

THE WEBBERS RETURN TO BAJA

by Kristy Webber



Kristy and
Richard Webber

Last November my husband Richard and I had so much fun participating in a “Sea Paddler Training” course located out of Loreto, Baja California del Sur, México that we made the unexpected decision to return for the “Loreto I islands Builder” trip this March.



I say unexpected because getting to Loreto is not the easiest or cheapest kayak destination for us, but we were hooked and wanted another infusion of the magic of the Sea of Cortez and of Ginni Callahan’s company leading these trips, Sea Kayak Baja Mexico (SKBM).

For people in Colorado, getting to Loreto means an overnight in Los Angeles, and then an Alaska Air flight to Loreto the next day. There are other suggested ways to get there (including driving), about which you can read at Sea Kayak Baja Mexico’s website: www.seakayakbajamexico.com.

When we arrived we stayed at the modest but very comfortable Angra Hotel for a couple days prior to the trip. Although it was not in the center of the appealing historic part of town, we enjoyed walking through the streets down to the main plaza and the seaside malecón [sea wall or jetty] each day, so it was perfect for us.



Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto



The Paseo, a pedestrian walkway in downtown Loreto

SKBM's "Builder" trip was all about seeing spectacular wildlife and the jaw-dropping beauty of the area, and not intended as a course in which to learn more kayaking skills. However, one cannot help build skills when paddling in such varied sea conditions. Two guides with us, Edgar and Ramon, were quite willing to help any one of us work on any particular skill in which we had interest. Edgar was particularly helpful to me on one challenging paddle.



SKBM provided quality boats and gear for the excursion. I paddled an NDK Romany and Richard paddled an NDK Explorer. Five of our group used European style paddles and the other four used Greenland style paddles.

All in the group were experienced paddlers. On the first three nautical mile crossing to Danzante I land for lunch, I slightly nervously wondered if such a brisk pace was going to be maintained for the next six days of paddling. Mostly, it was. [A nautical mile is 1.15 statute miles]

Day One's paddling was in mild weather with calm seas, and provided an opportunity to get used to being in a boat, being in a group and carrying the cargo needed for camping for six days. All water and provisions were provided by SKBM but the load was distributed among all the paddlers. Our first delicious lunch was indicative of the excellent and satisfying meals that followed.



Edgar cooking lunch

After lunch we did another 3 nm crossing to Carmen Island to camp for the night. After landing, several people opted to snorkel in the cold water and were rewarded with a variety of fish sightings. In the glow of the early evening we watched whales spout off in the distance between Danzante and Carmen and a pod of dolphins playing off shore. It was a wonderful beach site except for the nearby light tower. Anyone leaving their tent in the middle of the night lost intermittent privacy in the flashing light.

Day Two unfolded with a paddle around the southern end and up about a third of the eastern shore of Carmen to our next camp site. The first impression of this site was disturbing because the beach was littered with fish bones and carcasses, especially the heads of baby hammerhead sharks. It was obviously used as a fishing camp.



Rich Webber

But after adapting to the situation and contemplating the realities of how fishing is often done in the Sea of Cortez, we were able to appreciate the magnificent scenery all around us. Richard and I both decided to brave the cold water to snorkel, although I had to bail early due to a severely leaking mask. (Check your equipment before you go!)

The weather was forecast to change to high winds. On schedule, the late afternoon winds began to push waves onshore and we had to move our tent back against the cliff behind us to avoid a wet surprise as the tide rose in the night.

The next day, white caps were clearly visible outside our somewhat protected beach. We had already planned to spend a second night at that campsite, but would have had to do so anyway because of the wind.

The group determined that it still might be possible to paddle up the coast a bit around a headland on the third day. Richard wisely chose to stay in camp to protect his problematic shoulder. As the rest of us paddled into the exposed water, I began to have my doubts. I was at the limit of my comfort level in terms of the wind and waves and was definitely having trouble keeping up. Feeling myself to be a comparable paddler, I kept asking myself why I was struggling.

Then Edgar shouted over to me that I was dragging a dry bag (politely referred to as my "poop bag") off the stern of my boat. It was acting as a sea anchor. He unclipped it for me and with his sound forward stroke advice, he calmed my nerves. Without the extra drag and with renewed confidence, I found the entire experience to be the most exhilarating and challenging paddling I had ever done.

The following days unfolded with whale sightings (including the less frequently seen Blue Whale), jumping Mobula Rays, occasional sea lion heads, dolphins and a dizzying variety of birds. The Sea of Cortez is vibrant with life. The hiking that we did was enriched by the local flora knowledge of our guides.



Endemic Baja sea gull

The paddling continued to challenge and delight us with wind-driven bumpiness. We found ourselves crossing watery paths with other groups of paddlers unable to cross to Danzante due to the wind. The fourth night we shared a beach with another Sea Kayak Baja Mexico group doing a longer "Naturalist" trip.



A windy day meant sharing a beach with another group

One of the joys of that day was actually at night. Our guides gave us a 360 degree presentation of the night sky, highlighting planets and constellations with a laser beam. It was magic.

The last crossing to Danzante required ferrying across the wind and currents through exhilarating rough seas, but rewarded us with lots of wildlife sightings and a circumnavigation of the island.

However, there always seems to be at least one something that can throw a wrench into the works on each trip we have taken. The wrench on this trip came in the form of a massive luxury yacht drifting into view on the final night of the trip. This multi-million dollar homage to conspicuous opulence chose to park itself in front of our campsite in one of the most beautiful coves of the trip. Lit up like Paris and with aggressive audio

speakers, it issued loud head-banging techno music all night long (truly until dawn) that no earplugs could defeat. Such incongruity of experiences was memorable.

It was a trip rich with memories. Our final crossing to the mainland was taken slowly on dead calm seas, almost as if we were trying to prolong the trip. The Sea of Cortez is a jewel for kayaking. Sea Kayak Baja Mexico offers paddlers a genuine and unfussy direct experience of this environment. We highly recommend the adventure.

Find miscellaneous editorial asides with more information about these and other RMSKC members, travel in Loreto, and Baja in general on the next page.

There is also a fabulous picture of Kristy surfing.

MORE ABOUT LORETO AND BAJA



Kristy surfing in Baja during the Webbers' November, 2015 trip.



Andrew Emlen playing a Bach suite at LoCo Roundup, 2010

EDITOR'S NOTE: Kristy didn't mention it, but the wake-up call on the morning that they were sharing the beach with the natural history group was a flute and guitar duet played by Ginni Callahan on flute and Andrew Emlen, one of the naturalists, on guitar.

Andrew played Bach cello suites at Ginni's "kayak camp" several summers when I was there and has led almost two hundred Roads Scholars' kayak tours in the lower Columbia River valley where he lives. He's a Lewis and Clark buff who can bring the history of their time and expedition alive with costumes and music, and he records with a local groups Willapa Hills and the Skamokawa Swamp Opera.

EDITOR'S NOTE #2: The Webbers spent a couple of days in Loreto, a pleasant village of about 15,000 people. Both Rich and Kristy speak Spanish. Rich had Peace Corps language training and spent a few months in Bolivia before the entire mission was expelled from the country in 1971; poor fellow, he had to finish his tour on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. Kristy has traveled to Cuenca, Ecuador, for several sessions at Spanish language schools there.



The Angra Hotel

The Angra Hotel where they stayed in Loreto is often used by SKBM's clients; it has a nice open patio area for a meal or a glass of beer.

EDITOR'S NOTE #3: My first kayaking was with SKA in Loreto where I met Ginni, who was leading the trip; it was her last season with them before starting SKBM. Before I went I read a novel about the area called *King of the Moon*, by Gene Kira. He writes like a cross between John Steinbeck and John Nichols, who wrote *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Amazon readers give it 4+ stars and I would too. It is excellent.