



Shipwrecked in the Cortez



✓ Land Boat

✓ Find Water

✓ Signal Help

✓ Hunt Food

✓ Make Shelter

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In this true adventure story set in Baja California, the author and his cousin Rob have attempted to cross the midriff of the Sea of Cortez in a 14 foot Catamaran (see inset). As recounted in the previous issue of FunPig, the trip has turned disastrous. One pontoon of the Cat has begun shipping water and a chubasco storm has forced their retreat. At the end of Part 1, the intrepid sailors find themselves on a sinking vessel in a storm at sunset far from land.

Part 2 of Shipwrecked in the Cortez.

The mind is a curious thing. I had myself been considering the potential that we would not make it out of this situation, when it simply and naturally occurred to me that death was not an acceptable option. This was surely some form of rationalized denial, but a pretty effective self-preservation mechanism considering it filled the synapse void that might have otherwise defaulted to a state of panic. In that moment, two things became crystal clear. We had to right the boat one more time so we could get up out of the cold water or we would certainly succumb to hypothermia, probably before sundown, but certainly shortly afterwards. Secondly, we had to make it to land and shelter of some sort. Even out of the water, we could not last the night on the open trampoline with the equipment we had.

Somehow we managed to get the boat righted one final time. The wind and water had shred the reefed main so the only sail we had left was the jib. Rob extended the tiller to the front of the boat so I could keep my weight forward and starboard while steering, thus balancing on our one good pontoon. First objective accomplished, we were out of the water and moving. Secondly, we set a course back to Guardian Angel Island about seven miles away, sailing under jib only. We spent the next two hours fighting the wind and waves back to the island. I sighted a canyon that looked like it might have a landing beach at its mouth. Every ounce of our attention was focused on that canyon. We were able to attain a course that put just enough force against the jib to maintain forward motion while keeping the port pontoon at water level while avoiding capsizing under the gusts, which continued to be very strong and variable.

As we approached the island, it became obvious that we would not

make it to the beach--we were being blown sideways into the rocky shore faster than we could make forward progress with the jib sail. The sun disappeared over the western horizon just as we abandoned ship into the cold, dark, and boulder-strewn water at the base of the cliffs. We were able to clamber up the rocks and could only watch helplessly as the wind waves smashed the Cat into the rocks. The boat was gone, but we were standing on dry land. But were not out of danger yet, as we were still quickly losing body heat as the sun sank beyond the horizon.

The second objective of making it to dry land of any sort was accomplished, but it was clear that we had to find some way to get warm quick. Our dry-bags were the only equipment to survive the entire ordeal-at-sea, although their plastic buckles had failed and everything in them had become quickly soaked. Luckily the dry bags contained our sleeping bags which because they were packed so tightly into their own tight stuff bags had only been soaked on the surface. Turning our backs on our splintering craft, we clambered over the rocks into the nearest canyon and some flat, sandy ground. Teeth chattering painfully, we clumsily climbed into our sleeping bags and assumed a warmth-conserving fetal position to begin the process of raising our body-heat out of the danger zone. The wind howled all night as we shivered uncontrollably in our damp bags, but exhaustion soon overcame cold and we slept hard.

The next morning we awoke to a dismal “paradox in paradise.” Under bright blue skies, light warm breeze and calm azure sea, our Cat lay completely demolished among the rocks. Other bright yellow pieces of the pontoons lay scattered more than 100 meters down the beach. We would not be sailing home today.

Assessing the situation, we quickly determined that drinking water was our next priority issue. We both had vague



memories concerning Cordon cactus and desert survival, and this island was covered with Cordon. We accosted the nearest victim with Rob's penknife, and soon discovered that the juice of the cactus tasted like half-baked bile, but it could certainly sustain us with moisture indefinitely. Third concern for drinking water accomplished.

Some worthy notes for those who would use Cordon as a source for emergency drinking water: 1. The older parts of the Cordon cactus hold less moisture but have a less bitter taste than the juicier, newer tops. 2. The cactus juice tastes better in the early morning hours while it is still cool. Late in the day, the juice tastes like warm bile, which is far worse than cool bile. 3. Chewing the Cordon pulp and sucking the juice out of the crushed pulp is the most efficient method for extracting the liquid. Using flat rocks as a mill for grinding the moisture out yields much-sought gulps of pure liquid, but is not worth the expenditure of one's scarce energy in an emergency situation. Drawing attention to ourselves was the fourth objective. We had seen only one other boat on the water in the last two days, but associated this with the Cinco de Mayo Mexican holiday weekend, which may have kept the local fisherman out of the water. We reasoned that smoke was the primary option we had available to us to attract long- distance attention to our predicament. We built a fire from driftwood and developed a good pile of coals, ready for more intense burning of smoke-yielding fuel should someone come along. Through trial-and-error we determined what brush-fuel would make the most smoke, and we stockpiled an ample cache of these bushes near the coal pile.

Also, the bright yellow color of the Catamaran pontoons was a clear attention- getting anomaly against the grey-brown backdrop of the desert island. The remnants of these were propped up vertically amongst the boulders as a beacon to those that might venture close enough to the island's edge to notice them. The fourth objective of rescue was staged.

The fifth concern was food. We had been able to salvage several days worth of food from the dry-bags, but we knew we might need to be prepared to survive beyond this supply. The wet food from our "dry" bags was spread over flat rocks for drying, alongside the few extra clothes we had also been able to salvage. In exploring the immediate area it became obvious that beyond eating the pulp of the Cordon, there was an

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tastes better
in the early
morning**

abundance of good-sized native crabs. These crabs were very alert and it was clear that stealth alone would not get us close enough to catch them. To our advantage, we found out that the crabs were not as perceptive of thrown stones and would stay put until stunned by a well-placed toss. In less than five minutes we were able to peg and catch two good-sized crabs, which we ate raw. With miles of crab-infested coast at our disposal, the fifth level concern for food was fulfilled for the time being.

The last remaining issue was shelter. We spent the first day skulking in the shade of Cordon cactus and the volcanic boulders at the water's edge to keep out of the scorching sun, which tended to be most oppressive in the early afternoon as the breezes dropped to a whisper. Inspection of the Cat carcass revealed that there was enough remaining rigging, sheet rope, trampoline material, pieces of shredded sail, boom, and pieces of the mast to provide building materials for a reasonable shelter. We dismantled the pieces and hauled them over to "our" canyon. The boom and remaining piece of mast were tied together, forming two sides of a triangle against the ground. These were secured in place by two opposing sheet ropes, which

were tied off to rocks. The two halves of the trampoline material were re-stitched together with rope and draped over the boom/mast structure. The corners were stretched in opposing directions over this frame. The pieces of sail we were able to salvage were stretched over the ground and secured along their edges with more rocks as a ground-tarp. We had shelter - sixth level of concern overcome. We soon found out that waiting for rescue from a desert island is a very effective method for extending time. Seconds stretch over long minutes to interminable hours, phases of days, and nights. You alternate between scanning the horizon for a hopeful glimpse of the chance boat, and watching small, colorful fish dart about in the dappled light of the shallow water about you. Of course, in the ensuing days the wind dropped down to perfect sailing weather velocities, and the air temperature rose to the more characteristic high 80's and low 90's. The crystal sparkling waters and hot sun became our attractive captor. The only manmade sounds were our own muted clattering about the place and the low rumble of jets two or three times a day as they streaked anonymously overhead at 30,000 feet northward up the center of the Cortez. "...And on the left side of the plane folks,

is Isla de la Angel Guardia, the uninhabited second largest island in the Sea of Cortez.”

The most maddening and seemingly ludicrous aspect of our captivity was that from our position on the island we had an almost direct visual shot into Bahia de Los Angeles and our parked car some 13 miles away. It was too far away to make out the details on that shore, but too close to escape the ridiculous sense of closeness while the weather was good. In the heated clarity of mid-day it seemed you could have reached out and touched that parallel shore. If we only had a surfboard or a floatable piece of pontoon we could paddle across this little puddle. Where the hell are all the fishermen who must make a living off those beached pangas and drying nets we saw when we left, anyway? In the late afternoon when the wind would pick up and the haze and coldness would again pervade, thoughts would drift back to the frozen afternoon on the water that landed us here, and we were again secure in having four feet on dry land, if nothing else.



After the second day, we settled into a routine of sorts and had the luxury of noticing some of the details of our newly imposed habitat. Bleached white Iguana skeletons lay loosely connected to the brittle-dry and twisted remains of the animals they once were. We could occasionally spy their remaining progeny bobbing their heads aggressively towards we intruders in true iguana fashion. The iguanas skittered from the tops of rocks to the dark, cavernous refuge of nearby boulders as soon as we made any motion in their direction. Another type of indigenous lizard would run behind bushes when approached, then run again in short, apprehensive spurts with striped tail held vertically aloft, flicking it back now and again as if to warn you of impending danger should you dare to continue your pursuit. A cliff above our humble shelter was riddled with caves, and a pair of nesting hawks would scuffle periodically with marauding sea gulls. More caves along the cliffs at the water's edge had a habit of converting wave action to a repetitive and hollow-sounding har-rumph that would sometimes unnervingly sound like a distant outboard motor laboring against a choppy head-wind.

In the late afternoon and evening, thousands of tiny, blood-sucking gnats and no-see-ums would descend and make themselves at home on any bit of exposed flesh. Fighting them was impossible, and completely

sealing oneself inside the sleeping bags was not an acceptable option until the cool of the evening had set in. Unlike a mosquito bite, the seemingly benign feasting of these little beasts would not be realized until our bodies were covered with blister-like welts several days later.

“What’s that?” Rob said, peering to the southwest. It was early morning of our third day on the island and a small speck of white had appeared on the sea and seemed to be growing. There was no sound, but it was clear that a vessel was approaching the island. We quickly snapped into high gear. With dismay we noticed that wind and wave had knocked down our pontoon banners during the night. We also found out that our coals had burned out. We quickly lit a new fire, and as Rob waved a piece of shredded, colored sail and whistled loudly, I scrambled around to rebuild our signal fire. The details of the boat became more clear as the panga fishing boat skirted the island about 800 yards distant, but it soon became clear that we had not been noticed. The boat disappeared into the sheen of the afternoon sun on a northerly course. We didn’t say much the rest of that afternoon, but we did do a lot of sitting and dejected sea-watching. Early on the morning of our fourth day on the island, I was lying looking out from our shelter as the sky blue intensified with the rising sun. The harrumphing of the waves as they slapped into the sea caves was singing its familiar song...or was it? Something sounded a little bit different but not enough to get out of a warm sleeping bag just yet. More out of curiosity I decided to stand up and look over the rocky berm that separated our shelter from the water. To my ecstatic surprise, a black dot was streaking by about 500 yards offshore. I yelled over to Rob, and we were soon jumping up and down, yelling, whistling, and trying to light our signal fire all at once. The black dot stopped and stood still. In a moment, the dot turned and it was soon obvious that the vessel was heading directly for us! A wave of hopeful relief overcame us as I waded out into the water to talk to our saviors.

Five Mexican fishermen in yellow raincoats looked at us curiously from their Panga as they poled expertly among the rocks just under the surface. I explained our predicament and asked could they please take us across the channel to Bahia de Los Angeles. While the fishermen looked on, we quickly assembled our remaining clothes and gear, stuffed them in

our dry-bags and clambered aboard. They immediately gave us a jug of water, which we proceeded to down in long, hard swallows.

As we approached the Bay, the eldest of the fishermen explained that they did not have the necessary government papers to enter into Bahia de Los Angeles, and would have to drop us off somewhere outside the bay where we could walk or try to flag down another panga. I asked them how much the infraction would cost them if caught, in the hope that we could entice them to take a chance, with us footing the bill if there was a problem. Unfortunately, they were more afraid of having their boat confiscated, so we gladly accepted landfall in a small bay south of the main channel into Bahia. With the gift of another gallon plastic jug of water and our dry-bags in hand we waved as our saviors turned their panga to continue their journey north.

We did not have a clue how far we still were from town, nor the nature of the terrain in-between. Happy just to be on the Baja mainland, we took off in brisk stride up into the hills along a goat path heading west towards the Bahia. At the top of the nearest ridge we started to realize we might be in for a bit of a hike as a long series of ridges faded into the distance in front of us. Not wishing to risk being lost again, we decided to head north where we could walk along the shore of the bay. As we soon found out, the southern perimeter of the Bahia is a contorted and seemingly endless succession of volcanic boulder-strewn coves, cliffs and shore--not a welcome proposition in our condition at that point. Also, the only footwear we had were boat sandals, and the nylon straps of mine had already drawn blood in several places and were pulling out of the soles in another. We started wondering if this epic would ever end.

Many coves and boulders later, we spotted a shiny spot moving west into the channel. Waving one of our red life vests from an exposed boulder, we once again found ourselves trying to attract the attention of a passing vessel. This one too passed by, seemingly oblivious to our presence. We had given up on any chance of them seeing us when we noticed the boat turning and coming our way. Within minutes we were safely aboard a small skiff with an elderly American gentleman and his wife and daughter. Bob and his wife live half the year in Bahia de Los Angeles and the other half in Jamul, near San Diego and their



daughter was visiting from Las Vegas. Bob's wife said we were lucky they stopped for us--they don't usually pick up hitchhikers. We felt lucky by any measure to have avoided what would have otherwise been another daylong hike-from-hell.

Bob's trailer is at the southern end of the bay, and he was kind enough to drive us the four and a half miles of rough road into town in his pickup. The first order of business was a call to our families who we expected were worried sick by now. He also stuck with us as we bounced from place to place to try and find someone to help us break into and hot-wire our car since my keys had been lost at sea. At the tire shop, "no, I can't do it--try Rojo (Red)--he lives up on the hill over there in the white house."

Rojo, a Mexican with flaming red hair who grew up in Tijuana, said he could help us later, but first we should try to find Pajaro (bird)--just ask for him down at the Pemex station. From the Pemex station they pointed out a yellow house down the street where Pajaro lives, and when we went there a couple of middle-aged women relaxing in the shade of a patio nearby told us that Pajaro was gone fishing and wouldn't be back for a few hours. Back to Red's place, and this time he agreed to meet us at our car in about 20 minutes.

Bob wished us luck and we parted company. While we were waiting for Rojo, a couple of Americans told us they had notified the local police chief that we had not returned after the Saturday chubasco storm had blown through. They told us that the winds in Bahia de Los Angeles had been clocked between 50 and 60 miles per hour during the storm, and that everyone thought we were in Davy Jones' locker for sure. Red arrived and the car was opened and hot-wired in about a half-hour and we were on our way, settling in for the 10-hour drive back to San Diego. We didn't talk much. Ecstatic relief had faded to quiet introspection as we reflected on our strange combination of bad and good luck, decisions, and actions over the previous days. The bright yellow remnants of the Catamaran are probably still standing sentinel out on Guardian Angel, but boats can be replaced and we felt ultimately lucky to have survived this little epic. Chalk one up to experience. Boy, you should see our checklist for next time...