

Mabel went to Baja. (By Clive Ashford).

Just after lunch on Good Friday 5 intrepid explorers, (in alphabetical order Clive, Dai, Helga, Joy & Malcolm), left Plymouth en route to Baja, pronounced Baha. In the time honoured tradition of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story here is Clive's account of our adventure.

The transport arrangements went exactly according to plan but that didn't stop the journey being extremely tedious. We flew into Newark, on to Dallas and then eventually landed in Los Cabos. The final leg of the journey was to be a 2.5 hour drive from Los Cabos to La Paz. Even though our final destination was in Mexico

we had to pass through USA immigration. I can reliably inform you that the Yanks are world experts at making foreigners feel unwelcome. On top of that, whilst in Dallas airport we sampled the delights of a bagel from "Dunking Doughnuts". If you can imagine a mixture of grease, sawdust and plastic then you have just imagined the joys of Dunking Doughnuts. Yum yum. You may just be getting an inkling that I was less than thrilled with our visit to Uncle Sam.

While all that tedious travelling is going on let me tell you where Baja is. Look at a map of North America. Cast your eyes to the West coast, (left hand side of the map if you need to know), and look at the USA / Mexico border. Dangling down you will find a long peninsular; (750 miles long according to the tourist blurb), this is Baja California to give it its correct title. The city of Los Cabos is right at the bottom of this peninsular and La Paz is a little further north on the east coast. Let me say right away that no-one goes to Baja for its architectural delights and that Los Cabos airport certainly matches expectations!

We now join the stars of this particular soap opera some 28 hours after leaving Plymouth. You find a rather tired and dishevelled bunch travelling in an air conditioned mini bus on the 2.5 hour drive from Los Cabos to La Paz, a town on the coast of the Sea of Cortez. We are driving through desert mountains and the scenery is stunning. There are deep cut arroyos that in the wet season would be raging torrents but as we crossed them they were dusty dry. Elsewhere the vegetation was a dense mixture of cactus and thorn bushes, any attempt at walking cross country would probably result in a serious sense of humour failure in a very short time. Our driver is pointing out places of interest, enquiring about what we will be doing in Baja and telling us fisherman's tales using the same time honoured tradition of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story as perfected by your narrator! While driving into La Paz we quizzed our driver about places to eat and he booked us into the Three Pilgrims restaurant, a choice that later turned out to be an excellent recommendation. Taking everything into account our welcome to Mexico far bettered our experiences in the USA.

Eventually booking into our hotel for the night we find that Helga has mysteriously changed her name to Mabel, which even in our fatigued state caused much hilarity and inspired the title of this little essay. A quick freshen up then we had a taxi ride to the Three Pilgrims. The condition of the taxi came under the heading of "interesting," so much so that Mabel felt compelled to book the same taxi for our return journey. The return journey was blurred within either an alcoholic haze or a haze of exhaust fumes. We may have been lucky to survive.



The Five Amigos together with Manuel at the farewell meal.



Isla Espiritu Santo & Isla Partida and an American Airlines' wing!

The reason for travelling to Baja was to do some sea paddling in the Sea of Cortez. The aim was to circumnavigate the twin islands of Isla Espiritu Santo & Isla Partida, a distance of some 44 miles, camping on different beaches most nights. The logistics were that we would load 3 days supplies (including fresh water) into the boats, paddle and camp completely independently, then be re-supplied for the second half of the week. All camping and paddling equipment was supplied together with a guide / cook but we were expected to help out with the communal chores. That evening we met the rest of the team, being introduced to our guide

Manuel and an American couple Karen & Brigg. (Yes, Brigg, even he agreed that he owned a rather odd name). Karen & Brigg were to paddle with us for just the first half of the week. During the briefing Manuel asked us all about our paddling experience. We were all suitably modest and when I asked Manuel about his experience he was equally reticent.

We were picked up from our hotel early on Easter Monday and transported to a beach where we loaded supplies onto a motor boat and were then taken to Isla Espiritu Santo. The loading of the boat was a bit of an education, as we had to wade out with water lapping above our knees. We learnt first hand how warm the Sea of Cortez is. (Very pleasant).

Once we arrived on Isla Espiritu Santo Manuel set about getting us organised. All our personal & camping gear had to be coerced into the rear hatch or the kayaks while our share of the communal gear, (food, water, shelter & kitchen), was distributed around the front hatches. It was a daunting task but eventually the mountain of gear piled onto the beach had disappeared inside the boats. All the hard work was now over and we could get on with some paddling. Yee har.

Manuel made a comment on the lines, "I normally talk about kayaking, teach paddling strokes and get people to perform a wet exit at this stage but I don't think we will bother to do any of that with this group." What a good chap. Later in the week he suggests we do some skills. "Like what?" I ask.

"Like rolling and wet exits." Manuel replies.

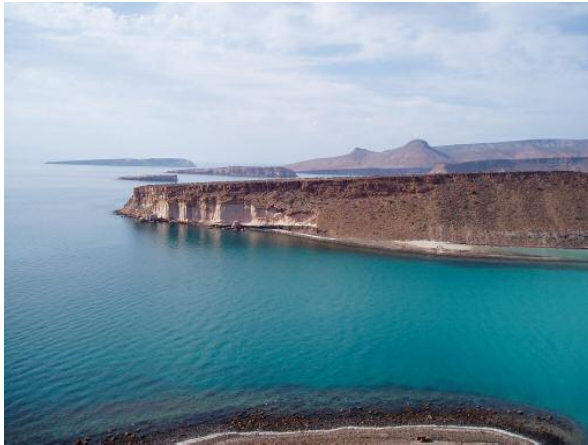
"Kayaking is a dry sport." I assert. There was no more mention of doing skills.

When paddling you put a blade in the water, pull the boat past it, change sides and repeat the process again and again and again and again until you reach your destination.

On the way you have to cope with whatever conditions you are confronted with, which is where good planning comes into its own. We paddled on warm turquoise water under clear blue skies, sun cream being very much the order of the day. The wind did occasionally make conditions less than perfect but never stopped us getting where we wanted to go. There is little point in trying to describe the scenery to you because looking at the photos will do a far better job but suffice to say that we paddled under cliffs, along beaches (some of which were backed by



You can't describe scenery like this.



You can't describe scenery like this either.

mangrove forests) and on occasion through arches and caves. The islands are gradually sinking to the west; thus the cliffs are generally higher and steeper with fewer landing places on the east coast. Due to the difficulties with landing our longest days paddling were around the eastern side of the islands during the second half of the week.

We quickly settled into a routine. The daily timetable would be get up at 07:00 and be paddling at 09:00. Lunch would be at our campsite at whatever time we arrived followed by a period of exploration / snorkelling. It was then

“happy hour” as Manuel produced cocktails on the beach, (Mary please take note), and then a period talking or studying the library, (a dry bag full of books to help identify what we had seen). Later we would eat our evening meal, clear away, do more talking and go to bed when the sun went down. Our contribution to producing the meals was confined to washing / chopping the various ingredients, Manuel would do all the actual cooking. (Something to do with not trusting the children with naked flames I presume)? It was all very civilised.

The atmosphere in the group was fantastic. We all had good camping experience and were keen to get the chores done. Brigg was the weakest link on the water but for two of the three days that he was with us he paddled in a double kayak where his lack of experience was not noticeable. Having spent some 30 hours travelling together the five Plymothians already had already established an easygoing banter. It took Karen, Brigg & Manuel just a few hours to work out what was going on and about another 30 seconds to learn how to join in. Oh how we did chortle. When Brigg & Karen left after three days we were genuinely sad to see them go. All of us enjoyed looking at the wildlife and took a genuine interest in our surroundings, so much so that at the end of the week Manuel let it be known that we were one of the best groups he had led. He particularly enjoyed our enthusiasm, saying it very much reminded him of the time when he was first discovering the islands.

The wildlife was spectacular. The area is rich in bird life with Pelicans being commonplace. Among other species seen were kingfishers, spotted sandpipers and turkey vultures. The avian highlight may have been watching an osprey make a kill or it may have been seeing a humming bird dance from flower to flower. Either way it was all very memorable.

Even more impressive than the bird life was the sea life. Snorkelling left us marvelling at the myriad of fish all around and swimming with sea lions was a very enlightening experience. Whilst paddling we spotted Manta Rays jumping out of the water, dolphins and barracuda. During one snorkelling trip Joy showed Mabel a “string of pearls”. Said item was later described to Manuel who calmly announced that this was a jellyfish with a nasty painful sting. Mabel was not impressed. Another time we had left Malcolm alone on a beach while we went exploring inland. On our return Malcolm told us how he had fought off a huge shark single-handed. We were somewhat suspicious as the “shark bite” he showed us had more than a passing resemblance to the wound one might receive had one slipped on, say, a barnacle covered rock, but if Malcolm says it was a shark bite then shark bite it was.



Pipe fish.

Less impressive was the wildlife with wings and six legs that seemed to like the taste of human blood.

On 3 occasions Manuel gave us an almost formal lecture. One was on the human history of the island, one was on mangroves and the third was on the geology of the island and surrounding area. All very interesting and informative, Manuel's knowledge and willingness to share it was a real bonus that made a good experience into a brilliant one. It was all too easy to forget that English is Manuel's second language.

Whilst snorkelling I was aware of being affected by currents that kept changing direction. I couldn't understand why until one evening we landed on a shallow shelving beach. While setting up camp we watched the water level drop dramatically then surge back in again, a pattern that repeated itself all night. Manuel said he had never known anything like it. The only explanation we have managed to come up with is that this was the after effect of a tsunami that had occurred off the Solomon Island a couple of weeks earlier. If you know any better please enlighten me but in the mean time I am claiming to have survived a tsunami!

On one of the windy days we were quietly sitting on the water taking a short rest. I had a paddle blade in the water and was using it for support when I saw Joy quite calmly let go of her paddle to take photographs. I would claim that she had a wider, thus more stable boat but I have the horrible feeling that she can do this because she is a better sea paddler than I am. Don't tell her though, it will make her all big headed.

By the end of the week we had successfully circumnavigated both islands and landed on the same beach from which we had started. The kayaks were unpacked and the worst of the sand that had accumulated inside was given back to the environment. The boat arrived that was to take us back to the mainland bringing lunch and cold beer. How horrid. We were transported back to La Paz where we spent a few hours shopping, cleaning ourselves and packing. In the evening we were treated to a farewell meal in a restaurant. As we walked in Manuel was already sat at the table and greeted us, "Hello all you shiny people." Perhaps we had been smellier than we had realised on the island!



A typical sea kayaking picture.

All too soon we were being transported back to the airport to have another sample of USA hospitality. On the way our driver started talking about "Hotel California" and "Eagles." It transpired that the very hotel made famous by the song (you probably have to be of a certain age) was on our route back to the airport and that we had time to stop. I confess that I was not expecting very much but the Hotel California is a wonderful place to stop for coffee and was the icing on a very large holiday cake. (And we did manage to leave).

Los Cabos airport was incredibly busy but while waiting to go through check in etc we quite by chance met up with Karen & Brigg again. They had spent a few days relaxing on a beach on the Baja Pacific coast and were now returning to the States. We had chance to say "goodbye" all over again.

Our trip to Baja was brilliant, we would recommend it to anyone. We booked via Spirit of Adventure, based in Postbridge and the tour operator was Baja Outdoor Adventures. (BOA.) BOA also run a 10-day kayaking trip along the peninsular coastline, which they say is a bit more serious. Joy and I are sort of making plans to go back.