

SLOW BOAT to LA PAZ

*High adventure on the Sea of Cortez,
at a more relaxed pace.*

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

Driving from Loreto to La Paz takes a little over four hours, depending on how many slow-moving trucks you have to pass. Compared to other parts of Highway 1, it's not a particularly pretty or interesting drive; it's a home-stretch kind of a drive. Unless you're going to stop in Lopez Mateos or Puerto San Carlos to go whale watching, you just can't wait for it to be over.

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *This page: The wonderful Captain Bill Bailey, in the pilot house. The original ship's wheel - still steering the Westward 93 years after it was installed! Yet more original equipment - this time, the ship's compass. Some of the original rigging aboard the Westward. Opposite page: The deck of the Westward with the Baja coastline in the background. One of the four staterooms on board, each with a full size bed, a single bunk, plenty of storage, and a full ensuite bathroom. The MV Westward is, quite proudly, on the National Register of Historic Places! The ship's original gauges keep a steady watch over the massive Atlas Imperial diesel. The beautifully restored salon where we would curl up during the day with a book, and where Captain Bailey, after dinner, would read us passages from Steinbeck.*

Recently, it took Joan and me seven days to cover that same distance aboard the historic boat – the MV Westward - in the Sea of Cortez. The world is a much different place at nine miles per hour.

We had been told to look for a guy with a grey beard who would be waiting for us outside of immigration and bag claim when we arrived at the Loreto airport. Of course, this being Loreto, there were three guys with grey beards all standing next to each other as we cleared through the immigration doors. Somehow, we made our way to the right one – Bill Bailey, the owner and captain of the Westward. Wearing a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, flip-flops, and a baseball cap, he just looked the part.

We loaded our suitcases and camera equipment into his minivan and set out for the port where the Westward was awaiting our arrival. We were getting to the boat a few

days late - the other guests having arrived two days earlier to explore the prehistoric cave paintings in and around Mulegé with the Westward's on-board naturalist, Carlos. Scheduling conflicts prohibited us from making it down for that part of the trip, but our real goal was the upcoming week on the Westward, exploring the remote coves, bays, and islands of the Sea of Cortez, as well as seeing all of the wildlife on, below, and above the water. We were excited!

We were welcomed onboard by first mate (and, we would soon learn, Culinary Institute-trained chef extraordinaire who had cooked at some of the best restaurants in San Francisco) Tracie Triolo, who ushered us into the salon and then down below to our cozy stateroom. There are four cabins on the

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(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | *This page: So many parts of the boat are original and still perform their designed function. This is the "Forward" & "Reverse." A flock of Eared Grebes. Communal dinner on the afterdeck after a great day. Opposite page: Joan taking a break from the Steinbeck's Log From The Sea of Cortez to experience... well...the Sea of Cortez. View from one of the staterooms into the center hallway below-decks. First mate and chef Tracie is wearing the latest spring fashion: a t-shirt advertising the Westward's sister boat - the Catalyst. Everything we need to enjoy the beautiful sunsets! From this small, compact, well-equipped kitchen, comes one incredible meal after another from Chef Tracie Triolo. Jerk Chicken Breast, Kale, Roasted Cauliflower, and Pine Nut Salad, Apricot and Raisin Quinoa.*

boat – all identical, with a generous double bed and a single bunk bed, plus a full en-suite bath, closet, plenty of drawers, and three portholes that open to let fresh air in. It's an ingenious design and use of space – and it's really comfortable.

As we pulled out of port and began to make our way to our first anchorage, we met the other six guests and the naturalist, Carlos, and learned quite a bit about the boat.

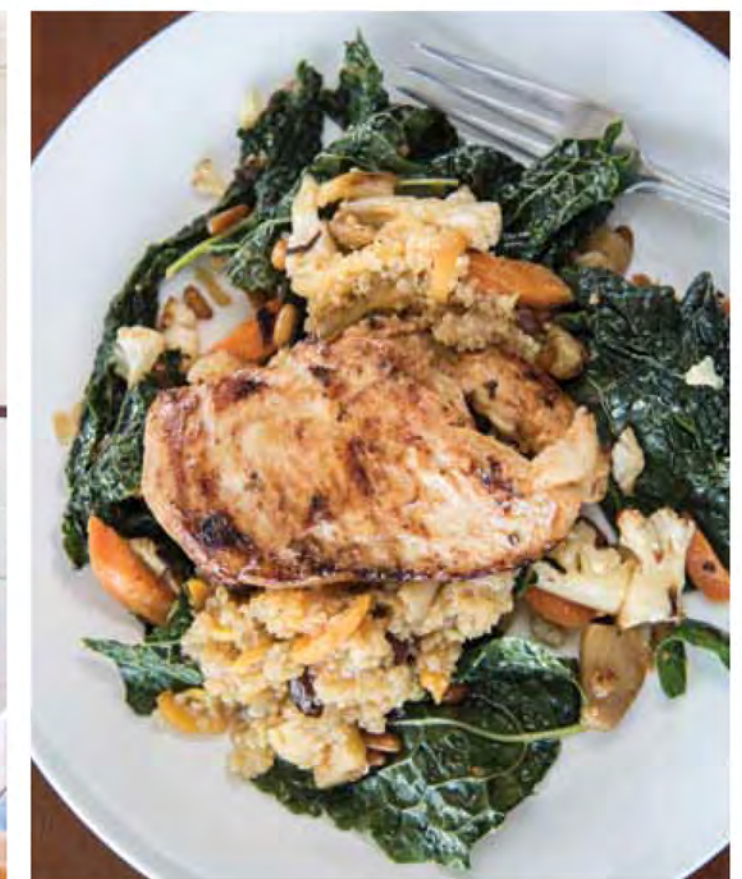
At 86 feet, she was designed to be the first purpose-built charter boat to take guests on expeditions to the Inside Passage of Alaska. Constructed in 1923 around a rather massive Atlas Imperial 4-cylinder diesel engine, she was launched in 1924 and has been in continuous service since then. At the time, guests included Bing Crosby, George Eastman, E F Hutton, Walt Disney, and other luminaries who wanted to

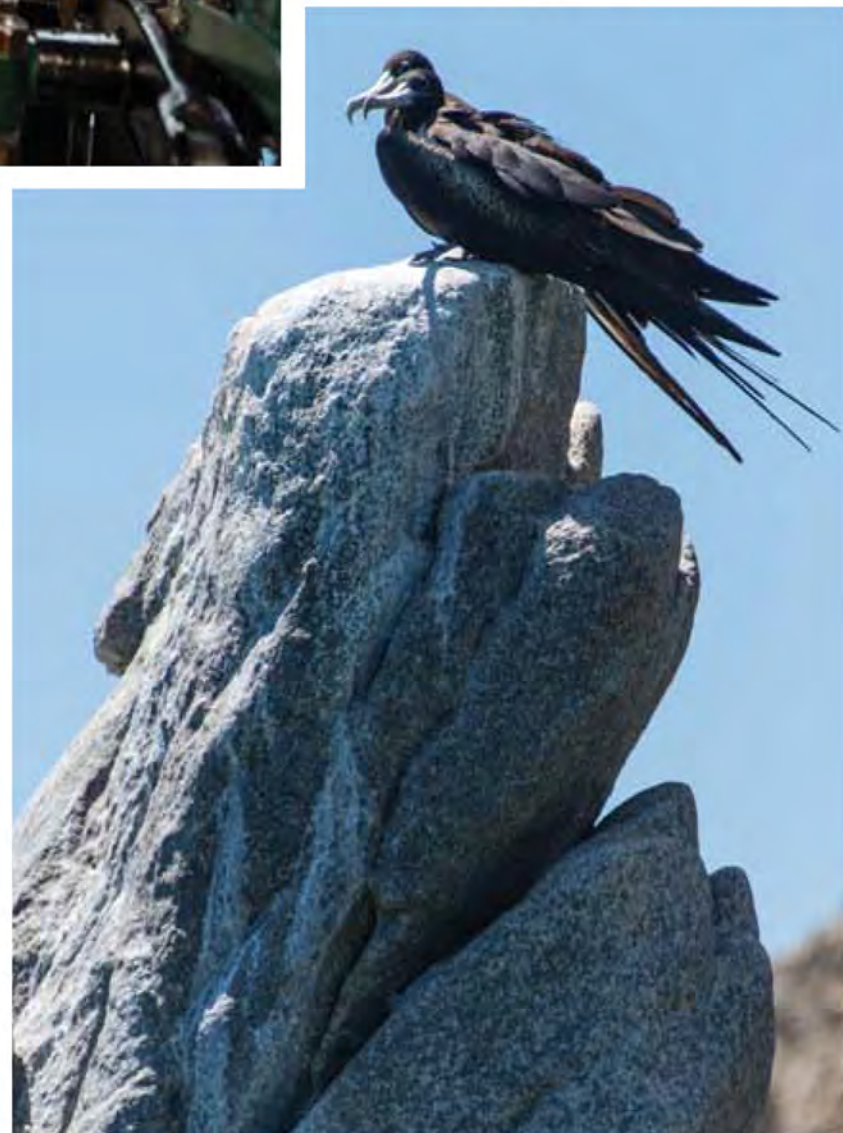
experience the wilds of Alaska up close and in real comfort.

The Westward still makes those voyages to Alaska during the summer and fall months, and then makes her way down to the Sea of Cortez where she runs regular trips between La Paz and Loreto during the winter. The company also includes an overland trip to the cave paintings or whale watching in either Bahía Magdalena or San Ignacio, depending on the time of year.

The boat has had several refits throughout the years, including one fairly recently, during which major repairs and upgrades were made – including the new cabin design. One thing that has remained a constant,

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though, is that beautiful, shiny, impeccably maintained Atlas Imperial engine. It's the last one of its kind still in operation, and Captain Bailey has been having a love affair with it since he purchased the boat in 2012. While the boat is running, he has to hand-oil 120 points on the engine every three hours. He disappears down the ladder to the spotless engine room, grabs his oil cans (different viscosities for different parts), and proceeds to place the most minute-appearing droplets on every visible part of that mammoth, churning engine. It's part of the Zen of owning and operating a vessel like this: one becomes one with it in every sense, fully attuned to every sound, vibration, motion and need. Captain Bailey appears to be busy all the time, but it's a busy he loves.

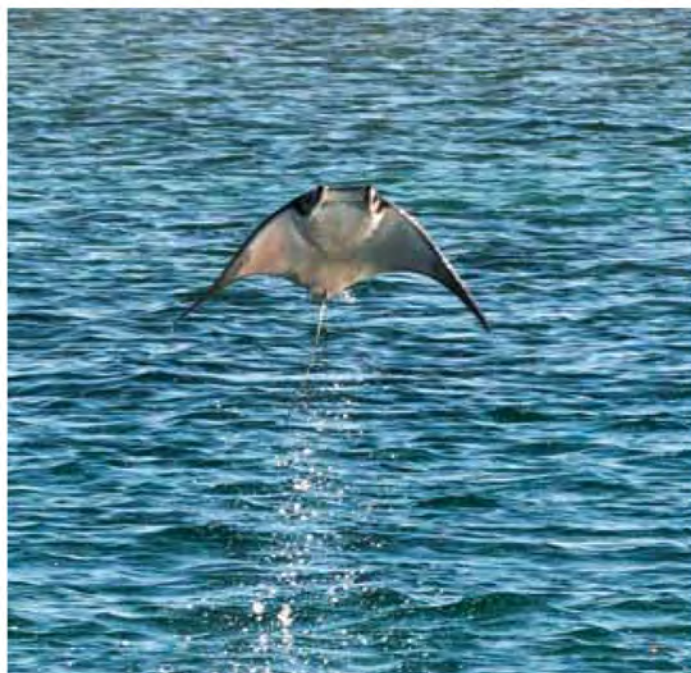
There isn't a set itinerary on this Westward "Sea of Cortez" cruise, other than to be in La Paz seven days after leaving Loreto – or the other way around. Everything is

dependent on weather, sea conditions, and that we make it to a safe and protected bay or cove to anchor in for the night. Since it was already late in the afternoon, we didn't go far, and set anchor just before sunset not far from Loreto.

It was about then that we all realized that there was no cell service aboard – and for the next six days, there wouldn't be. The tension was palpable, as everyone looked longingly at their devices in the hope that they could coax one more brief access to a social media platform out of them. But after we reluctantly put our phones in our cabins, we also became acutely aware of how quiet and peaceful it was around us. The sounds of the water gently lapping against the sides of the Westward was the only sound we heard,

(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *Opposite page: Baja coastline between Ague Verde and Isla Danzante. The great, throbbing Atlas Imperial diesel - the engine that the boat was built around in 1923. Captain Bailey starting up the engine. The spotless valve lifters. A Great Blue Heron guarding its nest. Two Frigate birds taking a break on a rock. This page: Captain Bailey hand-oils the engine.*

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | This page: Vultures scouting their next meal. One gigantic Mobula Ray giving us a show as he launched himself out of the water. They can jump more than two meters! Just two Mobula Rays out of a school of over a hundred rocketing out of the water. They belly-flop back onto the surface with a huge slap. Opposite page: Exploring the rocky coast and arches on the east side of Isla San José. Another arch on Isla San José provides a perfect picture frame for the stately Mexican giant cardon cactus. She watches over the El Coyote Island fisherman every day. Isla Cardinal Harvested Red Clam and Spinach Stuffed Triggerfish, Serrano Ham, Charred Red Pepper Puree. Coffee cups to greet the morning with. In the Zodiac with Carlos, the naturalist, as we head out to explore the estuaries and lagoon on Isla San José.

and after a perfect dinner of green ceviche of scallops, fresh clams, with avocado, tomatillos, cucumber and jalapenos and a few bottles of outrageously good wine, that sound rocked us all to sleep.

The next morning, after an eye-opening breakfast of grilled nopales with chorizo and fried eggs, gluten-free apple cinnamon muffins, really great coffee, and a selection of teas, we pulled up the anchor and set out to begin our explorations of the coast and the islands.

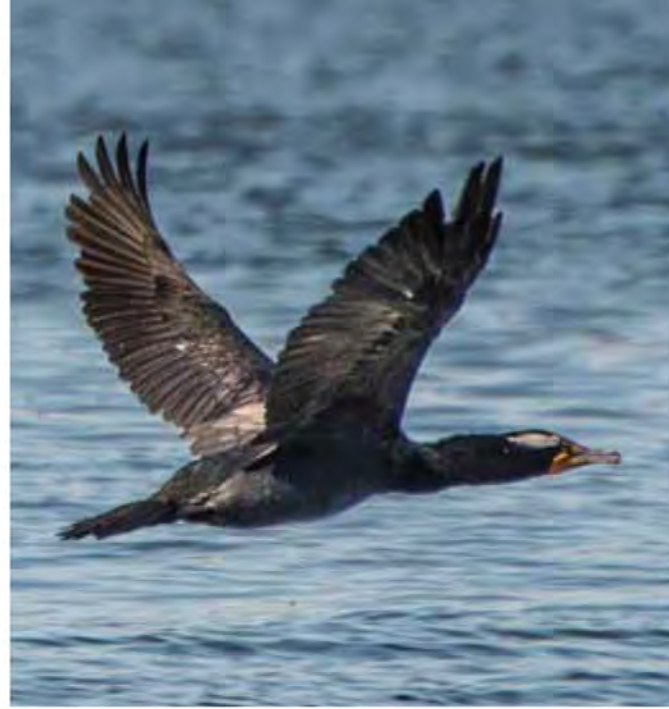
It wasn't long before we heard a crazy sound of something smacking the water. We were in the middle of a school of at least a hundred Mobula Rays and we all watched, in absolute awe, as they rocketed

themselves about six feet out of the sea, flew through the air with the help of their enormous winged bodies, and belly-flopped themselves back onto surface of the water. We looked at Carlos and asked why. "Scientists don't know," he said. "It might be to attract a mate, get rid of parasites, or it's a form of communication." Then he added "But I think that they just do it for the fun of it!" We decided that that was the best explanation of all.

Since this is pretty much a free-form itinerary, we motored where Captain Bailey felt the weather was best and the seas were

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the most calm. As each relaxing day drifted into the next, we'd choose our favorite spots on the boat as we made our way to the next adventure: in the salon reading a book, or on deck with a cold beer, binoculars and a camera, watching for more Mobulas or dolphins (we saw lots of each), or on the aft deck, just taking in the scenery.

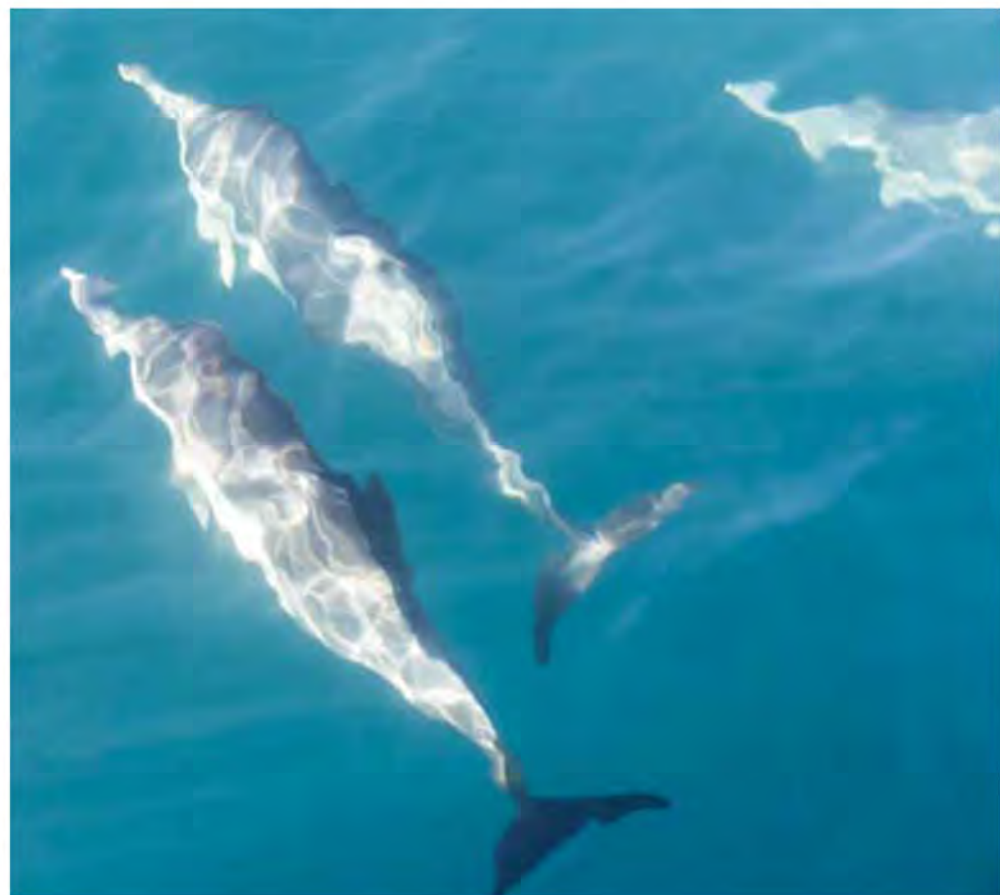
One morning we piled into the Westward's inflatable Zodiac to explore the estuaries on Isla San José. We saw countless species of sea birds – each one identified and described by Carlos as he steered us slowly through the mangroves, finally ending up at a large lagoon called Amortajada. The lagoon was separated from the sea by a narrow strip of land, and the waves crashing over it, with the other islands visible in the background,

was gorgeous. After a couple of hours, we headed back to the Westward and sat down at the communal table on the aft deck for a lunch of Baja-style fresh fish tacos with roasted tomatillo and avocado salsas. This pretty much became our daily routine. A good night's sleep, a fabulous breakfast, a mid morning adventure, a wonderful lunch and then... whatever else the day offered. And – of course! Carlos turned out to be quite the bartender, mixing margaritas, piña coladas, or just about anything else we asked for to enhance the already beautiful sunsets.

As we motored along, Tracie was either hard at work in the compact galley getting

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(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | *Opposite page: A double-crested cormorant gliding above the water on its way to the lagoon on Isla San José. Thousands of Frigate birds make their home in Bahía San Gabriel, on the southwest end of Isla Espiritu Santos. The entrance to estuaries of Isla San José. A snowy egret in deep contemplation. Dolphins escorting us on our trip. This page: Bahía San Gabriel, on Isla Espiritu Santo, is home to thousands of Frigates. Here, two Frigate hatchlings wait for their meal while other Frigates are nesting around them. A tiny fiddler crab - found on many of the island beaches. The estuaries of Isla San José.*





(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | This page: Lamb and Broccoli Vietnamese Style Soup with Wide Rice Noodles, Crisp Tofu and Shallots. The surprise dinner of the trip: sushi! Tracie's herb and veggie garden in a boat on the boat, on top of the salon. Opposite page: El Coyote Island - the only populated island in the Sea of Cortez. Japanese Style Crab Steamed Egg Custard. One of the many schools of dolphins we saw during the week swimming with the boat. Guests enjoying a cold beer on the afterdeck just before sunset. One of the El Coyote fisherman salting the Manta Ray.

our meals ready or lifting and carrying and hauling and doing everything that a first mate does. She is a force of nature and a culinary genius. Her menus are global, and ingredients are always locally sourced. In fact, she has her own garden on board, which resides in the hull of an old skiff on top of the pilothouse. In addition to herbs, she grows potatoes and other veggies, and is always experimenting with different varieties to see what can grow best in these challenging conditions.

On any given night, she might prepare a chile relleno with shrimp and white wine, avocado salsa, and lobster oil, or marinated flank steak with roasted grapes, Gorgonzola polenta, and asparagus, or – and this really blew our minds – a Japanese dinner

with miso soup, various sushi rolls, seared yellowtail with cactus ponzu, and pickled shitake mushrooms. Lunches were equally imaginative: boat-made duck sausage, kale and sweet potato soup, shrimp and pea shoot fried rice with seared whitefish cumin papadum are just a few. Her wine pairings, as well as her desserts, were amazing: a pineapple and coconut tamale with caramelized jamaica and Damiana liqueur, a Cruzan rum cake with bittersweet granache and mango puree, and more.

After dinner, we would all head to the cozy salon where Captain Bailey might read us passages from John Steinbeck's *The Log*

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from the Sea of Cortez, or show us a short documentary film about the area. We'd recap the day, have a brandy or tequila, and hangout until it was time to head down to our cabins for another peaceful night at sea.

During the remaining days on board, we snorkeled with the sea lions at Las Islotes, kayaked in more beautiful bays that we can remember, explored Bahía San Gabriel, the home of a magnificent colony of thousands of breeding Frigate birds, hiked up Isla Partido, and paddle boarded in another calm, translucent aqua cove. We ate one incredible meal after another, and – most important of all - we became part of the crew. The intimacy and atmosphere on board made us all feel that we wanted to pitch in and, within certain parameters, Captain Bailey, Tracie, and Carlos let us. We helped set the table, carried food out of the galley, and made drinks for everyone if Carlos was busy. They allowed us to “supervise” as they

played out the anchor and brought it back in, and I seem to recall that, in a moment of weakness, they let me hold the rope attached to one of the kayaks as we were coming back onto the boat.

It was that kind of an adventure.

As we came around Isla Espiritu Santo, we heard from below the faint sound of someone's cell phone chiming over and over as it delivered an endless stream of backed up emails and texts.

OK – it was mine.

In no time, all of our heads were once more bent over our tiny screens as we came within view of La Paz. But just as quickly, each one of us looked up sheepishly, buried our devices in our pockets, grabbed a cold beer, and enjoyed the last half-hour of the journey in silence – the only sound being the chug of that giant engine delivering us into port.

Contact: www.pacificcatalyst.com **El Fin!**

(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *Opposite page: One of the roughly 400 sea lions that populate Las Islote. Hiking up to the incredible overlook on Isla Partido. The beautiful overlook on Isla Partido. Captain Bailey and Chef/First Mate Tracie showing us how paddle boarding is done. Paddling one of the Westward's kayaks to explore the east side of Isla San José. This page: Sunset over the Baja peninsula between Agua Verde and Isla Danzante. Snorkeling with the sea lions at Las Islotes “rookery” - a protected marine park. The Westward at anchor off of Isla Partido as we went off on the Zodiac to explore the island.*