

Las Islas Encantadas: Pottering in Northern Baja
Eric Zilbert, p19 #621, Riptide
Davis, California
April 2002

Part I: Preparation

Well, spring break has come and gone. We made a trip to Baja with Riptide to sail the Enchanted Islands, south of San Felipe on the east coast of the Baja California Peninsula. This is a first installment. Photos to follow with future postings.

I have to say I prepared for this trip like no other. Two weeks before the break David (11) and I went out for a weekend on Tamales Bay as a sort of shakedown cruise. I went crazy with all the junk that was cluttering the cabin, so I decided to initiate a crash program of adding storage space. I ordered and installed two 11x 15 access hatches to the quarter berths as well as a round inspection port in the seat forward of the mast. I also added a removable stainless steel basin next to the sink for storing various misc. junk and to use as a wash basin that can be emptied into the briny.

Made a list of things to do, too. On the Sunday before leaving I started on the list. First item: lube hubs. Now, I have the spindle-lube hubs that have a grease fitting built in. I started on the left side and put grease in, and in, and in. What is going on? I look behind the wheel and there is grease all over the place. The rear seal is gone! I proceed to remove the hub and find the whole assembly badly corroded. Checking the other (right side) I find it works perfectly. Well, I run to Champion trailer as soon as possible to get the replacement parts. They sell me the wrong bearings. I return the next day and get the correct ones. On Thursday after work I attempt to replace the bearings and I cannot get the inner race of the inner bearing off - Argggggggggh!!! I am nearly apoplectic. Luckily, I had planned to take Friday off to get ready. I take the whole axle off and run down to Champion with it at 8:00 a.m. They fixed the whole thing, no charge. Even gave me a new hub in the deal. On the way back, I stop into West Marine to pick up a few screws for one of the new hatches. I pick up a few things on a whim. Some grease, a Marine-tex repair kit, some engine oil.

By the end of the day Friday I have got the whole thing together. Boat is packed, boys are packed, and all is ready. Saturday morning I come out and realize - hey, I have to move the motor to the cockpit! I had been going back and forth to the Bay Area, (as well as Tomales Bay), with the motor on the mount and securely strapped to the transom. However, I have always used the cockpit system on long trips. I could not find the mounting board (a 2x4 covered with carpet) so I make a new one. We leave Davis on Saturday about 9:30 a.m. (also had to get ice).

Part II: The Drive

We head down I-5 with the intention of driving straight through to the border at Mexicali. I am driving a new-to-me 88 Nissan Pathfinder. For those of you who know me, all previous trips involved my 86 Nissan Maxima. The Pathfinder worked well, over the grapevine (major hill, about 3000 ft. elev. gain in less than 20 miles) at 45 mph in 3rd gear, no sign of heating up. Did use a bit more gas. We skirt to the North of L.A., but wind up in a terrible traffic jam in Ontario at about 5:00. On to Indio where the kids get hungry. We pull into the parking lot of what looks like an inexpensive cafe. I instruct my youngest son to change his shirt. He goes into the cabin of the boat and changes, and discovers our first major disaster. The cockpit is covered with engine oil from the outboard!

A quick investigation leads to relief and frustration. Nothing appears to be broken - the oil fill cap/dipstick on the Nissan 5hp 4 stroke had come loose, allowing oil to drip out and spatter all over the place.

After dinner (as it turned out the place was quite expensive, nothing under \$17 on the menu) we made numerous trips in and out of the bathroom for paper towels. We got the worst of it up but it still looked pretty bad. Headed on to Calexico on 86, if you go this way take Hwy. 111 (we did on the way back, it was much more direct and in better shape). The date palm fields are a real trip, and the citrus was blooming. The car was filled with an incredible floral smell for mile after mile.

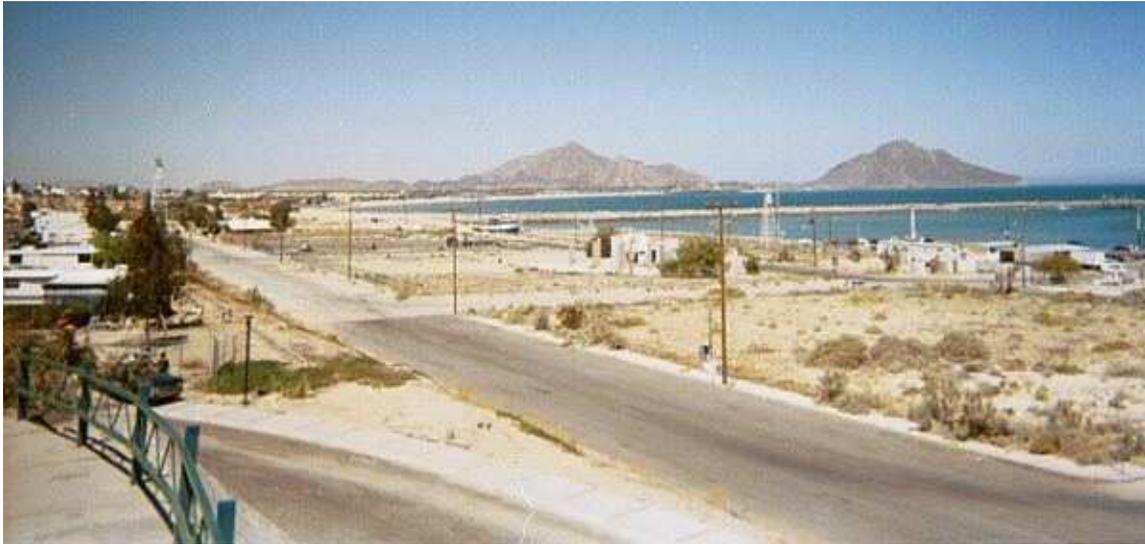
Arrived in Calexico at about 9:00 p.m., decided to recoup the price of dinner by hanging with the truckers parked for the night next to the Denny's. The boys slept in the boat while I slept in the truck. Next morning we head out, stopping at a self-serve carwash to clean up the boat some more. She was still not really clean.

I go to get Mexican auto insurance and discover the next disaster. I have the papers for the car and the boat, but not for the trailer! This was the first time I had used the Pathfinder for towing and had failed to move the trailer registration. The fellow sold me insurance anyway (\$50 for the week), saying he thought I could get across the border without the registration, and if I couldn't I could get a copy faxed to his office if necessary. It turns out the Mexican border guards were very unconcerned about anything other than charming us with their smiles, and we made it across in less than 15 minutes. Of course it was Easter Sunday at 8:30 a.m., so things were pretty slow.

I had not been in Mexicali for many (25) years and was really surprised how good things looked there. Very clean and prosperous. The farms to the south of town looked good too. Baja Norte seems to be doing pretty well out of N.A.F.T.A., whatever else it has done.

We arrive in San Felipe about noon. The place is a riot. Streets are jammed, people drinking on the streets, girls (Mexican, believe it or not) shaking their booties out car windows, a really crazed scene. We spend an hour or so checking things out and decide to head for the Marina, I wanted to check out a new development there and see if nautical charts were available. The only

charts I had were from a book on fishing in Baja, and these were not the best ("not intended for navigation"). No luck, and the port Captain's office was closed. We had a good lunch at the Marina resort, (the prices were very close to U.S.), and headed south for Puertecitos. The photo below is overlooking the marina, the brown smudge toward the end of the breakwater are about 8 shrimp boats.



Puertecitos is the end of the paved road on the east side of Baja. After about 40 kilometers from San Felipe it is only about 50% paved, so you have to weave and dodge to avoid the very significant potholes randomly salted here and there along the road. Below is yours truly in front of a home in Puertecitos.



The author and skipper with his rig.

There are also many serious dips known as "vados" (wading place) where seasonal streams cut across the road. On the way back we counted more than 80 of these over the 85 kilometers from Puertecitos to San Felipe. We get to Puertecitos about 4:30 after a two-hour drive. At the end of the paved road we are greeted by a small runabout on top of a house.



I pay the lady \$8 to use the ramp and an additional \$2.50 per day to park the truck and trailer while we sailed. We set up the mast and boom and prepared to spend the night on the ramp, intending to launch early the next morning. There is no marina, and the little bay empties almost completely at low tide. The ramp however seems serviceable to a Potter down to about mean low water.

End of the paved road.



David and Evan wait at the Puertecitos Ramp

That evening we enjoy the hot springs near the ramp. These are tide pools heated by geothermal vents below the rocks. You have to be careful because the water temperature depends on the state of the tide, which has a range of about 20 feet in this area of Mexico, one of the greatest tidal ranges in the world. I cook on the patio by a small, uninhabited house where we eat. I go down the ramp to rinse the pans and see an incredible display of phosphorescence. A piece of seaweed on the ramp glows, looking for the world like a piece of the blob. We play in the water for awhile, splashing and watching the water glow.

Part III: Puertecitos to El Huerfanito

The next morning we play in the bay as the tide recedes, and pick up some additional supplies at the small store. I also scrub the cockpit with Bon Ami and get it back to presentable condition. Puertecitos is not much, about 30 small beach houses/converted trailers (many airstreams that have grown plywood appendages and roofs), a small school, police station, and a store or two, and the Puertecitos Resort, where the ramp and hot springs are. They have campsites with palapas, water and picnic tables. They are a little close together from my point of view, but pretty nice. There is also a restaurant at the resort (nice building, never saw it open) and rooms for rent on the beach. The main cantina is on the edge of town and is known as "Cowpatty's".



Puertecitos from sea. The ramp is to the right of the white house.

The plan for the trip was to take advantage of prevailing afternoon N.E. winds and explore the islands. I had checked out the locations of camps on the shore where we could spend the night. I had planned to sail for about 4 days, willing to motor a lot on the last day to get us back. Well, the wind was very uncooperative from the beginning, blowing from due south. We get underway in the afternoon. The first tack does not get us very far, as the tide is coming in and we are sailing against both wind and current. After a while we give up tacking and motor. Then the wind starts to pick-up at about 4:00 p.m., now from due west. Soon we are really clipping along, hanging out for all it is worth. The breeze continues to build and there are whitecaps all over the bay. We are near the first island, El Huerfanito when I decide we should head for shore

as it will be dark soon and we need to find a place for the night. The closer we get to shore the harder the wind blows.

In the middle of a wild jibe (boom grazed my head) I am stunned, shocked and amazed when a porpoise about 10 ft. long jumps completely out of the water FROM UNDER THE BOAT. I swear it was less than 5 ft. away from me. I could not watch for it to come up again as I was very occupied sailing.

We approach El Huerfanito. It is a vertical, wedge shaped chunk of solid rock covered with guano. I proceed around to the lee side but can see things are really wicked in the bay. The area that should be protected looks like there are 5 helicopters hovering over it. The wind is crazy, blowing from at least two directions and straight down! Spray is flying. Swells are going in every direction. We are hit by a major gust and suffer a knockdown. No water in the cockpit, but the second mate comes up from below and asks what the heck happened! I make for shore which we reach just as the sun is dropping below the horizon.

Now, I had planned to stay ashore most of the time on this trip, and had expected to be in a protected cove with a sandy beach. No such luck. At the point we went ashore the cove on the map appears to have been no more than wishful thinking. As we sat there pondering our fate, an American in a dune buggy pulls up and asks if we need help. I tell him we are looking for a place for the night. He directs me to a cove just to the north where, according to him, "all the boats anchor." We head north and find the tiny cove that does seem deep enough to anchor in and we do so, anchoring with one anchor off the bow and another about 90 degrees to the first off the stern.

Part IV: Campo Nacho

It blew at gale force plus all night long. The noise was horrific. Boys slept well, I almost not at all. Went out on deck to check things about every two hours. In the dawn I see that the wind is coming over the headland in front of us and diving down to the water right where we are. I take a few pictures of the sun coming up. In the photo you can see that the waves originate at the boat and radiate in all directions outward.



Sunrise by El Huerfanito. Farther out you can see Isla Miramar (“El Muerto”), Isla Lobo, and Isla Encantada to the far right.

The boat stayed put all night, but about 7:00 a.m. we hear the centerboard banging on a rock. Time to go. We get the anchors up, start the motor and head out of the cove. David is preparing to raise the main. Just when we think we are clear of any obstruction the centerboard strikes a submerged rock. We only have about 1 ft. of it in the water and we slam pretty hard. David and I are on deck, and Evan calls up from the cabin (Evan is 17 and still in his berth) "Dad, you better look at this, NOW!"

Judging by the panic in his voice something is really wrong. Sure that we are in a safe area I turn the helm over to David and go below. It turns out our little collision did some major damage to the centerboard trunk! The forward edge is torn out for about three inches from the top of the trunk, about 1 inch wide. You can see the water in the trunk and it is slopping into the cabin. My heart sinks to my toes as I recognize this as a major problem. We cruise along the coast while I think about what we should do. I decide that I can probably fix it thanks to the Marine-tex I had picked up as an afterthought just a few days before.

The wind is finally starting to ease as we approach a large powerboat that is anchored to the beach. Here it is sand all the way out and we beach the boat and head inland to answer the call of nature. We meet the owners of the boat who said they too had been surprised by the wind, and pointed out a small shack and camp that belonged to a fisherman. They said they were staying in one of the beach houses and had arrived by boat the evening before. The fisherman had laughed at their anchor (too small) and had lent them one of his. I went to talk with them and learned that they had lost an aluminum rowboat in the blow the previous night. There were four brothers and they were having a great time preparing for the days activities and seemed to take their loss in stride. I had coffee with them while the boys played with a puppy. I got my charts from the boat and discussed other anchorages with them.



Tito (left) and his brothers. Look at the size of that pismo. The round structure is a water tank.



Sandy beach at Campo Nacho. Watch out for the crowds.

I recognized that the spot where we had beached would have been far superior to the cove we were in the night before, and ask about similar spots farther south. They indicated a couple of places, but I noted that their knowledge seemed quite limited once one started talking about

anything more than a few miles away. One thing they are sure of is that the west wind we had suffered through was a phenomena restricted to just their immediate area of the coast. They doubted we would be "pegado" (hit) again in the same way farther south. Apparently, the canyons here carry wind all the way across Baja from the Pacific.

Back at the boat I rig an old piece of halyard with a couple of blocks so I can get 2:1 purchase around the centerboard trunk. I mix up the Marine-tex and line the edges of the tear with it and then cinch up the halyard. It works like a charm. I doctor up the outside and inside of the tear while the boys make lunch. We are on the hard now as the tide has gone all the way out, but we have to wait for the Marine-tex to dry anyway. The fisherman dig up a bunch of really nice Pismo clams on the beach that they proceed to prepare for their brother who is going to return to the states that day (all but one brother worked in the states, none spoke English). Then we set off for the next Enchanted Isle, Los Lobos.



Evan lunching while we make repairs. El Huerfanito (The Orphan) in the upper left.

Part V: Los Lobos to Okie Landing

One of the most difficult aspects of planning the trip was a lack of good information on approaching the area by Potter. By this I mean you could find some information on anchoring options for big boats, or you could find information for campers, but info. on good places to beach a boat were scarce.

For one thing, this appears to be a low priority area for Baja Cruising. None of the cruising guides I looked at had much information on the area, usually a page on San Felipe and a page on Baja San Luis Gonzaga and Isla Willard or a little information on the Enchanted Islands. I also lacked real charts. The charts I had were fishing maps from a guide to fishing in Baja called the Baja Catch. These were good for a big picture overview, but did not help with some of things you see on a real chart, such as the nature of the bottom, soundings, and locations of anchorages.

I realized after our first night that, due to the tidal extremes, anchoring was going to be a challenge. I liked the way things had worked out during our repair on the beach, and hoped that armed with the information provided by the fisherman we could find a similar sand spit. The main problem was our departure was delayed until the tide came in and floated the boat. Since we had been waiting for the epoxy to dry this wasn't a problem the first day, but I wanted to get an early start the next couple of days so we could make it to Baja Gonzaga before our trip ended.

We left Tito's beach (that was the resident fisherman's name) and headed for Isle Los Lobos. In Spanish Los Lobos means "the Wolves." I asked the fishermen if there were wolves there and they laughed, replying "Si, en todos lados," which means "yes, on every side". We sailed away from shore in a good breeze, but it slowly died as we got away from shore. We headed south and wound up motoring for quite awhile, passing isla Mirador, known to the fisherman as El Muerto because of its singular silhouette which looked like a man lying on his back with arms folded over the chest. We saw more wind farther out and so motored to where we could sail again.

On approaching Los Lobos we could hear the "wolves" long before we could see them. There were thousands of sea lions. The island was very steep and rocky and we took a few pictures. There were big groups of sea lions swimming together like schools of fish. Many came by to take a look at us. I took the large population as an indication that the Sea of Cortez still has a lot of fish in it.



Isla Lobos, the disturbance in the foreground is a large group of sea lions. The shore is covered with them.

By now it was well past three and we headed toward shore to find one of the landing places the fisherman had indicated on the map. The wind died on us again and we motored for at least two hours, first to get to shore and then to find a good place for the night. We found Okie Landing, which turned out to be a very stony beach which was being subjected to waves from the west of about 1 ft. There were several pongas overturned on the beach, but there was no sand and there was no way I was going to allow Riptide to rest on those stones, many of which were a good 5 to 6 inches in diameter. Worse, the beach was infested with a type of no-seeum known to bite and lap up blood. We got out of there and proceeded along the shore, first north, then south, looking for a good spot. It was all rocks. Visibility was about 7 feet, but that was not enough considering the tidal range. Lacking a depth finder we rigged an anchor rode as a lead line to judge the depth of potential anchorages. I finally found a spot next to a spit of beach that formed a small cove that seemed deep enough.

Recalling the previous night we anchored the boat using all three anchors: One from the bow, one from the stern, and another from the stern at ninety degrees to the first two to keep us from drifting down onto the point. This was Evan's idea, and though a challenge to rig (I used the spinnaker sheets tied together to pull ourselves from anchoring point to anchoring point) it worked really well. We had dinner on board consisting of clam chowder and French bread along with some canned fruit, cookies and candy. We played cards and then bedded down for the night.

Part VI: Isla San Luis

It was a very quiet night and I slept really well. I set my watch alarm for about one hour before low tide so I could go out and see how things were progressing. When I went out I saw that everything was well and proceeded to get back in my berth and sleep until just before dawn.

I went into the cockpit to watch the sun come up. David was stirring and I told to come up and watch the sun come up. He poked his head up and then retired again. Evan was still unconscious. I sat there looking at the islands in the distance and thought about the trip so far. The wild broach, the desperate search for an anchorage the first night, the grounding, the repair, the long search for an anchorage the night before and the very long drive. I found myself a little depressed. Then, looking up in the rigging, I saw the port telltale lift. My sprits rose with the telltale, and I decided that I wanted to get moving right away.

It took me about an hour to get the anchors up. This included rowing the tender to the anchor off the bow and pulling it up by hand. What had been a good seven feet of water when we had anchored was now about a foot. There was a slight breeze blowing and I decided I would sail. I strapped the tender on the bow, and raised the main before taking in the second stern anchor.

We ghosted out of the little inlet, and headed for the big island, San Luis, about 7 miles off. Being pleased with my efforts and somewhat thirsty, I opened a beer; it was about 6:30 a.m.



Heading for Isla San Luis. The island to the left is Isla Pomo. A very large chunk of pumice.

We proceeded to the island, preparing and consuming breakfast while underway. Evan made quesadillas, coffee and cocoa. After awhile I had to break down and start the motor as the wind had again died on us. We took the long way, staying near the coast to take in the view.

We arrived at the island at about 10:30. We anchored in a beautiful cove on the north side. I dropped the kids on shore, went back out into the middle of the cove and anchored. Then I rowed the tender in solo.



Coves on Isla San Luis.

All of the Enchanted Islands are volcanic in origin, and San Luis is basically the caldera of an extinct volcano. On the beach were huge pumice rocks, washed up in a band like seaweed. We hiked for several hours, climbing the slopes below the peak, finding them covered with very prickly vegetation that looked like grass from a distance, but was not.



David wields a large piece of pumice.

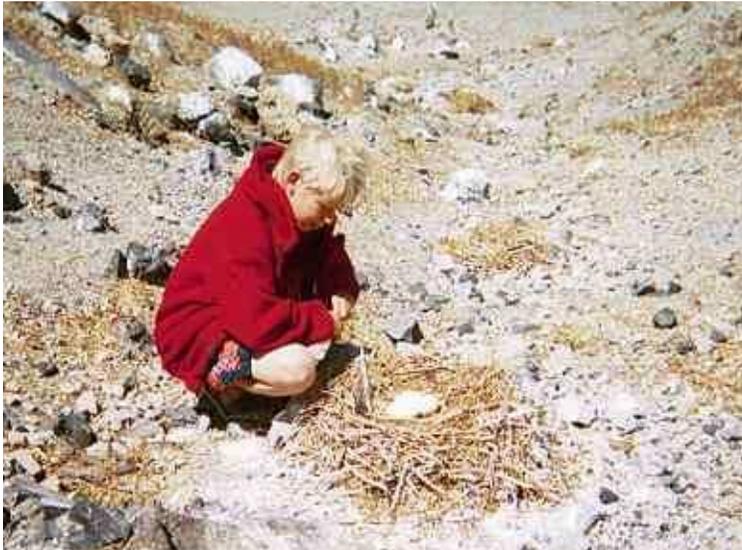
From the shoulder of the hill just below the peak we got some good picture of Campo Bufeo to the west and Gonzaga bay to the south. The small cove on the south west side of the island looked very picturesque, a recommended landing for kayaks and RIB's.



Looking south from the shoulder of the extinct volcano. Cove and beach to lower right look good for a landing. Gonzaga bay in the distance.

On the way down we descended through a small, steep sided canyon about 100 yards long and 15 to 20 ft. deep. We were amazed to find we had discovered a pelican rookery containing about 50 nests. I was worried as we went down the canyon that the birds might attack us, but

they just flew up to the canyon rim and watched us go by. We got a picture and touched nothing, passing down to the beach and the boat. I swam back to the boat and the boys rowed.



David examines a pelican's nest.

Part VII: Homeward Bound

In planning our next steps the boys indicated that they had had their fill of the island and did not really care to hang around the rest of the day. The south wind had started blowing nicely and it looked like we could make serious headway to the north if we took off soon. I had wanted to spend at least one more night out, if not two, but our discussions led to the conclusion that they would like to have a day to get things sorted out before they had to go back to school. They were also very keen to spend a full day at my parents' house in L.A.

I had already determined that we should not go farther south with the amount of gas we had left. We had used most of our first 3 gallons, and I had only brought a two-gallon spare tank. I was worried that if we got too far south we might have some real problems getting back in a timely manner. We were already 24 miles away from the ramp. We decided to make for Puertecitos that night.

At first we had a strong southerly wind and we were making 4.5 knots to the north. However, the wind slowly began to die. We were kind of hard-core about starting the motor but finally gave in when we realized we were barely moving. We stayed away from shore looking for wind, passing to the east of Isla Encantada, another steep sided rock. To the east of Encatada is a very small and low island named Isla Recife, or Reef Island. This marks the edge of a rock reef extending eastward that the cruising books had strongly suggested avoiding. I motored

between the two islands and then set a course for Isla Lobos. Things proceeded to get quite hot in the cockpit, and the water turned glassy. The boat was really moving now, doing just about 6 knots over ground according to the GPS. I gave the helm to Evan and went down for a nap. I slept for about an hour or two. When I came back on deck I could see that we were passed El Huerfanito and that there was wind a little farther out. We motored northeast and found a good southerly breeze. Evan and I decided to rig the spinnaker. At this time it was just after five and we were about two miles away from Puertecitos. Amazingly the little town was in my GPS, but it was in the wrong place! I had marked a waypoint just after we left and now noted that it was well inside the location given by Garmin.

Running with the spinnaker was great while the wind cooperated. However it kept veering back and forth and, as the foredeck crew, I tacked it three times. After about a mile the wind reversed completely. Finally, the north wind I had expected all along. We brought the headsail in and fired up the motor one more time. We arrived at the ramp just after the sun set behind the hills. I took a picture as I went up to get the car.

We spent the night in the boat at the top of the ramp. David and I enjoyed another soaking in the hot springs, chatting with an American couple and a Mexican woman and her daughter who were visiting the area just to bathe in the springs. This time Evan slept in the truck. The next day we packed up and headed to San Felipe for lunch, then on to L.A. We arrived at the border at about 4:30 p.m. and had to wait about an hour. The border guard simply asked us to state our citizenship and declare what we were bringing from Mexico. After we crossed Evan was incredulous. "Wow, we could have a whole bunch of terrorists in the boat. I am really disappointed! Is this how they protect us?" We laughed and decided we must look pretty much like typical tourists. In fact, even at the 4 or so military checkpoints we passed through on our trip we were never searched. We arrived in L.A. at about 11:30 on Thursday night and I spent Friday cleaning out the boat, washing cloths etc. The trip back to Davis was un-eventful. The first thing I did when we got home was grease the bearings!

I really do think that this is a good area for Pottering. It would have been nice if the wind had cooperated more and if we had had more time. The tides are a problem and make it hard to plan. The water was a little cool for swimming and the visibility wasn't fantastic. I am pretty sure we were bucking some fairly strong currents part of the time, increasing or gas consumption. It is likely that I could have gotten gas at Alphonsina's on Gonzaga bay, but I really didn't want to chance it. The Nissan worked really well the whole trip and we would have been in trouble without a motor. I flushed it well on Sunday after we got back. The boat had quite a bit of salt on the transom, and the under-side of the motor had small salt stalactites hanging down from it. We noticed throughout the trip that our towels and cloths that got wet would get stiff with salt in short order. Another thing was a souvenir we brought home from Isla Lobos, thick brown slime that covered the boat on the side facing the island! Those sea lions just have no respect for nature!

