



South of the border, where the rugged windswept desert meets an emerald sea, James Kay shows us some of the hidden splendors that await an adventurous photographer

*Text And Photography
By James Kay*

BAJA CALIFORNIA



I'm watching my wife Susie disappear behind the swells as she bobs up and down while paddling her kayak to my left. Often described as the most notorious of any sea-kayaking trip along this 100-mile stretch of Baja coastline south of the town of Loreto, the turbulent waters around Marcial Point are living up to their reputation today. With only a slight breeze to accompany them, however, the waves are providing us with an intense, yet exhilarating roller-coaster ride as we round the point.

It was invigorating to be back on the water again after spending the previous 72 hours holed up on a small spit of sand as 50 mph wind gusts slapped the tent fabric against our faces. Known by the direction from which they blow, these "El Norte" winds can wreak havoc for kayakers plying the waters of the Sea of Cortez. At the time, however, I remember being more concerned about the havoc they were wreaking on my sleep.

The dry, rugged jag of land that forms the 800-mile-long

Baja Peninsula was once attached to what's now the west coast of Mexico. Beginning about 7 million years ago, tectonic forces deep within the earth began to rip it away from the mainland. As this movement progressed, the sea slowly invaded the gap between these two land masses to create what we know today as both the Gulf of California and the Sea of Cortez. The entire Baja Peninsula, along with an approximately 50-mile-wide strip of southern California up to San Francisco, rides atop the Pacific Plate as it grinds northwest along the edge of the North American Plate. The famous San Andreas Fault marks the boundary between these two plates. Contrary to the predictions of California "falling into the sea," as the Pacific Plate continues to drift to the northwest, this fragment of crust will one day form a large island off the west coast of North America. With an average rate of movement of one inch per year, however, it will be a while before we'll need to build a bridge to reach Los Angeles.

When I first developed an interest in sea-kayaking photography, I found myself drawn north to the fiords of Alaska and the wilds of British Columbia. As spectacular as these locations are with their tidewater glaciers, waterfalls and huge mountains rising straight from the sea, the nearly constant drizzle and low clouds of summer often can lead to photographic frustration. Then there's Baja. Imagine yourself paddling beneath perpetually sunny skies along white sand beaches while suspended by transparent green water. The only clouds you'll see will be of the high cirrus variety, seeming to materialize out of thin air just in time to enhance yet another glorious sunrise or sunset—no rain, no soggy tents, no fogged lenses.

With scores of offshore islands and 1,200 miles of desert coastline, the Sea of Cortez along the Baja Peninsula is a sea kayaker's paradise. Although vastly depleted by decades of commercial overfishing, these waters support a huge ecosystem and more species of marine animals than any other body of water



In And Around Baja California

► Practical Information

The only news most Americans have heard from Mexico over the last few years has been about the drug-cartel-related violence. Fortunately for Baja aficionados, the southern three-quarters of the peninsula is probably the best place in all of Mexico to avoid these issues. The vast majority of this violence is located along the U.S. border on the Mexican mainland. Areas around Tijuana and Ensenada have seen an uptick in petty drug-gang-related crime over the last few years, with some American visitors being harassed at gunpoint, so it's probably best to avoid this region of Baja until things calm down. Other than an increased military-police presence on the streets of La Paz, we saw no evidence of drug violence at all and felt very safe during our trips.

► Getting There/Getting Around

Driving. To drive from San Diego to La Paz takes about 22 hours to cover the 926 miles. Just stay on the Baja California Trans-Peninsula Highway, also known as Mexico Highway 1. Due to the narrow road, wandering cows and the occasional bandito, it's best to avoid driving at night. **Airlines.** Alaska Airlines offers 2-hour, 15-minute nonstop flights from Los Angeles to La Paz every day of the week. **Rental Cars.** All major U.S. rental car companies have booths at the airport in La Paz. Rent them in town to get a better price.

► La Paz

La Paz hasn't been overrun with resort development yet. It's an authentic Mexican town and has a completely different feel compared to the tourist Disneyland of Cabo San Lucas. The old town located along the waterfront is friendly and safe. If you stay at the Posada LunaSol with Mar y Aventuras, you hardly need a rental car; it's only a several-minute walk to the beautiful waterfront promenade known as The Malecón. The locals come out early in the morning to get their workouts in before the heat of the day. Many good restaurants are tucked away on side streets just up the hill above The Malecón. Taxis are cheap if you want to travel further afield. We've never been hassled walking around, even at night, and have felt safe at all times.

► Accommodations

Todos Santos accommodations: Posada La Poza, www.lapoza.com
Best hotel in Cabo San Lucas for photographing the granite sea cliffs:
Hotel Solmar, www.solmar.com

OPENING SPREAD: Kayaking in El Cardonal Bay, Partida Island, Espiritu Santo National Park; Architectural details of the Posada La Poza Boutique Hotel in Todos Santos; Doorway in the town of Todos Santos. **THIS PAGE, ABOVE:** Sandstone patterns along Puerto Gato Bay.

of its size on the planet. You'll find hump-back whales, blue whales, marlin, sail-fish, sea lions, manta rays, dolphins, leatherback sea turtles and tropical reef fish. The skies are filled with pelicans, cormorants, frigate birds, blue-footed boobies, blue herons, gulls, oystercatchers, osprey and grebes, all of them dependent on the sea for their existence.

If you've ever photographed saguaro cactus in the Sonoran Desert region of southwestern Arizona, you'll feel right at home in Baja. Often mistaken for the saguaro, the peninsula is home to the cardon cactus, the world's largest species, with some specimens reaching nearly 70 feet into the dry desert air. Huge forests of these cacti share wide valleys along the coast with ocotillo, manzanita, cholla cactus, palm trees, elephant trees, agave and the exotic-looking boojum tree. With their bizarre architecture, these plants all provide excellent subject matter for photography, especially during spring when many produce brilliant flower clusters.

What makes Baja photographically unique, however, is this Sonoran Desert environment juxtaposed beside the white sand beaches and turquoise waters of the Sea of Cortez, an oxymoronic tropical desert. Outside of the Middle East, there aren't many tropical desert coastlines and certainly none with cardon cactus towering above warm green waters.



More In And Around Baja

► Kayak Excursions

Baja offers countless opportunities for sea-kayaking excursions. Except for the hardy few who choose to make the 900-mile drive south to La Paz with their own kayaks, most will find it easier to fly into La Paz and rent boats there. Of the several rental companies in town, I personally recommend Mar y Aventuras (Sea & Adventures) (www.kayakbaja.com). Located a stone's throw from the waterfront in a quiet La Paz neighborhood, this U.S./ Mexican-owned company offers fully guided kayaking trips, ranging from day excursions to weeklong expeditions. They also rent kayaks for self-supported trips. You can inquire with their U.S. booking office at (800) 355-7140. The English-speaking staff is well-informed and friendly. Located above the rental office, the reasonably priced rooms of the Posada LunaSol inn offer views out across the waters of La Paz Bay.

► Weather

Summer temperatures in Baja can be blistering while winter highs range in the 50s to 70s. The months of December through February can be very windy, with rough seas lasting for several days at a stretch where you won't be able to get on the water if you're kayaking. Avoid the hurricane season in September and October. Keep in mind, however, that after the occasional drenching rains of a tropical storm, the southern half of the normally desiccated peninsula miraculously transforms into a verdant, green paradise. Water temps in the southern half of the Sea of Cortez average in the 60s in winter and reach into the high 70s in summer. Bring snorkel gear with a shortie wetsuit.

► Whale Watching

La Paz serves as a gateway to Magdalena Bay located about 100 miles northwest of town on the Pacific coast. While whales range throughout the Sea of Cortez during the winter months, the lagoons of Magdalena Bay are a major Pacific calving ground. There's a well-established whale-watching community based there with photographic excursions into the bay during the winter months. Mar y Aventuras also offers guided whale-watching trips to the bay.

It was this unique desert-by-the-sea environment that attracted me to the photographic possibilities of Baja in the first place, and what better way to explore it than by sea kayak? With all the gear for a two-week trip fitted snugly into the hulls of our boats, Susie and I could explore miles of empty coastline at our own pace, stopping whenever I saw a photographic opportunity. We could poke into every nook and cranny along the way and camp on secluded beaches impossible to reach on foot or by large boats with deeper drafts. We could gaze at colorful tropical fish circling more than 30 feet below us and haul out nearby for some snorkeling.

Our first kayaking excursion to Baja took us to the island of Espiritu Santo located four miles off the coast north of La Paz, the capital city of the state of Baja California Sur. With its 200,000 inhabitants, La Paz fronts a protected bay on the Sea of Cortez and serves as the stepping-off point for kayaking trips along the southern half of the peninsula. Recently anointed with national-park status and surrounded by scalloped, white-sand-fringed coves, the island hosts the most ecologically diverse ecosystem in the Sea of Cortez. We kayaked on turquoise bays surrounded by cardon cactus forests as

hundreds of brown pelicans dive-bombed the waters around us and blue-footed boobies jostled for position along the cliffs.

For our most recent trip to Baja, we chose to paddle the 100-mile stretch of mountainous coastline south of Loreto where the 4,000-foot summits of the Sierra de la Giganta Range rise from the water's edge. In several locations, this rugged escarpment resembles the cliffs of the Grand Canyon. In others, red rock reminiscent of the Navajo sandstone of Utah's national parks lines the shore. It's easy to understand why much of this wild coastline is currently being proposed as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Locals hope this status will help protect Baja's last undeveloped section of coast from road building and the rampant resort development that has so heavily impacted the southern tip of the peninsula at Cabo San Lucas.

Compared with my typical landscape photography trips, where I'm loaded down with a bulging backpack full of camera gear, I pack light for these kayak-based shoots since everything needs to fit into the hatch. I bring my Canon EOS 5D Mark II fitted with a 24-105mm zoom, a 24mm fixed lens for extreme depth of field, a carbon-fiber Gitzo tripod with a

lightweight Acratech ballhead and a Canon EOS 5D as a backup body. Without a laptop or portable hard drive to back up files each night, I bring several 8 GB CF cards and edit my images along the way, deleting all but the best ones. I toss in a polarizing filter to eliminate reflections off the water and a couple of neutral-density graduated filters to reduce contrast. I stuff the Mark II with its zoom lens into a Lowepro chest pack and wear it as I paddle as long as the seas aren't too rough. If the waves pick up, I stuff the chest pack into a waterproof SealLine river bag and strap it to the deck in front of me until the waves subside.

Once back on dry land in La Paz, we rented a car for a four-day trip along the portion of Highway 1 that forms a 200-mile loop around the southern tip of the peninsula. Todos Santos, the first town encountered as you drive south from La Paz, hosts a small community of artists on the Pacific side of the peninsula. Several miles south of town, palm-tree-lined Playa Las Palmas offers a long deserted beach surrounded by rocky headlands.

After 50 more miles of narrow, winding highway flanked with cardon cactus, Highway 1 drops into the teeming resort developments of Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip of the peninsula. If you can handle the traffic and crowds, it's worth a side trip to photograph the dramatic granite cliffs and arches around Lover's Beach south of town. Most people reach this area on tourist boats filled with partygoers. If you prefer to avoid the carnage, scramble over the rocks along the west side of the point south of Solmar Beach. After Cabo, head east to San Jose Del Cabo with its quaint old town and then north to the windsurfing mecca of Los Barriles on your way back to La Paz.

With more than 1,200 miles of Baja coastline along the Sea of Cortez, it would take several lifetimes to explore it all. With the keen knowledge that a fair portion of my lifetime is already behind me, I've already sketched out plans for our next adventure. OP

To see more of James Kay's photography, visit www.jameskay.com.

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