



# WAVE DIVERS

SPEARFISHING ADVENTURES ON THE PACIFIC COAST OF BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR





AT 75 FEET THE VISIBILITY WAS CRYSTAL CLEAR, THE WATER AN INTENSE COBALT BLUE AND OF AN ALMOST EERIE STILLNESS. SPREAD BELOW ME WAS A HYPNOTIC SWAYING OF KELP AND COFFEE PLANTS, AND JUST BEYOND ROCKS FANNED WITH A PICTURESQUE COLLAGE OF PSYCHEDELIC LOOKING MUSHROOMS. THE ROCKS HAD A LABYRINTHINE SERIES OF HOLES INTO WHICH GIANT GARROPA GROUPER DARTED, FISH AS LARGE AS 90 LBS. RACING IN AND OUT OF TUNNELS AS IF “COMMUTING” ALONG SOME ANCIENT UNDERSEA SUBWAY SYSTEM.

**MAD MAG**  
by Niko Bolduc



**WATCHING THIS INCREDIBLE TABLEAU,** I wished I had brought my pole spear. Not only because it was the perfect weapon with which to spear grouper as they zipped in and out of the myriad cavities, but also because it would have attached me to a local fishing tradition that stretches across thousands and thousands of years, to a time when native Guaycuras – a tribe of primitive hunter gatherers whose range extended from Loreto to Todos Santos – wandered these same waters seeking big fish and sea turtles.

Even without the pole I felt the echo I always get when spearfishing, that feeling of being part of a tradition that stretches back into the distant mist of human history.

I surfaced for a deep breath, then descended again to stalk my prey.

Cabo San Lucas is one of the capitals of the sportfishing world. Located at the southernmost point of the nearly 800 mile long Baja California peninsula, the waters off its granitic Land’s End headland teem with everything from tuna, wahoo, dorado, grouper, snapper and sierra to marlin, manta rays, dolphins, sharks, and, seasonally at least, humpbacks and other whales. I opened the area’s first spearfishing business in 2013, and have been going great guns (no pun intended) ever since, thanks to the tremendous biodiversity generated by upwelling at the juncture of the Pacific Ocean and Sea of Cortés.

But Cabo has been a tourist town for decades, packed with boisterous nightclubs and kitschy tshirt shops, and filled with charter boats competing for local resources in what seems a neverending pageant of big game tournaments. For a taste of the real Baja nowadays, the untamed and unspoiled places that hardcore U.S. fishermen fell in love with in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and that pre Hispanic California tribes fished for millennia, it’s necessary to journey well away from the boutique shops and luxury resorts of Los Cabos.

That’s why me and my team – Jacopo Brunetti (AKA Jacob Scuba), an Italian born marine biologist and professional underwater photographer, and Miguel Angel Constantini, a Mexican fishing guide with some serious big game credentials – recently packed up our equipment and Pelagic Gear, and traveled over 160 miles up the Pacific Coast of Baja California Sur to go spearfishing in beautiful Bahía Magdalena.

Magdalena, or Mag Bay, is probably best known as a breeding ground for gray whales. Each year, after a 10,000 mile plus migration from arctic waters to the more temperate climes of México, these leviathans of the deep – some weighing as much as 70,000 to 80,000 pounds – spend the winter months (mid December to late March, early April) breeding, bearing and raising calves in the shallow waters of the bay.

But the seasonal arrival of gray whales is only part of the wonder of this very special place. A chain of barrier islands protect this part of the Pacific Coast, allowing for a vibrant and incredibly complex marine ecosystem that extends to mangrove estuaries and shorelines lined with enormous sand dunes the size of

office buildings. Life of all kinds proliferates here, from a kaleidoscopic array of colorful fish to the highest concentration of sea birds in all of Baja.

Many of the barrier islands also feature what is known as “island endemism,” a Galapagos type of insular exceptionalism that allows plant and animal species to flourish that don’t exist anywhere else in the world. On Isla Magdalena, for example, an over 40 mile boomerang shaped strip of land that protects its eponymous bay, there are at least five kinds of cactus unknown throughout the rest of México.

Seen on a map, the lower left portion of the boomerang looks as if some prehistoric monster took a bite out of it, with the teeth marks fringing the outer bay, Bahía Santa María, that brackets and protects the larger inner body of water that is Bahía Magdalena. Below Magdalena, protected by its own barrier island Santa Margarita, is Bahía Las Almejas, or Bay of Clams – so called because of its wealth of “chocolate clams,” brown shelled mollusks that are justifiably considered one of the peninsula’s greatest delicacies. >>>







Until the Spanish arrived in Baja in the 16th century – first Cortés and his soldiers with their armored breastplates, greaves, gorgets and plumed helmets, their fire snorting horses and thunder throwing harquebuses; later the Jesuits with their black robes and proselytizing message – this idyllic coastal area was known well only by the Guaycuras, primitive hunter gatherers who wore no clothes, grew no food, and made very few tools. They subsisted entirely by gathering fruits and seeds, hunting deer, fox and smaller game with bows and arrows, and fishing in offshore waters.

Today, the area remains sparsely populated, with few amenities and a forbidding isolation. Puerto San Carlos is the only settlement of note, and on Isla Magdalena, where we set up our base camp, there was not a single hotel and only one restaurant, and that limited to two tables. The only illumination at night was an enormous blanket of stars that shone with a piercing luminescence unknown to city and resort destination dwellers. We were, in Baja parlance, “off the grid” and loving it. Exhausted by the drive up, we had dinner and a few beers, and relived old times as a prelude to fresh adventures.

On our first full day in this pristine para-

dise, we were up before dawn, readying cameras and equipment, and loading a boat onto a trailer for a trip into the wild. We had engaged a local captain, an absolute necessity in a place like this, where there are an almost infinite number of potential freediving sites, almost all of which are as familiar to the guides – the latest link in one of the longest continual fishing cultures on earth – as the back of their well calloused hands.

After putting the boat in the water at a secluded spot of incredible natural beauty – every panorama is a postcard here, and every fishing story a poem – we decided to devote the day to both reef and blue water fishing. After initially motoring some 32 miles out into the endless blue, where the captain knew a spot with a strong upwelling effect, we climbed into our wetsuits – brand spanking new thanks to our trip sponsor, Pelagic – and clambered over the side.

It’s always important for me to put a fish in the boat right away, to break the ice... to remove the jinx, so to speak. So we kicked down in an exploratory freedive to a ridge that rose from about 120 up to 85 feet below the surface, a huge double swell that looked as comforting as a mother’s bosom. We soon

discovered that the captain was on point, as big tuna and bonito quickly flashed in front of our eyes.

A shadow slashed across Jacob’s back, giving Miguel an enticing early shot at a prize wahoo, which he wisely passed on considering there was a better than even shot he would have speared our cameraman before the fun had really begun. The “comic relief” portion of the outing continued when my line fouled on my first shot at a big bruiser of a tuna. It was an inauspicious start, granted, but from that moment on the next two days were a pure dream, with one magical moment after another. I vividly remember a perfect sequence of stalking , shooting and reeling in a fat grouper, then turning to see Jacob there just nodding at me over his camera, confirming that he had captured every moment of the fight for posterity.

Miguel and I put one fish after another into the boat – bonito, wahoo, dorado, grouper – gradually moving inshore to ensure we didn’t put undue pressure on any particular species, or any specific site. Safe harvesting, to me, is the single most important factor when practicing this sport. However, we weren’t in any danger of suffering for our principles. >>>>




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Our grizzled captain held the keys to the local kingdom, and led us again and again to prime undersea hunting grounds. By nightfall, we were back at base camp with a fish bag that was, if you'll pardon the expression, packed to the gills.

Day two was, if anything, even better. We decided to concentrate on reef fishing, driving five miles across tropical wetlands – the five miles, as luck would have it, with the most intense concentration of sea birds in all of Baja – then boating 90 minutes through choppy waters to reach a couple of remote locations, which for the purposes of this story I'll simply refer to as spearo nirvana.

The most memorable featured a surreal underwater environment, with kelp and coffee plants swaying on the ocean floor like drunken dancers, and a group of rocks whose maze like tunnels served as a veritable high speed transit system for gigantic garropa grouper, the biggest of which were 90 lbs. if they were an ounce. I was stoked, as in all my years of spearfishing this coast. I had never stumbled upon a scene anything like it. I briefly wished that I had brought my pole spear, which would have been a perfect antidote to the challenge presented by the surfeit of holes and hiding places 75 feet below the surface.

It also would have been appropriate to the setting of this hidden sanctuary, where time had seemingly stood still for thousands of years, and the waters teemed with life as they must have when the world was new.

Miguel and I looked at each other, as if to commemorate the beauty of the moment, then went to work. Within 45 minutes of reaching the site we had each hauled a sizeable grouper back to the boat. Easier said than done, however, as it required a great deal of strategy and skill to shoot the grouper before they could dart through rock openings to safety, and lungs of steel to fight and reel them in.

By the time I wrestled my third grouper onto the boat, I was in the grips of a bone deep exhaustion...but I also felt a keen sense of exhilaration, and the clear conscience that comes when you know you have absolutely maximized your mental and physical capabilities.

It was dark as we headed in, and the wild beauty of the place – the dimly observable backdrop, the briny sea smells, the symphony of animal sounds – was intoxicating. At one point I thought I saw two vampire bats wing by us. The captain laughed, and said it was just a couple of sea birds, but that everything looked strange and exotic there at night. Shortly afterward we hit the home stretch, leaping out to help guide the boat in through an obstacle course of shallow water perils. As evidence of the numerous navigational hazards, we heard Miguel let out a short stifled scream as he rammed his knee on a low lying sandbar. Finally, after what seemed a short forever, our second glorious day of spearfishing Magdalena Bay was done.

Looking down at our full cooler of ice packed fish, the captain smiled and nodded at us. Given his competence and the culture in which he was raised, it was the ultimate tip of the cap, an unspoken acknowledgment that he respected us as fellow fisherman. We shared a few celebratory cervezas with him back at his house, then said our good byes before starting the long drive back to Cabo San Lucas, and what passes for ordinary spearfishing in these parts.

Naturally, we told fish stories all the way home. PAU 94

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