



THE MAGICAL SEA

ADVENTURES ON MOLA MOLA

By Pam Bacich

I really wasn't very interested in the Sea of Cortez. I'd been to Cabo. I thought it was overcrowded, overbuilt and overrated. Nothing in Cabo feels much like Mexico. Why, I wondered, would anyone want to spend several months cruising in that area?

Well...Cabo isn't the Sea of Cortez! If you're lucky, you'll sneak around the Cape and head north. With a celebratory send-off by dozens of waiting humpback whales, you will soon enter into a magical sea.

La Paz makes a great base for your first Sea of Cortez exploration. With a good selection of marinas and marine services, boaters often stay for the season. La Paz has the feeling of a lazy Mexican village that has grown outside its boundaries. Downtown and the long waterfront strip are lively, especially on weekends. We went to Palm Sunday services in the old cathedral and then attended Easter Sunday services in the new cathedral, which will be under construction for years to come. The exterior of the building is almost finished and the inside of the church was packed during the holiday services. There was no ceiling, but this didn't seem to bother anyone.

The real attraction of La Paz is the jewel-like islands about 25 miles outside the bay. The islands of Espiritu Santos, Ensenada Grande, Isla La Partida, and Los Islotes are famous for their clean, clear waters that are packed with vibrant and colorful sea life. There are fantastic flying fish demonstrations, feeding pelicans, friendly close-ups with sea lions, and amazing jumping rays. I've been an ardent shell collector my whole life and was almost overcome when I found my first paper nautilus.

The paper nautilus is the delicate egg casing from an octopus. They ride on a cushion of sea grass and can be found among tiny sea urchins and other delicate shells on the southern end of some of the beaches.

On the way to Loreto there are must-see anchorages; one favorite was Bahia Amortajada on Isla San Jose. A highlight of this bay is a dinghy trip back into the mangroves. You slip through a very shallow entrance bar at the mouth of the estuary and are transported into a long meandering channel that empties into a wildlife-filled lagoon. If the tide is right, you can float carefully out the far end of the lagoon and back into the sea. A short dinghy ride takes you to the tiny island fishing village of Isla Coyote, where the fishermen are welcoming and what there is of the island is fun to explore. There is a small church, a few houses and a blue whale's carcass. Two of the island ladies sell homemade jewelry. Shopping and exploring —what could be better!

Another favorite stop is the peaceful anchorage of Aqua Verde, which has a small town and fishing village. There's a petite market, and you can purchase fresh (yummy!) tortillas. The children are adorable and eager to interact. My husband, Mick, is an artist and takes his sketchbook with him whenever we travel. In Aqua Verde he was the Pied Piper to a small





group of children who enjoyed adding their art to his book. When we returned later with photographs of the children, we were offered homemade goat cheese as a thank you.

The wildlife was abundant as we continued north toward Loreto. One of our favorite wildlife spectacles we named the “Wall of Dolphins.” In the distance we saw what looked like the wake from a boat. Seeing no boats anywhere, we worried that maybe it was waves breaking over a reef. As we got closer, we saw that it was a tightly packed school of dolphin with hundreds of these graceful animals moving in unison in a straight line. The water was flat calm everywhere else, but it churned with wave action inside the “Wall.” In one of these large schools of dolphins we noticed something else quite unusual. At least half of the dolphins had large suckerfish attached to them. This was a new one for us.

Throughout the sea are hundreds of jumping rays. It’s an amazing show as one after another jumps and flips out of the water. The rays never let you get very close to them as they just keep flipping and flipping. One day we came across a group of rays engaged in mating activities. The water was dead calm and the rays were otherwise occupied and so they let us float right next to them. A pair of rays would dive down together and then come up intertwined. As they came to the surface, the tips of their wing like fins were the brightest blue I’ve ever seen.

Each night we couldn’t wait to turn on our underwater lights and see what new creatures awaited us. One night the water was teeming with hundreds of pale blue and green two-foot-long worms. The top five or six inches wiggled and turned. Mick took the boat hook and lifted one onto the swim step. To our amazement, it instantly turned into a pool of black ink.

Nightly when we turned off the lights, the sea came alive with every imaginable size and shape of phosphorescent creature. There were tiny, tiny critters that lit up when you moved the water; and bigger, chunkier pieces that looked like stars had fallen from the sky. On my favorite night, we looked out and saw what looked like Japanese lanterns floating on top of the water. As we watched they slowly melted into the Sea.

During our months in the Sea of Cortez we had many wonderful encounters with whales. Some nights we could hear fin whales in the bay near us. One of those nights we slipped quietly into the dinghy and headed out toward the sounds of the whales blowing. We drifted silently, listening to the whales all around



us, but decided it might not be the safest thing to do and headed back to Mola Mola. I’ll never forget it.

Loreto was the first Spanish settlement on the Baja Peninsula. As the original capital of the Californias, Loreto is rich with history and charm. The town offers great shopping, a wonderful weekly farmers market, good restaurants, and interesting missions and historic sights for exploring. In calm weather you can easily anchor in shallow water right in front of town. For longer stays, Puerto Escondido is a short drive from Loreto and offers good anchorage, a few slips, and a small market and restaurant.

Many feel that this section of the Sea of Cortez between La Paz and Loreto is the most interesting and offers the most beautiful scenery and wildlife in all of Baja. Although there is much to be seen as you travel further north, given the chance I will gladly spend as much time as possible in this magical part of the Sea.

