

“You have to go on and be crazy.
Craziness is like heaven.”
Jimi Hendrix

A sea kayaking adventure in...

BAJAA

Words: Michael Powers

Photos: Michael Powers unless noted otherwise

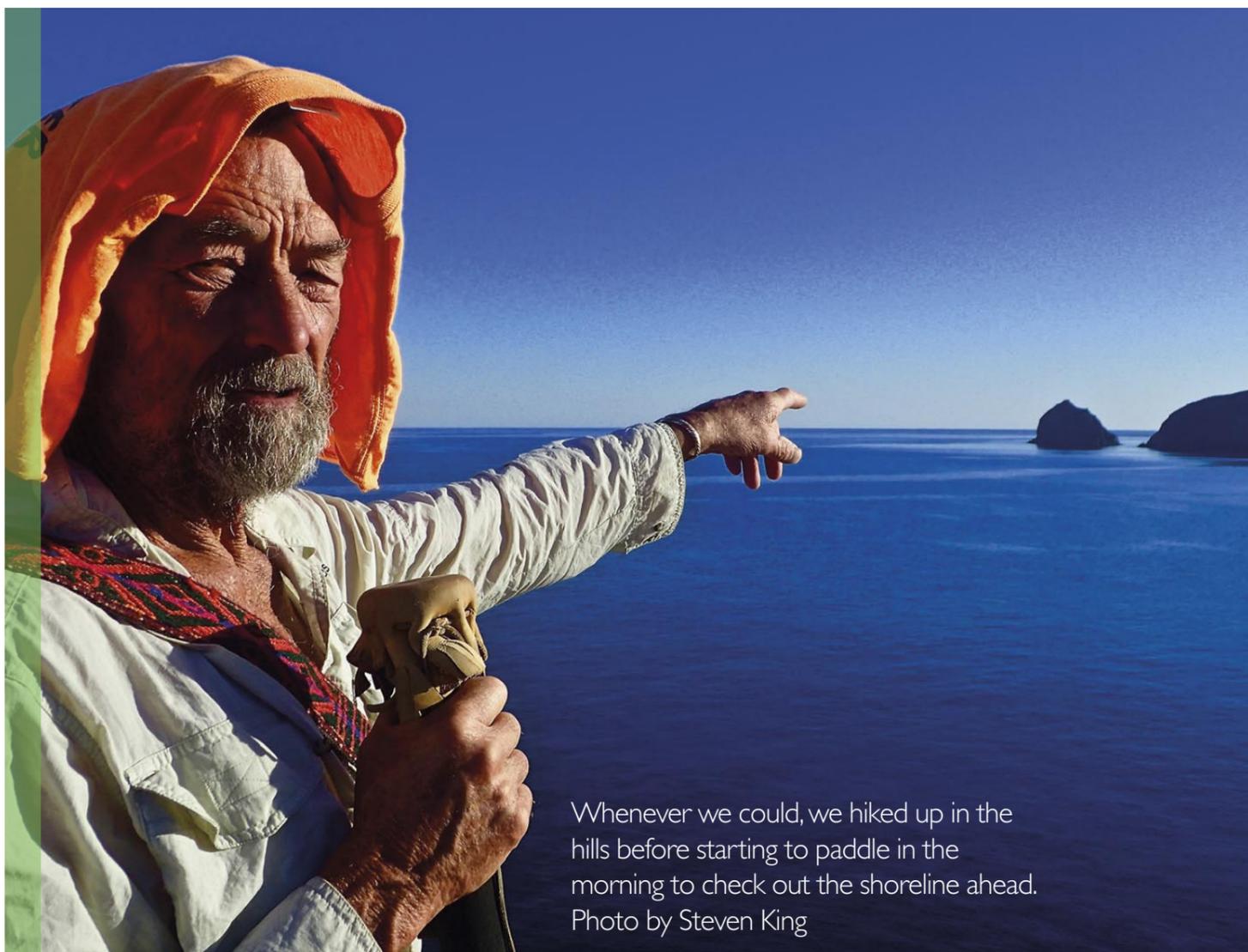


The storm struck our camp sometime after midnight. I was awakened when El Norte, the fierce winter wind so much feared by the Mexican Pescadores, started making my sturdy four-season mountaineering tent shudder violently. The wind rose to a roar and rain began to pour down. I burrowed deeper into the warm, dry comfort of my sleeping bag, hoping this was just a passing squall. But when shouts of alarm started coming from the other Ranger's tents, I sat up and groped around frantically in the darkness for my headlamp.

The clouds that filled the sky that evening at sunset had been spectacular – an ominous prelude perhaps of the massive storm front bearing down from the north that the weather service transmissions from Loreto had been warning about. Tsunami Ranger team member Nancy Soares began to question if we would remain safe here on the little micro-beach where we were camped if powerful wind and waves started to drive the rising tide even higher. But no one else seemed especially concerned – the school of dolphins just offshore were in a feeding frenzy and the Rangers were in a celebratory mood. Yet I remember whispering to myself as I headed back towards my tent, “Hopefully, El Norte will be kind to us tonight...”

Now I clambered back out of my tent and into the full force of the storm. The feeble light of my headlamp revealed just what I had feared. The Sea of Cortez had become a witch's brew of white water breaking over offshore reefs, and hungry waves were swirling up towards the high ground where we had moved our heavily loaded kayaks with great effort yesterday. Worst of all, the beach surrounding our tents was fast disappearing.

Photo: The expedition team pass beneath a solitary giant cardon cactus as they begin their circumnavigation of Isla Carmen. Isla Danzante and the Baja Peninsula lie beyond them on the western horizon. Photo by Ginni Callahan



Whenever we could, we hiked up in the hills before starting to paddle in the morning to check out the shoreline ahead.
Photo by Steven King

As everyone raced to stuff wet gear back

into their boats, I thought about the ancient Aleuts who liked to camp on a narrow strip of land between two bodies of open water where they could quickly escape if another tribe's baidarkas were spotted charging down on them from the sea. Ironically, the storm-driven sea itself was the enemy attacking us now... and yet it was also our only refuge.

In record time all hatches were secured and the boats hauled down to a now turbulent shoreline. Captain Deb Volturro, a senior officer of the Tsunami Rangers and the de facto leader of our expedition, spoke loudly to be heard above the wind: "Let's all try to stay within sight of each other... and por favor, try not to capsize!"

It had long been a Ranger tradition, especially when launching in stormy conditions, to stand for a moment before the ocean and ask the sea gods for permission to enter their realm. But there was no time for that now. One by one, we slid our open-deck kayaks down into the dark, wind-lashed water and leapt aboard. The Rangers had paddled many times into breaking surf, but never before at night in the midst of a violent storm. Yet Neptune was kind to us that night – everyone made it through the menacing offshore reefs without capsizing, and then raced madly for the relative safety of deep water.

TSUNAMI RANGERS

For many years the Tsunami Rangers had come together in autumn for a multi-day sea journey along some remote stretch of the Pacific seacoast. Cape Flattery up on the westernmost point of the Strait of Juan de Fuca had been an epic paddling adventure. The lush southern Oregon coast had mystical sea caves and waterfalls that cascaded directly into the

A female frigate bird



ocean. A still wild stretch of the Mendocino Coast in northern California held secluded coves that were accessible only to highly skilled kayakers – and filled with succulent abalone. But in 2019 the California Fish and Game closed the entire state to diving for abalone... and about the same time, a clarion call began among the Rangers for a warm water paddling destination. There was a sea kayaking trip in Baja, Mexico that we had all long dreamed about – a 100-kilometre ten-day circumnavigation of the uninhabited Isla Carmen in the Sea of Cortez.

Kayaking around that desert island would prove however, to be a challenge to the Tsunami Ranger's improvisational, ancient sea warrior style of kayaking. In 1996 Isla Carmen had become part of the nearly 800-square miles, five-island Parque Nacional Bahía de Loreto created by the Mexican government. Now we would need permits to paddle there, and only be allowed to camp at designated sites that we had selected in advance. Diving to spear fish and foraging for shellfish, long-time Tsunami passions, were prohibited there too. All this regulation ran counter to the freedom and independence the Rangers had always taken for granted when kayaking along wild coastlines. Sadly the world had now become a more crowded place, and as Bob Dylan once famously sang, "The times, they are a changing." Yet Isla Carmen had remained pristine, a 'mega-diverse' region with a phenomenal concentration and diversity of wildlife. So six of the Rangers, three men and three women paddlers, ultimately decided to head south for our next Tsunami retreat.

EXPEDITION-STYLE KAYAKS

Four of our group of six chose to drive the long, winding road down the Baja Sur Peninsula. We would take two vehicles, which would allow us to bring along all our own boats for the trip. One of the founders of the Rangers and our most senior officer, Admiral Jim Kakuk, has been hand-crafting the expedition-style kayaks for many years. Large hatches made them easy to pack for long sea journeys, and we knew that the open-deck Tsunami boats would be a great pleasure to paddle in the warm water and desert environment of Baja.

Everyone rendezvoused in Loreto, about 1150 km south of the U. S. border. The old fishing town sat nestled on the long, narrow Gulf of California at the



Debra and Paula paddle their Tsunami Trident double kayak on the crossing from the Baja Peninsula towards Isla Carmen. Isla Danzante and the Baja Peninsula stretch out beyond them on the western horizon.
Photo by Steven King

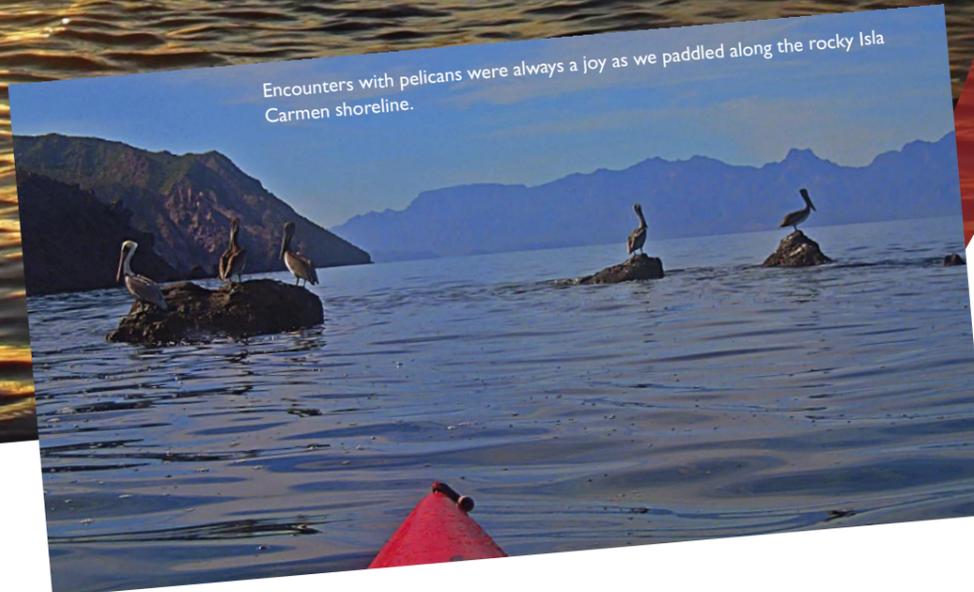


Above: It was always a great thrill when dolphins surfaced close to us as we paddled along the Isla Carmen shoreline. This school of common dolphins passed by our final campsite, just hours before the big storm arrived.
Photo by Steven King

After a pre-dawn departure from our first campsite along the eastern shoreline of Isla Carmen, the Tsunami Rangers salute the sun rising over the Sea of Cortez.



Encounters with pelicans were always a joy as we paddled along the rocky Isla Carmen shoreline.



base of the rugged Sierra de la Giganta range, where trails led up to caves in the mountains with prehistoric paintings. In Loreto we met up with a sun-burnished American expatriate named Ginni Callahan, whose unbridled passion for Baja had led her to create a local sea kayak touring company there with a Mexican partner. She helped us get the required permits for paddling in the national park, and turned out to be a virtual cornucopia of useful information about Isla Carmen. Then since she had no tours to lead for a couple days, she offered to join our initial open water crossing to the island.

The next morning our little caravan headed south from Loreto on the paved highway and turned off on a dusty dirt road that ended at a sleepy little beach named Playa Quemado. From here only nine-kilometres of open water stood between us and our objective, a much shorter distance than if we had paddled from Loreto. Sea conditions that day were muy tranquilo, and we reached Isla Carmen early in the afternoon.

AMAZING GRACE

The next morning at sunrise, Ginni climbed a rocky promontory above our camp to play a soulful rendition of Amazing Grace on her flute. Afterwards everyone gathered on the beach for her departure and Tsunami officer Steve King stepped forth to present Ginni a little parting regalo, a faded Ranger pennant that had accompanied us on many previous expeditions before. Ginni got pretty emotional and her eyes clouded up, but dried again quickly in the warm morning sunshine. The Coronavirus pandemic had not come to the world yet, so there were warm abrazos all around. Then Ginni slipped into her kayak and paddled away with the strong, sure strokes of a well-seasoned paddler. We would miss her great warrior spirit, and all her colourful Baja stories and wisdom mightily.

But everyone was totally stoked to truly be in expedition mode now. We knew that drinking water would be a critical factor in the ten days we would take to paddle around Isla Carmen, so we had each brought about 35 litres in flexible rubber bladders. This made our boats very heavy of course, but we appreciated the great load-bearing capacity of our high volume, expedition-style sea kayaks. I had learned long ago in tropical Papua New Guinea to keep my exposed legs covered when traveling long distances in an open-deck kayak. Because of the prevailing winds Ginni had advised us to paddle around the island in a counter-clockwise direction, so we began kayaking north along the east coast of Isla Carmen. Deb kept waterproof marine charts on her deck to monitor our progress as we moved along the rugged, convoluted shoreline.

LINE FISHING

Since diving with spear guns in the parque nacional was strictly prohibited, Steve King had bought a fishing pole and some special lures that his friend back in the states had sworn the Baja fish would find irresistible. So as our trip progressed the fresh fish that King caught became a welcome change from all the dehydrated camp food we had brought along. One day as we stood on the beach in a little cove where we had landed, the surface of the water in front of us suddenly erupted as a school of small fish frantically tried to escape from a larger predator that was pursuing them. A moment later a two-foot long, brilliantly coloured bonito burst into the air in the midst of the minnows – and Steve went rushing to get his fishing pole out of his kayak.

Narrow, brush-filled arroyos led back into the desert hills behind some of the beaches where we camped. They were intriguing to explore, but we always kept a sharp lookout for rattlesnakes and other critters that might bite, impale or otherwise injure us. It seemed that nearly everything here in the extreme Baja ecosystem had evolved thorns, fangs, or armor to survive – except us humans, who had only our sturdy sandals, sun glasses and wide brimmed sombreros.

On day four of their Baja expedition, the Rangers emerge from a rock garden along the rugged and convoluted eastern shoreline of Isla Carmen.



UNSETTLED CONDITIONS

Each time we approached a point of land thrusting out into the Sea of Cortez, the wind and the currents would always intensify. So on the sixth day as we drew near to long, narrow Punta Lobos at the far northeast corner of the island, everyone started to pay special attention. This is where Ginni had warned we might face unsettled conditions, as we became fully exposed to the strong El Norte winds for the first time.

Just as Ginni's had warned, the sea changed dramatically as we paddled around Punta Lobos. Wind-driven waves were smashing into the rocky shoreline and ricocheting back to collide with the oncoming surf, sometimes sending explosions of whitewater high into the sky above our heads. Deb and her partner Paula from New Zealand were paddling together in the long, sleek Tsunami Trident double kayak. This was the fastest boat in our group in flat water; but now their heavily loaded craft would sometimes submerged entirely for a few hair-raising seconds when a big rebounding wave broke over them. Yet overall, it was the kind of exciting, high-adrenaline ocean play that the Tsunami Rangers loved dearly.

The next day brought some final white-knuckle moments as we kayaked around an unnamed point on the northwest tip of Isla Carmen. Then we turned and headed downwind along the east coast of the island, in more relaxed conditions that would remain with us until the big storm came on our last night on the island.

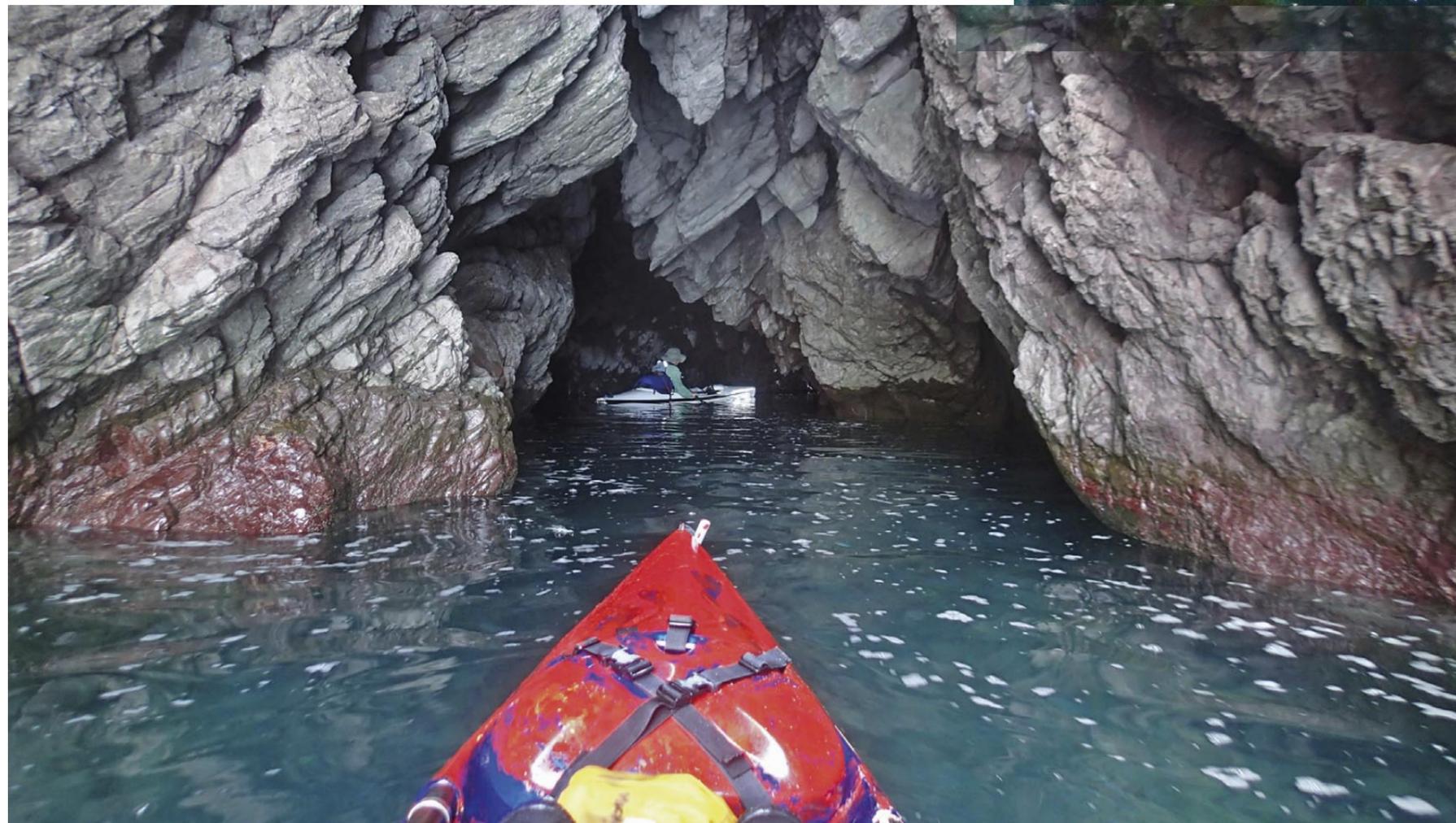
REGAIN OUR STRENGTH

When dawn came after our night time escape from the flooding campsite, we arrived back on the beach where we had first landed on Isla Carmen with Ginni nine days before. We landed and Jim and Deb quickly erected a tarp overhead to shelter us from the rain. Huddling under the tarp we ate some trail mix to regain our strength and received the grim news from Loreto that a massive low pressure system still surrounded us. But maybe we were in the eye of the storm now, because the rain began to ease up and then stopped all together. We saw frigate birds circling peacefully in a clearing sky, and took that to be a good sign. So with a final prayer for calm conditions to continue, we pushed our boats back down into the sea and began paddling west towards the Baja Peninsula.

Muchas Gracias Dios, the wind and rain held off for our open water crossing – but returned with a vengeance soon after we landed at Playa Quemado. Back in Loreto that afternoon we were amazed to find the streets of this normally arid desert city filled with rushing water. Seeing this, everyone was so relieved that we had risked paddling back from Isla Carmen during of the brief interlude in the powerful storm. That evening we gathered at a little cantina and raised our glasses in a hearty toast to the sea gods, who once again had been very kind to us.

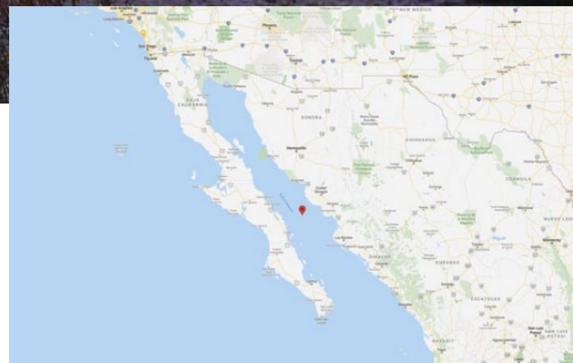
Sea kayak guide Ginni Callahan came along on the first day of our expedition as we paddled from the Baja Peninsula out to Isla Carmen. She got very emotional the next morning when the Rangers presented her with a parting gift, an old and faded Tsunami pennant. Photo by Steven King

Steven King paddling into the sea caves we encountered along the shoreline. They were always a mystical experience and a welcome respite from the desert sun. Photo by Michael Powers





At sunrise kayak guide Ginni hiked up the hill above camp to play Amazing Grace on her flute.



<https://goo.gl/maps/3EXo5G6K3aID7DQ76>

SHOUT OUTS

Our sincere gratitude too, for all the great outdoor gear and services that make expeditions like the Tsunami Rangers' 2019 Baja adventure possible:

Baja sea kayaking outfitter (seakayakbajamexico.com)
Ginni Callahan has everything you need for a multi-day kayaking adventure on Isla Carmen and the surrounding coastal areas
Keene sports sandals (keenfootwear.com) durable footwear that really works for warm water open-deck paddling and hiking through the rugged Baja terrain.
Leica X-U digital camera (us.leica-camera.com) brings legendary German optics and precision together in a waterproof sport camera.
Casio Pathfinder waterproof, multi-function sports watch (protek.casio.com), has a digital compass & barometric pressure sensor that indicates when a low pressure system is approaching.
Tsunami Rangers (tsunamirangers.com) – edited by Nancy Soares, this always evolving website provides a tsunami of information, history and stories about the Rangers.

TSUNAMI RANGERS

The Tsunami Rangers are an "extreme condition" sea kayaking team based in northern California. They employ highly specialized sea kayaks of their own design to explore remote coastal regions from Antarctica to Norway, and have been featured in numerous national television productions, including the National Geographic's Wave Warriors series. Eric Soares and Michael Powers coauthored the book Extreme Sea Kayaking, published by McGraw-Hill. Michael Powers is a commander in the Tsunami Rangers.

Deb Voltumo thought the wild goat skull she discovered while hiking up in an arroyo would make a nice talisman for our camp. Photo by Debra Voltumo

