

Bahia de los Angeles

A Dive Travel Primer

Version 1, November 2003

Original text by John H. Moore, following an October, 2003, dive trip; with additions by Robert Melendez, Steve Haynes, Lorin Mannella, Rick Colman, George Spalding, Rich Arrieta, and Abraham Vazquez. The text below is generally written from the perspective of John on his first trip there, but includes many sections written by others who have spent more time down there. Photos are by John, unless noted otherwise.

This is a first draft; if you have comments / suggestions / additions, please send them to bayofla@divebums.com.

Mexican Tourist Cards

If you're travelling south of Ensenada, then you need a Mexican Tourist Card. These cost about US\$20 and are valid for 180 days. Each individual needs his/her own card. You have to both pay for the card and get it stamped by the bank and get the card stamped by the immigration window at Mexican secondary inspection. You can pick up the card at the Mexican Consulate on India Street, but you'll still have to get the bank stamp at Mexican secondary inspection; or you can pay for the card at one of the various Baja tourist services in San Diego, but you'll still have to get it stamped by immigration at the Mexican secondary inspection; or you can visit both the bank and immigration at Mexican secondary inspection – whichever way you choose, you still end up at Mexican secondary inspection. I believe that both the bank and immigration at Mexican secondary inspection are open 24 hours. Be aware that when you depart Mexican secondary inspection, you have to push a button which will randomly determine whether your vehicle gets inspected, so consider whether you want to activate your tourist card before your vehicle is completely filled with gear. That said, you should expect to get inspected at some point during your trip!

Note that while it's unlikely that anyone will ever ask to see your card between here and Bahia de los Angeles, you should think strongly about whether you wish to break Mexican law by not having one... especially if you're not a Baja regular who's fluent in Spanish. If you travel to the southern state of Baja California Sur your card will most certainly be checked by Immigration officials.

Mexican Auto Insurance

Get it. It's available near the border as well as from lots of other places. Be sure to get telephone numbers (toll free U.S. and/or Mexican numbers) and possible e-mail/website contacts to extend the insurance should your trip take longer than expected.

If you are involved in an automobile accident in Mexico -- even if it not your fault -- you will be detained by the police unless you can show that you can pay any damages. The best way to do this is Mexican insurance. Don't even think about driving in Mexico without it.

Also be aware that ANY kind of vehicular contact in Mexico is a felony. Apparently this law was directly caused by Americans who used to flee the scenes of Mexican accidents, so we have ourselves to blame. So unless you are a Mexican national you must buy insurance recognized by the Mexican government, period. If you are involved in an accident, please cooperate pleasantly with authorities, and once there is clear information you are not at fault you will be turned loose along with your vehicle. If the Mexican national is injured or dead, your vehicle will most likely be impounded.

I repeat in the strongest possible language, if you are involved in an accident in Mexico and you do not have proof of insurance, you will be taken to jail. Even if you are seriously injured, you will go to jail while the authorities sort things out. Americans have died in jail of injuries suffered in automobile accidents.

In reality traveling down to Bahia de Los Angeles usually means you plan on staying at least five days or more. Look into the coverage rate for a year. You may find that it may be just a few dollars more or even cheaper depending on length of stay. This would make one less stop for the rest of the year when you return to Mexico and well worth the peace of mind even when just taking Aunt Martha from Ohio for a quick visit to the tourist traps in Tijuana.

When towing a trailer or boat, have all registration papers with you and insure what you tow also. If you rent a "U-haul" type trailer, whether the owners know or not that you are taking it into Mexico, get brand name, serial numbers, model type, and the value. This information will be needed for insurance. The Mexican insurance agency may default to just using the license plate number, but it will be at the discretion of the agency.

Gas

Overall, count on getting gas mileage not a lot better than you get driving around San Diego. There are some fast straightaways, but there's also a lot of hills and curves. The last reliable Pemex station is in El Rosario, which means that you have to be able to make about a 350 mile round trip from El Rosario to Bahia de los Angeles and back,

plus any driving around town gas, plus some kind of emergency reserve. You may find gas in Catavina at a roadside stand, you may find gas at Bahia de los Angeles at a roadside stand, but you may not... and it'll be expensive if it's there. We carried an extra 20 gallons of gas with us (four 5-gallon containers), just in case. We ended up using 10 of those 20 gallons between stops at the El Rosario Pemex station. Others have commented that they always bring one or two 5-gallon containers of extra gas and never let their tank get below half full.



Roadside Gas Stand in Catavina (Rich Arrieta photo)

Another possible solution if short on gas on the way back to El Rosario is to turn south once you get back to Mex 1 and head for the closest Pemex station that way... which will be much closer than El Rosario. (From there, you'll have to backtrack to the north to continue on your way to El Rosario.)

The general rule of thumb is to buy gas any time you see an open gas station from San Quintin on south. Buy gas in San Quintin, then again 40 miles later in El Rosario... because what if you hold off until El Rosario and that station is closed??

A note of caution: at some Pemex stations it's self service, at others they fill the tank for you. When they fill the tank, be certain to see the pump readouts **BEFORE** they start pumping, to be sure that it was zeroed out before they began pumping... or you could end up paying for your gas and again for the last guy's gas.

Your Car/Truck

For most of the drive, you're pretty much on your own. No towns, no services, no phones, nothing. Be certain that your car/truck is in good mechanical condition. Be certain that your spare tire (or two!) is in good condition. If you're towing a trailer, be certain to have a spare tire (or two) for that also. Also bring some basic tools with you. If you can, travel in a caravan with other people with whom you'll be in Bahia de los Angeles. For the technologically inclined, some Baja travel outfits rent satellite telephones. That and a GPS will allow you to summon help... from a LONG way away! (There are also roadside kilometer markings to help you determine where you are.)

There is help available should you break down along the highway, but it may take a while for it to arrive. The Mexican government funds the Green Angels who patrol over most paved roads in Baja. These consist of distinctive large green pick-ups crewed by teams of two mechanics. They help with minor repairs, provide small parts, sell oil and gas at cost, and arrange for towing and repairs. At the most they will patrol a road once a day and sometimes not that often. They don't charge for their labor, but you should tip them out of courtesy. Another option, if you speak even a little Spanish, is to knock on someone's door or, more commonly, try to flag down other drivers to ask for help. Many people are willing to help, and often are very resourceful at helping to fix vehicles.

Be careful if you're driving along and you come to a number of rocks or branches strategically placed one after another in your lane. These are the Baja version of highway flares and usually indicate there is a large truck broken down in your lane around the next turn.

A final note: for not that much money (about US\$60), you can purchase a small battery unit which you can use to jump your car should you have problems, which also includes a light and a tire inflator, and can even be used to briefly power battery chargers or laptops (to save digital photos) if you have an inverter. One of the groups which went down recently had an electrical problem and could have been helped by having one of these devices.

Water

Not only will you be in Mexico, where we Americans tend to think drinking the water is a bad idea, but you'll be travelling through hot desert most of the way there. Bring A LOT of water with you. For two of us for five days, we brought about 18 gallons of water with us... and only came back with a couple gallons. You need emergency water in case you break down in the desert, you need your regular drinking water, and you need even more drinking water since you'll be diving and you need to stay well hydrated.

Recommendations on the amount of water varied from five to ten gallons per person per week. It's best to bring much more than you need until you're an experienced Baja traveller and have a better idea how much you actually need. On your departure back to the U.S., keep a day or two's worth of water (enough for emergencies) and give the remainder to others in town who might need it.

Cash

In addition to all the dollars you'll want for paying for accommodations, pangas, etc., bring some pesos to pay for things like gas and food. You'll fare better on the exchange rate, plus it's just better to deal in the local currency. At present, it's 11+ pesos per dollar, but you'll find that most places do an easier to calculate 10:1 ratio.

Separate your cash into a bunch of different piles and hide them in various and strange places in your vehicle and gear. Keep only a little in your pockets.

As you travel further down the peninsula fives and ones should be the largest American bills you should carry to do business with, with the exception of paying for pangas and accommodations. Like most people, if you use the ATMs on your way into Mexico, use some twenties at the toll booths between Tijuana and Ensenada to acquire smaller bills, which you will need at mom and pop stores and stands. Shop at "Gigante" and "Calimax" when in Rosarito and Ensenada and use your credit card for the best exchange rate which will be at the national rate. You can use large American bills at these places, but will not be the best rate and they'll have rate posted when you walk in or at the check stands. Their registers will automatically convert for you at the store's present rate. Past these large chains near the border, it's unlikely that you'll be able to use a credit card.

Route

From San Diego, cross the border at San Ysidro. Make your way to the tollroad to Ensenada (Mex 1-D) and head south. You'll hit three tolls, 23 pesos each. Keep the receipts, they're good for travellers assistance on the tollroad. If you are pulling a trailer you will pay more; they seem to charge per axle.

Bring a map which shows city streets in Ensenada to help with getting through town. The tollroad ends in Ensenada, so you'll be switching from Mex 1-D to Mex 1 either north of Ensenada at the Y or south of Ensenada after Mex 1-D goes through the harbor district.

If you take Mex 1 at the Y north of Ensenada (left side of the Y), you'll come to a stop sign with a sign "To San Quintin →". Go right there, then left at the next block onto 9th (Noveno) Avenue. Go over the bridge for the dry riverbed, then several more blocks to the restaurant Monique Colonial on the left for a great breakfast. From there, continue

on 9th Avenue another half dozen blocks or so until you again have “To San Quintin →” at a major intersection. This is Mex 1 and you’re now on the only road you’ll need for hours and hours and hours.

While in Ensenada, you may also want to stop at the fish market in Ensenada if you will be camping to buy fresh fish, shrimp, lobster, scallops, etc. and feed on real fish tacos if time permits.

You’ll work your way south out of town and stay on Mex 1 through San Quintin, through El Rosario, and all the way to about 350 miles from the U.S. border where you’ll find the turnoff for Bahia de los Angeles out in the middle of nowhere. All this time the road will be two-lane undivided highway, with lots of hills and curves. This is the only highway through Baja, so you’ll have lots of trucks. **STAY ON YOUR SIDE OF THE ROAD** through blind curves over blind hills, etc. There may well be a fast-moving semi coming the other way. Obey the Do Not Pass signs (it’s a graphic of two side-by-side cars with a circle and line through it). There are lots and lots of roadside crosses and memorials marking people who died on this road. Pay attention.

South of Ensenada, most of the roads are rural. They are not fenced, not lighted, and do not have large shoulders. Cows can and do wander onto the roads at night. Hitting a cow, or swerving to avoid a cow, may cause a serious accident. Keep in mind that what limited medical assistance is available may be more than a hundred miles and several hours travel time away. Think long and hard before driving at night.

You’ll go up into hills and back down into valleys quite a few times. The highest elevation our GPS found on the trip was 2900 feet, near the southern end of the run, if you think about these things post-diving.

Another good restaurant stop (lunch) is Mision Santa Ysabel in San Quintin – north end of town on the east side, red building. About two blocks north of what I believe to be the northernmost Pemex station in San Quintin.

Another restaurant recommended to us is the truck stop at Catavina, where all the truck drivers eat.

Much of the scenery on the trip is spectacular, so you might want to plan on spending some time stopping to take pictures or just enjoy the view. There are frequent pullouts along the road. If it’s not obviously a good place to pull over, don’t.

The trip from San Diego is just over 400 miles. On the way down, we had 9 hours of driving and 2-3 hours of stops. On the way back, we had 8 hours of driving and again 2-3 hours of stops.

The general recommendation we got was to plan on 10 to 12 hours of total driving time. We received many warnings both to follow the posted speed limits and to stay in our lanes, including the following advice: "Driving above 60 to 65mph is NOT recommended. Depending on the season, remember you will be driving through mostly ranch land, cattle and other livestock have free reign to travel as they please. Don't let the seemingly desert image fool you. You will be driving through some one's ranch land and if you hit a cow you'll be expected to pay for ALL incurred damages. Whether you understand the implications of your actions or not. This doesn't even touch upon the damage to your vehicle or your death. Which brings me to the idea of rushing and "getting there" at night. Don't drive at night!! Unless you grew up around these parts, night driving is a BAD idea. Even the locals don't like doing it."

If you should decide to break the trip into two days, you might consider the following advice: Avoid camping in the desert along the side of the road. While this used to be a safe and popular practice, it has now become dangerous due to thieves. This is especially true in areas that are near larger towns. Camp in places where there are a lot of other people camping. Should you camp along the road, try to do so completely out of sight... both for safety reasons and so that passing trucks do not use their air brakes out of caution upon seeing your car pulled over, as their air brakes will surely wake you!

Mex 1 is in great shape. Barring randomness, you shouldn't have any problems with the road surface. You could make the trip to Bahia de los Angeles in a regular car if you stayed in town (not if you stayed at any of the places north or south of town, however, then you'd need a pickup truck / SUV / off-road vehicle). From the turnoff from Mex 1 to Bahia de los Angeles it's about 40 miles to town, the last 15 of which are older pavement with potholes. This is the only bad section of road, and it's not that bad. Just drive a little slower (30-50 MPH) and watch the road and you'll be fine.



Your first view of the water as you drive down towards town

One oddity of driving in Baja is that you'll be driving behind someone and they'll turn on their left directional signal along a stretch of desert that doesn't have a left turn for the next 100 miles. This signal does not mean that the driver ahead intends to make a left turn into a cactus patch. Rather he is signaling to you that the road ahead is safe for you to pass him. This practice is extremely common in Baja and you should use it yourself. Just make sure that the on-coming lane ahead is free of traffic and safe for the driver behind you to pass you. The flip side of this is that, if you ARE in the middle of nowhere on open road, and decide you want to turn left and pull over, make sure no one is behind you before using your left-turn signal. If someone is behind you, get in the middle of the road THEN put your left-turn signal on. This will help prevent the person behind you from broadsiding your vehicle when he passes you as you are turning left.

Driving down, we had a detailed Baja road atlas but had a hard time figuring out where we were from the signs along the road. However, we noticed that our atlas had Lat/Long along the sides of the pages, so we turned on our GPS and followed our progress by finding our position on the map that way.

Military Checkpoints

We encountered two military checkpoints each way on our trip to Bahia de los Angeles; of those four encounters, we were searched just once and that only took five minutes. They were very polite and generally just interested in where we were coming from and going, what we were doing, and whether we had any guns.

We received the following information about these checkpoints: "There are generally two checkpoints you will encounter if your destination is Bahia de Los Angeles. One on the southern end of Maneadero, the last town southward at the "Y" for the La Bufadora and another in the middle of El Rosario. The U.S. government funds these checkpoints on major highways in Baja and the mainland to check for drugs and guns. The Mexican government on the other hand is concerned with the lack of population on the Baja peninsula. These young boys are like our own military, ages 17 and 18, except pulling mandatory duty and brought here from the mainland to hopefully settle down in Baja. Remember these kids are also in unfamiliar territory, so extend them courtesy, a smile and if possible attempt the language, it will go a long way and you'll be on the road faster than you would believe (usually without being checked). They want to know where you are coming from and where you are going. Spear poles and spear guns at last report is not on the U.S. list of dangerous weapons or drugs. You may want to let them know you are "buzos" (boo-zos, "divers"), it will garner a smile and speed things up." Take note, however, that pneumatic spear guns are considered a weapon in Mexico and are thus illegal.

Bahia de los Angeles



Pulling into Bahia de los Angeles (Rich Arrieta photo)

The town itself is on the road which brings you to town and then runs parallel to the bay. To get to the northern places to stay, you'll turn off onto a dirt/sand road right at the northern end of town. Places such as Raquel and Larry's or Daggett's have signs with arrows to follow. That said, do NOT attempt to find these places for the first time in the dark! If staying at Camp Gecko, you'll have to find an unmarked dirt/sand road at the south end of town – past the invisible stop sign at Guillermo's and then another couple hundred feet past where the road turns to the right. There is NO SIGN for the turnoff for Camp Gecko, but it's a couple hundred feet past the 90 degree turn in the road, with a mercado on the right and a mechanic shop on the left. You turn left (south) and then 4.0 miles on a bumpy road to Camp Gecko at the south end of the bay. A purloined freeway marker from Interstate 5 greets you at the turn to Camp Gecko.

In town itself there are a variety of restaurants and several hotels. We had experience with the following:

Las Hamachas – good food, inexpensive; rumored to be inexpensive & OK hotel as well
Costa del Sol – good food, inexpensive; newer, modern place; hotel has air conditioning; US\$65/night

Isla – restaurant rumored to be good & inexpensive; internet café downstairs (15 pesos/30 mins); satellite telephone (US\$2 first minute, US\$1 each minute thereafter)

Guillermo's – bad food, bad service, more expensive. Boat ramp, though, if you need one.

Inexpensive food means that the entrees are 40-120 pesos (40-60 pesos if you stay away from crustaceans). Meals are served with chips/salsa as well as soup. Beers were 14 pesos.

For other things to do around town, Bahia de los Angeles is located in an area that has a rich mining history (mainly silver). There are a number of abandoned mines you can visit (do not go into them!). There's also a museum in town with exhibits on Indian, mining, and natural history. An adventurous side trip, for pick-up or SUV only, is to Mision San Borja. For more info on things to do see *The Baja Adventure Book*.

Where to Stay

We stayed at Camp Gecko and rented the best "house" he has – a two story place with a screened in upstairs (shown at right). This is the only place at Camp Gecko which is enclosed, all others are open air. Normally they don't have mosquitos, but after the hurricane they did and being enclosed was important. Mostly mosquitos are a problem just near dawn and dusk, but that's no guarantee. See campgecko.com. Rates are on the website, but it ranges from US\$3/person/night for a palapa to US\$25/night for the "houses" with stove, refrigerator, toilet and shower. Camp Gecko charges US\$120/day for a panga, up to four people. Camp Gecko also has one of the few air compressors in town. And, finally, the whale sharks seem to prefer the southern end of the bay, which is where Camp Gecko is located. All of those positives aside, it's rustic.



We also went and toured Raquel and Larry's and Daggett's, both of which are north of town. Raquel and Larry's was very nice: restaurant on site, two larger houses to rent, plus a number of hotel-like rooms. The larger houses were each three bedrooms (each with a room air conditioner), kitchen, living room. All enclosed. They looked nice. US\$100/night for the first two people then US\$8/night for each additional person, up to six people. Raquel and Larry's charges US\$150/day for pangas. They also have an on-site compressor, but apparently don't always admit to it! In all, Raquel and Larry's

looked nice, but you'll spend more than at Camp Gecko. bahiatours@yahoo.com (no website)

Here are some comments from a recent guest at Raquel and Larry's: "I am not wild about staying there. The house is overpriced at \$100 plus. For example, the air conditioning is only available when Larry runs the generator, usually from about 6 to 10 PM. Half of the windows do not have screens so you cannot open the windows. Only one bedroom even had a window blind, the rest are just wide open so you get up at sunrise whether you want to or not. The kitchen has no refrigerator. The bathroom works, but is a little cruddy. Etc. etc."

Another reviewer felt otherwise, however: "I would recommend Raquel and Larry's place. They rent separate houses and also individual rooms under the restaurant. Also, Raquel makes some of the best fish tacos I ever had. We rented ponga's from Guillermo's."



Rental house at Raquel and Larry's (Rich Arrieta photo)

Daggett's looked pretty average. A number of hotel-like rooms for US\$30/day but without screen doors. I don't think there were air conditioners, but I'm not positive. Also lots of palapas and RV parking. Daggett's is near Raquel and Larry's and the apparent lesser of those two choices. campdaggetts.com

South of Daggett's is a place called Antonio's, which is rumored to have palapas and several cabins, but we did not investigate this place.

Also near these places is the Turtle Farm (Turtle = Tortuga), which is rumored to be another place in town currently filling scuba tanks. On our one trip there, no one was to be found, so we could not confirm this. Contrary to rumor, Daggett's is not filling tanks at the moment.

In town, Costa del Sol looked nice. US\$65/night and air conditioned. Good if you're bringing higher maintenance buddies / spouses / etc. But town is not especially aesthetically pleasing. The outlying areas are for lower maintenance people, but quieter, darker and more visually pleasing. There's a hotel Villa Vitta which looked newish, but we did not investigate. And we had a recommendation that the Hotel Las Hamachas is nice and less expensive US\$30-40/night, but we only saw the restaurant there (which was very good).

Camping

Generally the camping is drier and rockier at the north end of the bay, but it is windier also. The south end of the bay is calmer, but then you have more mosquitos because there is no wind. If it is rainy there will be mosquitos everywhere, but the south is marshier and closer to the waterline, so the water tends to stay around longer.

(This entire section, below, was contributed by Robert Melendez.)

Points North: Punta La Gringa

Camping for the most part is very primitive. There is semi-primitive camping along the bay north of town with established camp sites, but the best way to go is away from lights and people. Easiest is the area known as Punta La Gringa which can be seen from town as hill out where the old fish camp used to be. Take the dirt road north of town as you were going to Daggett's except you will never turn towards the bay. You keep going north on a washboard road for about eleven miles, past the military barracks which just recently moved from town out by the bay along this road. Travel along this road when fully laden will probably force you to move along at about 5mph if you don't want parts rattling off your car or truck/van (when empty you can fly at about 40 to 50mph for ice/forgotten items in town). At the end of the road it will fork, follow around to the right. You will come upon some houses (shacks by our standards), the first one on your immediate right with a porch is the caretaker's house, and his name is Roberto. He will send a young man around to collect money and trash at the campsites. Fee is US\$2 per vehicle per day. Roberto is getting old and is not very mobile nowadays, but unless he is sick will make the rounds to check out the visitors. He is the authority out here and he will size you up. He is a good person but will not allow any nonsense. You will be left alone unless you are bad news. If you are bad news you will be escorted out by soldiers. Don't be fooled by his ragged-homeless-looking image. Invite this man for a beer (loves rum and cokes) and a chat (he speaks

only Spanish, English is broken). If he likes you he will keep the Fish and Game warden off your back and keep you apprised of things that would affect you.

If you go left at the fork, you will need a truck/van or jeep with good clearance and this road will take to points north of the Punta La Gringa camping area. Trailers are not recommended unless you scout ahead for your particular equipment. No one will bother you out at these places so no camping fees need to be paid, but please take all your human evidence that you were there with you when you leave. If you like total privacy, this is where you want to go.

The beaches are pebble beaches, bring thick sandals/booties or tennis shoes you don't mind in sea water. Bring a porta-potty which is best, otherwise bring lime and a shovel. This area is great if you have kids of any age as there are no bad critters and the water slopes gently. The atmosphere has no or very little pollutants so bring and apply plenty of suntan lotion (the higher the SPF the better). Bring shade, a large canopy and carpeting for changing in and out of dive gear. If you make arrangements with the panga drivers in town, they will come out to camp site and pick you up for the day's diving at whatever time you set. Diving off the beach can be very interesting and the sea life will vary with the season. After a day's diving it's a great place to burn off remaining air in the tanks. For 30+ years I have conditioned the Bullseye puffers to come to you if you bang on your tank with a metal object, they will be expecting to be fed. Do not feed these fish ANY processed food!! Mussels, clams, any seafood will be welcomed. If a good rapport is established they will even let you hold them. If you are here for a week or more you will be able to identify the individuals. Twice a day, one hour after sunrise and one hour before sunset you will be visited by a lone sea lion cruising the shoreline feeding. Why only one? Must be some kind of agreement among themselves, but this activity has gone on as far as I can remember, so it can't be the same sea lion. Pilot whales are common and Manta Rays have been seen, but not by me. At night and sometimes in late afternoon/evening you will be visited by desert foxes. Clean up food items unless you don't mind them going through your food.

I tend to stay north and avoid the southern ends of bays. My experience is there always seem to be mosquitos. Or more of them, in the south end of the bays like LA Bay, Bahia Concepcion, Puerto Escondido, etc. Why? I don't know, never thought to ask. Must have a reasonable answer I'm sure. Maybe just me and my timing? Most of these bays do have marshes in the southern ends."

Air Fills

As covered above, the places currently doing air fills are Camp Gecko, the Turtle Farm, and Raquel and Larry's if they admit to having a compressor. Camp Gecko is four miles south of town; the Turtle Farm and Raquel and Larry's are closer, perhaps two miles north of town. All are down dirt/sand roads.

Bringing your own portable air compressor is also an option.

Note: At Camp Gecko, he is not able to do DIN fills. If your tanks are DIN, bring your own DIN fill adapter. I do not know whether the other places can do DIN fills, best to check with them from the States or to bring a DIN fill adapter.

Do not expect fills above 2800 PSI or so. I believe that the air fills at Camp Gecko cost us US\$5/tank, but I'm not certain as there were other small costs in the same bill... it might have been US\$6/tank. Fills from Raquel and Larry's were US\$10/tank, thus continuing the theme that everything is overpriced at Raquel and Larry's.

Diving

Bahia de los Angeles is a large bay protected by mountains to the west and a large island to the east. Inside of that are many small to medium sized islands, the largest of which are Isla Smith to the north, Isla Ventana and Piojo in the middle and Cabeza de Caballo to the south. In between many of these islands are submerged reefs which may or may not be exposed at low tides.

In general, the islands slope steeply down large boulder fields underwater; these boulder fields may end in the 60-80' deep range, with sand slope continuing down. In other places, the boulder fields extended beyond our willingness to go, given the remoteness of the site. The underwater terrain may remind you in places of Los Coronados, although with different fish and warmer water.

Once outside the bay, our experience was that there was less boulder field and more big relief – large walls, etc.

Tidal currents are a huge issue in Bahia de los Angeles, especially outside the bay. See <http://oceanografia.cicese.mx/predmar/calmen.htm> for a tide chart. Plan your outside dives according to slack tides, and even then be prepared for currents.

As a general rule, visibility is better on the outside and there's more life on the outside. But there are places with better conditions and plenty of life on the inside.



Isla Smith, with Ventana Reef showing in the midground

On our trip, we dove the following sites:

Coronadito – a small, bird guano-covered island just north of Isla Smith. Steep boulder field dropping into the deep. We dove the south side; plenty of fish life, very little invertebrate life (a theme for us), currents near the west and east ends.

Submerged reef just north of Piojo. Some current. Plenty of fish life. Nice east-west running walls. N29 01.684, W113 28.201.



Ventana

Ventana (the island, not the reef; this was a misunderstanding). Least interesting site.

Just around the corner from Punta Don Juan, inshore from N28 57.486, W113 25.886. Headed south from that drop in. Boulders to 40-60'. Lots of fish life. Got better as we got further south. Next time would drop in just short of the sandy beach to the south.

Ventana Reef (submerged reef). Medium fish life, interesting terrain. Old shrimp seiner wreck near the SE end of the reef. Currents. SE end near N28 59.420, W113 29.667.



Punta El Pescador, right out on the point. Best site of the trip. Absolutely have to time this according to the tides. Had at times strong current and we dove it +/- 30 mins of a high tide. Great terrain, great fish life. Saw a frogfish here. Another recent SoCal visitor to Bahia de los Angeles also reported that his best dive was at Punta El Pescador, where they had schooling sharks and sea turtles.

The photo at the left was taken where we dove at Punta El Pescador.

Places we'd go next time: Outside to the south, anywhere from before Punta Don Juan around Don Juan towards the sandy beach, then jumping

over to in front of the small red volcano (Quemado Bay), out to Punta El Pescador and perhaps a bit around that point. Isla Smith and Piojo might be worth exploring. I got the definite impression that closer to the outside is better.



Punta El Pescador on the left; the "red volcano" in the middle

Recommendations made by others:

"There's a fishing boat that sank off the east side of Isla el Racito around 1981. It's in 10-16 feet of water and is said to present one of the finest displays of plant and animal life in the Sea of Cortez."

"Diving at an island's extreme ends, as with the submerged reefs must be timed with the tides. Because of the narrow passage created for the water by the islands the currents will be unbelievably strong if you miscalculate. If you bring your own boat and you don't know how to read these waters, you must leave some one that can drive the boat in an emergency. Plan on bringing boats completely out of the water above the highest tide level or anchor them with something you would expect for the QE III! If your boat is not there in the morning, expect to find it past Isla Ventana later that morning or down by Puerto Don Juan/Punta Que Malo (too bad) area. (this includes floating camera equipment if you let go!)



Isla Calaveras (skull) is a small white dome looking island. It is a seal rookery and can be fun playing with the sea lions. These sea lions will play "tag" with you. Don't! These animals are very powerful, when they tag back and your "it", you may end up with broken ribs, which makes it very painful getting back in the boat.

(Sea lion photo by Rich Arrieta.)

The submerged reef between the southern end of Isla Coronado and Isla Piojo (louse) is known as Mulliner's Reef by the old timers. At low tide the high end will be about 30 feet and slope down from there. Very interesting things to see, but only dive during tidal slack time.



Isla Coronado [aka Isla Smith] is the large Island facing you with the obvious volcano looking mount. This is all one island with a low spot in between known as the turtle pen. this is off limits as well as setting foot on any of the islands. Diving on both sides of the Island has it's own unique features. Torpedo rays seem to be more common on the eastern side.

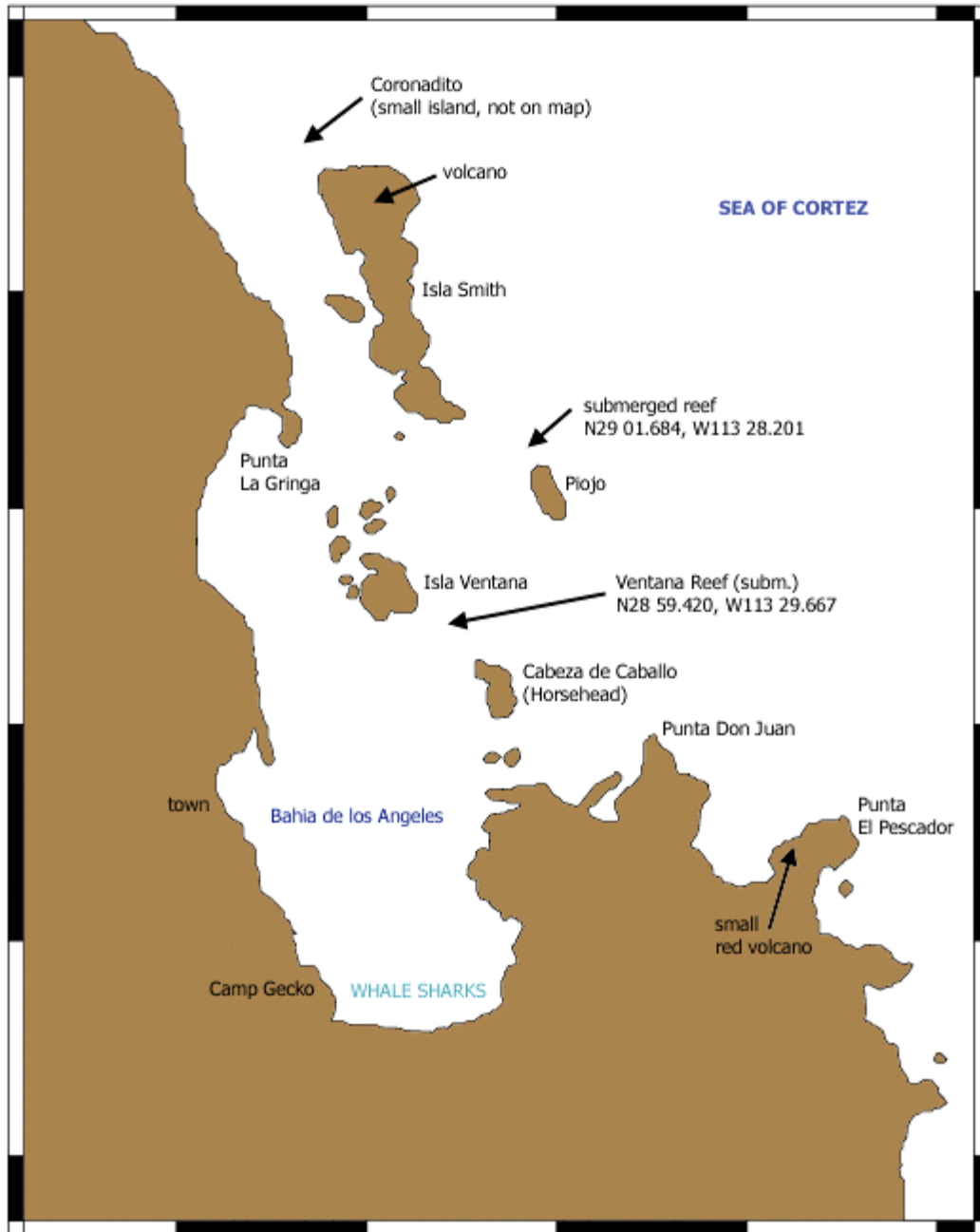
This photograph shows the north end of Isla Coronado on the right and Isla Coronadito on the left.

Isla Milton is a small island within the larger Isla Coronado, makes for great snorkeling and interesting sealife in and around the underwater rocky seascape.

Isla Coronadito is the northern-most small island of Isla Coronado. Diving here turns into cliff diving and sports the Zigzag oysters which are supposed to be indigenous at 110-120ft. Plan this dive very carefully with the tides, this is not for beginners.

The large land mass behind Isla Coronado is not the Mexican Mainland (we can't see that far) it's Isla Angel De La Guarda (Guardian Angel). It's realistically too far for small boats, not recommended."

If you'e on a beach, during the summer, as in San Diego, there area large number of stingrays in the area. Don't forget to shuffle your feet.



Apparent place name synonyms (don't take these as gospel):

Punta Don Juan = Punta Que Malo = Punta Quemado

Punta El Pescador = Punta Soledad

Isla Smith = Isla Coronado (this one is definitely correct)

Water temp during our visit was 78 to 80 F. Vis varied from 30-50 feet, generally better on the outside. I believe that they considered this not especially good visibility for them.

For water temps see: <http://www.terrafin.com/sstview/samples/freecenbaja.htm> – there's a better view on this site ("Cortez Midriff"), but it's not free. You can often find this better view on the Camp Gecko website under "Gecko News".

Water temperatures in Bahia de los Angeles vary quite a bit during the year. Much like San Diego, early spring is the coldest and late summer is the warmest. To give you a rough idea what to expect, here are some numbers: Late March, 59-62 F. Late June, 67-70 F. October, 75-82 F. Late November, 68-70 F.

Some kind of full body protection was necessary, if not for thermal protection but because the water was loaded with some kind of small ctenophore with a medium sting – the affected area would hurt mildly for an hour or so. That said, I know of one person who had a much more significant reaction to a sting down there recently, although it's unclear whether it was these same ctenophores or some other jelly which caused that hit. We wore 3/2 full suits and were on the warm side.

Whale Sharks

Abraham Vazquez at Camp Gecko, who works with a variety of whale shark researchers, says that the whale sharks can be there anywhere between May and December. However, it sounds as if your best bet is from the end of summer into fall, perhaps September through November. This coincides with what some say are the best conditions down there, taking air temperature, water temperature and winds into account, around the month of October.



Whales

There are whales in spring, summer, and early fall; the most common ones to see are fin backs, bryde's, minke, and humpbacks. In the summer months you can also see some blue whales on the outside, pods of pilot whales, and sometimes killer whales. During cold water winters you might get to see gray whales inside the bay.

Boats

We hired a panga while down there; US\$120 per day (7 am to 1-2 pm) for up to four divers. We made certain to get a panga driver who spoke some English, as we speak no Spanish, and it sounds like many of them do speak some English. Raquel and Larry's was charging US\$150/day. Our panga driver was a very nice guy who seemed to reasonably know dive sites, although he was certainly more of a fisherman than diver.

You could bring your own boat and save a lot of money, but keep in mind that one of the major issues in Bahia de los Angeles is the winds. They are susceptible both to strong winds which blow for days out of the north and strong winds which come up very quickly from the west. One of the advantages of using a local is that presumably he will know more than you about reading local weather and be able to get you off the water safely before things get too dangerous. While down there we heard many stories of people who didn't know what they were doing or didn't heed advice and got stuck for days outside the bay while the northerly winds blew. We also heard several stories of groups not knowing what to do and getting people killed in the winds.

Should you bring your own boat, please talk a lot with the locals about conditions and how to react should the winds come up.

Private boaters down in Bahia de los Angeles should be very careful. We heard a recent report of a boater who came up from a dive to discover that the boat was gone due to an anchor not being set properly. It was only by dumb luck that the anchor caught on something, and he was able to swim about a mile to catch up to the boat and do a self-rescue for all three divers involved. It's always a good idea to leave someone in the boat while divers are in the water, and it's imperative in a location this remote.

Your only chance in case of a problem is to get on VHF channel 16 (which is monitored pretty constantly by the locals) and call for help. Visitors should have a handheld VHF Marine Radio to call for help if a problem occurs.

Also keep in mind that you'll need to bring sufficient gas for your boat.

Weather

As noted above, for water temps see:

<http://www.terrafin.com/sstview/samples/freecenbaja.htm> – there's a better view on this site ("Cortez Midriff"), but it's not free. You can often find this better view on the Camp Gecko website under "Gecko News".

For air temps, see Accuweather.com, click world, then select North America, then select Mexico, then scroll down to Bahia de los Angeles. The following long link may work:

http://www.accuweather.com/adcbn/public/intlocal_index.asp?reg=NA%3BNORTH+AMERICA&cntry=NA%3BMX&wxcountry=NA%3BMX&wxcity2=BAHIA+DE+LOS+ANGELES+&partner=accuweather

Winds

It is always important in Bahia de los Angeles to pay attention to the winds, which can come strongly from the north or the west. The northern winds can blow for days and trap you outside the bay for days. These winds occasionally kill people. Talk with the locals about what they expect from the day's winds, as they have a better chance of reading the signs than we do.

When the winds aren't dangerous, you should still expect mild afternoon winds. These come up sometime between late morning and early afternoon and generally shouldn't do more than provide a little wind chop. The upside of the afternoon winds is that it cools you down during the hottest part of the day.

The winds are sometimes so strong in the winter that they have picked up inflatables (complete with outboard) parked on the beach and blown them over.

Medical Facilities

We did not investigate medical facilities. The man who runs Camp Gecko, Abraham Vazquez, is a medical doctor.

Also, the Mexican government maintains a health clinic in town. It is in the middle of town, one street in, away from the bay. The doctor is fulfilling his mandatory service usually for one year. Also the Flying Samaritans from the Los Angeles, CA, area come down when they have supplies to deliver and conduct a clinic to see patients that can not be helped with the limited resources there. The doctor can set broken bones, deal with minor burns, and little things like that.

Certainly there is no hyperbaric chamber, so be conservative in your diving.

We received the following general recommendation on receiving medical care while travelling in Mexico: "My recommendation is to never enter into Mexico without the phone number for Comité Binacional De Servicios Médicos de Emergencia (Binational Emergency Medical Care Committee) at your immediate disposal in case of any medical issues you may encounter while traveling in Mexico. BEMCC has been in service since 1976 and is the only organization that can help you out of Baja. DAN is a joke (and does not exist for all intents and purposes in Mexico) compared to this organization in an emergency. Here are the facts: Executive Director is Celia Diaz; 24 hour emergency medical number is 619-425-5080; their website is binacionalemergency.org, you can email them at <mailto:bemcc1@pacbell.net>. Yes, they right here in Chula Vista at 642 Third Ave., Suite I, 91910. I can not impress the dangers you risk if this number is not on your person. She has connections to EVERYONE. The coast guard, Military (Mexican and U.S), all police authorities (Mexican and U.S.), Embassies, etc. Don't play with you life if you are involved in a life threatening situation!!"