

MEXICO MYTHS, MISCONCEPTIONS

ALL PHOTOS ALENE D. RICE & BRUCE BALAN

After all the planning, the work, the time, the spending(!), you're making it happen and heading south. Good on you! During those years of prep, you've probably read gigabytes of articles and blogs, and watched too many vlogs — all of which have swamped you with waves of information. If Mexico's your first stop, it's possible that you might have a few misconceptions about cruising below the border.

How do I know? Because I made every one of these mistakes. And every year since I made them, I've watched others make them as well. If there's one thing that really drives me crazy in Mexico, it's watching competent sailors, with good boats, in fine weather, miss out on some of the best cruising in the world.

It's Cheap!

Yes, *food* is! (And the food is great.) But boat parts are not. Marinas are not. Boatyards are not. Labor can be, but you might pay near-US prices for quality mechanical, metal and canvas work. If this is your first big cruise, you'll be working bugs out of your boat and fixing things that broke on the way down — that can get expensive. You've probably seen articles that boasted, "We spent six months in Mexico and only spent \$29!" It's possible, but only if you defer maintenance and haulouts, and eat a lot of beans. Mexico can be inexpensive — especially when compared with French Polynesia. But don't be surprised if you get your yard bill and it's not quite the same deal as the *cuenta* at the street taco stand.

The Marina Black Hole

If you want to go drinking and not have to maneuver a dinghy to get home when you're wobbly-walking, yeah, it's probably safer to be at the dock. But I've never met a cruiser who declared, "I spent too much time at anchor and

The author's Cross 46 'Migration'.



not enough in the marina." It's at anchor where you'll start to slow down and get into the cruising life. Just as important, Mexico is the best place to hone your anchoring skills before you head toward more distant shores. There are hundreds of easy anchorages with sand bottoms. And they're all beautiful.

Letting Land Life Tag Along

It takes time for land life to wash off your skin and out of your mind. What's important 'back home' is not necessarily important at sea. So, continually evaluate what you want, need, and



Dinner!

desire, and see what's true for you. Most of us don't go to sea to replicate land life ... we go to sea to discover alternatives. Look for them.

Missing Out on the Sea

Many boats come down the outside, stop at Cabo for a check-in, and head to the mainland. Then, waving adios, they turn their bows south or west, missing the Sea of Cortez completely ... or per-

haps just visiting the islands near La Paz. Remember that the Sea is one of the most unique places in all the world. Just because it's next door and might not feel as exotic as faraway destinations, that doesn't mean it's not

worth your time. Go north to find the solitude and beauty of the Sea. That's where you'll get away from the charter boats blasting their music and the megayachts running their generators. For one of the most unique experiences ever, spend a summer around Bahia de los Angeles, where you'll wake up many a morning to whale sharks swimming around your boat.

Marina Hot Pot

If you decide to spend the summer in Mexico, be aware that marinas are one of the most uncomfortable places to sit. Simmering at the dock is not pleasant. At anchor, sailboats face the wind and provide natural air conditioning. In a marina you don't get that. And you can't just jump into the water when you're hot.

A/C Addiction

If your boat is fitted with air conditioning, the best thing you can do is leave it off. First of all, it means you won't have to run your generator — you'll appreciate the silence (as will your neighbors) and the Earth will appreciate the absence of greenhouse gases. You'll become acclimated to the temperature of the environment you are living in; the heat won't seem nearly as bad when you move between your cabin and outside. In fact, you'll spend more time in the breeze of your cockpit, where you'll experience the glorious views and have the opportunity to spot the sea life that Mexico is famous for.

Underestimating Your Hosts

Ask anyone who's spent time cruising Mexico and they'll mention the friendliness of the Mexican people. It's true. If you've come to Mexico with preconceived notions often spread by US news outlets, you're in for a wonderful revelation. Approach your hosts with an open mind and open heart; you'll be surprised how safe and welcome you feel. Sure, stuff happens. Stuff happens everywhere. But most longtime cruisers will tell you they feel safer in Mexico than in many locales in their home country. Nearly everyone has a story of Mexican kindness and is inspired to give something back to this wonderful country.

Neglecting the VHF

Not that long ago, there was a cruising community held together by radio communications. Now, with boats leaving their Iridium GO! on 24/7, friends often



Staying on deck lets you experience the real world.

just text each other. And the VHF? Sometimes it's not even turned on. The VHF is a sailor's lifeline. Leave your radio on. Use it. You might save a local fisherman in need of help. Or he might save you. It's a two-way street. We can't take care of each other if we don't hear the call for help.

It's Always Hot

It's Mexico: beaches, desert, sunshine, tropically warm water. Yep, that's true ... except in the Sea of Cortez in the winter, when the water temp hangs in the 60s and a screaming Norther will have you hoping you actually did bury that fleece jacket beneath the V-berth. The Sea is beautiful — and fairly empty — in the winter, but unless you're one of those hearty folks from Canada or the PNW, head over to the mainland when the temps start dropping.

Stuck in Parts Limbo

In our home countries we get used to ordering exactly what we need and having it delivered immediately. We forget it's not actually necessary to

have everything perfect right now. If you have a repair and need a part shipped in, don't hang around and waste weeks waiting for it. Jury-rig the plumbing system or use a piece of Dyneema to replace that shackle and get out cruising. You can sail back to the marina when your part arrives.

Project List vs. Cruising List

Maybe you're planning on crossing the Pacific but you just had to get moving before everything was done. First of all, congrats on getting off the dock; we all know that if we wait for the boat to be perfect, we'll never get to sea. However, don't spend all your time going through your punch list. Yes,

there is a lot that must be done before a big ocean passage. But pay some attention to your cruising list ... that's the scrap of paper with all the must-see anchorages your friends have told you about. You don't want to look back on your time in Mexico as just being a working slog.

A whale shark circles 'Migration' in Bahia de los Angeles.



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Top left: Feeling lucky. Top right: Avoid anchorages like this by going farther north in the Sea. Middle left: No Wi-Fi here. Middle right: Plenty of nice marinas, but they can be hot in the summer. Bottom left: The reason we do it. Bottom right: Solitude that can't be bought.

Cutting the Wi-Fi Wire

I know, Wi-Fi has no physical wire, but the emotional one can be as strong as your backstay. The day you don't need to check your phone, read the news, or update your blog ... you will enter a new world. Trust me on this one.

Ignoring the Sand at Low Tide

Sitting comfortably in the anchorage at Isla San Francisco, we watched a 40-ft bareboat head out into the

six-foot, six-second chop of a 20-30-knot Norther ... and then turn north! I suppose they had only a week and weren't going to let the weather get in their way. If there's anything the pandemic year and a half has taught us ... well, you can probably figure this one out. You've heard it said that cruisers write their plans in the sand at low tide. But we often forget what that really means. Cruising is about getting into a different rhythm of life. Make plans

but be willing to change them. Maybe decide to stay in Mexico an extra year. Central America calls instead of Polynesia? Go for it. Be willing to bend; it will keep you from breaking.

So that's it. Can I guarantee that if you avoid these mistakes you'll have a great time? Yeah, I think I can. With a good boat and the right attitude, you have to work hard not to love life when you're cruising Mexico.

— **bruce balan**