

The 750-n.m. Pacific coast of the Baja California Peninsula is often referred to as the “outside of Baja” as opposed to the Sea of Cortez (next chapter).

Pacific Baja is mostly rugged and rocky, has only a few isolated ports and very little population or sheltered anchorages in between them. Unlike the enticing cruising grounds of the Sea of Cortez, this outside coast of Baja seems a bit desolate and inhospitable – kind of like the rough, dry husk protecting a tender, juicy fruit. When planning to cruise Mexico, we may think of Pacific Baja as the big hurdle before reaching our goal.

Because Baja’s Pacific coast is contiguous with Southern California, some aspects of its boating weather are similar – such as: Prevailing winds are from the northwest; Prevailing northwesterlies are moderated by the land-sea breezes near shore; Fog and overcast are common, especially in the northern half; Well off shore (60 plus miles) the wind is often out of the northwest at a constant 20 knots or more day and night.

As you voyage farther south along Baja, the fog and overcast conditions usually diminish regardless of the time of year. Air temperatures are remarkably cool along the northern half (Ensenada to Turtle Bay) in all but late summer. Not until you round the southern tip of Baja at Cabo Falso on the approach to Cabo San Lucas do you enter a tropical regime. This change is quite dramatic; one minute you’re in woolens and wind-breakers and after you round the corner, you peel down to shorts, T-shirt and flip flops. However even Cabo has its cool-winter years.

This chapter looks in depth at Pacific Baja WX in winter, spring, summer and fall. (For complete navigational information about the places mentioned along this coast, please read my nautical guidebook *Mexico Boating Guide*.) Then we’ll look briefly at Bashing up the Baja. (Suggested reading: *The Baja Bash II* by Capt. Jim Elfers, also from Point Loma Publishing.)

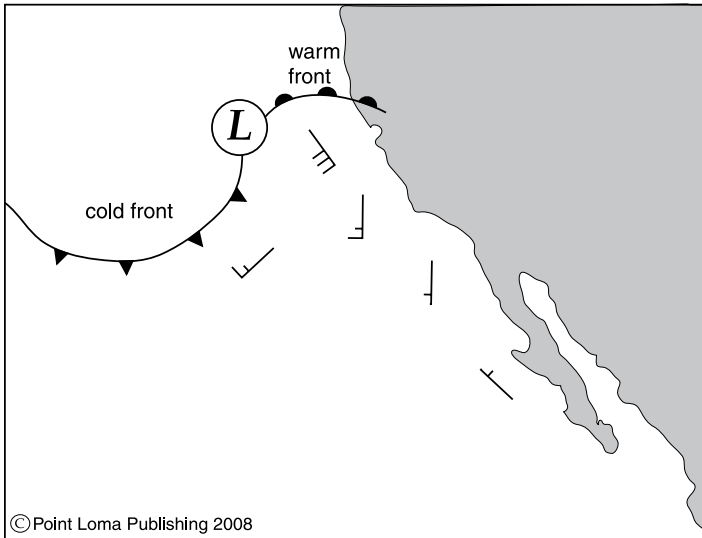
Winter on Pacific Baja

November 1 begins the traditional migration of “yatistas” heading south into Mexican waters. Winter and spring together form the primary cruising season, because the overall weather picture is balmy and benign – once you get past the rugged outside of Baja!

**Turtle Bay is about
half way down
the outside
of Baja.**



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Examples	Explanation of wind arrows
	30 knots from SE
	20 knots from NW
	15 knots from SW
	5 knots from NE

Each feather signifies 10 knots
Each half feather signifies 5 knots
A triangle signifies 50 knots
Avoid areas with triangles

Winter occasionally brings storms to the Pacific coast of Baja. But you can avoid running headlong into them if you know what to look out for. When you see a southward shift of the Jet Stream and a corresponding breakdown of the Pacific High, the window is open for stormy weather here. (During spring and summer, the Pacific High is quasi-stationary between Hawaii and the U.S. mainland.)

Cold fronts can invade during winter. (See Fig. at left.) The strongest cold fronts are preceded by south to southwest gales and rain. Southeast gales and rain tend to develop closer to the low center, followed by winds shifting to the northwest,

and finally by clearing. The frequency of southeast gales diminishes farther south along the Baja coast, rarely reaching the mid to southern sections of Baja. But they can happen.

The first of February we were southbound and 24 hours out of San Diego on "Heddy," a 112-foot Baltic ketch. Weather forecasts had gale warnings for southerly winds in 24 hours. What rotten luck. We thought we were off on a downhill slide to Paradise, and instead we were going to buck gale-force head winds.

What to do? Protection from southerlies is hard to come by on the coast of Baja. Fortunately, we were only about 20 miles from Isla San Martín. A low curving arm of sand jutting off the southeast corner of the island provides is only about 500 yards across, but it offers some protection in southerlies, so we headed that way.

We anchored on the north side of the spit, called Hassler's Cove, along with several fishing boats and a kelp cutter out of Ensenada. For two days we stood 24-hour anchor watch, while 35-knot southerlies raked us and huge waves broke on the little spit, washing away most of the sand, leaving only a rocky reef. Other vessels dragged, but we held. Finally the wind dropped and hauled around to its normal northwesterly direction, so we shoved off.

Northbound sailors can take heart from this story, watching for a tail wind to help them up Baja. More often, the winter breakdown in the Pacific High causes an interruption in the usually strong northwesterly flow. Several days before an approaching cold front, the wind may switch from its customary northwest direction or – more often – simply become light and variable. This condition may last for days, especially if the

cold front stalls out farther to the north of your position.

When this happens, southbound sailors are singing the blues and whistling for wind. They could head well off shore where the wind should be steadier and not influenced by diurnal fluctuations of the land-sea breeze. Unfortunately, the wind may be flat calm well off shore as well.

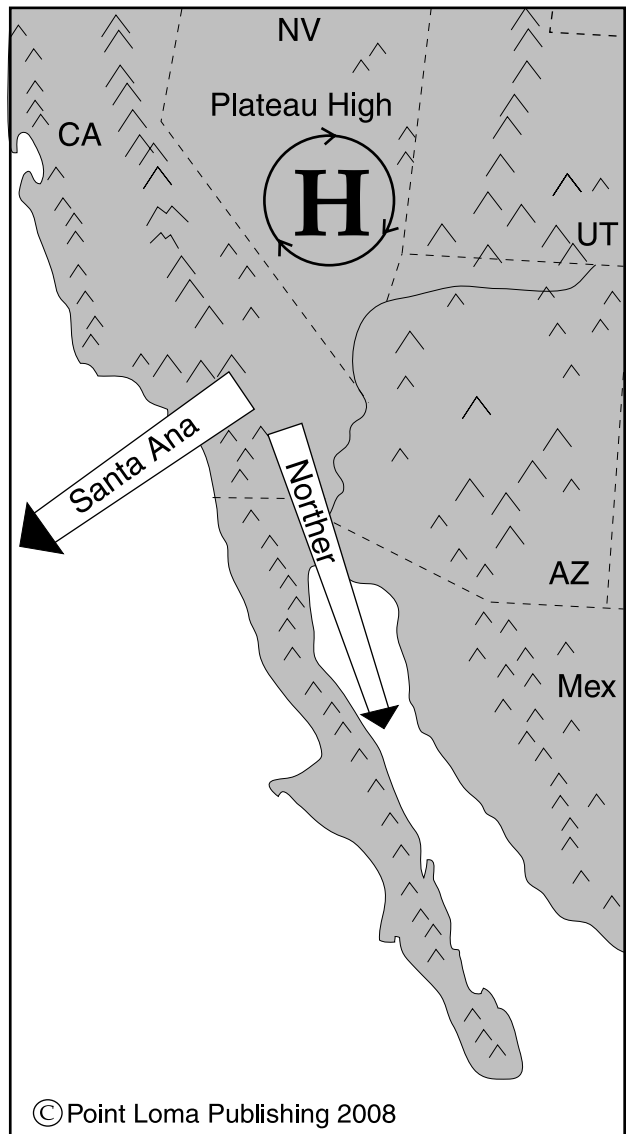
This calm pattern makes for great northbound passages, even for sailboaters, when the best one could hope for is not taking high wind and big seas on the nose and having to motor into it. During yacht deliveries, we have made many fast, comfortable powerboat passages from Cabo San Lucas to San Diego during November and December. The fastest took only 30 hours, and the seas were so flat calm we never even got spray on the windshield.

Santa Ana Winds: After the passage of a winter low-pressure system, high pressure often moves into the inter-mountain basin near Nevada. (See diagram below.) This generates a north to east offshore wind known in Southern California as a “Santa Ana.” Such winds blow most strongly near shore and especially down the canyon mouths. Though they can reach dangerous strengths in Southern California, they rarely do so in Baja. Sometimes a Santa Ana can help on a northbound trip, as in the following example.

We flew to La Paz on the first of December to pick up a 60-foot schooner to bring back to San Diego. During our last night at the marina in La Paz the wind picked up from the north. We figured it would, because it had been raining when we left San Diego; 48 hours later the cold front had caught up with us.

The first two hours we had a wet ride as we motored northward into the wind and sea, until we began to turn the corner at the San Lorenzo Channel and head south. Then we began to sail in a 20-knot breeze.

We smoked down the Cerralvo Channel on a broad reach, surfing in 8- to 10-foot seas. This channel runs between Cerralvo Island and the east side of Baja’s bulging East Cape. Especially when wind and tide oppose one another, the Cerralvo Channel



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generates some notoriously steep seas. They were lofty and close together this time, and the ride was uncomfortable even going downhill. The wind stayed with us till San Jose del Cabo and then died as we got into the lee of the cape mountains. The sea was flat calm as we motored around Cabo Falso.

The morning forecast on the California/Baja Net (See the Frequency Guide in the Appendices.) mentioned strong high pressure building over the inter-mountain plateau of the western U.S., creating a Santa Ana in Southern California. A Norther was still blowing in the Sea of Cortez, and north through east winds were predicted for the outside of Baja. Good news for us. Any break from the normally strong northwesterly flow would allow us to get some drive from our sails and not have to meet those square waves head on. With that forecast in mind we hugged the shoreline rather than take a straight course to Mag Bay. We had a 10-knot northeast wind on the beam and a flat sea, so we made good time.

At Cabo San Lazaro (north end of Mag Bay), the morning forecast called for more of the same, northeast winds. We decided to take a straight shot to Turtle Bay – but that turned out to be a tactical error.

At sunset that night, the wind came out of the northwest. We made slow, wet progress for several hours until it lightened and shifted to the north. If we had hugged the coast along Punta Pequeño and Abreojos, we would have had more favorable winds and flatter seas, thus making better time, even though it would have been a longer distance.

Usually we go through the Dewey Channel between Isla Natividad and Punta Eugenia, and then up the eastern side of Cedros Island, which is normally the lee. But because the wind was still hooting from the northeast, no lee would exist there. Instead, we went outside Isla Natividad and between Cedros and the San Benito Islands.

Punta Norte, the 4,000-foot precipice at the north tip of Isla Cedros has some “cape effect,” and the prevailing northwest winds often pile up against it – creating something of a “bugaboo” for northbound boats a bit timid about jumping off across the Bay of Vizcaino.

This time, however, the boogie man was lying in wait for us at the southwest corner of Cedros, at Cabo San Agustín. We struggled against lumpy seas at three knots until finally rounding it. Things lightened up, and at the north end the wind was flat calm.

The forecast called for more of the same, a long-term Santa Ana. A large area of very high pressure, 1038 milibars, had taken up residence over Utah. When we again closed with the coast, we alternated between calms and gusty offshore winds that blew down the canyons and valleys. It was like that the rest of the way into San Diego.

We were lucky! Once again November-December proved to be the best time of the year for a northbound trip. We had ridden the High Pressurelator all the way home.

The area between Mag Bay and Turtle Bay gets easterly Santa Ana-like winds in winter, but they're typically weak and bring light, cold winds and very good visibility. Occasionally though, easterlies can make for cold, uncomfortable going if not down right dangerous conditions.

During the first week in November, we were bringing a 78-foot motoryacht up from

Puerto Vallarta to San Diego. We had a calm crossing, and because nothing significant was predicted on the Pacific weather horizon, we planned to push up Baja non stop.

But the afternoon we were half way up Baja, the wind suddenly gusted up very strongly off the beach. We were only five miles off Thurloe Point, so we turned and headed toward Turtle Bay. It was a wet and uncomfortable five miles, and as we entered the bay we had a surprise. The wind had picked up an enormous amount of sand and was blowing it our way, horizontally, reducing visibility to zero.

Turtle Bay's most popular anchorage off the town pier isn't sheltered in Santa Ana winds, so we tucked as far as possible into the bay's eastern shoreline. This provides some lee from the high sea berm and is well clear of the town anchorage. We didn't want to worry about ourselves or other vessels dragging anchor. We payed out 7:1 scope and rode comfortably.

Throughout the night, the wind howled and the anemometer showed 50 knots, as we took turns standing anchor watch. Visibility went to zero, but we kept in VHF contact with other boats in the bay. Three other yachts that had anchored near the pier did drag. Two of them moved over to our side of the bay, and the third put out to sea.

By morning light, even the vertical surfaces of our beautiful white boat were caked with ocher-colored grit blown down the mountains and off the beach. Still the Santa Ana didn't let up. It was my birthday, so we celebrated by hanging out in the pilot house reading novels, writing articles and sharing ham radio WX reports with boats up and down the coast – while the wind shrieked in the background. During the afternoon the wind in the harbor began to drop, and toward sunset we were able to hose down the dirty boat.

By evening, our wind had dropped significantly, and the same was reported by boats up the coast – so we departed northbound. Though a lumpy sea was left over, it continued to flatten and we had a good trip the rest of the way to San Diego.

Spring on Pacific Baja

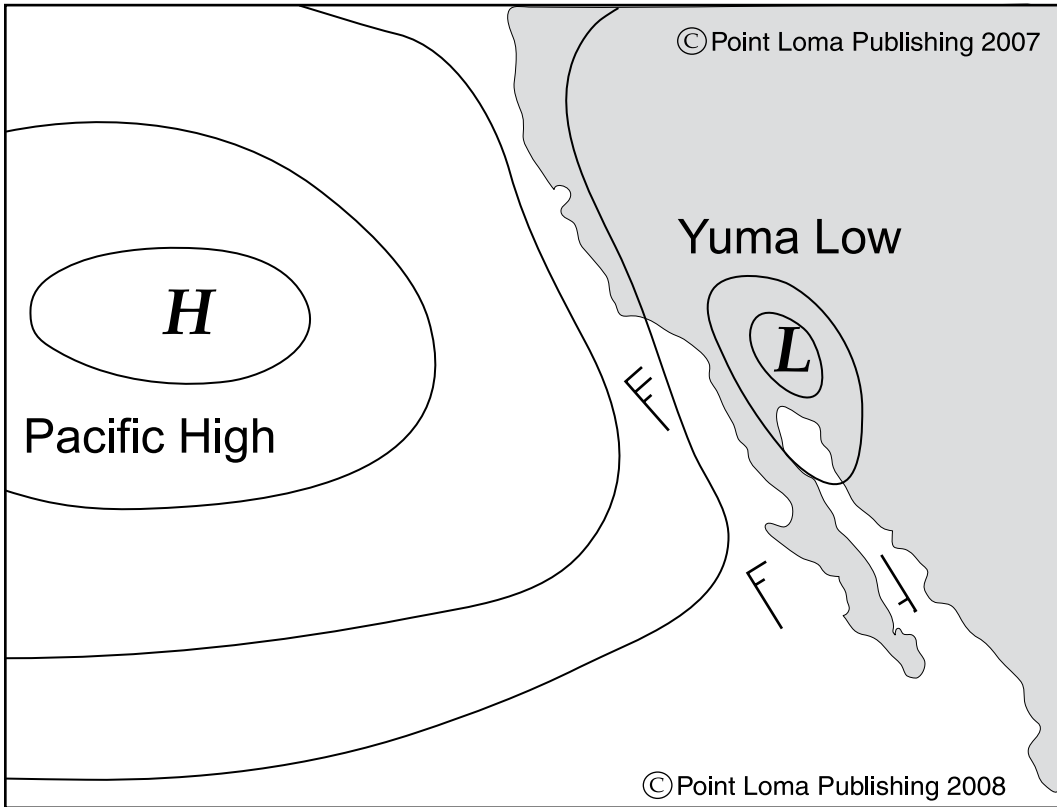
As the year lengthens, fewer and fewer low-pressure systems invade Baja.

Southbound: Heading south down the Baja in spring can be a good itinerary option, because you may get a push downhill. But your itinerary must consider where you're going to be in summer. See below.

We've sailed south in May, delivering boats for Mexican clients. Several times we've made the run from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas in 4.5 days - not bad for vessels in the 40- to 45-foot range. In one case we made 400 miles in two days, surfing down huge waves, white knuckles firmly gripping the helm, afraid to look over our shoulders at the white-crested monsters that kept trying to crawl over the transom and into the cockpit.

Northbound: May is when most cruisers return from Mexico, so they can be stateside before the beginning of hurricane season – or before their insurance coverage expires. But spring is often the most difficult time to head north – the epitome of the Baja Bash.

Here's why. By May, the Pacific High is a fairly permanent feature located between Hawaii and the continent. Likewise, the Yuma Low has developed over Arizona



Spring often create strong northwesterly winds and a wet ride up Baja.

by then; this thermal trough of low pressure is formed by surface heating in the deserts.

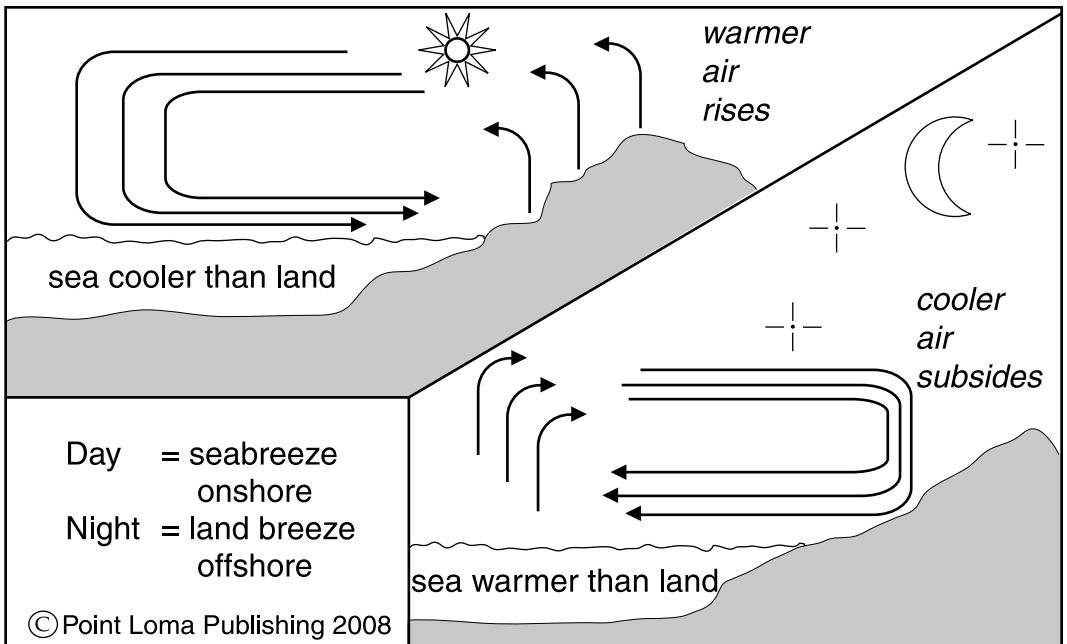
What happens is (a.) the wind's clockwise rotation around the Pacific High and (b.) the pressure differential between it and the Yuma Low creates (c.) strong and steady wind out of the northwest along the Pacific Baja coast.

During years of bashing up Baja in all kinds of boats, we've discovered some tactics that may help. Fortunately, if you're northbound in late spring, you can try to take advantage of the land-sea breeze cycle close to shore.

Land-sea Breeze Cycles: A diurnal (daily) cycle of wind that forms along Baja's Pacific coast is caused by the sun. (So if something else is going on that brings overcast or rain, this may not work.) Normally, the wind here is light or calm from sunset until late morning, when the wind builds up, stays up through the afternoon, and then dies at sunset. (See figure on next page.)

Sea Breeze: The air over the land heats up from the sun during the day and then cools off rapidly at night. The air over the ocean, however, remains at a much more constant temperature. During the heat of the day the air over the land actually rises. As it rises it draws in the cooler air from the ocean. This generates the seabreeze, which peaks in mid-afternoon and dies near sunset.

Land Breeze: At night, the land cools off rapidly, and the cooling air sinks downward and blows out toward your boat off shore. This is the land breeze, and its effect on you diminishes with your distance from the shoreline. A land breeze peaks just



Use the land breeze and seabreeze cycle to your advantage, especially heading north on Baja in spring.

before sunrise and is much weaker than the seabreeze, rarely more than 10 knots; often it is non-existent. If nothing else is affecting the weather, that means a calm night.

Plan A: You may want to keep traveling northward near shore during the calmer conditions throughout night and early morning hours, and then tack off shore in the afternoon when the wind picks up and grows to its strongest, especially around headlands.

Plan B: You could also plan to drop the hook in a protected anchorage, rest during the period of strongest winds – even though it’s daylight hours – and then put to sea again after sundown.

These may seem contrary to your seaman’s intuition. Most boaters tend to head offshore at night to get away from any unseen hard things associated with land. Certainly, traveling inshore all night requires much more precise navigation, a well-tuned radar and depth sounder, lots of sharp eyes, and a couple of thermos bottles of strong coffee.

Power boats have a better chance to complete the run between two distant anchorages before the wind comes up again, but sail cruisers who know all the little gunk-holes along Pacific Baja can use the same tactic. See “*Mexico Boating Guide*” chapters 1 through 5.

TIP: The most successful tactic when heading north on Baja – especially in spring – is to *keep moving* whenever the weather allows it. For north-bounding, good traveling weather is very rare. If you don’t take advantage of it by pushing onward, you’ll exhaust yourself trying to move when it’s too rough and windy, and then you’ll waste those valuable calm periods trying to recuperate.

First-timers’ most common mistake is to plan on bashing up Baja like normal cruising – that is, to travel north for a day, spend a night or two resting at anchor and

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then travel again. That's when you really get bashed up and feel like it takes forever to get home.

Cape Effect

At several spots along the west coast of Baja California, any existing winds are amplified near prominent headlands – a phenomenon called “cape effect.” You'll encounter cape effect near all the major capes, points and headlands on all the world's oceans. The bigger the cape, the stronger its cape effect is felt on mariners.

West coast boaters who haven't traversed Point Conception or Capes Mendocino and Flattery may first encounter cape effect when they head down Pacific Baja. For example, when the prevailing northwest winds pile up against Punta Norte at the north end of Cedros Island, they amplify themselves for several miles off shore.

When I was new to power boating and helping my husband deliver a big sportfisher up from Cabo San Lucas to Los Angeles, I was standing watch on the fly-bridge one afternoon as we passed the east side of Cedros Island. I had just laid a new course across Vizcaino Bay to outside Sacramento Reef, when I was shocked by what showed up on radar. A 3-mile wide patch of huge seas lay right in my path about a mile ahead. Gulp.

I grabbed the binnocks and tuned the radar up and down the ranges, but it was obviously something real out there. Those wave tops were 12-foot high. I pulled back the throttles, threw on my PFD and hailed “all hands on deck” to prepare for an approaching tsunami.

John, who'd flown up to the bridge in a heart beat, assessed the situation with his more experienced eyes. He explained how cape effect around Punta Norte (a.) deflects and amplifies the normal northwest wind, which had (b.) picked up with the afternoon sea breeze, and how (c.) the strong southbound current was further steepening these local waves. It was an ugly patch of sea, yes, but it was a local phenomenon affecting only a 3-mile-wide patch of ocean – not a dangerous tsunami moving toward us. We simply steered around it and went on our merry way. (But I kept my PFD on.)

Cape effect is sometimes responsible for keeping *yatistas* hunkered down in the “Cedros Island Yacht Club,” a narrow anchorage in the lee southeast of Punta Norte, the big headland at the north end of Cedros Island. By poking your nose out and scanning the northwest horizon with binoculars and radar, you can't always tell if it's truly nasty all the way to San Quintín – or if you're being tricked by a 3- to 5-mile patch of ugly seas masquerading as bad traveling weather. With a better understanding of cape effect – and perhaps with a larger radar view and better WX reports – some skippers might find they can divert around Punta Norte's cape-effect patch.

Of course, it's not always just local. I am never shy about hailing a larger vessel on my radar horizon to ask what wind and seas they are experiencing, what they've heard from the latest WX broadcasts. Ever since my first frightening encounter with Punta Norte's cape effect, I try to pass along the latest WX forecasts to anyone waiting in the Cedros Island Yacht Club.

Likewise, as the wind funnels over a particular headland, it often lines up with

Cape effect is felt at Cabo San Lucas (shown here), Cabo Falso and many other prominent turning headlands.



the lower canyons on either side and gusts strongly down them like a venturi.

Puerto Santo Thomas, just south of Ensenada, is one such anchorage. I was anchored there in my own boat years ago, with my small inflatable trailing off the stern quarter. The wind was quite gusty that afternoon. One very strong gust died as quickly as it came; a couple of minutes later another gust hit us from almost astern. Before the boat could swing on her anchor and line up with the new wind direction, the inflatable blew into our cockpit. Now, that's a violent wind shift.

Cape effect is accentuated when the afternoon seabreeze kicks in. Several anchorages in the lee of headlands are notorious for their cape effect. The wind usually dies away to calm in the night and early morning hours.

Other Baja anchorages known for gusty winds are Colonet, Fondeadero San Carlos, Santa Maria and the north end of Cedros.

The entire region of Cabo San Lucas has a huge cape effect especially during the late spring. The wind blows from the northwest 20 knots or more in the afternoon, making it nearly impossible to leave Cabo San Lucas northbound. In such conditions, it's best to depart at around 0400 when it's calmest. The wind dies away the more miles you get away from the cape. On some occasions this wind blows day and night for several days.

This cape effect has another peculiar characteristic during the spring months. Beginning northwest of Cabo San Lucas it parallels the coastline, bends around the cape and ends up blowing as a southerly in the Sea of Cortez.

We were bringing a 54' DeFever trawler back from La Paz in late May. When we left La Paz we had a 20-knot southerly, a head wind, as we plowed down the Cerralvo Channel. The wind remained on the nose as we turned southwest. The wind stayed on the nose we passed Cabo San Lucas, rounded Cabo Falso, and headed northwest. This weather condition is known as Bad Luck.

Summer & Fall on Pacific Baja

Hurricanes generally haven't threatened Baja California waters until August. But there's nothing general about hurricanes when one's heading your way. Their frequency in this region peaks in September, and October through November are still in jeopardy. Baja's southern regions are more affected than north of Turtle Bay. More on Baja's summer weather in the hurricane chapter.

Best Route North No Matter the Season

Overall I've learned while running northbound that the wind and seas are usually less closer to shore. We've sneaked around Cabo Falso well inside of a half mile when the wind was blowing and found the seas much less. The rhumb line to Mag Bay takes you 20 n.m. offshore, however we continue hugging the shoreline within five miles almost up to Mag Bay.

At Cape San Lazaro north of Mag Bay, the most direct route to Turtle Bay takes you 50 n.m offshore. Instead I turn due north to about five miles south of San Juanico and then lay courses to pass offshore of Abreojos and then into Turtle Bay.

Since we started using this tactic between the Cape and Turtle Bay, we've never encountered a weather delay in that region due to prevailing northwesterlies. However, the offshore stretch north of Cedros Island has turned us around several times.