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Big chop. Big fish. Meet Mexico's quiet side

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SAN JOSE DEL CABO— Globe and Mail Update

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All night long, the surf was up, big waves thumping the beach like artillery. At 6:30 in the morning it was light enough to see palm fronds whipping in the wind. We stood on the balcony looking at the Sea of Cortez. A smudge of rain clouds on the horizon. “I think we should cancel,” said my fishing buddy, John McDonald. “Look, the wind is actually digging holes in the ocean.”

John is a seasoned sailor and unafraid of a little weather. My other fishing buddy, Angus Reid, came out in his underwear and called our charter boat captain. After a moment or two, Angus lowered the phone and looked at us. “He says it’ll be beautiful out there.”

Off we went. An hour later, we were smashing through heavy seas in a 42-foot Hatteras fishing boat. The swells were so high that another boat running alongside us a few hundred metres away kept disappearing in the troughs. The problem was the chop – a chaos of ragged waves slewing in every direction. It was a feat trying to move from one handhold to another in the boat. “I never get seasick!” Angus shouted enthusiastically. “But I think I’m going to barf!!”

I never get seasick either, but I was beginning to think a lot about our breakfast of fried eggs. Better to close the eyes or keep them open? I tried both. At one point, I opened the eyes and saw what looked like the prow of a J-class submarine emerging from the ocean about a hundred metres away, pointing straight up, then sliding back out of sight. Enormous whale, I thought to myself, might as well keep the eyes open.

Around 9 a.m., just as the captain promised, the wind died down and the sea became pacific. Considering that the entire Eastern United States was being assailed by the fifth blizzard of the winter, a short gale at daybreak didn’t seem so bad. Even the clouds were gone. “It never rains here,” Angus said. “It’s basically a perfect climate.”

The Baja Peninsula trails down into Mexico from the bottom left corner of the United States. It is wild and rugged, characterized by steep arid mountains, red desert and forests of saguaro cactus. It’s 1,600 kilometres from top to bottom and if you drive its length, you have to calculate gas stations on a map. People call it “the other Mexico” because the Sea of Cortez separates it from the mainland’s much-publicized kidnappings and drug wars. There are two towns at the southern tip of the Baja – Cabo San Lucas, which is overrun with beach vendors, cruise-ship tourists and badly sunburned party dudes – and the quieter, more refined San Jose del Cabo, 40 kilometres up the coast.

San Jose del Cabo is a community that seems to be propped up by several thousand wealthy, wintering Anglos who have brought along their ideas in art, cuisine and design. (Morgans, one of the town’s best restaurants, is operated by a couple from Harrison Hot Springs, B.C.) There are top-notch jazz combos playing around town and half a dozen excellent restaurants and the safe, quiet downtown has a charming colonial feel. There is a verdant central plaza, an ancient mission church and an art district with many

small galleries. On Thursday night, there is a regular two block-long “art walk,” with gallery owners offering free wine and an introduction to the work on display. In short, San Jose del Cabo is a Mexican town that has adopted the best elements of American culture and dropped the ones we can all do without.

As with any seaside town, the real attraction is the sea. In the autumn, thousands of humpback and grey whales arrive from the north, bound for the Sea of Cortez to give birth to their young. If you’re strolling the beach at San Jose del Cabo, you only have to watch the sea for a few minutes to see the spout of a migrating whale. If you go fishing, they’re everywhere.

By midmorning, we were trolling up the Pacific side of the cape. Massive aquamarine waves reared up and flung themselves onto the uninhabited red-sand beaches. We never saw a soul, except for the whales. In every direction, whales were rolling, spouting, lifting their great tails as they dove under. Some would breach, jumping clear of the ocean and landing with a terrific explosion of spray. From a distance, it looked like someone was dropping school buses in the ocean.

We fished for five hours, searching for striped marlin, about the size of a kayak, and saw a hundred whales. Midafternoon, we arrived back in port, sunburned, rubbery in the legs and keen for a platter of hot tortillas and cold beer. We all agreed that it was a great fishing trip. We even caught five skipjack tuna. They’re a small fish (about the size of your forearm), but good eating.

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