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B A J A B O U N D

A KAYAK JOURNEY INTO THE SEA OF CORTEZ

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“Quick, put the fish in the water!” I yell.

A Botox-lipped fish, called a burrito grunt, is flopping around at my feet, covered in sand, fighting for its life.

Moments before, high on the horizon, I watched a cormorant pluck the unlucky fish from the Sea of Cortez. A large frigate bird with forked tail feathers then gave chase to the cormorant. It was like a Discovery Channel scene come alive.

As the made-for-TV action disappeared from view, I went back to writing in my journal.

Thump!

Suddenly, lying in the sand at my feet in the middle of its very own impact crater, was the wayward fish. The cormorant had released the fish to me like a homeward-bound tourist dumping foreign coins at the airport—as if I needed a handout. Alas, burrito grunts do not come wrapped in a tortilla.

Bill, in wildlife rescue mode, carries the convulsing fish back to the water. We watch for a few moments and sure enough, the shell-shocked grunt shakes off the sand and swims away, no doubt eager to reunite with his schoolmates and tell his improbable tale. Bill and I exchange a high-five, knowing we made a difference in the life of one troubled pescado.

You never know when fresh seafood may drop into your lap when paddling in Baja, even if you don't choose to eat it. We're near the funky fishing village of Loreto, 700 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border for a one-week self-supported kayaking trip on the Sea of Cortez. “Self-supported” means no motorboats—we're traveling under our own steam and carrying all our gear. There are 10 of us, plus three guides from our outfitter, Sea Kayak Adventures.

We will paddle tandem kayaks into Loreto Bay National Marine Park, and visit Isla Danzante and Isla Carmen, both uninhabited wildlife sanctuaries declared as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. We will be off the grid—no e-mail, cell phones, hot showers or flush toilets. Instead, we'll reset our priorities to paddling, snorkeling, hiking, swimming, and, at the end of each day, we'll reward our burdensome diligence with happy hour.

At a short orientation the night before our departure, held at the swanky La Mision hotel in Loreto, one of the guides, Ray, gave me a broad, confident smile. And why not? Dude had it made. He's youthful, tan and fit—living the Baja dream. He tossed me three drybags in which to pack all my worldly possessions for the next seven days. I'd known this was coming; I'd had the official packing list for weeks. But the choice between Keen or Teva shoes, a towel or a sweatshirt, continued to flutter in my consciousness. Was I really ready for this?

Squelching my lingering doubts, I made my way downstairs to meet the van that would take us to the launch site and the adventure of a lifetime.





Edgar is also a marine biologist. He points to all manner of sea life: purple and yellow angelfish, orange cup coral, crown starfish and a rainbow wrasse. Then he pulls a purple spiny sea anemone from the sea wall and asks if I want to hold it.

My paddling partner for most of the trip is Gary, a tall, strong man in his late 60s who works as a substitute schoolteacher. This is his fourth Baja trip with Sea Kayak Adventures. He is here along with his two old friends who together call themselves Larry, Curly and Moe. The fact that Gary is a multi-trip repeat customer comforts my novice apprehensions.

Ray and his fellow guides, Edgar and Vlady, demonstrate how to pack the watertight hatches of our kayaks with sleeping bags, pads, tents, and drybags. I'm sporting shades, SPF-30 sunscreen and a broad-brimmed sun hat that makes me look like a lost beekeeper. Gary sits in front of the tandem kayak and I'm in back, in charge of working the rudder. Paddles in hand, we are ready to put civilization in our wake.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE LAUNCHING A SEA KAYAK into open water for the first time. I feel like an ancient mariner setting out to traverse the sea to an unknown world. An aboriginal sensibility overtakes my consciousness, and now is all there is. Gone are thoughts of purpose, expectations, doubts or even drained energy. The organic nature of a fresh start takes hold and everything is possible. Deeper into the journey, I will see that all of us on this trip are searching for something—adventure, camaraderie, connection to sea and sky—all of it coalescing in this nascent exploration into the wilderness.

After two hours of paddling, we make our first landfall: Isla Carmen, a rugged desert island, the largest in the area at more than 18 miles long. We ground on a sandy beach of seashells and coral. We carry the heavily

loaded kayaks above the high-tide line in teams of six to eight. At around 200 pounds each with food and water, they are gut-busters, and our guides strongly discourage back-wrenching heroics. Next, we unpack the group gear and then our personal belongings. This gentle rhythm of collaborative routine establishes itself early on. We will paddle for two hours every morning and two hours every afternoon.

The ratio of three guides to 10 clients means that at least one guide is always available for hiking, snorkeling, cooking or mischief-making. The camaraderie between these tres amigos is genuine and heartfelt. They are a winning combination of efficient work, organization and playfulness. It's obvious they like each other and their jobs. Vlady teases us with his colorful gringo-Spanish greetings: "Hola Coca-Cola! Que pasa calabassa? Nada limonada." Does the guide's life ever get old, I ask. "Never," Vlady replies. "I love my office."

Our first two dinners were pescado Veracruz and pollo mole made with a spicy Oaxacan chocolate sauce. After that, all meals are vegetarian; keeping meats fresh after a few days in this remote setting and warm climate is not feasible. However, we have fresh fruit (papaya, melon and pineapple), and vegetables (zucchini, cucumber and chayote) at every meal. My favorite dinner is tortilla soup made in a chicken broth with carrots, jicama, onions, tomatoes, and served with avocados and salsa. I don't know what made me happier: holding a steaming bowl of hot soup while the sun set after a long day of paddling, or watching Vlady and Edgar prepare this savory dish

shirtless, with only aprons and board shorts covering their bronzed bodies.

At night, the sky comes alive with stars. First Venus appears, then the constellations of Orion and Taurus, then the Big Dipper. Voila! The Milky Way opens up in striking wonderment. My reptilian brain knows the stars are always present, I'm just not aware of it on a daily basis. I am awestruck, pausing to savor the night and allow the celestial heavens to penetrate my being.

Night brings another natural wonder as well: bioluminescence. Millions of marine organisms emit a greenish chemical glow, dancing like tiny waterborne fireflies in time with nature's rhythm. I look up and see luminous stars, then look to the sea and marvel at nature's mirror. I ponder the literal and figurative lightness of being. If illumination is above and below me, then does the luminosity also dwell within me? I exhale a deep existential sigh and am filled to the brim with trust that all is as it should be.

IT IS 9 P.M. I RECKON IN CAMPING TIME THAT'S NEARLY MIDNIGHT. I step into my one-person tent, blow air into my sleeping pad, unroll my bag and make a pillow out of my fleece jacket. I zip up the tent after bringing in my hiking shoes—a favorite lurking place for scorpions. I power off my headlamp and fall asleep to the sound of waves gently lapping the shore, lulling me into a deep restorative slumber. My head hits the pillow and I am out, dreaming of bioluminescence and the magic of the sea.

I wake to the sound of clanking lids on pans and the deep roar of a

propane burner. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee lingers in the salty morning air. The kayaks wait patiently on the high-tide line like sentinels on Easter Island, ready to come alive. Tent zippers open and achy, sleepy bodies emerge one by one. The ethereal morning light on the canyon walls expose striations in the rock. A pelican skims straight as an arrow over the calm sea. Soon the sun rises and the rays of light warm my skin. I am ready to start the day.

Paddling in my kayak has become a natural rhythm. The water viscosity appears to be a combination of Saran wrap and foil, all silvery with small ripples. My newfound friend Ingrid describes it as feeling "like a bar of soap bobbing in a big bathtub."

The group is in a jovial mood. Larry, of Curly and Moe fame, sneaks behind our kayak and lifts our rudder. For a few minutes, my straight-ahead intentions are sabotaged. When I discover what he's done I vow revenge. The joke really is on me: loosen up sister, life's a journey, not a destination. Before I'm ready to exact retribution, it is time to go ashore once again. But the rudderless metaphor is not lost on me.

Snorkeling in Baja is like swimming in an aquarium. Edgar is also a marine biologist. He swims with the grace of a sea turtle, sans fins. Gary and I are wetsuit and fin-clad to keep pace. Underwater, Edgar points to all manner of sea life: purple and yellow angelfish, orange cup coral, crown starfish and a rainbow wrasse. He pulls a purple spiny sea anemone from the sea wall and asks if I want to hold it. Yikes! No, thank you. We continue swimming close to the tide line, where an abundance of sea life thrives.



At night, the sky comes alive with stars. First Venus appears, then the constellations of Orion and Taurus, then the Big Dipper.

Just as my pruned hands and chilled body are telling me it's time to get out, a pod of eight bottlenose dolphins appear 30 feet away, diving in and out of the water in unison. I can hear their breathing, like a precision team of cross-country runners. It's a scene from *The Little Mermaid*. Any minute King Neptune will arrive with his scepter and crown and the fish will break into song.

"The combination of sea temperature, maximum 12-14 hours of sunlight, deep ocean upwelling and high salinity level of the Sea of Cortez creates an ocean oasis," Ray says. "Animals love the salty water."

We hike to the top of a canyon and from the ridgeline stand witness to the largest mammals on earth, blue whales and fin whales. As they surface, the plume of air and water from their blowholes shoots up 30 feet, so they can be seen and heard miles in the distance. I spot a whale's fluke and this iconic Baja image fills me with delight and wonder.

As we hike back down an arroyo, white blooms of native palo blanco smell like honeysuckle. There are hundred-year-old cardón, a cactus that looks like the saguaro from the Sonora Desert. Ray points to the smallest nest I've ever seen. Incubating inside are two hummingbird eggs. Mama launches a buzz-kill assault and we make a hasty retreat. A canyon wren sings us a high-lilting song as we make our way down the slippery slope to happy hour and an inspired Dutch-oven meal of chiles rellenos.

Happy hour is simple: One bottle of liquor per night—tequila, rum or vodka—mixed with either passion fruit, orange, or lemon juice, along with chips and salsa, mixed nuts, or crackers and cheese. This daily ritual is a welcome way to loosen up tense muscles and tongues from long and sometimes difficult traverses between islands.

Inspiring moments of clarity and philosophy sometimes emerge through these distilled spirits. One night, Bill, the fish rescuer, sits next to me in his camp chair. Three luminaria candles in brown paper bags generate a flattering light.

"There is one thing I learned in this life," he says, leaning back, nursing a rum concoction.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Maintain the relationships you have with your friends and family."

Fine advice, particularly coming from a man traveling with friends he has had for nearly 45 years.

Our last night in Baja is a mixture of camaraderie, grace and reflection. Michael, Francine and I sip margaritas and watch the afterglow of yet another tequila sunset—orange hues that match our newly tanned skin.

"We really are going to have to stay in touch," says Michael, whose gentle blue eyes reflect the water.

I simply nod my head in agreement, not expressing what I know in my heart. The only time we have is now.

"I want to come here every year until I die," says Francine.

We look out over the sea. Three pelicans fly overhead. The distant echo of dolphins and whales leave an imprint on my heart. Slowly, we make our way back to the laughter of the group—another day in this unforgettable Baja paradise.

