful to visitors who attempt to communicate in Spanish.

Currency: Mexican peso. U.S. dollars are accepted in some of the larger cities. The exchange rate varies, at the time of publication it is about 3,075 pesos to the dollar. Visitors will find prices in Mexico to be a bargain.

Entry requirements: A tourist card is required for travel beyond the border cities or for stays in border cities longer than 71 hours. The cards are available at border crossings and are given out on flights to Mexican airports. The cards are taken from visitors upon leaving the country. To get a card, U.S. citizens need a photo ID and proof of American citizenship. A passport is highly recommended. A single entry card is good for 90 days. Mexico has a \$12 exit tax collected at the airport or border upon departure.

Time: Baja California is split into two time zones, Pacific Standard Time in the northern state and Mountain Standard Time in the south.

Electricity: Plugs and sockets are the same as in the United States and Canada.

Getting there: There are direct flights daily from the United States to Loreto, La Paz and Los Cabos, or you can drive down the peninsula's freeway.

early fall to dive without a wet suit.

Large open-ocean creatures, such as manta rays, whale sharks, fin whales, and dolphins, make the Sea of Cortez their home. The marine life cannot seem to contain itself under water, and a watchful eye can spot manta rays spinning above the water, marlin jumping, shark fins slicing, flying fish zooming, and turtles floating along.

Diving is great all along the Gulf

coast and Loreto, La Paz and, Cabo San Lucas have established and reliable dive services. All three areas share similar marine life and underwater scenery, but each is known for its unique dive spots.

THE CAPE

The Cabo San Lucas region, also known as the "Cape" or "East Cape," includes roughly 100 miles of the southernmost Sea of Cortez coastline between

Cabo San Lucas to the south and Bahia de Los Muertos to the north. Long, deserted stretches of white-sand beaches separate the desert from the sea. Emerald green shallow waters hug the shoreline and change abruptly to deep blue and black as the water plunges to depths of more than 3,000 feet, occasionally within a quarter-mile of the beach.

The East Cape is known for superb big game fishing for marlin, sailfish,

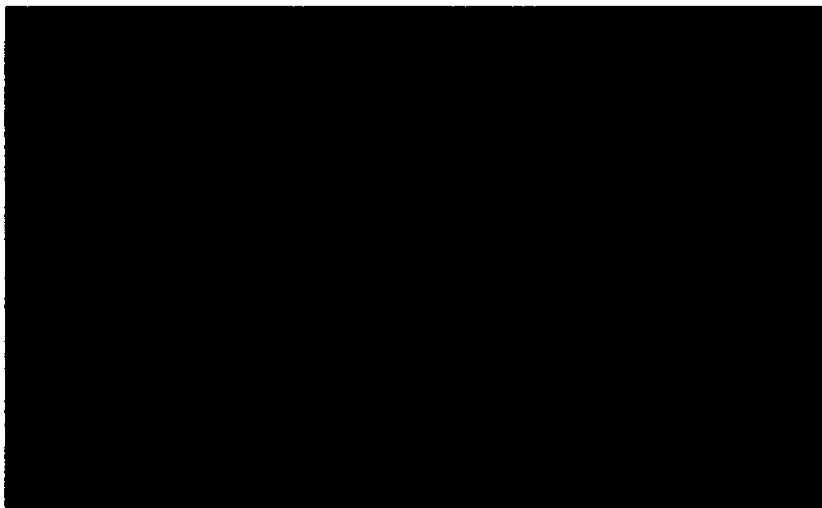
WEATHER & the Gulf of California

BY H. MICHAEL MOGIL

The Baja region, which comprises Baja Norte, Baja Sur, Sonora, and Sinaloa, receives relatively little rainfall. As a result of this arid climate, it can only support desert-like vegetation. This isn't much different from the coastal regions of southern California, Europe's Iberian Peninsula, and northwest Africa. Only in southern California and the Iberian Peninsula, where people have planted many trees and shrubs, has the expected climatological vegetation changed.

At first glance, this non-rainy weather regime sounds like great news. There isn't much, if any, stormy weather to disrupt a diving vacation. But there are important weather factors that you should keep in mind. Even if you aren't planning a trip to Baja soon, it's interesting to understand how a unique combination of meteorological and oceanographic factors create the region's peculiar weather patterns.

The most important contributing factor to Baja's weather is a slow-moving river of water, called the California Current, that flows from north to south along the California and Baja coasts before turning westward, out to sea. This current brings cool water further



A sunset over the Gulf of California

south than would otherwise be expected.

As the California current ambles down the Pacific coast, it is warmed by the sun. The Coriolis Force (the result of the Earth's rotation, and something we'll discuss in a future weather column), combined with offshore winds, try to move this warm surface water away from the coast. When the warm surface water is pushed out to sea, cooler water rises from the ocean depths to fill the aqueous void. This process, "upwelling," causes dramatic changes both beneath and above the sea's surface and accounts for the large water temperature variations that occur in the Gulf of California.

When upwellings occur, the cooler surface waters have a profound influence on the area's weather. First they

chill the air over the sea. On days when this overlying air mass is moist, fog and low-level stratus-type clouds might form. Once formed, these clouds block out the sun. The combination of these two events causes cool temperatures along the west coasts of Baja and Sinaloa. Mazatlán, in the Sinaloa province, has almost 25 days of fog each year. Inland, and along the Gulf of California's coastal sections, there is less fog. Guaymas, on the Gulf's eastern shore in the Sonora province, only has an average of nine foggy days per year.

Wind is another factor affecting northwestern Mexico's climate. Winds in the coastal regions of Baja California and Sinaloa blow from the northwest most of the year. The persistence of these winds is evident in the vegetation. Visitors to Baja, and even resi-

dorado, tuna, and wahoo. Diving has come along fairly recently, and one of the area's charms is that it's relatively unexplored under water.

Living coral reefs, the only ones known on North America's west coast, are the unique feature of East Cape diving. Two good examples of living reefs in Baja are found just offshore of Punta Pescadero and Cabo Pulmo.

These reefs consist mainly of huge

clumps of stony hard corals growing on igneous rock in 20-60 feet of water. Fans and encrusting sponges of yellow, red and orange provide profuse color, and the hard coral's nooks and crannies are home to numerous small fish, invertebrates, reef fish and eels. Larger pelagic species are regularly seen on these reefs, most likely because of the deep water nearby.

Dive facilities (tanks, air, weights,

and boats) are available through most hotels in and near Cabo San Lucas, and at several resorts between San Jose del Cabo and the punta area. Most diving in the Cape is done from "pangas," (small boats) and many of the reefs can be dived from the beach. Beach access is available in many areas via a passable road from Cabo San Lucas to Punta Pescadero.

LA PAZ

"We were to sail in the early morning," Steinbeck wrote, "and that night we walked in the dim-lighted streets of La Paz. And we wondered why so much of the Gulf was familiar to us, why this town had a 'home' feeling. We had never seen a town which even looked like La Paz, and yet coming to it was like returning rather than visiting."

Today the ancient seaside village that once provided pearls for the robes of popes offers the same feeling of home: friendly townspeople, excellent restaurants, breathtaking sunsets, and fine diving. Long a vacation retreat for Mexican nationals, La Paz is famous for its "Malecon," a romantic seaside promenade, and for its proliferation of shops.

La Paz harbor is a convenient departure point for a half dozen gorgeous coves of white sand and teal water. The nearby island of Espiritu Santo provides a rocky under-seascape, and dolphins occasionally will race your boat there. Espiritu Santo and nearby Isla Ballena offer coral reefs, crystal coves, and some cavern diving.

Nearby La Paz is El Bajo, or the Sea Mount, an undersea mountain that starts 6,000 feet below the surface and rises to within 60 feet of it. Its base is firmly set in the nutrient-rich cold-water deep in the Sea of Cortez. Currents bring these nutrients up the slopes of El Bajo, where thousands of species of sea life gather to feed. At the top of the food chain, hammerhead sharks, manta rays and occasional whale sharks circle the mountain peak.

Not far from Espiritu Santo, red rock juts out of the sea in an unlikely forma-

dents of southern California, will attest that the upwind side of trees and vegetation exposed to these winds can be completely void of vegetation. This is because of the combined effects of evaporation, wind, and the resultant blasts of sand and dust.

Breezes sweep in from the Pacific Ocean and blow along Mexico's ocean-facing coasts. During the summer these breezes help moderate the region's otherwise unbearable heat. In winter, the ocean breezes keep coastal areas from becoming cold. Along the Gulf of California's inland shores, the mediating Pacific winds are non-existent. As a result, temperatures are hotter in the summer and cooler in the winter than areas along the Pacific coast. During summer the predominant wind direction changes from north to south. This seasonal change fuels the monsoon season and pushes warm, humid air from the equator into Baja and the Southwest U.S.

Thunderstorm activity is rare in and around the Gulf of California. Rain is almost as unusual, but the advent of the monsoon season sets the stage for precipitation. During the day, you might see a thunderstorm build atop the inland mountains, then drift over the Gulf. Strong gusty winds, lightning, and heavy downpours accompany some of these storms. By the next day, patches of high-altitude clouds may be the only reminder of the previous day's thunderous weather.

Another weather phenomenon asso-

ciated with monsoon season is the "chubasco." Chubascos are the results of tropical cyclones that develop in the eastern Pacific. More than 20 tropical cyclones develop annually in an area south of Baja.

Fortunately for those living there, most of these cyclones make a westward track away from Mexico and die as they encounter the cool Pacific waters. A few, however, track northward, become a chubasco, and disturb the coastal areas of Sinaloa and the southern portions of the Baja peninsula. Though a chubasco is not as strong as other forms of tropical storms, it brings increased seas, and can dramatically alter currents and underwater visibility.

During winter, cold fronts and low-pressure systems crash ashore in the western U.S. These systems affect the weather in western Mexico, especially in northwestern Baja. As the fronts push southward into Mexico they bring cooler temperatures, large ocean swells, cloudiness, showers, and strong, gusty winds. These winds can affect underwater visibility, but make for great sailing and wind surfing — two of the region's increasingly popular winter activities.

Overall, the weather in the Baja region can be summed up in two words: hot and dry. Although some of the local weather phenomena can disrupt your underwater plans, it is usually ideal for divers — even if it is relatively boring for us weather types.

tion that seems it may topple at any moment. The rocks of Los Islotes, as the tiny island is known, provide hauling-out spots for dozens of sea lions year-round.

The female sea lions often engage divers in a friendly underwater dance, but any diver should be careful about getting too fresh with the ladies. The massive and territorial males keep a

watchful eye on their harem. The curious tykes nip at fins, snorkels, hair, and fingers, but are usually careful not to bite too hard. These wild animals act like excited puppies at the pound.

Further north near Isla San Jose in Las Animas, an island of pinnacles pokes its tips innocently out of the boil of life below. Its name, meaning "the

spirits," adds mystique to the place, which haunts divers long after they ascend from its depths. Hammerheads congregate here in groups of 100 or more, while other sharks, such as silkies, can be found swimming within divers' sight of the island. Divers can swim into schools of thousands of silvery jacks and lose all direction in the flashy crowd. Dramatic sheer walls and heart-stopping pelagics make Las Animas one of the most exciting spots to dive in the Sea of Cortez.

LORETO

About 125 miles up the coast, Loreto offers another approach to Baja California. Lacking Cabo San Lucas' tourist appeal and the cosmopolitanism of La Paz, Loreto is small, dusty, and quiet. But those qualities bring Loreto's faithful back.

Loreto long has been popular with American fishermen, but a burgeoning dive operation has sprouted there. Expecting big things from the little town, the Mexican government has built a luxurious hotel and a state-of-the-art international airport there.

After visiting the oldest mission in the Californias, visitors can take panga trips to Isla del Carmen, a huge uninhabited island that buffers the Loreto shoreline. Off Carmen's steep bluffs, divers can find a macro photographer's paradise, brilliant nudibranchs and darling blennies and gobies, moray eels peeking from the cracks, and abundant reef fish. Punta Coyote is a rocky point near Puerto Escondido, a rapidly developing port that not long ago was mainly a tourist campground. The point offers gorgonian corals, angelfish, pufferfish, triggerfish, and smaller reef fishes.

Baja provides divers and travelers with a wealth of visual and sensual experiences. Its rugged terrain has captured the hearts of many, but its secrets are open to only a few — those who take the time to understand the history and the geography of the region.

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