

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Solmar V to San Benedicto & Socorro

It Doesn't Get Much Worse Than This

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Lunch had been a dreary affair. Here we were, 250 miles and five days out of Cabo San Lucas, cooped up on the Solmar V off barren San Benedicto Island, one of the ecologically-protected islands of Mexico's Revillagigedo Archipelago. The December weather was deteriorating, and we still hadn't seen a manta.

Suddenly, one appeared off the stern. I scrambled into my gear, strode off the dive platform, and dropped to 40 feet. A 16-footer circled at the edge of visibility, 30 feet away. It banked majestically toward me, its mouth wide enough to swallow me whole -- if that had been its biological determination. I stroked the rough skin behind the gills. Its pelvic claspers were bony and pebble-grained, but at my touch they parted slightly while its wing tips trembled. Now, there was a G-spot! I spent a euphoric hour petting and playing with her and three others.

From there, the trip went downhill. My nine-day trip turned out to be, as a crew member said, one of their roughest and most disappointing ever. And yet I experienced most of the big animal encounters these islands are noted for, if only in limited doses and under less-than-ideal conditions. Consider my report a baseline for the least you can expect from a trip to "the Galapagos of Mexico."

To the eye, the 112-foot Solmar V is a beautiful boat, with its gleaming forest-green hull and luxurious mahogany-paneled salon with etched glass dividers, green leatherette banquettes, and Tiffany-style lights. The sundeck has a half-dozen lounge chairs, and the spacious bow is padded for additional lounging.



Baja

over which of the two settings to use. Two nights I slept on rolled-up towels until finally, after repeated requests, a pillow appeared. Each cabin did have an individual VCR player for the ship's videos (which ranged from Johnny Carson to Striptease). The bottom line: spend the extra bucks for a superior stateroom in the midsection – more space and sinks outside the en suite heads (#404 has a small fridge and can be joined with #403 to form a suite).

Our trip to San Benedicto began on gentle, following seas. The first morning I awoke to a gorgeous sunrise on the open ocean. Our group – a Parisian, three Japanese, two single women, four single men, four married guys without spouses, and four middle-aged couples – spent the day sharing live-aboard experiences and getting cameras ready. One of the three divemasters, San Diego ex-pat Scott Sundby, assigned us individual dive stations with an aluminum 80 and a storage bin. Two rinse tanks, a pair of shower heads, and a carpeted camera table (no onboard film development) are just forward of the dive platform (along with clean fluffy towels). One of two inflatables ("pangas") was deployed whenever divers were in the water. Buddies were free to plan their own profiles until the platform gate closed at 4:30 p.m., an hour before sunset.

Although two safety tanks with multiple second stages hung over the side, the rule is no-decompression diving. Divemasters log in maximum depth and bottom time after every dive. Anyone descending below 130 feet is done for the day. Anyone requiring a decompression stop stays dry the next twenty-four hours. Drink during the day and your diving's finished.

Although the Solmar's T-shirts show divers clinging to the backs of mantas, this thrill-ride was eliminated years ago The government rule is "touch nothing, including mantas, unless one approaches." Gloves and knives are not allowed in

Practically, however, when she's booked to capacity (22 for most cruises, 24 in our case), living space is cramped, storage is difficult, and bathroom facilities are a cruel joke. My buddy and I were crammed into one of six forward cabins where, as a crew member put it, "You have to step outside to change your mind." Double-decker bunks, a narrow half-closet stacked atop a tiny three-drawer bureau, and a claustrophobic head/sink/shower (a sink faucet, on a flexible extension, that transforms into a hand-held shower head) left us with a postage-stamp floor. (I preferred the community head off the dining salon and washed up in the rinse-off showers on the dive deck.) Fortunately, soft-sided luggage and unnecessary gear could be stored in a forward hatch. For the upper bunk, the overhead was so low I couldn't rest a hardcover book on my chest, and the gooseneck lamp drooped down and threatened to burn my ear. The cabin had no circulation; a small port-hole – it didn't open – served only to let me know when daylight arrived after a fitful night's sleep. Each cabin has individual A/C, but roommates squabbled

the water, nor are lights, so there is no night diving. Scott offers a PADI Manta Awareness Certification for \$100, sharing his extensive research into manta identification, anatomy, and behavior. Unlike any other location in the world, the mantas here seem to seek human contact. Scott says they seem to appreciate eye contact, don't mind strobes, and get off on bubbles. While they're not shy about having their privates stroked, their tails, backs, gills, and wingtips are off limits.

But on this trip, mantas were few. Diving began forty-six hours after departure (2:00 p.m. on our second day) at the Boiler off San Benedicto – supposedly a manta cleaning station. Three-meter swells made the dive plan difficult to follow, even with 60-foot visibility (about average for these parts). I saw a few big jacks and a distant shark, but little else of note. Ten-foot vertical surges down to 70 feet served as reminders to exhale as I bounced up and down; they also took a toll on my air consumption. And there were no mantas on the second dive here, either.

After a 38-mile crossing from San Benedicto to Socorro Island, they served dinner. Geronimo, the indefatigable ship's steward, set the banquet tables with white table cloths and served up American family food: pot roast, baked potatoes, carrots, and broccoli. Beer and wine are complimentary, so I enjoyed a smooth cabernet from Baja's Guadeloupe winery.

The next morning, after a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and soggy hash browns, we had to wait for sailors from the nearby outpost to conduct their normal inspection of the vessel and our papers. The plan was for divemasters to lead four dives to different sites at this anchorage; buddies, after the briefing, could go off on their own. I joined Roberto's group. On entry, two 6-foot Galapagos sharks greeted us; more appeared later, but none ventured in camera range. I made a gentle descent down the colorless wall to 109 feet, where only the ubiquitous,

Moving to the Tropics — Places Rated

If you're thinking of picking up stakes and settling down in a tropical country, what should you consider besides the diving?

The newsletter *International Living* (January, 1998) says you ought to think about the overall quality of life, which they see as comprised of seven elements: cost of living, culture and recreation, economy, freedom, health, infrastructure, and safety (a variable they see as being as much as three times as important as other variables).

Here's how their data ranks the diving countries:

Antigua.....	55
Australia.....	71
Bahamas.....	64
Barbados.....	61
Belize.....	59
Caymans.....	63
Costa Rica.....	61
Dominica.....	56
Fiji.....	55
Grenada.....	56
Honduras.....	54
Jamaica.....	54
Jurubtu.....	63
Maldives.....	53
Mexico.....	63
Palau.....	54
Papua New Guinea.....	42
St. Kitts and Nevis.....	55
Seychelles.....	49
Solomon Islands.....	54
Tonga.....	55
Tobago.....	61
Vanuatu.....	56
Western Samoa.....	56

For comparison's sake, note that the United States scores the highest rating, a 79. (Does anyone detect a bias here?) Afghanistan, on the other hand, logs in at 19. Cayman gets a low score because of its extremely high cost of living, although it gets a rating of 100 for "freedom," a score that may deserve some reconsideration given the recent flap about a gay cruise boat.

Where the Schlock Meets the Sea

Cabo San Lucas has a perennial spring-break atmosphere, one of almost-desperate festivity. Music blares from every

establishment, the big American chains like Planet Hollywood and the Hard Rock Cafe as well as mom-and-pop taquerias. At the most popular bars, like Kokomo and the Giggling Marlin, waiters with trays of Jello shooters or bandoleers of tequila shots force-feed the fun during audience participation shows that specialize in Elvis impersonations and similar humiliations. Half the people on the street are wandering around with drinks in hand.

Everyone also seems to have a hustle, from ancient Indian women peddling look-alike artifacts to pretty blondes hawking timeshares. Visitors seeking a quieter, more traditional atmosphere would be better off staying in San Jose del Cabo, about 18 miles up the highway, or at scenic Todos Santos on the Pacific Coast.

Cabo does offer some very pleasant underwater diversions. There are several dive shops in Cabo San Lucas, primarily in the waterfront Plaza Las Glorias. These are limited retail outlets that specialize in renting basic gear and booking excursions. A two-tank boat dive runs \$60-\$65, with rentals averaging \$30 for tank, BC, and weight belt. If you don't want to do the legwork yourself, hotel concierges can help book your trips.

I had a thoroughly enjoyable two-tank dive with Amigos del Mar (the shop affiliated with the Solmar) that took us to a couple of sites off Land's End at the tip of the peninsula. Near Lover's Beach we saw the underwater sandfall that Cousteau made famous (and over-hyped). Our second dive took us past the famous Land's End arch, from the Gulf of California into the Pacific. As we circled back, we were welcomed back to the Gulf by a committee of curious sea lions.

The next day we piled into a van for a two-hour drive up the Gulf of California coast to Cabo Pulmo, site of the northern hemisphere's only living coral reef. It was really a rocky outcropping with some hard and soft coral growths, but it made for some interesting diving, particularly around the wreck of an old tuna boat where we enjoyed the irony of fish feeding in an abandoned gill net. A one-day trip is also offered to Gordo Banks, where you might get big-animal encounters similar to the Revillagigedos (minus the hands-on manta experience).

There's limited shore diving at Chileno and Santa Maria beaches, as well as Cabo Pulmo. Expect long walks, long kicks, and depths no greater than 40 feet. Snorkelers can try these spots or Lover's Beach, which can be reached by water taxi or a glass-bottom boat ride.

bright-orange Clarion angels stood out. The water: high 70's.

On another dive (after a lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches on burger buns, a chowder, and dessert (which, would you believe, was always half a Milky Way)), a couple of mantas appeared in the distance and a Galapagos shark made a token sniff at my fintips, but peeled off before I could shoot his picture. Since the top of the seamount was 85 feet below the surface, this was another deep dive. Other divers reported an open water drift surrounded by feisty silky sharks; however, when I tried the dive it was an uneventful drift with no sharks, although there were big leather bass, bumphead, and bicolor parrots.

That night the chef barbecued chicken and a tuna caught that day. At 5:30 the next morning I was awakened as the boat pulled anchor to get out of worsening weather and head for a sheltered spot. After breakfast, the plan was to dive out of the inflatable pangas, so they each gave us each a safety sausage. During the dive, I encountered a 3-story-high school of skipjacks. In the middle a 5-foot silky patrolled like a border collie and later I saw a few more silky, Galapagos sharks, and a 6' hammerhead. On a later dive a hammerhead circled constantly (Scott said this was "unusual" behavior). Better yet, a pod of dolphins checked us out, drawing close enough that we could make out scars and other identifying marks. That encounter got me so stoked that when I came across a 5-foot moray lying out on a shelf, I merely muttered "ho-hum." The crew assisted my climb back into the inflatable, which wasn't difficult because of its low gunwales.

At the end of the day, the Solmar V got underway, beating uphill until 3 a.m. when we anchored off the south side of San Benedicto. Only then could I sleep. The weather was too rough to get to the Boiler — where mantas supposedly line up and wait for us humanoids, so we dived here: visibility 40

feet, lots of broken coral, a couple of lobsters, and a smattering of graysbys, porcupinefish, tiny Cortez rainbow wrasse, crevalle jack, and coronet fish. Initially the next dive seemed like more of the same, but below 30 feet pumice from the volcanic cliffs shrank visibility to 10 feet. While trying to elude the cloud of silt I lost my buddy, eventually finding myself at 100 feet – considerably deeper than expected. I began to see why the crew was so scrupulous about monitoring our computer readings

That afternoon our persistence paid off with the three-manta encounter I described above. While watching video replays during happy hour, we all agreed that this one dive would make the trip complete, even if we saw pubkis the rest of the voyage. The steaks the crew barbecued for dinner topped off the dive.

Although the sun appeared the next day, it was still too rough for the Boiler and a hoped-for visit to Roca Patrída, which was a major disappointment since a couple who had been there last year saw hundreds of hammers and other sharks in 200-foot visibility. We were forced to content ourselves with another three dives at what the frustrated crew renamed "Same Place," divesthat brought another manta, stone fish, 16-inch leopard groupers, brown jacks, goldrimmed surgeonfish, redtail triggerfish, and typical rocky bottom with sparse corals.

On one dive, Scott advised us to hover at 25 feet to find mantas, but Roberto led us to the 85-foot bottom, swam us in circles, and then departed with another diver, leaving the group behind. Roberto's behavior was apparently the result of a rift between the divemasters over the choice of sites (some believed the Boiler was diveable). Although he'd been personable throughout the trip, he now seemed to take out his frustration on his divers, which I could only view as bad form.

At 3:00 p.m., we battened down the hatches for a rough ride back to Cabo. We all rinsed our gear and secured it in the only available space: our bathrooms. Waves were breaking over the bow before we lost sight of San Benedicto. The Solmar was rolling side to side, but at least it wasn't pitch-rolling as it had earlier. Several divers, feeling queasy, hung in their cabins. I took a Dramamine and a nap, then sat down to a lobster-tail dinner. It took twenty-eight hours of uphill pounding to get back to Cabo, six hours more than the trip out. Scott could only recall two rougher voyages in his four years on the boat. We finally spotted land at 2:00 p.m., and, although the decks were still awash, it was warm enough to get in last-minute tanning up on the sundeck. Dinner was served as we neared port, and, when we docked at 8:00 p.m., everyone rumbled ashore to phone home. My last night aboard I slept blissfully, departing the next morning to the Solmar Suites, where I picked up an airport shuttle.

Well, I did miss the masses of mantas, hammerheads by the hundreds, and vintage visibility reported by my fellow Undercurrent readers. I didn't see whale sharks or the schools of 400-lb. tuna that are sometimes spotted. My shots are not clear as I'd like. But I had one hell of an adventure, accomplishing just about everything I'd hoped for, although not with the frequency I'd anticipated Still, if it doesn't get any worse than this, it's a good bet for a trip.

Solmar V

Diving (experienced):

Reefs	★
Specialty dives	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★
Boat snorkeling	★
Service and attitude	★★★
Accommodations	★★
Food	★★★★
Money's worth	★★★
Potential money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

(Caribbean scale)

★★★★★ = excellent

P.S.: Reader Charles Stearns (Lilburn, GA) reports that on his February trip aboard the Solmar he had ten-foot rollers on the way out, but got to the Boiler. "The mantas are huge (up to 21 feet) and delight in coming up close and personal. Several days we were unable to dive locations because of the high waves with winds up to thirty-five knots! I saw lesser electric rays, lots of green morays (four in my view finder at once), and zebra eels. The crew took us to an enclosed aquarium filled with clear water and juveniles of everything. Clarion angel juveniles with natural light are fantastic on film. The greatest experience was to be in the water and hear a humpback whale singing, a sensation so intense your entire body – including your lungs – vibrates!"

D.L.

The Weather & the Water of Cabo & La Paz

What's a one-word description of Baja diving? Variable. Water temperature and visibility vary dramatically. Two divers returning from the Baja only weeks apart can give such different reports that you have a difficult time believing they've been to the same destination.

In the southern part, the temperature of the upper 30' of water or so remains warm enough year-round to support tropicals and several varieties of hard coral. Below that depth, winter and spring water temperatures in the 50s and 60s freeze out the tropicals. From mid-summer through November, water temperature is 80°F. or higher as deep as sport divers would care to go.

During spring and summer, the surface water temperature rises, of course, but the big change is the lowering of the thermocline. This is a complex and uneven process. During a June visit the thermocline was at 45-50'. Sometimes the change was gradual or of small magnitude, but on one dive we recorded a plunge of 16 degrees between the surface, at 76°, and a thick layer of 60° planktonic green gloom 50 feet down. Later in the season, the water is 80° all the way past 100'. (I've even recorded 84° water in October.)

Another seasonal variable is the plankton concentration. Sometimes the more plankton-rich waters can be observed as distinct layers and masses. During my June trip, visibility was generally 30-40'. Later in the summer, it's usually 80-100' — part of the annual evolution of conditions that make the Cortez so dynamic, so productive, and so different from the constant Caribbean.

After the first of December, north winds often make diving difficult because of rough seas. By spring the thermocline is high and a 1/4" wetsuit is recommended (some sort of protection from jellyfish is recommended year-round). Tropical storms can occur during summer and fall, just as in the Caribbean. On average, they are most likely from mid-September to mid-October. La Paz and its waters tend to be somewhat protected.

Diver's Compass: The Solmar V runs 14 nine-day trips from Cabo San Lucas to the Revillagigedos from November through May. (\$2,200 for a standard stateroom, \$2,360 deluxe). Rarely are single accommodations available. During June-October – hurricane season – the boat makes 8-day excursions in the Sea of Cortez (\$1,600 standard, \$1,750 deluxe)... Book through any travel agent or Cabo Resort Reservations, P.O. Box 383, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272, 1-800-344-3349; (www.solmar.com/solmarV.htm)... The V has a 3 p.m. departure time and it's your responsibility to get from the airport to the pier; nearby Solmar Suites, a handsome beach club, is \$190/double/night. I booked an Alaska Airlines Vacation (1-800-468-2248) that included three nights in a choice of waterfront hotels for \$100/person over airfare. Daytime air in the eighties (warmer than usual, thanks to El Nino), dipping into the seventies on our return... In Los Cabos eating and drinking is a bargain. (Watch out for street pay-phone ripoff; 7 minutes to San Francisco put \$53.15 on my AT&T card.) Cabo San Lucas and neighboring San Jose del Cabo (known collectively as Los Cabos) are served by Aeromexico, Alaska, American, America West, Continental, Delta, and Mexicana, or drive the Transpeninsula Highway, 1,000 miles from Tijuana to Los Cabos....