

FLEMING: THE ULTIMATE CRUISING YACHT

POWER CRUISING

Fleming's Design Philosophy

- Outstanding Quality
- Performance
- Dependability



**Flemings Have Earned
a Reputation for Their
Extraordinarily Quiet,
Smooth Ride**

November/December 2008
www.powercruisingmag.com

WILD KINGDOM

EXPLORING THE SEA OF CORTEZ

By Tony Fleming

THE LONG, SKINNY BAJA PENINSULA IS separated from mainland Mexico by the Sea of Cortez. Also known as the Bay of California, this unique body of water extends 600 miles north to south and between 70 and 100 miles east to west.

The San Andreas Fault runs up the middle, and Baja, along with coastal California, is creeping slowly northward. The land has an uncompromising beauty with candelabra cacti standing sentinel over the stark landscape.



The Sea of Cortez is home to a variety of marina mammals. In Puerto Escondido, a humpback whale breaches close to a group of anchored yachts (above). Acrobatic dolphins are a common sight throughout the region (below).

The peninsula is sparsely inhabited. Most of the land and, of course, all of the islands and remote bays in the Sea of Cortez are only accessible by boat. Its azure waters abound with wildlife and, if you include “remote” in your cruising lexicon, then exploring this gem in your own boat is a dream come true.

Last year, we brought *Venture*, my Fleming 65, south from Vancouver, B.C., to be one of the escort vessels in the FUBAR rally, in which 50 assorted powerboats left San Diego with La Paz, Mexico, as their ultimate destination. Situated just north of the southeast corner of Baja, La Paz makes an ideal starting point for exploring the Sea of Cortez.

This area is surprisingly cold during the winter months and is subject to strong northerly winds, so most cruisers wait until March or April before heading back to California. In the meantime, they stay in touch with each other via a cruising net on VHF Channel 22 at 0800 every morning. It includes a local weather forecast and news of general interest to area boaters, including those with problems seeking technical help or spare parts.

The almost-joined islands of Isla Espiritu Santo and Isla Partida lie just north of La Paz and offer numerous coves and inlets in which to anchor and explore. The water is a spectacular emerald green, and the elements have sculpted the rocks along the shore into bizarre shapes with lacy overhangs that seem to defy the laws of gravity.

Some who have cruised the area for many years feel that the wildlife is not so prolific as it once was, but on our trip, the natural world did not disappoint and, for us at least, lived up to its reputation.

On the very first day, we encountered a pod of orcas, or killer whales, as we headed for Los Islotes, a rocky islet that teemed with sea lions, while fork-tailed frigate birds wheeled about our heads and pelicans plummeted into the



DAVID AND IRENE MYERS (2)

water to feed on seemingly endless schools of fish.

Although we did not indulge on this particular occasion, you can join the sea lions in the water. Once you’re fully submerged, they will cavort around you and blow bubbles that resemble globules of mercury as they wobble their silvery way toward the surface.

On our first night, we shared an anchorage off a bay with a perfect crescent beach. Situated on the island of San Francisco and aptly named “The Hook,” this spot is well protected from northerly winds. On this night, however, our sleep was disturbed by choppy waves whipped up by a local wind called the Corumuel. Unique to the La Paz area, this wind comes from the south and usually arrives after sunset.

The following morning we continued northward along the



Baja Peninsula, passing mountains with layered strata of contrasting colors reminiscent of the Grand Canyon. Just above the water a 70-foot-high natural sculpture of a giant hand—aptly named Mano de Dios (Hand of God)—stood out in stark relief against the rock face. The sea that day was glassy smooth, and *Venture* seemed to float, suspended between the sea and the sky.

Over the next few days, we encountered numerous cetaceans, including huge, endangered blue whales, as well as fin whales and the more athletic sperm whales, which repeatedly breached clear of the water. It became almost routine for dolphins of several types to stop what they were doing and speed toward the boat.

They would body-surf in our wake and cavort around the stern, some turning on their sides, as if to gauge the height of the bow. Then they would use powerful thrusts from their tails to launch themselves clear of the water—higher than the foredeck handrail.



TONY FLEMING (2)

Huge manta rays, too, could be seen hovering just beneath the pellucid surface, emerging to do backflips as they sought to rid themselves of parasites.

We anchored in the bay at Bahia Aqua Verde and visited the isolated pinnacle of Roca Solitaria (Solitary Rock) in the tender. Just before sunset a mist—so out of place in this arid environment—blew in from the sea and enveloped the rock, giving it an eerie appearance and leaving the pelicans perched on its shoulders, silhouetted against fading light.

The small village on the shore bustled with activity as the *pangueros*, returning from a day of fishing, brought their catches ashore while squadrons of pelicans circled in the hope of an easy meal.

In the early light of dawn, the *pangueros* set out again until they became distant specs against the horizon. There is a hard way to make a living in this unforgiving environment.



DAVID AND IRENE MYERS

***Venture* sits at anchor in Bahia Aqua Verde—the Bay of Green Waters (top left). A picturesque hotel courtyard in Loreto (top right). Pelicans perch on Roca Solitaria as an unexpected sea mist rolls in (above).**

The Sea of Cortez is home to many unusual creatures, including the Giant Humboldt Squid, which fortunately for the casual swimmer normally lives at depths between 660 and 2,300 feet. It has a large brain, stereoscopic eyes, three hearts, blue blood, and eight arms—each equipped with suction cups lined with a ring of teeth.

The Humboldt Squid has the ability to change color several times per second, from deep maroon to opalescent white, and it reaches lengths up to eight feet. This is truly a monster of the deep and one that many biologists consider to be among the most cunning and ferocious of all animals.

For two weeks, we enjoyed perfect weather, with warm days and cool nights, anchored in a series of secluded bays surrounded by the stark beauty of the Baja coast. The sky remained a pastel blue streaked with ever-changing patterns of wispy clouds, while the sea took on the shade of a kingfisher's wing. Every evening, mountains as high as 4,000 feet were etched in sharp relief against the backdrop of a lingering sunset.

We spent a couple of nights in the perfect protection of Puerto Escondido (Hidden Harbor), from which we took a taxi to the charming town of Loreto. Here we stumbled across a perfect gem of a hotel and, at a nearby restaurant,



enjoyed the region's deliciously fragrant coffee.

Like La Paz, Loreto is serviced by direct flights to and from Los Angeles. So, remote as it seems, you can access your boat from a major metropolis in less than two hours.

Loreto is the oldest continually occupied town on the Baja Peninsula, and its mission was founded in 1696. Today, the old buildings house a museum that is well worth a visit.

Loreto itself has no secure anchorage, but Puerto Escondido, 15 miles to the south, is a harbor of refuge and a hurricane hole. On the landward side, it is overlooked by the 3,600-foot-high Sierra de la Giganta mountains.

North of Loreto, we anchored for a couple of nights in San Juanico bay. Using the tender, we explored a cluster of peach-colored rocks, atop whose spires were perched huge osprey nests. The birds had gathered all manner of materials, tucking strands of blue polypropylene into the tangle of twigs.

Miniature Western Grebes, bobbing in large flocks on the water, amused us with their habit of disappearing en masse beneath the surface. They left us wondering whether our eyes had deceived us, only to reappear as if by magic a few moments later.

As we lay at anchor aboard *Venture*, the air was so still that we could hear the hollow sound of blue whales breathing, and



Jackie Fleming and Irene Myers use the tender to explore the rugged coastline of San Juanico bay (above). Osprey use driftwood and other flotsam to construct nests atop the barren rock spires (top).



Flanked by towering peaks and dramatic rock formation, *Venture* rests in still waters (top). From abundant wildlife to spectacular desert scenery (below), the southern Sea of Cortez is a region worthy of leisurely exploration.



DAVID AND IRENE MYERS (2)



TONY FLEMING

we took the tender to investigate. Keeping a respectful distance, we were able to observe their stately progress through the calm water and watch their massive flukes break clear of the surface.

We went ashore on Isla Carmen and wandered through the crumbling remains of what had once been a thriving salt-producing operation. Cacti sprouted from the seats of rusting forklifts, and collapsing stairs led to nowhere. The corroded remains of a steel hull lay awash adjacent to a crumbling jetty whose railroad tracks lurched drunkenly into space.

I was struck once again by how swiftly nature works to break down the detritus of mankind's failed operations—possessions that he so casually abandons when they are deemed no longer useful.

At Bahia San Avaristo, a panga filled mostly with children of all ages, including a babe in arms, came by and asked if we had fresh water to spare. Having a reverse-osmosis watermaker on board, we were pleased to oblige. Cruising this region with-

out a desalinator would be difficult, as water sources are few and far between.

We had heard that the GPS charts for Mexican waters are far from accurate, and so they proved to be. We found the actual land to be as much as half a mile from the position indicated on the electronic charts. Moreover, it was not unusual for a given chart to show us anchored well inland. Keeping a sharp lookout and using radar to confirm actual distances is mandatory for safe navigation in this remote area.

The Sea of Cortez is one of those places that deserve leisurely exploration over an extended period. *Venture* had an ambitious cruising schedule ahead of her, including a visit to the Galapagos Islands and transit through the Panama Canal to the U.S. East Coast.

So, our visit with the wild creatures and scenery of the Bay of California was all too short. Nevertheless, it was one that will live on in our collective memories. ❁

*“The loudest sound inside the boat
is the rush of water past the hull.”*

— SEA Magazine



Cruising on a Fleming 55 is a quiet, dignified affair thanks to extraordinary measures that reduce engine noise and vibration. Running at a fuel-efficient 10-knots, sound levels in the pilothouse are a mere 60 dB — within the range of normal conversation. At 17-knots, sound measures only 66 dB, making her one of the quietest motor yachts ever built.

Above all, her classic, low-profile gives her an artful sense of elegance highlighted by her luxurious, hand-crafted interior. Visit www.flemingyachts.com and find out why boating journalists and Fleming owners throughout the world consider her the ultimate cruising yacht.

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	55'9"
LWL	50'10"
DISPL	66,000 lbs.
BEAM	16'
DRAFT	5'
FUEL	1,000 U.S. gal.
WATER	300 U.S. gal.



FLEMING

THE ULTIMATE CRUISING YACHT.

Fleming Yachts • 1760 Monrovia Avenue, Suite A18 • Costa Mesa, CA 92627 USA • 949.645.1024
Also available: 65' & 75' Models • information@flemingyachts.com • www.flemingyachts.com