



FISH out of WATER

story by JENNA CAVELLE • photos by ENRIQUE VARGAS

LURED BY THE GLOWING SEA OF CORTEZ, A COOLER OF MEXICAN BEER AND THE MOST OBVIOUS OF A WOMAN'S WEAKNESSES – A PUPPY – I ARRIVED IN LA PAZ AND QUICKLY FOUND MYSELF ABOARD A SMALL CRUISER IN QUEST OF MY FIRST FISHING ADVENTURE. MY ENTOURAGE INCLUDED ANDREA TOMBA, FOUNDER OF DESEA BAJA ADVENTURES, HIS BILINGUAL PUPPY ZIGGY, LUPE OUR NATIVE MEXICAN SKIPPER, ENRIQUE VARGAS OF BAJA LIFE AND LOTS OF COOL FISHING GEAR. THE SMELL OF DIESEL COLLIDED WITH SALTY AIRSTREAMS CREATING A SCENT ONLY A FISHERMAN COULD LOVE. I PERCHED HIGH IN THE BRIDGE AND THE WARM SUN SWALLOWED MY BODY AS THE PUPPY'S SOGGY TONGUE GENTLY SLAPPED MY FACE. I WAS SWIMMING IN A MAN'S WORLD AND LOVING EVERY MINUTE OF IT! IN THE DISTANCE, THE TURQUOISE OCEAN KISSED THE HONEY COLORED SHORE WITH SMALL FIZZY WAVES.

MY SPIRIT BEGAN TO SMILE » » »





(above left) The right of passage into the boys club appears to be a puppy and a beer. The trick is keeping the former from the latter. (above middle) The crew steers clear of a wayward woman when she has a knife in her hand. The fish has no choice. (opposite top) Andrea uses his powers of persuasion. Ahh, sweet, sweet surrender. (opposite bottom) Redefining the meaning of “download”, Baja style.

As we approached a nearby neck of land, the roaring sound of the boat’s engine gradually faded to a soft hum and our anchor quietly pierced the sea’s brim. “Who’s up for a swim?” tempted Andrea. I felt my opposing personalities race to be the first to answer. The adventurer in me was all about jumping in. My demure lady was worried about whether the saline waters would be too chilly or sting my freshly shaven legs. The adventurer prevailed and soon I was leaping feet first into the transparent water below.

For a few moments, I blissfully swam with the boat drifting beside me. At first the water felt like a satin sheet, soft and cool. Then suddenly it changed to the stinging sensation felt when spanked by a hundred little stingray tails. The crew watched me with approval, unaware of my predicament, as my burning body ate away my strength. It took all I had to force a smile. I swam back to the boat while the ocean’s current stabbed at my breath for what seemed like time without end. The realization of my dependency on the boat lent an all too personal meaning to the words “Mother Ship”.

Back on board my skin was ablaze and my legs were covered with crimson colored welts. “Oh, those are very small jelly fish stings we call ‘agua mala’ for bad water,” confirmed Andrea. “At certain times of the year, they’re all over the place out here, but usually the water is totally clean of them,” he continued. Of course they could have given me that piece of inside information before I jumped straight into a school of them. And now, as men fancy themselves as big problem solvers, they advised me of my three options: 1. Urinate on myself. 2. Have someone else urinate on me. 3. Wait for the pain to subside. I chose what was clearly my only option, to wait. The burning dissipated in about fifteen minutes and we were all laughing – seems I had unknowingly passed my initiation into the boy’s club.

The engine cranked up and we headed back out to sea. After toweling off, I wrapped my body in a red silk sarong, collapsed on the boat’s stern and knocked back a traditional dose of Tecate to numb the residual tingling from the agua mala. Just as I dipped into a peaceful buzz, an unexpected call of nature pinched my impending stupor and I flipped off the stern like a fish out of water to assume the duty of fisherwoman. The pole began jerking and my anxious eyes followed intently.

The propulsion of the unforeseen catch was so arresting that I can’t even remember how the fishing pole ended up in my grasp or how I came to sit in the chair that cradled my animated body. Everything and everyone around me froze as I entered some parallel universe where my weapon, my quarry and me performed an ancient battle dance at sea. I know it sounds a little dramatic, but hey, I’m a woman and I was catching my first real fish! I mean work with me here—there were actually men present who witnessed my brave entrance into “The Circle of Life” and my subsequent conquest of a fighting sierra. I felt like such a show off! In my mind, I was already composing a theatrical reenactment of the entire event to present to my big brother back home. He’d be so proud, and of course very jealous. I was reveling in satisfaction and felt a mischievous grin breaking the surface. My wild child had come out to play.

I could hear the muffled sound of the men’s voices closing in on me. I guess they were probably trying to lend much needed instruction but I snapped back, “I’ve caught trout before, I know how to do this!” Now when I say I’ve caught trout before, I’m talking about the little eight-inch fresh water

trout my brothers and I used to catch at the local river in Texas when I was barely ten years of age. It never occurred to me that this angry fellow on the end of the hook was to be my ceremonial dinner and would generously feed four adults. When the final coil was reeled in and a beautiful six-pound sierra with rainbow skin and iridescent spots emerged from the water and flailed in the air at arms length, I thought I would explode. I was smiling so big that the corners of my lips were ripping. And, I'm embarrassed to report that I was jumping up and down like an eager child on Christmas morning.

Knife in hand, fish on cutting board and overflowing with anticipation, I began slicing open my gift. The fish was as silky-smooth as the trout I used to filet as a young girl and gripping it in place was difficult. With the blade positioned just beneath the gill, I pressed the knife close to the bone and applying a sawing motion, severed the fish's

“You don't think I'm gonna' EAT that, do you...it's RAW!”

muscle down to the tail. I filleted the other side and would have happily dismembered an entire pail of fish had there been one - I was that entranced by the experience!

Andrea appeared from behind me with a bottle of Tabasco while Enrique prepared a freshly cleaned sliver of sashimi. “You don't think I'm gonna' eat that do you...it's raw!” I blurted out. “Of course you are. This is when the fish tastes the best,” Andrea insisted. I wasn't about to retreat from the proud gaze of my fellow fisherman just yet, so I flung my head back, locked my eyes shut and opened wide. Unexpectedly, my palette was bathed in the flavor of sweet, zesty flesh. I reached for more sashimi before the existing mouthful had even reached my belly. Baited by a delicious adventure and hooked by the taste of a sierra, the magic of fishing left me spellbound.

On the kind of day that seemed to last forever, the milky waters of Mother Nature's womb branded my body with the attack of her tiny jelly soldiers, leaving me irritated and a little pissy. And then, as if in request for forgiveness, she presented me with an offering of sustenance with which to nourish my tattooed body. I received an injection of pure, unadulterated fun that returned me to a forgotten playground and revitalized my grown-up. Whatever the hidden meaning is behind this divine contradiction, one thing is certain; what at times feels like a man's world is actually hers and she is in control. Her supremacy is not cruel, but rather kind and nurturing—this simple revelation renders me wanting more. ■



ABOUT DESEA ADVENTURES ||

Owned and operated in La Paz by Andrea Tomba and Ana Laura Cossio Rojano (pictured at right), Desea Baja Adventures offers its clients the opportunity to experience a wide variety of land and sea-based adventures throughout Baja California Sur, Mexico. The company offers fully customized excursions with professional guides and is continually updating its program in search of unique and memorable attractions while maintaining the highest level of service to its clients. For more information on Desea Baja, please visit them on the web at www.deseabaja.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR ||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||

Jenna Cavelle is a travel writer currently living in Los Angeles. Jenna has traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and North America. After visiting Baja California for the first time, she found herself inspired and rejuvenated by the simple yet magnificent way of life Mexico offers.

