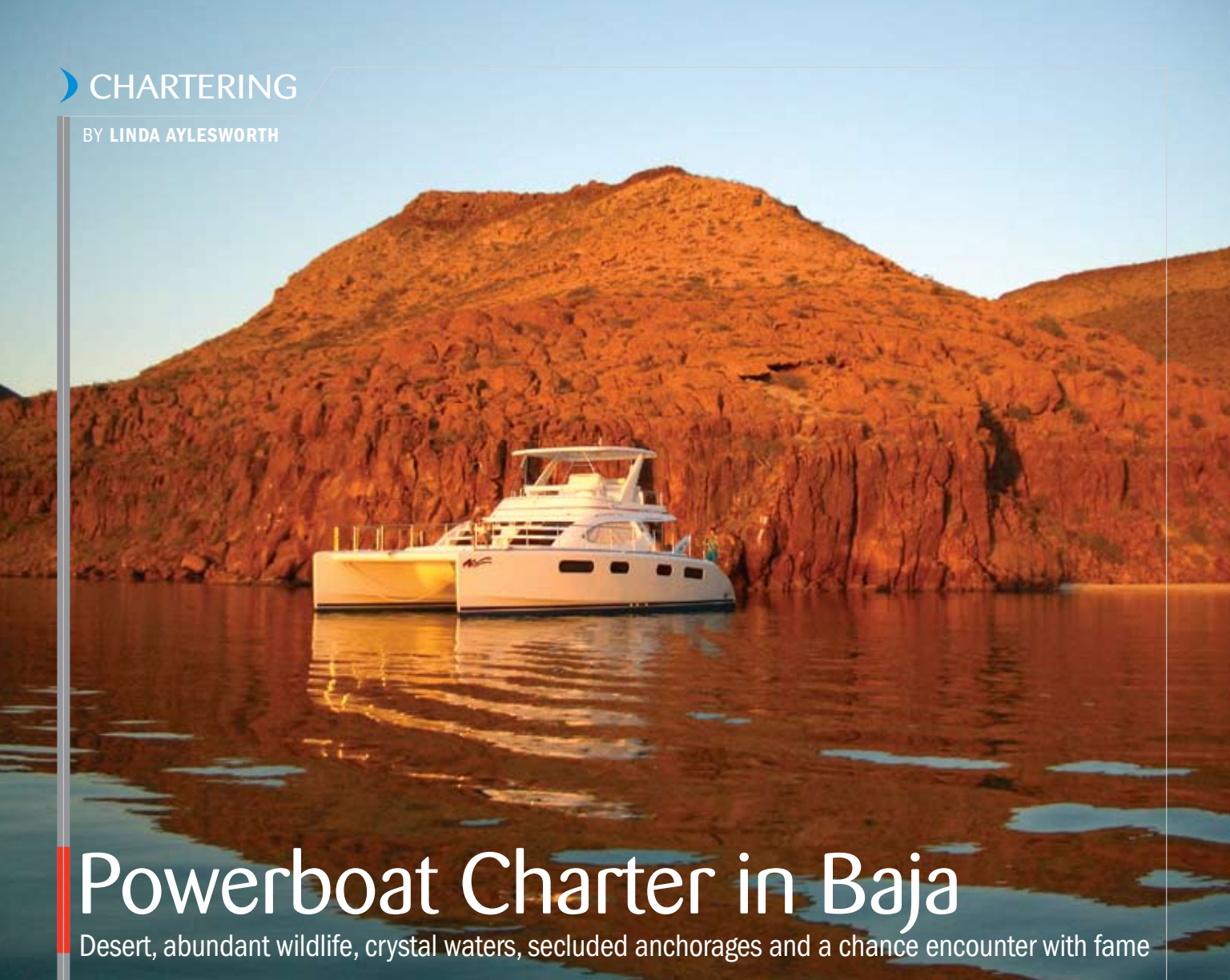


BY LINDA AYLESWORTH



# Powerboat Charter in Baja

Desert, abundant wildlife, crystal waters, secluded anchorages and a chance encounter with fame

**I**t's the youngest sea on the planet. Born 5 million years ago when the earth's plates shifted—separating what is now the Baja peninsula from mainland Mexico. Today, the Sea of Cortez, also known as the Gulf of California, is as geographically stunning as it is ecologically diverse. The 1,400-kilometre strip of subtropical water is home to 39 percent of the world's marine mammal species. Little wonder the sea and its 244 islands have been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO.

So when we heard that Moorings Charters had added powerboats to their fleet in La Paz, we jumped at the chance to explore. My husband John and I, with two dear friends, David and Anne, arrived a couple of days early to enjoy the amenities at the Costa Baja Resort and Marina. Located not far out of the city of La Paz and just a few minutes walk from the 47' catamaran that would soon become our home away from home during our eight-day adventure.

## Swimming With Sea Lions

As Moorings Charter customers, we were welcome to take advantage of the resort's exclusive Beach Club—which we happily did. But even more memorable than bartender Salvador's piña coladas was our trip to Los Islotes. Here, we were told, we could swim with California sea lions. While we could have taken our charter boat to the site ourselves, anchoring at the site is not allowed. So we chose to join one of the area's many organized day trips. After being sized for wet suits at one of the marina's dive shops (we weren't quite in the tropics here so the water was still slightly chilly in April) we joined a group for the cruise north to two craggy guano-covered volcanic rocks that, for some reason, are heaven to a colony of about 200 sea lions. When we jumped into the water, masks and snorkels in place, it was like sounding the recess bell

## The sun-scorched red earth of the Sonoran Desert.

to the adolescent sea lions. While the enormous males and their harems sat on shore bellowing, the kids came out to play. At first

they kept their distance, putting on great acrobatic shows for us. But soon enough they became bolder and—like enormous puppies—started grabbing our legs and arms with their mouths. As I struggled to keep my neoprene-encased body from floating to the surface, one curious youngster came to rest on top of me and stuck its nose in my mask. Perhaps this isn't everyone's idea of fun, but for us, it was truly the experience of a lifetime.

## Under Way

On the day we were handed the keys to our impressive 474 Powercat we were both excited and intimidated at the thought of being entrusted with such a large new boat. Forty-seven feet of length was one thing, but a 24' beam was quite

another. And yet it didn't take any time at all to become comfortable navigating our floating estate (complete with four state rooms, each with its own head) through this amazing sea and its gorgeous islands. The boat handled beautifully and—accustomed to twin engines on our own boat—we found it was a breeze to drive. Once we left the marina, we were on our own. We were told there was only one place to fuel up and get extra supplies. Fortunately, we needed neither. The boat was provisioned with everything we needed.

**Isla San Jose** The kind of beauty you get here is the antithesis of home. This is the Sonoran Desert after all. A place where life on land struggles to survive. As we travelled north up the peninsula, we passed dramatic red cliffs and sun-scorched earth all set against the bluest of skies. Everywhere there were examples of more than 100 different types of cactus, but one species—literally—stood out above the rest. The massive Cardon, the largest cactus in the world, can reach 20 metres in height and live for as many as 200 years. They dot

the landscape everywhere, but on the south end of Isla San Jose along the Amortajada Lagoon—there is a spectacular forest of them. There is also a lush green mangrove swamp, which, while lovely, is one reason you should not anchor here for the night. Mangroves—and guano-covered rocks for that matter—are to be avoided if you don't want to be driven inside by insects in the evening.

In the bays and coves, the bottom is most often covered with white sand. Not only does it hold your anchor securely when the winds kick up, it magnifies the blue-green colour of the water.

**Ensenada Grande** In one of our favourite anchorages—Ensenada Grande on Isla Partida—we sat back one afternoon watching the turkey vultures and brown pelicans flying overhead and marvelled at how the water's reflection tinted the undersides of their wings a vivid teal.

Like most of the anchorages, Ensenada Grande is full of wonders to investigate. John and David preferred doing so in the 5-horsepower inflatable dinghy. But Anne



and I chose kayaks. While The Moorings offers the sit-on-top type, we asked them to arrange for ocean-going kayaks from a company in La Paz. They were happy to oblige and we were pleased with our decision. The steep rose-coloured cliffs that surround part of the bay have been dramatically sculpted and filigreed by wind and wave action. Clinging to them with a hold that even the most determined wave can't loosen, are colorful and elusive Sally Lightfoot crabs. We even had our own pair of sea turtles in the bay.

**Wildlife Wonders** Each day when we set out for our next destination, we were confident we would see something remarkable. There were always dolphins eager to ride our bow and wake, and the humpback

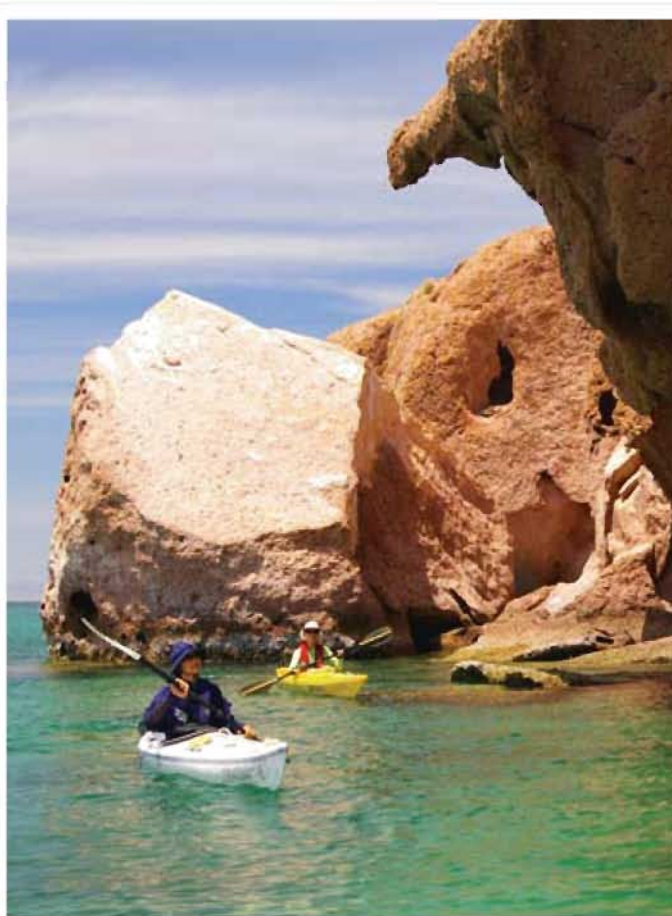


whales never failed to amaze us. But it was the great 80-foot-long fin whales—the second largest creatures on earth—we grew most fond of. They live in the Sea of Cortez year-round, and while they are described as the “greyhounds of the sea,” on this day we came across one that was taking its time. We cut our engines and watched for over an hour as it fed in slow, wide circles. When it dove out of sight for five or so minutes, we turned our attention to the manta rays, billfish and dolphins all around us. I can think of few more peaceful moments in my life than this—these were the experiences we had hoped for.

**Chance Encounter** There was one sighting, however, we never could have expected. We were on the small, uninhabited Isla San Francisco. An impressive luxury yacht was anchored just outside the bay known as The Hook. While walking along the long crescent-shaped beach, we saw a substantial dinghy leave it and deposit two people on shore. You notice those things when you are the only people around. When we met up, the usual pleasantries were exchanged before carrying on our separate ways. But we felt that these were not strangers—that while we had never met them before, we knew them. Once again we met on the beach and chatted about the trails and the whales. It was John who finally asked, “Are you Bill and Melinda Gates?” The answer was yes.

One of the wealthiest couples in the world needed to unwind for a week. They could have gone anywhere in the world but they chose the Sea of Cortez. As if there had been any doubt, we most certainly chose our holiday destination well. 📍

**Steep rose-coloured cliffs surround Ensenada Grande.**



## If you go

We found Alaska Airlines to be the best choice to get from Vancouver to La Paz. We changed planes in Los Angeles, but it was in the same terminal so we didn't have to pass through security before reboarding.

Pack as you would for any tropical holiday but include something warm for cool desert evenings.

Navigating the Sea of Cortez is interesting since the area was last charted by the U.S. Navy in the 1890s, so all the charts, including electronic, are out by 2–4 miles. Before you cast off a Moorings skipper will go over a list of waypoints that will take you safely to the entrance of any bay or anchorage.

For provisions, The Moorings supplies you with a list and stocks the boat accordingly. The cost for four people for a week was CAD\$832. The list also includes beverages. Our wine, beer, tequila and 20 gallons of drinking water (bring a refillable water bottle) cost \$330.

Prices fluctuate, but in early April, the total for the boat, provisioning, taxes and insurance was just over \$14,000 per week. Fuel was very inexpensive. Due to strong winds we decided not to travel as far north as Puerto Escondido—a trip that would have burned 900 litres of diesel. As it was we went through 594 litres. The cost was under \$400.

More information is on The Moorings website at [www.mooringspower.com](http://www.mooringspower.com). —LA