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Sunrise ON THE *Sea of Cortez*

WORDS | SUSAN DRAGOO,
PHOTOS | SUSAN AND BILL DRAGOO

It would be a crime to sleep through a sunrise on the Sea of Cortez. As I walk barefoot toward a point of rock, waves like molten lead slowly lap on the shore, dyed purple by the early rays of the sun, still half an hour below the horizon. I had anticipated the moment, waiting in the dark in our truck-top tent until there was enough light to get out and capture the sight with my camera. Now I have the entire beach, a mile of it, all to myself. No other campers, no manmade structures, just the sand, the rocks, the ocean and the light.

Every morning, it's the same as we ramble along the coast of the Sea of Cortez. Gentle waves on the beach, sunrises that defy description, cool air warmed quickly when the sun peaks over the edge of the earth, and solitude. Bill and I are traveling in January, escaping the cold weather to the north, and camping on the most remote beaches we can find. Our Toyota Tacoma gets us where we want to go, off the beaten path in Baja California, which is already very much off the beaten path.

The Baja California peninsula protrudes nearly 800 miles into the Pacific Ocean south of the U.S. state of California and west of mainland Mexico. The land mass is divided into two Mexican states, Baja California and Baja California Sur. Between Baja and the mainland, the Sea of Cortez, commonly known as the Gulf of California, is 150 miles across at its widest point. Because of their sheltered nature, the beaches of the Sea of Cortez are generally warmer than those on the Pacific side, making them an attractive proposition for us and many other Americans who frequent the area in the winter.

We came to Baja with no real itinerary, just an itch to explore and camp for a few weeks. Our wanderings took us into the desert and briefly to the Pacific coast, but we found ourselves drawn back repeatedly to the Sea of Cortez. We often ended up on beaches we probably couldn't find again, but here are three locations that are easy to locate and relatively easy to get to.

Gonzaga Bay

As an introduction to Baja beach camping, Gonzaga Bay is a good stop, although solitude is not always one of its qualities. After crossing the border via Mexicali, and stopping in San Felipe for the first of many fish and shrimp tacos, we arrived at Gonzaga Bay via Highway 5 late in the afternoon. At the Rancho Grande market, we managed with my rudimentary Spanish to convey that we wanted to camp, and rented a spot with a palapa, a palm-roofed shelter. Directly across the highway was the entrance to the campground, down a road about a mile long. At the beach we found a long row of palapas running to the south with a row of rickety outhouses running parallel to them at a safe distance. Private homes and a resort line the northern end of the crescent-shaped bay. We picked out palapa #15 and set up camp.

It would be an exaggeration to say it was crowded, but we did have several neighbors. It was pleasant at first, listening to some American girls at the palapa next door playing ukelele. But soon it became apparent they knew only one song and, bless them, they sang it for hours. Long into the night. Fueled by alcohol or other mind-altering drugs, they eventually came up with lyrics for a second verse.

We walked the beach in the dark, then retreated into our tent, and the next morning were greeted by a sparkling dawn. I strolled the sand again in the gentle breeze, photographing the huge variety of sea shells, and leaving them to their fate.







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Photo by Charles Turner Photography

Bay of Los Angeles

After breakfast we continued south on Highway 5; the pavement soon disappeared as the road veered southwest to intersect with Highway 1 at Nueva Chapala, where we had lunch. Farther south we turned east on a paved road for the Bay of Los Angeles, looking for a more remote camp for the night. On the map we spied a spot called Playa La Gringa seven miles north of the town of Bahia de Los Angeles and followed a dirt road to get there. Sheltered from the open sea by a spit of land, we camped on a stretch of smooth black gravel only a few feet above the water, and a quarter-mile from the nearest camper. Sunset seemed to come suddenly, and soon we enjoyed the sight of the Milky Way hovering over the quiet water. In the night, the tide sounded so near it seemed to surround our camp, even as we heard the distant crash of the surf beyond the point of land protecting the cove. A coyote punctuated the rhythm of the sea with his own occasional yelp.

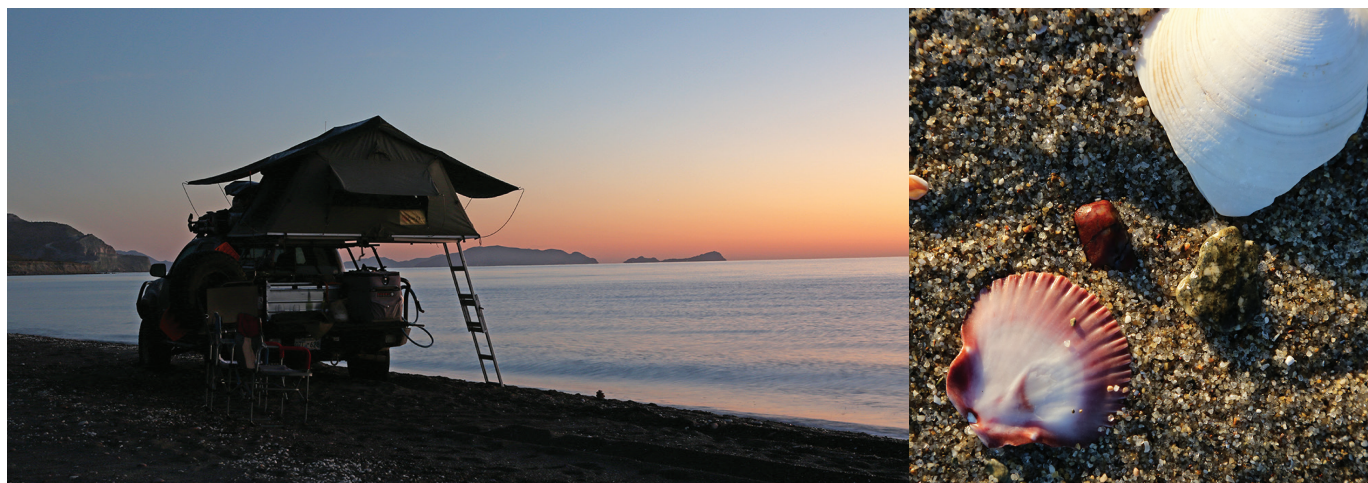
Agua Verde

Much later in our trip, after traveling as far south as the northern edge of La Paz and turning back north, we stopped in Agua Verde. South of Loreto, reached by a rough 4WD road off Highway 1, this was one of our favorite spots in Baja California Sur. In the small village of Agua Verde, there were a couple of restaurants and a smattering of other campers. A small cruise ship had even anchored in the bay and tourists were riding horses and burros up a steep trail and through a palm oasis near the beach.

Again looking for more isolation, Bill and I explored the side trails north of the village and found a path leading through the palms to the beach. When we emerged onto the sand, we looked toward the end of the beach and as far as we could see there was no one else. We drove to the farthest point of the strand, about a mile, and camped there, enjoying two days and nights of nearly complete solitude. I ran on the beach, waded in the surf, and stretched out in the sun with a book while Bill repaired gear and reorganized our cargo. We made simple meals and burned driftwood in a fire pit Bill dug in the sand. At night after we extinguished the flames we would walk in the surf and gawk at the bioluminescence in the ocean. It was a perfect spot and well worth the trouble to find it.

As we prepared to depart Agua Verde, we drove back to the village for brunch — huevos rancheros (we provided some of the eggs, they had run out) and shrimp tacos — at Brisa del Mar, a restaurant run by a lovely woman named Maria, one of the many kind and generous people we met in Baja.

What you'll find in Baja California depends on what you're looking for. Go for a week or a month, but don't get in a hurry. Take all the time you need to experience the phenomenon travelers south of the border call "Baja Magic." And, by the way, the sunsets aren't half bad, either. **X4**



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PLANNING YOUR SEA OF CORTEZ ADVENTURE

WHEN TO GO: When it's cold in the U.S., it's time to go to Baja, where it's warm. When it's warm in the U.S., don't go to Baja because it is very hot there in the summer.

WHAT TO KNOW: Web sites such as discoverbaja.com provide general information for travel in Baja California, but for specifics you need more. We used two books, *Moon Baja* and *Camping Mexico's Baja*, and National Geographic's *Adventure Travel Maps* for Baja North and Baja South. We also talked extensively with friends experienced in traveling Baja.

OUR EQUIPMENT: Our overlanding platform is a 2011 Toyota Tacoma and we call it the "Tacoma GS," after the popular Gelände Strasse (meaning land- and street-capable in German) BMW motorcycle. Modifications include a custom-fabricated, extended range fuel system and Icon Stage V suspension, Warn Winch, Hellwig air assist bags, and a Leitner Active Cargo System supporting our Eezi Awn tent. A complete long-term review is coming soon in a future issue of *OutdoorX4*.

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