

Travelogue... Sailing the Sea of Cortez

An Essay on Health and Wellness by Ted Flanigan

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This essay is about an important aspect of sustainability... Health and Wellness. The planet is too good to waste and we need to be healthy to enjoy it.

EcoMotion provides sustainability consulting for schools, universities, cities, corporations, and resorts. Our climate action plans focus on EcoMotion's Seven Spheres of Sustainability.... Electricity, Water, Transportation, Waste, Built Environment, Natural Environment, and Air... linked by education/information. They are not equal and have considerable overlap but are a means of categorizing measures to cut emissions, pollution of the air, land and sea, and to enhance the quality of our lives. These spheres are elements in the acupressure of climate action planning.

In later years, we added another sphere... Health and Wellness. Creating health and wellness, in our cities, schools, companies, and in our homes requires deliberate planning and action. Being healthy is a prerequisite for forging a sustainable world. I often ask our Flanigan's Eco-Logic Podcast guests how they maintain a healthy work/life balance. Often they joke and say that they do not have a healthy balance: "A vacation is when you work from somewhere else!" "Bad question Ted." But many talk about the great value of balance... getting out in nature, exercising, enjoying family, travels, beach clean-ups, singing, dancing, taking time to recharge and to relax. These times bolster our productivity.

Peter Rumsey and I have been friends for nearly 40 years. We bonded in Bangkok where I was on assignment for the International Institute for Energy Conservation and he and Anna took me into their home there. Some years later they moved to the Bay Area where Peter grew up and where they went to college. Peter built up and sold two engineering firms and now works freelance and is a professor at Stanford teaching a course on building decarbonization.

I salute Peter's work/life balance and his pursuit of health and wellness and happiness. He has a vision, to balance work with sailing, and doing more and more of the latter. Sounds good to me. To make his dream come true, he enrolled in a sailing program to get experience and to earn accreditation. Two years ago he took a major step and bought a gorgeous boat, big enough to cross oceans and to explore the world. This is Peter's bold path to health and wellness.

In December, Peter invited me to join him and to sail in the Sea of Cortez. He made a compelling case... "You can sit in your office looking at your computer, or you can come sailing with me!" I booked flights.

Here is our annotated travelogue:

Travelogue Day One

Flying into Loreto, Mexico is a piece of cake for Los Angelenos. While Terry had been to Cabo years ago, it was my first trip down the Baja... less than two hours in the air, fortunately plenty of room for my travelling guitar in the overhead bins.

From the air, I was struck by the topography, the craggy mountains, the dry and barren land. The Baja Peninsula extends 775 miles from Mexicali in the north to Cabo San Lucas in the south. It separates the Gulf of California from the Pacific Ocean, varying from 25 miles to 200 miles wide. Its total area of 55,300 square miles make up two Mexican states: Baja California and Baja California Sur.

I had no idea that the Baja was so mountainous. Its highest peak — Picacho del Diablo - is 10,154 feet tall. The Baja has a coastline that extends 1,900 miles. It is surrounded by 100 islands.

In the air as we drew close, we passed over several islands and white sandy beaches. A father behind us exclaimed to his son that he spotted a whale, then another. That reminded me of flying into remote Kenya years ago, sighting wildlife from the air... elephants in water holes, lions charging wildebeests.

Clearing customs we grabbed a cab, then followed the coastline south for about 20 miles to Puerto Escondido where we met Peter at the Puerto Escondido Marina. I felt the calm immediately.

Good Ship Makara

We paid the driver, pulled out our bags, and I asked the first guy we saw if he could direct us to Peter Rumsey's boat. With a warm smile and rich German accent he said, "I am also Peter, and I will take you to his boat."

On the way, we passed his boat, the SY Kraniche, that we'd later learn is equipped with a professional espresso maker, a mill for grinding flour, and an oven to bake fresh bread.

Dock A features a blend of sailboats and motor boats decked out for fishing. The Sea of Cortez is well known for its commercial and sport fishing. The Gulf is known for its diversity of fish... often referred to as "the world's aquarium." There is ample scuba diving on its coral reefs. There are lots of whales here in winter.

Peter welcomed us aboard Makara, his 47-foot Passport. It is technically a cutter, a rig that features two headsails – versus a sloop's single jib – and which is apparently quite excellent for varied weather conditions. Its rigging breaks down the sail area into smaller, more management parts, simplifying reefing and sail changes in heavy weather.

Having sailed with Peter in the San Francisco Bay when Peter was a student, I was thrilled to see Makara... a manifestation of his dream coming true. It's a 20-year old boat with great lines, teak decks and accents, and glistening stainless steel fixtures. I admired the electronic winch used to raise the halyard and the mains sail up the mast. We'd also use that winch to hoist his Zodiac off the deck for dinghy excursions to shore.

Peter sleeps in the V berth at the bow, a comfortable bedroom with its own sink and shower. There's an aft cabin too and a spacious salon. The galley has a propane gimbaled stove, a refrigerator, freezer, oven, microwave, even an espresso maker. In addition to its water tanks, Makara has the ability to make drinking water from sea water thanks to a high-tech, reverse osmosis system. Makara has a single head, but one that features a toilet with a button to flush... versus pumps and bathroom procedures we'd experienced before and that only the most dedicated sailors enjoy. It also features a warm-water shower.

There's plenty of power on board thanks to Makara's solar panels, a generator linked to the engine, and a standalone generator. An impressive electrical panel rounds out the navigation station and its impressive controls. Peter can do Zoom calls from his on-board office. During our trip he was in communication with his longstanding consulting client in India... planning his trip there later in March. With Starlink connectivity, and our virtual work world, Makara serves as a functional office so that Peter can keep in touch with family and friends and his work projects. The "nav station" serves its nautical purpose, and also helps form the work/life balance that Peter is achieving.

After our tour and some settling we headed to the Marina's beachside bar. It features two kinds of margaritas that I can attest are delicious. We were a bit surprised to see one absolutely out-of-place vessel, a 234-foot luxury cruise ship. Turns out that it is named Launchpad, owned by Mark Zuckerberg. Its crew is well over 30 in size, made up of a young and clearly healthy staff. What a fun job.

Travelogue Day Two: Provisioning in Loreto

Peter has his systems worked out nicely: Guests like us arrive, provision in Loreto the next day – and set sail the following day prepared and rested and ready to go. We were. Peter and Peter had agreed to share a rental car for the day, so the three of us plus Jana and Terry squeezed in and off we went.

We began by walking in the old part of Loreto to its mission, admiring the beam work in its main chapel, and the thickness of its walls. Next up, lunch at El Andador featuring chile rellenos in green sauce that Jana raved about for good reason. After lunch the Peters went into a marine supply store – part of their never-ending boat maintenance and repair duties – while Jana, Terry, and I drifted into the tortilla shop next door. Its doors and windows were wide open, the precious smell of fresh tortillas lightly fried wafted in the air. The ladies on the job gave us warm smiles and samples. That did it. We bought a few dozen steaming lightly in their bags.

Later that afternoon, and back on the boat, Peter ran us through an important safety meeting. He presented man-overboard protocols... if possible throwing a marker in the water, turning on the engine, circling around, to bring someone on board. We learned how to radio for help. Peter also laid down his rules for using PFDs, personal floatation devices. They now feature mini-CO2 canisters that self inflate in water. We learned how and when to deploy tethers for high seas.

Travelogue Day Three: The First Day at Sea

We had nothing but bright blue skies and warm weather on our trip. Preparing for our trip, we had breakfast at the marina's Las Brisas cafe perched on the roof at the marina complex, providing nice breezes and a great vantage point for overlooking the marina and its tight pack of boats. Next we bought day passes for the Bahia de Loreto National Park since we'll be sailing and overnighing in the waters surrounding the Park's Isla Carmen for most of the trip.

One of the things I like most about Peter's style as a captain is his calm. No yelling or barking orders. No shouting from bow to helm. Instead, Peter uses headsets. As first mate I was taught to parrot commands back... such as "Cast off bow line," followed by "Bow line casted off." Or "Forward idle," and "Forward idle confirmed." The headsets were used only for casting off, picking up moorings, and releasing and setting anchors. These moments are notorious for breaking friendships. There is a name for these cruising headsets... marriage savers!

Makara is also equipped with bow thrusters that I'd only seen on cruise ships. One of Makara's prior owners had them installed, done by cutting a hole on each side of the bow below the water line to install a wide pipe with a motor and propeller that can work in either direction. "Bow thruster to port," followed by, "Confirmed, bow thruster to port."

First mate and chef I was for the week. My first role was to cast off the bow line, then to progress to the stern and cast off the stern line. Makara's bimini (which covers the cockpit) and its dodger (its windshield) somewhat limit visibility at the helm, so I was the spotter on deck checking for marina activity. We passed through the docks of diverse shapes and sizes of seafaring vessels, quietly gliding our way past Launchpad, through the channel, and out to sea.

There was no wind to speak of that day, less than four knots, so we motored most of the way around the northern point of Isla Danzante and then north to Isla Carmen. The Sea of Cortez is well known for its whale watching in winter, rich in gray, humpback, and blue whales that thrive in its nutrient-rich waters and sheltered lagoons where they feed, breed, and calve. We spotted a number of whales spouting and sluicing up and down in the water. One whale was close enough for us to hear both the sound of the whale spouting and its inhalation.

By mid afternoon we reached our destination... Puerto Ballandra on Isla Carmen. An idyllic bay with an inlet on its western side, creating a sheltered cove surrounded by rugged terrain with tall cacti and crows

flying continuously catching thermals. There were only two boats in the bay. One was Dragon Fly, the owner of which we'd met at Puerto Escondido doing yoga on his slip. There was also a lone kayaker from the Yukon who had been dropped there and who was circumventing Isla Carmen. We took the dingy to shore, swam a bit, and then came back to Makara after visiting Dragon Fly.

Every foot of boat length, we've come to learn, is invaluable space for cruising. Remarkably, Kevin and his wife Tina are cruising on the 24-foot Dragon Fly, about half Makara's size, and with very limited amenities. Kevin is a former cartography professor. Apparently they are used to small and isolated spaces having lived for many years in a 20-foot diameter yurt in Montana where they worked the land and maintained their homestead. They told us that they were upset when civilization got too close. Now they are sailing largely without a plan... keeping a Ford F150 with a camper on the back for their time ashore in the States.

Travelogue Day Four: Our Second Day at Sea

Throughout the trip we were aware of two types of speed: The speed of the wind and the speed of the boat under sail and/or motor. Both of these are measured in knots. This type of knot is not to be confused with a rope knot... for instance a bowline or square knot. Nor ought this knot be confused with "The Knot," a wedding planning website complete with tools and inspiration!

A knot is a unit of speed equal to one nautical mile per hour, or approximately 1.15 MPH. Why the difference? A natural mile is slightly longer than a standard land mile based on the geometry of the Earth. Because the Earth is an "oblate spheroid" (somewhat flattened on the top and bottom) exact lengths differ with latitude. The knot unit of measurement was developed and universally adopted for air and marine navigation, simplifying distance calculations over the curved surface of the Earth.

Our goal for the day was to sail from Puerto Ballandra on Isla Carmen to Caleta San Juanico so that we could later make it to Santispac... envisioning tacos and drinks on the beach there. But high winds and choppy seas ruled the roost and changed that plan pretty fast.

Makara loves a good wind. That day wind gusts were up to about 20 knots, making for good sailing as we tacked upwind. But rough seas caused one of us to feel nauseous and more. The boat was pounding through big waves, water spraying high, Makara bucking up and down like a carnival ride! Terry and I had applied patches to protect us from sea-sickness, but they were not effective enough. An upwind projectile episode was more than dramatic, and our captain wisely changed our game plan. With our support, our captain headed off the wind a bit into a broad reach, bee-lining it to the lee side of Isla Coronados where we anchored.

Isla Coronados is a former volcano with a 928-foot single peak. Not far from Loreto, Coronados it is known to have exceptional snorkelling, beaches, and rugged desert scenery. The island is uninhabited

and features “powdery white sand beaches, electric blue waters!” It’s one of five uninhabited islands in the Loreto Bay National Park, completely untouched.

As we motored into the anchorage, we were welcomed by porpoises off the port side... swimming alongside Makara. We anchored in about 12 feet of water. I was struck by how the water was a rich, light-green color. There were only two other boats at that anchorage.

That night we barbecued chicken and roasted veggies on a propane barbeque attached to Makara’s stern railing. A great meal, super location, perfect temps as we sat in the cockpit sipping drinks and watching the dusk quietly whisk the day away. We saw a large pod of dolphins pass by. What a thrill!

Travelogue Day Five: The Third Day at Sea

The next day we pulled the anchor early... leaving Isla Coronados headed for Caleta San Juanico.

The calmer seas were a treat. We first tacked on a beam reach to the east, and then “ready-about, hard-to-lee,” we took a long beam into port. As we approached Caleta San Juanico, we saw a small fleet of double-masted day sailers. Turns out they were from NOLS, National Outdoor Leadership School, clearly on a sailing expedition. We watched as their boats hit the beach and then as their crews set up camp there.

Later we took the dinghy ashore, having to cut the engine 50 yards from shore due to the shallow waters, and to wade in from there, our feet sinking into richly smooth and comforting sand as we made our way to the beach.

Travelogue Day Six: Hanging in Caleta San Juanico

We had decided to stay in Caleta San Juanico for two nights. That made for a super-relaxing morning! Peter used our slack day to sew a torn section of the jib. Boat owners, we heard again and again, are always fixing their boats. They tinker with small stuff, mess with engine repairs, and even fly to distant cities to buy special parts for their boats. Peter is remarkably handy. We marvelled at his grasp of the complexity of Makara’s systems and equipment.

After lunch we took the dinghy around the point to the north, exploring the rocky coastline and dramatic geology. Seeking sand, we turned course and motored off to another beach where we lounged watching birds dive into the water and where I picked up shells for my collection. We swam a bit and then motored back to Makara. “Hey isn’t that Dragon Fly?” Indeed it was. They’d made the same crossing. We motored over to say hi and invite them over for “sun-downers.” Along the way we invited two other cruisers to join us.

Exciting... we were having a party of six over for drinks, a prime time to share a few with fellow cruisers. They are wonderfully bonded by their boats and what I call "boat-talk." Terry and I chuckled watching them fall so easily into nautical conversations – telling tales of their travels and boat maintenance works – leaving politics and divisive viewpoints aside. Peter served up rum, wine and ginger beer. Kevin brought seviche made from a mackerel that he caught that day. Just add lemon juice.

Tina is from a small, mountainous region in Germany where the locals speak a little-known language called Romansh, one of Switzerland's four official languages. It is a language that descended from Latin; it was the spoken language of the Roman Empire. Today it is the main language for only 40,000 people in the Grisons region of Switzerland, tucked in between Austria to the north and Italy to the south. Tina was a nurse in Switzerland. She exudes boundless positive energy and enthusiasm, she and Kevin living aboard their modest sea-faring vessel.

Travelogue Day Seven: Fourth Day at Sea

It's amazing how one loses track of the day of the week when on vacation... especially at sea. The day of the week seems so irrelevant. I left my computer at home for the first time in decades... no meetings, no calls, no obligations. They all could wait. The routines of life at sea are comforting and clear, far from the world of consulting and its inherent technical and personality complexities. That's what Peter is after! I found myself falling into my natural circadian rhythms... waking with the sun and ready to sleep soon after it set each night.

The sail from Caleta San Juanico to Bahia Salinas on the east side of Isla Carmen was top notch, a nice breeze and relatively calm seas for our broad reach. Peter called it champagne sailing. We saw whales spouting on the north coast of Isla Carmen. We rounded Point Lobos at the northeastern tip of Isla Carmen... then arrived in late afternoon at Bahia Salinas... a broad anchorage marked by a white sandy beach, to the leeward side of the mountains and prevailing northerly winds.

Travelogue Day Eight: Fifth Day at Sea

Our last day at sea was calm. Peter set the main sail as we ran south with the gentle northerly wind, the engine on to motor-sail our way back down the east coast of Isla Carmen and back to Puerto Escondido. I was struck by the enormity of the open waters and the tranquility we experienced. For hours we saw no other boats or signs of humanity.

The Gulf of California was formed by plate tectonics. It came into being 5.3 million years ago as tectonic forces rifted the Baja California peninsula off the North American plate. The Gulf of California is also known as the Sea of Cortez, less commonly known as the Vermillion Sea. It has a surface area of 68,000 square miles and a maximum depth of 9,800 feet. The width of the Gulf is 30 - 150 miles... with 37 major islands, mostly on the west side of the Gulf.

Our only scent of civilization that morning was some floating trash bobbing in the open sea, a sorry reminder of man's careless neglect for the sanctity of the natural world... a small but poignant blemish. Without hesitation Peter swung the boat around 180 degrees to try to recover the remains of someone's lunch, a plastic bag shrouding a styrofoam container. It took me two tries with Makara's boat hook to get the trash on the starboard, one try on the port side... and we continued on having done our bit to remedy the luncher's wantless abandon.

Finally we rounded the southern tip of Isla Carmen, heading toward Isla Danzante, passing it to the north before dipping southeast. Preparing our final leg to the marina, we swung wide toward the channel into Puerto Escondido, turning upwind to bring down the mainsail.

After docking Makara, we had lunch at the marina cafe where we met another sailor, this one a man named John from Vista, California. A former HP engineer, he is clearly proud of "his inkjet" that he worked on for decades. John has made the trip from San Diego to Cabo many times on board his 35-foot Hunter named Wild Goose. We were struck by his smile and warm demeanor, and appreciation of sailing... clearly his best therapy. We learned that he loves to sail his boat solo.

Peter and I spent the late afternoon refilling Makara's water tanks. We then hosed down the decks and cockpit, the bimini and dodger. Then I slipped off for a rather glorious hot shower at the marina facility.

That evening we shared drinks with Peter and Jana. Their boat was out of the water getting a fresh coat of paint. They wanted to hear all about our trip, feasting on notes from our route, wind and sea conditions, and our bonding tales.

Jana fascinated us with her tales of childhood in East Berlin during communism. She recollected her amazement when the wall came down and a train station was opened right near her house, something that she had seen barricaded for years. As a child she thought that she'd heard trains, but there were no tracks. What she learned was that the underground station had been shut for years in East Berlin, serving only points in West Berlin. She had heard the trains... never thinking that they might be right beneath her.

Travelogue Day Nine

Peter had reserved a co-working office at the marina complex for a consulting conference call on our final morning. As such Terry and I had scads of time to round out our Makara adventure taking our time packing, sipping tea and coffee, and eating granola. It was the perfect morning, yet another bright and sunny day in Puerto Escondido.

The flight home from Loreto to LAX began with the clear skies to which we'd become accustomed, but as we approached California the weather changed dramatically, the pilot warning us that it's going to be rough coming into Los Angeles. I peered out the window to see massive clouds of various descriptions. Some looked like cotton candy.

We were all relieved as the descent and landing weren't so bad. But reentry to Los Angeles was cold and gray and busy. A nasty wind made a jam-packed shuttle bus look pretty good. This time we requested another electric vehicle from Uber... resulting in our first ride in a Toyota BZ4X. There was no added cost for the EV. Clamoring in and getting out of the cold wind, it struck me that there are now so many EV models on the market to explore.

There is only one thing better than getting away. It is getting home. We had a great trip. We are so fortunate to have Peter as a friend. Being invited to sail, to cast off from civilization and to get out in nature... with time, clean air, friends, good food, and spirits. Recharged is the word that comes to mind... a potent pathway to sustainable health and wellness.