

CABO LIVING

# SEA BAJA

*Exploring northwestern Mexico aboard a seasoned cruise vessel!*

*-by Paul Papanek & Joan Tucker | photos by Paul Papanek-*

Taking a 500-passenger week-long cruise on the Sea of Cortez to see the Baja peninsula and the upper west coast of mainland Mexico would not have been our first choice. But that's exactly what we found ourselves doing after our editor sent us a blurb about Cruise and Maritime's new Sea of Cortez route on the historic ship Astoria. We managed to get on their last sailing of the season, and what we found really surprised us – in a good way.

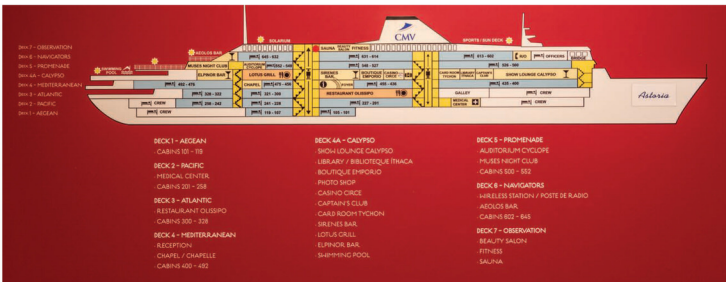
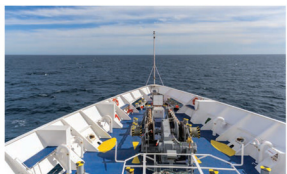
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The Astoria began life as the Swedish liner Stockholm, launched in 1946. Ten years later, she would become famous – or infamous – for her collision with the Andrea Doria off the coast of Nantucket. At the time, she was the smallest passenger ship in the North Atlantic, carrying only 395 passengers. Since then, she's had many lives, refits, and upgrades, and just as many names – ultimately becoming the Astoria and finding her way into Cruise and Maritime's fleet.

Having never been on a vessel larger than 25 cabins, we were full of trepidation. While not thousands of people, 500 is still a lot. Who would we meet? Who would we eat with? Could we put up with them for a week? As it turned out, we had nothing to worry about. After arriving at their embarkation point in Puerto Peñasco on the mainland via luxury buses from Phoenix and Tucson, we immediately bonded with Bob, a travel agent from Arizona and Roz, a PR person from the cruise line

(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: The length of the deck of the ship. Ship deck plan. The captain. View from the stern. OPPOSITE PAGE: The town of El Fuerte from the fort. Street scene in El Fuerte.



while on the tender taking us out to the ship. They quickly became the core of our group throughout the trip – a collection of interesting people from all walks of life that would expand and contract depending on who we bumped into at any random time of the day or evening.

As we were settling into our stateroom – one of only six with a balcony – we, and the rest of the guests, were immediately summoned with our life jackets to the on-board theater for our safety briefing.

That was followed by going to our assigned lifeboat areas where we would report to in case of an emergency.

And that was followed by our first – and by no means last – trip to the bar.

Then, planning for the week began. What's a cruise without excursions? Our first stop, after a day and night at sea, was Topolobampo – a place we'd always been curious about because of its proximity to Copper Canyon. Topolobampo had never been a cruise ship stop before this, and

we were met at the port by a welcoming committee who had freshly printed brochures and maps and an information trailer waiting for us. They were genuinely excited to see us, and warmly welcomed us to their town.

We chose the day-long adventure which began in Los Mochis, a city founded by an American businessman, Benjamin

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F. Johnson, who turned the city and surrounding area into a major center for sugar production when he opened his sugar mill in 1903 – the same year that Los Mochis was recognized as a city. While sugar production in the area continues, the mill that Johnson built is now shuttered and is being demolished. Los Mochis does not have a colonial history, but it does have a beautiful church and a wonderful, sprawling botanical garden that once was the backyard

of Johnson's mansion. We toured it all, and then set out for a one and a half-hour bus ride to the colonial town of El Fuerte - a designated *Pueblo Magico* and the birthplace of the mythical El Zorro.

It began to rain shortly after arriving there and we all quickly made our way to the Posada del Hidalgo Hotel for an elaborate lunch. Afterwards, the ship arranged an extravagant show of traditional regional folk dancing with live music and lots of

costume changes. Joan and I watched from the bar – of course - where we could see and listen while having shots of the hotel's own house-brand tequilas. We became aware of a dark presence close by and turned to see that Zorro himself was sitting next to us, waiting for the dancers to finish so he could take his turn in front of the crowd. We offered to buy him a round, but he politely declined and sauntered over to the pool table to kill some time until he had to go on. Since his act



required a lot of sword waving, not having the tequila was probably a good thing.

The hotel itself is a stunning colonial that was built in 1890 as a mansion for the mayor, and the Casa Vieja portion is said to be the original site of Zorro's house. Unfortunately, the rain held us back from doing much in-depth exploring, but when it let up for a little while, we went for a quick tour of the beautiful town and its wonderful church before making our way to the 1610 fort built on the El Fuerte River. The view

from the ramparts allowed us to take in the entire town and river, and there was a terrific little museum underneath with local artifacts. In the gift shop there, Joan found a traditional primitive ceremonial mask like nothing we'd ever seen before. Made entirely of animal hide with white fur and little painted red eyes, we had to have it – even though it was quite large and unwieldy. We

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**(FOR LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW) OPPOSITE PAGE:** The big Broadway-style show on board. **Zorro!** The El Fuerte River from the ramparts of the fort. **THIS PAGE:** El Fuerte church. The ship's main dining room. **Bingo on board.**



had no idea what the airline would say on our eventual trip back home, but we decided it was worth the chance. Spoiler alert – it was not a problem!

Once back at the ship, we discussed whether we would eat dinner on board or try to find a little place on a hill in Topolobampo that we'd been told about. It was a tough decision because the food on the ship was really great. But – the place on the hill won the coin toss, and we grabbed our new buddy Bob, found a cab in the port,

and headed up. The view of the entire port with all of the lights of the town and Los Mochis in the distance was amazing – as was the dinner! Coming home in the same cab, we took the slow route through the really narrow winding streets of Topo, ending up along the *mulecova* to get a taste of the local nightlife. We wanted to linger, but the ship was due to leave in a little while so we had to get back.

The next day and night were spent at sea on our way to Mazatlan. Perfect weather

(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: Mariachi onboard. Onboard casino. Crew drinking game. OPPOSITE PAGE: Mazatlan cathedral. Mazatlan malecon. Mazatlan central market.



accompanied us the entire way, and there was no shortage of things to do onboard while we sailed. In addition to trivia games served up in the bar, there was demonstration about how to make Irish Coffee (Joan volunteered), and a raucous drinking game on the aft deck comprised of the ship's crew dividing themselves into teams which each made a specific cocktail. The idea is that each team was trying to win the game by selling the most drinks for a dollar each. That amount of afternoon alcohol made the ping pong tournament, live mariachi music and, in the evening, a Broadway-style musical show and the nightly movie in the theater just that

much more fun. I had wanted to try my hand at the slot machines in the on-board casino, but Joan reminded me of the movie "Lost in America" and the protagonist's lost nest egg at Caesar's Palace, so I kept away. When we woke the next day, we were already tied up at the pier in Mazatlan. We had slept through the entire docking! That's a real testament to the comfort of the ship, the skill of the crew, and the previous day's activities.

Mazatlan rolled out the red carpet. We were again met by a committee of identifiers, all wearing the blue t-shirts that identified them as tourism ambassadors. The excursion

buses were waiting, and there were taxis for those who chose to wander on their own. Since we'd been to the city before, we decided to walk from the port to one of our favorite central markets – Mercado José Pino Suárez - which is just down the street from Mazatlan's historic cathedral. The tourism people really made the walk easy. There were arrows pointed on the streets pointing the way, and at almost every turn, there were more English-speaking volunteers to make sure we didn't get lost.

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: Mazatlan central market. Presidio Restaurant. OPPOSITE PAGE: Prosciutto and mozzarella. Hilltop view in Mazatlan of Astoria, astern of a larger Carnival cruise ship.

A city's central market is its beating heart. It's the city at its authentic best, and Joan and I are rarely happier than we are while walking up and down the aisles looking at the local produce, meat and fish, hand-made utensils and, most importantly, the people who are going about their daily lives. Opened in 1900, what makes this market even more special is its French colonial architecture which was inspired by the Eiffel Tower. Over 300,000 pounds of iron comprise the building, and each single-casting column is over thirty feet tall. It's

loud, it's fun, and it's also full of tiny cafes to fall into for a cold drink and a snack.

A walk through the old town - and along at least a part Mazatlan's 13-mile long malecon - is always a treat, but a lunch at chef Diego Bacerra's celebrated modern Sinaloan restaurant, Presidio, is the perfect way to break up the day. In the middle of town, we ran into our friends Bob and Roz from the ship, and dragged them with us. Built into a colonial mansion that belonged to Bacerra's grandmother but had been unoccupied and decaying for years, it's now

a sprawling place that embraces it age, with a beautiful patio, gorgeous bar, and lots of little nooks and crannies to disappear into. We had such a wonderful and leisurely meal that we didn't want to leave. It was getting late in the afternoon when we reluctantly forced ourselves out of our seats to make our way back to the ship.

We were due back onboard in about an hour, but there was a picture I wanted to capture before we returned. When we disembarked from Astoria that morning, we found that we were tied up just behind

a 4500-passenger cruise behemoth. The difference between her and our tiny, by comparison, 500-passenger vessel was beyond striking, but it was hard to capture it from the dock. Just looking up at her gave me a neck ache! Leaving the restaurant, we flagged down a *pulmonia* - Mazatlan's signature open-air taxi - and asked the driver to take us to the highest point in the city from which we could see the port. He knew exactly where to go, and we immediately found ourselves zooming through town and climbing the twisty, winding streets to the

top of a mountain. We hung on for dear life as we raced against the clock to get the picture and get back to ship in time. But finally - success!

That night, the ship made her way west across the Sea of Cortez and we woke up just as the beautiful morning light was being cast on the Sierra La Laguna mountains as we approached San Jose del Cabo. It was the first time we'd ever arrived there by sea, and

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the new perspective was stunning. An hour later, we dropped anchor outside of the Cabo marina, and tendered into shore for our excursion of the day.

We'd elected to go whale watching in a zodiac and, to be honest, while I had visions of six people crammed into a little rubber boat bouncing around in the ocean getting soaked, we were excited. Our large group was divided up and led to Cabo Expeditions' surprisingly large 12-passenger zodiacs that turned out to be comfortable and very dry. Our two naturalists onboard prepped us for

what we would – or would not – encounter as we made our way out of the marina. We would be looking for humpbacks – and find them we did, pretty much right away. We were not alone, as there were about a dozen other boats doing the same thing. But our captain had great instincts, and whenever the other boats took off after a whale, he went the opposite direction. He had it right every time.

After three thrilling hours during which we'd seen at least a dozen whales, we returned to the Astoria for lunch and to pack

up. While the voyage would be continuing to La Paz, Loreto, Santa Rosalia, and Guaymas, Joan and I would be departing in Cabo.

We loved everything about the trip – the staff, the ship and her history, the food – which was great at every meal – and the ports of call. The excursions were well thought out but, that being said, it would not be difficult at all to spend the day on one's own in any of the towns along the way.

The entire experience surprised and delighted us – and given the opportunity, we'd do it again in a heartbeat.

[El Fin!](#)

(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: Early morning view of the Sierra La Laguna Mountains as we approach San Jose del Cabo. Whale watching. OPPOSITE PAGE: Passing El Arco. Bartender onboard. Astoria at anchor in Cabo.

