

Baja 3 Ways



There's something for everyone in Baja—the perfect destination for diver and non-diver alike. Diving is superb from La Paz to Cabo San Lucas, in the Sea of Cortez, at the point where land ends, on Cabo Pulmo—the only living reef in the eastern Pacific and near the isolated, uninhabited Revilla gigedo Islands in the middle of the ocean where mysterious manta rays play.

Choices for diving and whale watching include day trips by a multitude of operators and 4-10 day excursions on live-aboards from Cabo San Lucas or La Paz. Above-water activities run the gamut from tennis and golf, horseback riding and hiking, shopping and sunbathing, to deep-sea fishing, parasailing and kayaking. Evenings evolve from glorious, blood-red sunsets into romantic dinners at excellent restaurants, and end with lively discos or stargazing on a deserted beach where you feel alone at the end of the world.

For those who may be as confused about this 1,000-mile-long desert peninsula as I was, the Pacific pounds the western shores and the Sea of Cortez caresses the area between the eastern coastline and west coast of mainland Mexico. The Sea of Cortez and Pacific Ocean meet in a dramatic marriage at the tip of the peninsula, Land's End, Cabo San Lucas. Tijuana, Rosarita Beach and Ensenada are at the top end, within 70 miles of San Diego.

About halfway lies San Ignacio, Guerrero Negro,

Scammon's Lagoon, and Magdalena Island where gray whales migrate to give birth from January to March. La Paz, near the end of the peninsula, was the first diving mecca before the growth of Los Cabos about 125 miles south.

Los Cabos (The Capes) refers to the many points and inlets along the lower tip of Baja. Cabo San Lucas, at the southernmost tip of the peninsula where the land plunges into the sea, San Jose del Cabo, about 20 miles north, and the

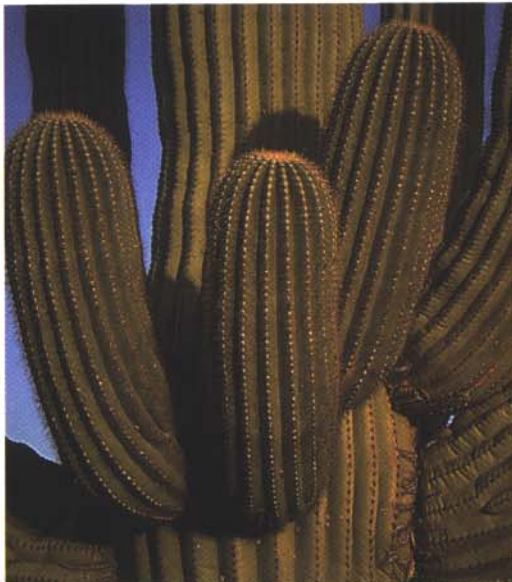
sun-drenched shoreline between them, is strewn with beautiful beaches, an ever-growing number of resorts and condominium complexes, and some delightful dive sites. The number of excellent restaurants alone can keep you there for weeks.

Average temperature ranges from 70-85 degrees year-round. Summer humidity makes it seem hotter. Fair-weather divers (like me) will appreciate the 87-degree water in summer, but a thick wetsuit is advisable from January to May when it can plunge to the 60s. Around Los Cabos the visibility can be anywhere from 15 to 100 feet and change daily. Typically, the visibility is best in summer and fall.

Nowhere else will you find such good diving on only five minutes from

shore, with an opportunity to see underwater sandfalls, manta rays and many of the 850 fish species that populate the area. And, of course, only here can you spend surface intervals on Lover's Beach between the Pacific Ocean and San Lucas Bay, within sight of the famous arch.

Amigos del Mar in Cabo San Lucas has been introducing



John Newman

divers to their special undersea discoveries and well-known dive spots for the last 17 years. They usually take no more than eight divers on any one of their five boats, and the experienced divemasters, crew and shop personnel are as friendly and knowledgeable as you can find. Top sites in San Lucas Bay include Anegada, The Point and Neptune's Finger. You never know what you'll find, but it's always wise to keep an eye toward the distant blue lest a whale shark or hammerhead goes by.

Amigos del Mar also runs sunset cruises and natural history whale-watching tours, manages dive operations on the luxurious 112-foot live-aboard *Solmar V*, and they have hotel packages with Solmar Suites Hotel. The striking two-level buildings are nestled beneath high sandstone hills.

Tio Watersports is also an excellent dive operator with four boats and lots of water toys for rent. Tio is on-site and has packages with two five-star, luxury Melia resorts. The Melia San Lucas, in Cabo, is a superb hotel right on Medano Beach on San Lucas Bay.

Tio took me to two dive sites within 15 minutes of Melia Cabo Real; El Gavilan—a rocky ledge leading into a canyon at 70-100 feet, and Chilenos—a super site with lots to see at 35-55 feet. The local dive operators offer special excursions to Gordo Banks and Cabo Pulmo, but the best way to dive the Sea of Cortez is aboard the *Solmar V*.

Besides luxury accommodations in roomy air-conditioned cabins with private baths and VCRs, delicious meals and snacks, pampering and the commodious dive deck with abundant storage and two hot water showers, you have the opportunity for three to five dives a day at remote sites you wouldn't otherwise see. El Bajo Seamount is the place to see schooling hammerheads and large pelagics. Excellent diving is also found at remote islands like Las Animas, Los Islotes and Cayos. Gordo Banks is the other seamount well known for hammerheads and pelagics.



Ellen Sarbone

But my lifelong dream was to dive alongside the graceful shape of a giant manta ray, taking time from its long, mysterious journey to commune with me. One of the most dependable places on earth to fulfill this dream is the remote Revilla gigedo Archipelago, four uninhabited volcanic seamounts breaking the Pacific's surface 220 miles from Cabo San Lucas, better known by the name of its largest island—Socorro. It lies in a zone of frequent wild storms that make it inaccessible most of the year.

I signed up for a trip on *Solmar V* to the Revilla gigedos (ray-vee-ah-hee-hay-do) Socorro and San Benedicto Islands during the Thanksgiving holidays. After an uneventful crossing and deep sleep on the gentle rolling boat, we

checked in at the Mexican Naval station at Socorro. We were lucky. The crossing can be rough—bring Dramamine. The Mexican government is working hard to protect its marine heritage, so at this time only two boats are issued diving permits, *Solmar V* and *Baja Treasure*. The rules are clear: no fishing, no gloves, and no lights in the water (i.e. no night dives). We were welcomed by bottlenose dolphins cavorting in our wake and leaping into the air. While we waited for Navy guards to finish their inspection, a large turtle broke



Ken Howard

the surface three times and seemed to raise its head in welcome.

The first three days we dove O'Neil Rock and Punta Tosca at Socorro Island. I asked another diver about his dive and he matter-of-factly replied: "Pretty much what we were expecting—hammerheads, a giant manta, a whitetip reef shark and tropicals." On Socorro, ^{what is called} ~~the expected,~~ ~~anywhere else that would be considered sensational.~~

I saw my first manta at Punta Tosca. Alone at the end of a dive, at 60 feet, I glimpsed a shape out of the corner of my mask. A small manta glided into view and lingered with me for a few minutes before disappearing, but it was only the beginning. In two days at San Benedicto, there were sometimes up to five mantas swimming with us. Everyone aboard (including the divemasters) was caught up in manta magic. We were cautioned not to harass the animals by grabbing them, chasing them, or hanging on to them for a ride, but it was okay to rub their bellies or just place a hand on their backs and kick along above them in the slipstream if they seemed inclined.

It's impossible to describe the emotions of swimming with these graceful giants and being permitted to rub the huge sandpapery white belly. As we glided along it came within two feet of me and looked me straight in the eye.

On the last dive of the last day, three of us were in the water with two big mantas as the sun went down and our air supply dwindled. The animals stayed with us all the way back to the boat and seemed reluctant for us to leave. So were we. All of us were changed by the experience. It seemed to overshadow all the dives that had come before—the experience of a lifetime and everything I could have hoped for.

—Ellen Sarbone