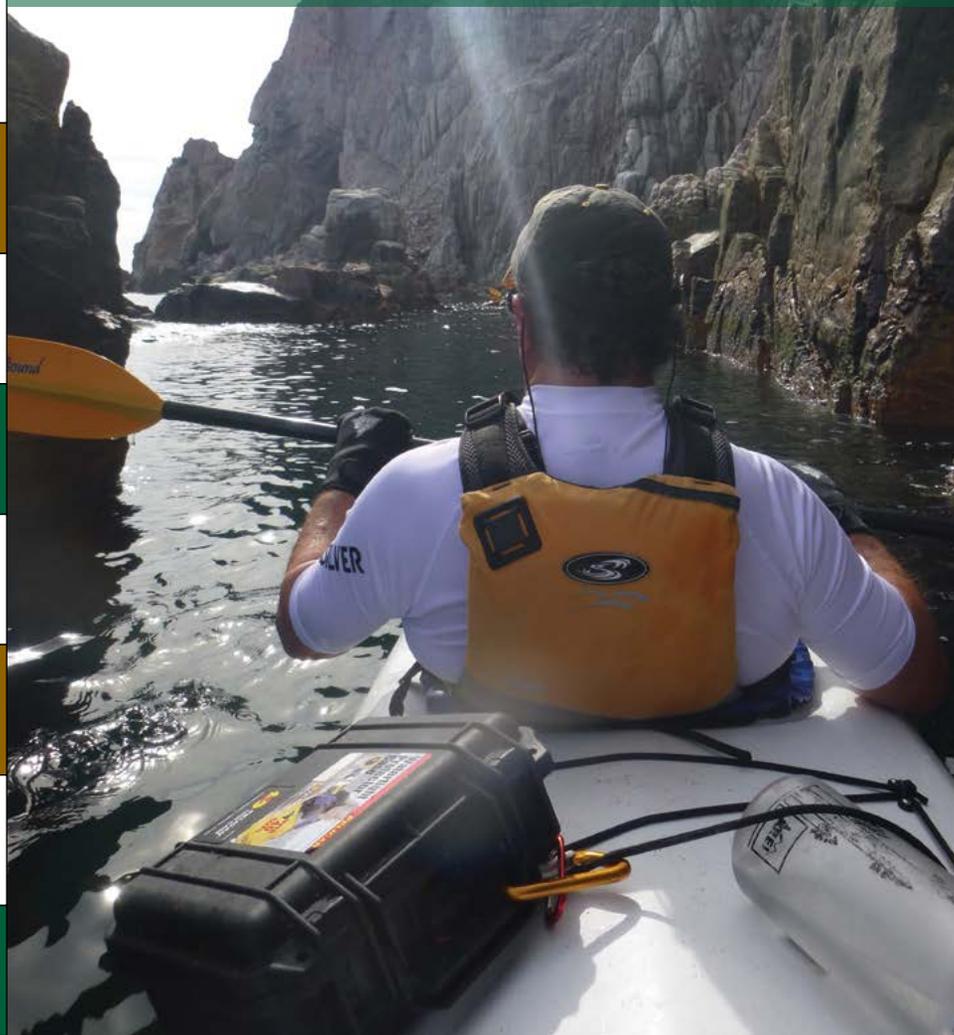


A Perfect Storm In The Sea of Cortez

By Don Mankin



The kayak in front of us climbed up the face of a steep eight foot swell and disappeared down the other side. My heart pounded, my stomach churned and I couldn't help but think of the movie, *The Perfect Storm*. Remember that fateful scene with the fishing boat, the Andrea Gail, trying to make it over the crest of a monster wave?



Unlike that ship, we made it!

The first two days of my recent sea kayaking trip around Espiritu Santo Island in the Sea of Cortez between Baja Sur and the mainland of Mexico was anything but idyllic, unlike my first kayaking trip on the island 25 years earlier.

What I remember from that trip were leisurely days of paddling in calm waters, the usual weather for that time of year, looking at the scenery and lazing on the beach in the late afternoon. That's the image I used to convince my cousin Dan, in his early 70s like me, to join me on this "easy" adventure.

Dan is a latecomer to adventure travel. Vacation for him usually means cruises and resorts. For Dan, adventure is what happens when the restaurant loses your reservation. But unlike most people sinking into geezerhood and facing the challenges of aging, he has decided to grab the gusto, take some chances and test his limits.

None of that going gently "into that dark night" for him. Two years ago, it was white water rafting; this year, "gentle" swells and peaceful paddling in the Sea of Cortez.

For hours, I tightly gripped the paddle and dug into the water as we battled the wind and the waves—which get bigger and stronger each time I tell the story. But when we got to our destination—typically a secluded beach with views of a turquoise bay in front of us and a craggy desert landscape behind—we celebrated with tequila and ice cold beer.

A cooler with ice is one advantage of having an escort boat to carry our gear and supplies. The other is that it followed us close by during the hairier moments of the trip in case we suffered the same fate as the Andrea Gail.



It was a great trip, a perfect blend of excitement and serenity, activity and relaxation, and great scenery, company and food. And we didn't have to lug the cold beer and tequila. We just had to drink it. Like the paddling, I think we did pretty well.

As for Dan, the trip was a revelation. Each day he got looser, more relaxed and funnier as he melted into the warm, seductive embrace of the setting and routine. Most important of all, he felt invigorated by the trip.

Shortly after he returned home, he sent me an email telling me that after a year of health scares and challenges, "I now know that there is a lot I can still do." We'll see what else he can still do on our next adventure. Not sure what that will be but I'm hoping for better weather.

Don and Dan's trip was run by Baja Outdoor Activities, www.kayactivities.com. For more info and photos, see Don's blog on his website, www.adventuretransformations.com.



Like all successful adventure trips, the risk was more apparent than real. The water was warm so the worst we faced was a refreshing dunk and a few minutes of adrenaline-fueled intensity as we tried to get back into our kayaks or into the escort boat in the rolling water. In any case, our kayaks stayed upright and the worst we suffered were cramped fingers and sore arms and shoulders.

The rest of the trip was as idyllic as our campsites. After the first two days, the weather calmed down and we were able to enjoy the scenery as we glided by in our kayaks – wind-sculpted cliffs, broad bays, thick mangrove forests, peaceful lagoons, swooping frigate birds and diving boobies, and white, curving beaches set against stark desert landscapes. When we weren't paddling (or drinking) we napped, swam, and went on short, easy hikes into the desert and among the crags off the beaches.

We also went snorkeling. The most memorable snorkel was with the playful sea lions at Los Islotes, a tiny island of jagged rocks a couple of miles off the northern tip of Isla Partida, separated from Isla Espiritu Santo to the south by a narrow channel. As we snorkeled a few feet off the rocks, the sea lions whizzed by within a foot or so, occasionally "flipping" us in the face.

Our meals were excellent featuring fresh fish, clams, squid and octopus almost every day, caught by the two-person crew on our escort boat. Plus I slept better than I have in years.

After a couple of uneasy nights adjusting to the sleeping bag, I usually fell asleep by nine and except for a middle of the night bathroom break, slept until dawn. Those middle of the night bathroom breaks, an annoying nighttime ritual at home, are something completely different when you are standing alone on an empty beach in the dark looking up at a sky thick with stars.

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