

A kayak and a cocktail off breezy Baja

■ Even with the winter winds picking up, simple pleasures abound at Isla Espíritu Santo and Isla Partida in the Gulf of California.

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As I waded out from the Gulf of California, a sight made me smile: Beach chairs were placed in a row so we could watch the sunset. Two cooks were waiting with a vat of premium margaritas and bar snacks, including chile-flavored nuts. A dinner of chicken fajitas simmered on the camp stove.



I was happy that my husband, Mark, and I had decided not to rough it on our kayaking vacation during the holidays last year. Although not totally new to kayaking, warnings of the sporadic but fierce El Norte winter winds kept us from going it alone. The winds that sweep from the Great Basin are at their strongest from mid-November to early March, sometimes reaching 30 mph and causing 6- to 7-foot swells. Though windsurfers welcome them, the gusts can make paddling difficult, especially for relative novices like Mark and me.

Plus, with only a few days to spare, we could enjoy the four-day guided trip to Isla Espíritu Santo, without having to worry about provisions and gear. We headed to this island just north of La Paz, on the Baja California peninsula, with Baja Outdoor Activities.

Wind and clouds dogged us during most of our stay on the island, forcing us to alter plans one day and making the air feel cooler than recorded daytime temperatures in the mid-70s.

The 14-mile-long island, which has one of the most pristine ecosystems in the region, is host to several species found nowhere else on Earth, among them the black-tailed jack rabbit and two snake species.

Isla Espíritu Santo is frequented by fishermen and kayakers, but it is easy to find secluded beaches on which to camp or picnic. Since 1978, the island has been protected from development, and Mexico's Commission of Natural Protected Areas issues permits to

only a few companies that take groups there.

Last January, Espiritu Santo and the adjacent Isla Partida made news when private Mexican and foreign donors, including the Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund, purchased the islands and transferred them into the hands of the Mexican government to ensure the islands remain pristine.

Although the island contains a few shacks and storage bins for fishermen, it also has a "pack-it-out" policy for garbage and human waste, and doesn't allow campfires.

While the crew unloaded luggage and prepared lunch, our group of 12 paddlers and two guides took to the water. Guide Hector Hernandez launched us into the water teaching us the wet exit, an exercise we came to dread. Each of us took turns in a single kayak, ceremoniously tipping it over, then pulling ourselves out from underneath it. The initiation was complete after we hauled ourselves back onto the kayak, looking like beached whales. I felt idiotic straddling the kayak and inching forward toward the seat as the rest watched my bathing suit ride up.



Thankfully, not long after, we broke for a lunch of tamales, fruit and beer, then hopped back into our kayaks for an easy four-mile, two-hour paddle to our campsite at Fisherman's Cove on the island's western shore. We quickly pitched our tents and put on short wet suits. Just offshore was a snorkeling site, and we waded out beyond the knee-deep water toward the mouth of the cove and swam into it.

Minutes later, we emerged.

"Did you feel any stings?" we asked one another.

The culprits were small, stringy red jellyfish, and Edgardo Cortes Nares, another guide, was waiting onshore with a spray bottle of vinegar to treat our raw skin. Fortunately, this was the only beach where we encountered the annoying invertebrate.

After dinner, Edgardo showed us books identifying some of the fish we saw while snorkeling. The Gulf of California is one of Mexico's richest repositories of marine life, containing 800 species of fish. We saw an array of sea life, including a turtle, manta rays, various starfish and coronet fish. On land the next four days, we saw some of the area's

50 species of aquatic birds, but there was no sign of the black-tailed jackrabbit.

We crawled into bed at 7 that evening. The wind howled all night, and few of us slept much. It even rained a little, but the next morning was clear, sunny — and windy. It never occurred to me that we could be trapped on a beach because of the wind. A plan for a short early hike and morning paddle to a snorkeling spot was scuttled because it was too windy to paddle, and we went for a long hike instead.

We slowly climbed the loose red volcanic rock to the top of a hill for a spectacular view of the 95-mile-wide Gulf of California with other islands tucked into its shades of blue. The peninsula is incrementally detaching from mainland Mexico as it moves along the San Andreas fault.

There are worse things than spending the day on a remote desert beach with interesting company. Our fellow paddlers, ranging in age from 24 to 62, hailed mostly from the U.S. coasts and as far away as Scotland. They included a sculptor, photo editor, website developer, social worker, oil well engineer, recumbent bicycle maker, university administrator, computer game developer, scientist, teacher, human resources director and a writer. Three of the paddlers were also part-time yoga instructors. Our guides were Mexican and bilingual, although not Baja natives.

After lunch, some of the paddlers joined the guides in plastic kayaks, battling the waves to the cove entrance, then "surfing" back on kayaks. Mark and I relaxed, playing backgammon and reading until the happy hour treat of piña coladas was served. As a bonus, we had no concerns about getting ill from ice cubes or uncooked produce, because water in Baja is purified.

Again, the wind howled all that night, but by morning it was calm enough to pack our tents and head back into the water after a breakfast of huevos rancheros. For those not drinking coffee or tea, the cooks offered Mexican hot chocolate.

As Edgardo warned us, the wind picked up once we rounded the protective shelter of the cove, making the paddling more difficult than the first day. Two hours later, we closed in on our picnic spot, which already had visitors, so Hector suggested we aim for our campsite. That meant two more hours in the kayak battling strong winds, but we agreed to try.

Alvaro Falcon and Pepe Winkler, our cooks, followed us in the boat, shouting, "*Alguien, fruta?*" (Fruit, anyone?) They threw apples, pears and oranges to us in the kayaks, and one paddler got to practice a wet exit when he reached too far to catch an apple and tipped over. Fortunately, he had learned his lesson well the first day and was back in his boat before anyone panicked.

By the time we reached our destination on Isla Partida, we were exhausted and ready for lunch. The beach was wide and open, and after a coed football game, Mark and I took the motorboat to a jellyfish-free snorkeling spot.

That night was Christmas Eve, and we were curious how we'd celebrate on a desert beach among virtual strangers. Two days before, Edgardo had suggested we draw names to exchange presents (something found on the island) after Christmas dinner.

It was a festive, low-key evening. Alvaro and Pepe roasted a turkey over the propane stove and mixed a batch of traditional rum punch. Special Christmas beer made its way out of the boat into our hands. We shared stories and songs. Hector described his memories of the holidays in Mexico City. Edgardo serenaded us with Spanish love songs while we struggled and failed to come up with comparable English ones.

Then we exchanged the gifts, explaining why we picked a particular shell or fish skull as a present. Though we would leave the gifts behind, the sentiments and thoughts behind them were touching. Hector made Mark a diamond-shaped contraption fashioned from twine and branches and reminiscent of a constellation because Mark, an amateur astronomer, had given our group an impromptu astronomy lesson under the clear sky the night before.

The next day, the last for Mark and me, was one I looked forward to the most because we would be snorkeling with sea lions at Los Islotes, an island a half-hour motorboat ride north.

Los Islotes, which is known as a great scuba diving spot, is home to more than 300 sea lions.



We snorkeled around, looking for the playful pups in the water. There were plenty sunning themselves on the island. But we were not allowed to get close to them on land because the adults might charge us to protect their young. In water, sea lion pups are more easily approached, though occasionally we saw a watchful adult swim nearby.

Hector dived down, spinning in the water, to encourage the pups to be more playful. We swam with a small group of three or four but weren't allowed to touch them.

I was sorry to leave them, and the natural world of Baja behind.

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