

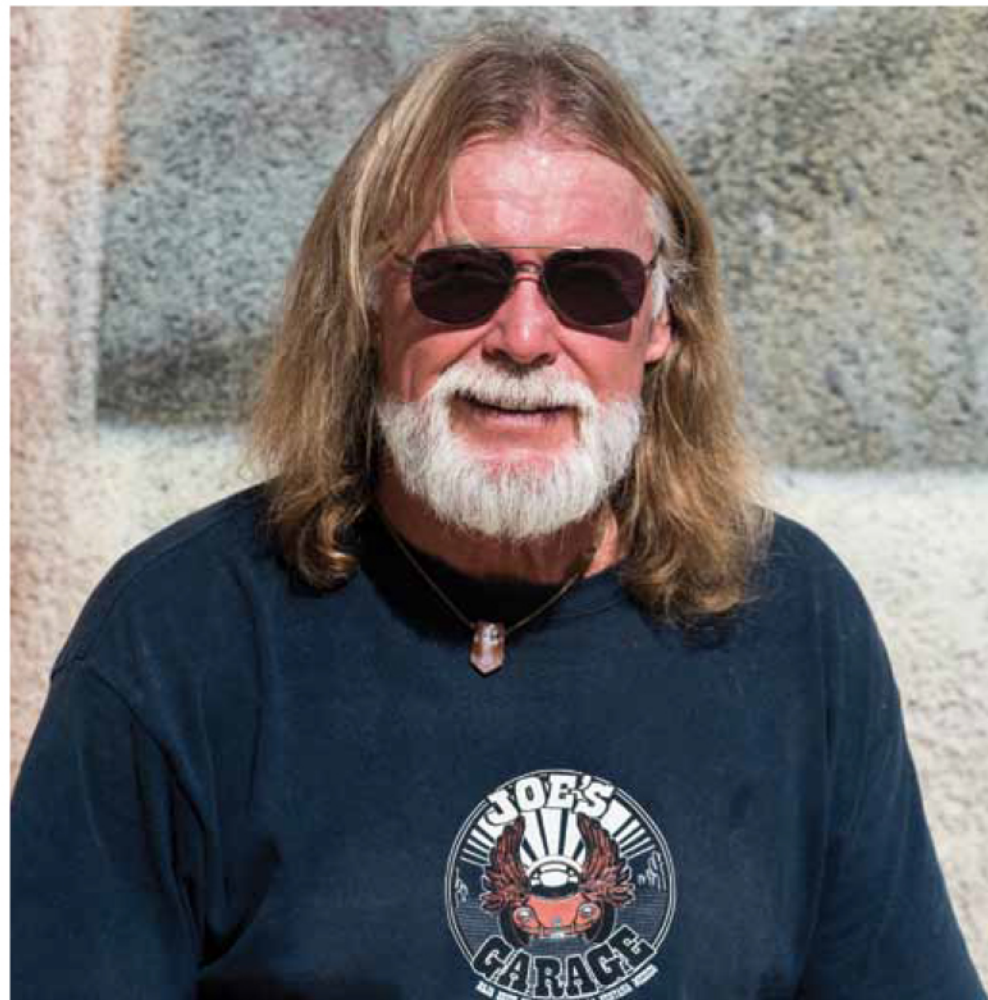
Hang Time!

Baja Joe helped make La Ventana a Mecca for a truly unique watersport!

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

It was late morning and the wind hadn't come up yet — which enabled us to get a prime parking spot at Baja Joe's Vacation Paradise in La Ventana. If we had arrived a few hours later, we would not have been lucky to find a spot on the other side of the highway. Baja Joe's is the epicenter of kiteboarding in La Ventana. It's a hotel, a kiteboarding school, a bar, a restaurant, a coffee shop, a gear shop, and the main hangout for kiteboarders and wind surfers from all over the world.

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *The eccentric Baja Joe, founder of Baja Joe's Vacation Paradise in La Ventana. Kites can be seen above the trees from the roof deck of Baja Joe's Vacation Paradise. Mark Bavis kiteboards on a strapless wakeboard.*

Having owned a house in La Paz for the last nine years, we're embarrassed to say that we had never been to La Ventana. Sure, we had driven down the Los Planes road out of La Paz to cut over to Highway 1 on our way to San José, and we'd once been to Bahía de los Sueños, but we had never stopped to explore La Ventana and the kiteboarding scene there. A chance meeting with a kiteboarding instructor in Los Angeles who was on his way down to La Ventana was the catalyst that we needed. He mentioned Baja Joe, and after some time spent Googling, we knew that this was a guy we had to meet.

Joe – kind of a cross between Kris Kristofferson and Jack Sparrow in board shorts, t-shirt, and flip flops - met us at the

entrance to the property with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes just visible behind his ever-present aviator shades. We knew right away that we were in for an interesting afternoon. He invited us up to his house on the property and we spent a few hours talking while waiting for the wind to kick up. It became immediately apparent that Joe was a man with an easy laugh and a lot of tales to tell.

Twenty years ago, La Ventana was barely a spot on a map, and Joe was in the process of selling off his logging equipment business in Northern California. That the two would improbably intersect is the stuff that good stories are made of. Joe spent his spare time sailing in the Bay area and one day, while

unsuccessfully trying to cross his boat back under the Golden Gate Bridge against the tide, he encountered a couple of windsurfers who were having no such trouble.

"That looks like a lot more fun than sailing!" he said to himself, and set about learning how to windsurf. It would take him two years before he could replicate what he saw that day, but he was hooked.

The winter months in Northern California are cold and windless, and he and some friends had heard that there was good wind in Southern Baja. They first explored Cabo Pulmo and then Los Barriles, but found the wind unreliable in both places. Someone

told them about La Ventana – about the bay with Cerralvo Island across from the beach that acted as funnel for the wind - and off they went.

The wind there, it turns out, is consistent from the late fall to early spring. It comes in late in the morning as the desert heats up and sucks it in, and when it cools off at sunset, it moves the wind back out. The wind came up exactly when you would want it to. It was, in a word, perfect. Joe had found his paradise and, at a time when no one was even thinking about buying land in La Ventana, he worked out how to purchase a large parcel right on the beach. He built a small place for

himself, and as more of his friends wanted to come down to visit, he started to build rooms and charge a little for them. Baja Joe's Vacation Paradise was born.

Shortly after, Joe and a friend got ahold of a primitive kiteboarding system – something he first saw in the Columbia River Gorge. They had no idea what they were doing, Joe told us, as they tried to make it work.

"Luckily, we didn't hurt ourselves too badly. Actually, I told my friend "you go first. After you figure it out, I'll go"."

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It turned out that all they did was hurt themselves. They got bruised and banged up but, Joe said, laughing, “It was a hilarious winter.”

Thankfully, the following season, a group of guys came down to film a kiteboarding video, and they were able to show Joe and his friends what they had been doing wrong. That changed everything.

“Now,” he said to himself, “All I need is one good, steady windy day to figure this out.” At that time, kites could only be sailed down-wind, had no way to de-power, were really hard to relaunch in the water, and had no way for the rider to safely separate from it in an emergency. It was several weeks before he finally worked it out.

It took about 10 years for the sport to really take hold in La Ventana. Joe spent that time clearing his land, planting 50 palm trees, adding more rooms, and inviting anyone to dinner who happened to drop by. Since he was one of the first to buy land there, people viewed him as the oracle on all things related to buying property. He finally had to recruit a friend to learn about real estate so he could concentrate on getting his place done.

In 2005, Joe opened the first kiteboarding school in the area. A talented kiteboarder from Canada, Marie Christine LeClerc, had just arrived with her very gifted kiteboarding partner, Mark Bavis, for their second trip to the area. She became the first instructor at

the International Kiteboarding Association-certified school. Mark became the manager of the gear shop and bar on the property. The kiteboarding school is now called Elevation Kiteboarding and is owned and operated by Marie. Mark has taken over the gear shop and Joe’s Garage Bar. The school has a full roster of talented IKO-certified instructors who share their love of kiteboarding with anyone who wants to learn – and who has three days to devote to taking lessons. The gear store, coffee shop, bar, and restaurant are closed between 12 and 4 every day to allow the staff to enjoy the wind and surf as much as they want.

La Ventana itself began to grow to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers



of kiteboarders and wind surfers who chase wind all over the world. Joe affectionately refers to them as wind junkies. When we asked how he felt about the competition – other hotels, restaurants, and schools – he shrugged and smiled and said that there was plenty of room for everyone. He really meant it.

That answer also applies to the beach. No matter how many kiteboarders and wind surfers are there at the same time, there does indeed seem to be more than enough room for everybody. During an infrequent lull in the wind, the beach is full of people sitting next to their kites waiting for it to come up again – looking like a camp of colorful gypsies. And when the wind does reappear, there can be hundreds of people sharing the water – ripping up- and down-wind, catching air, doing freestyle tricks, and generally having a great time. Miraculously, there aren’t many incidents of tangled lines and kites. But when it does happen, everyone is there to help each other out.

We had intended to just make this a day trip, but we fell in love – hard and fast – with the vibe of the place. We were just having so much fun that we were not in a hurry to leave. As if on cue, Joe told us that it was

blues night with a live band at the resort and that we might want to stick around. That sounded good to us! Joe’s hotel was full and, as we would soon find out, virtually the entire town was sold out. However, we lucked into a last-minute cancellation at a cliff-side hotel up the road, unloaded our stuff, cleaned up a bit, and got back to Baja Joe’s as the festivities were just about to get underway. Sitting around the fire pit, we had a few drinks and a couple of plates of tacos and were soon joined by what seemed like everyone within a 20-mile radius. Locals, singles, couples, families with kids, dogs - the place was packed and absolutely rocked into the night.

The following morning, we felt that a massage would be a great idea. Baja Joe’s has a massage palapa and a masseuse, but they were totally booked. Marie called the hotel next door – Ventana Wind Sports – and was able to schedule back to back massages for us there. While I went first, Joan had a wonderful breakfast at their restaurant, Coyas – fresh fruit plate, home-made granola, home-made yogurt, and a cappuccino - served under a palapa on the beach. A really nice way to start the day.

The wind was light, so we enjoyed just

(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | Mark Bavis and Marie LeClerc. Marie runs Elevation Kiteboard School, and Mark has taken over “Joe’s Garage” - the bar at Baja Joe’s. Walking around Baja Joe’s, one can find the Massage Palapa. Blues night at Baja Joe’s. The overall attitude, regarding all who come to La Ventana, is one of relaxed acceptance. According to Baja Joe, there’s plenty of room for everybody.

hanging out with everyone. No one was bummed that they weren’t out on the water; it was just another day in a wonderful place. There’s a genuine sense of community here. The kiteboarders arrive for the winter season – many taking up residence at a large campground that resembles a refugee camp filled with motorhomes and VW vans – then head off for a summer season elsewhere, and reconvene the following year right back in La Ventana. Friendships are made and rekindled over and over again.

There’s a sort of nostalgic Woodstock-like feeling in La Ventana that can be traced right back to Baja Joe – the Big Kahuna - and the world that has sprung up around him. We can’t wait to go back.