

Semana Santa in San Carlos

A sandy circus

Article and photos by Lisa K. Harris

The dive boat captain

urges us to gather our things, screaming “Apúrate, apúrate,” – “Hurry up, hurry up” to his two mates. The men stow tanks, wet suits, weights, and tidy the deck while the captain maneuvers the thirty-foot boat into the San Carlos marina.

Although I’ve spent many a lazy weekend diving south of the border, I am unfamiliar with the captain’s urgency, and ask what the rush is. “Semana Santa,” he replies with no further explanation, as if the words “Holy Week,” convey a force to be avoided.

By the time I throw our junk in the car and turn from the marina onto San Carlos’ main drag, I understand why — another hour or two on this Thursday afternoon and the four-lane road will become a parking lot for Easter weekend. Already cars are double parked and people crowd the road, lugging bags of tortilla chips, bottles of soda, and boxes of beer.

Bumper to bumper, we crawl through the center of town. At a jammed-packed intersection, the driver in front of us turns off his ignition and initiates a triple parked line of cars, his rollicking passengers bouncing from the car, ready for the party. If the captain wanted to make it home before Monday morning, he needed to apúrase.

My two daughters and I are spending spring break at the beach: diving,

kayaking, building sandcastles, hiking, and snoozing in the hammock. My youngest, Ava, hopes the Easter Bunny visits and comes prepared with her basket. Friends warned me of Semana Santa in San Carlos, telling me it is a dangerous “zoo” and suggesting we not go. But none of the nay-sayers had actually been here during Holy Week. “What’s a few more people?” I thought before we left home; the beach is long and wide.

San Carlos, a four hour drive south of the border on the Sea of Cortez, is usually sleepy with fishermen, American retirees, and scuba divers. But during the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, it morphs into a festive theater. The beach bursts with people as multi-generational families set up camp in makeshift homes. Some are actual tents while others are thrown together with plastic and blankets stretched across poles. They are accessorized with mattresses, clothing, pots and pans. I watch two men wrestle a full-size oven into one tent.

I’ve never seen anything like it, and while I would not describe the beach scene as a “zoo” it certainly is a circus, and an entertaining one as well. Men and women sit on chairs under protective canopies and look out at islands dotting

the bay. Others play volleyball, the court’s boundary outlined in seaweed. ATVs dart through the milieu, with little kids squealing on the back seats, clutching the drivers; grandmothers pat masa into tortillas and cook over campfires. Catamarans, kayaks, and well-used fishing boats play in the surf. The air is filled with hovering shore birds and fluttering kites.

Street vendors troll the beach, hawking hammocks, jewelry, and carved ironwood figurines. One man pushes a white ice-cream cart through the sand, crying “helados” to each family group he passes. Children flock to him, and he passes out coconut-flavored popsicles dipped in chocolate.

Seeking solitude, we jump in the kayak and paddle parallel to the coast. The dive shop had delivered the kayak to our condo unit and for a modest fee they also will

pick it up. We head toward Estero El Saldado, a mangrove estuary. The tide is turning, rushing out to sea, and entering the estuary is tricky, as the opening is narrow. We crash through a few waves, water spilling over us and paddle harder.

Once inside, the waterway is calm and an excellent spot for bird watching — snowy egrets and heron perch on mangrove branches, ambushing dinner in the shallows. We follow watery “trails,” exploring open areas in the mangroves, spotting giant crabs scurrying along the bottom and schools of fingerlings.

Earlier in the week, we explored another trail — a more traditional path through Nacapule Canyon, and, like the estuary, the farther away from the trailhead we hiked, the fewer people we encountered. Nacapule is a magical place, an enclave of tropical forest in the desert, with strangler figs towering over pools of water ringed by palm trees. A mile or so into the canyon, the trail narrows and we scramble over rocks. With a “kerplunk” frogs escape our tennis shoes, leaping into murky safety. On the ridge top, etcho and organ pipe cacti hover over us, growing in thick stands. The trail ends at a

pool shaded by a massive fig whose exposed roots make a perfect seat for a picnic.

In case the nay-sayers may have been right, I loaded up on groceries after we arrived. Ley’s in Guaymas, which sells everything from clothing to barrels of candied fruit, is a favorite. But I’m loath to give up my turn in the hammock, so instead of fighting traffic, I wait for Alejandro’s mobile market.

Like other vendors drumming up business among the sunbathers and ATVs, Alejandro screams his wares along the beach. In perfect English he barks, “I’ve got sweet pineapple, freshly squeezed orange juice, crab meat, yellow fin tuna. Taquitos. Chips and salsa. Tortillas.” Like lemmings, we follow Alejandro to his mobile “store,” a blue pick-up truck with a wooden canopy. He grabs a ripe mango, and with a one-handed maneuver I couldn’t duplicate, peels it. “It’s the best. Try it,” he says, handing it to me. Under his dusty sweat-stained straw hat, he grins when I nod, juice running down my chin. In addition

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San Carlos, Mexico, beach during Semana Santa.



Hunting for Easter eggs among the palm trees in San Carlos.



Alejandro and his grocery truck selling food at the beach in San Carlos.



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to selling good tasting food, Alejandro is a smart business man; he accepts both American and Mexican money.

Easter morning rolls around, and surprise, surprise, there are colored eggs hidden in the blooming hibiscus bushes. Ava grabs her basket and bolts out the patio's sliding-glass door, collecting enough jelly beans to keep the dentist's mortgage paid for months. The campers cheer her on, and afterward include her in a Mexican Easter tradition, the breaking of cascarones, or hollowed eggs filled with confetti, said to bring good luck.

We eat Easter supper on the patio overlooking the sea, wearing faded shorts and T-shirts. Barefoot. Behind us, the ocean shimmers, pelicans fly

overhead, and the volleyball players scream "dale, dale, dale." We discuss scuba diving and snorkeling. Like the beach, life underwater is abundant — we've spotted puffer fish, octopus, spiny lobster, and sea snakes.

After dinner, people sit on the sea-wall, sip exotic drinks made from Alejandro's fruit, and watch the landscape turn a shade of lavender as the sun sets behind the mountains. As darkness sets in, my girls build a bonfire on the beach from collected palm fronds and make s'mores,

Ice cream vendor on the San Carlos beach during Semana Santa.

sharing our heritage with the beach campers. At bedtime, I wash Ava's face, smeared with marshmallow goop and chocolate, her hair full of sand and confetti.

"This is the best Easter ever," she says.

And it is: circus, gridlock, and all.

Lisa Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.

If You Go

San Carlos, Mexico
sancarlosmexico.com

Diving and kayak rental
garysdiveshop.com

Nacapule Canyon
desertmuseum.org/books/
nhsd_nature_intro.php

Places to stay

San Carlos Plaza Resort,
sancarlosplaza.com.mx/

Fiesta Hotel,
mexonline.com/fiesta.htm

Vacation home rentals,
sancarlosmexico.com/rent.html

Condos Pilar,
sancarloscondos.com



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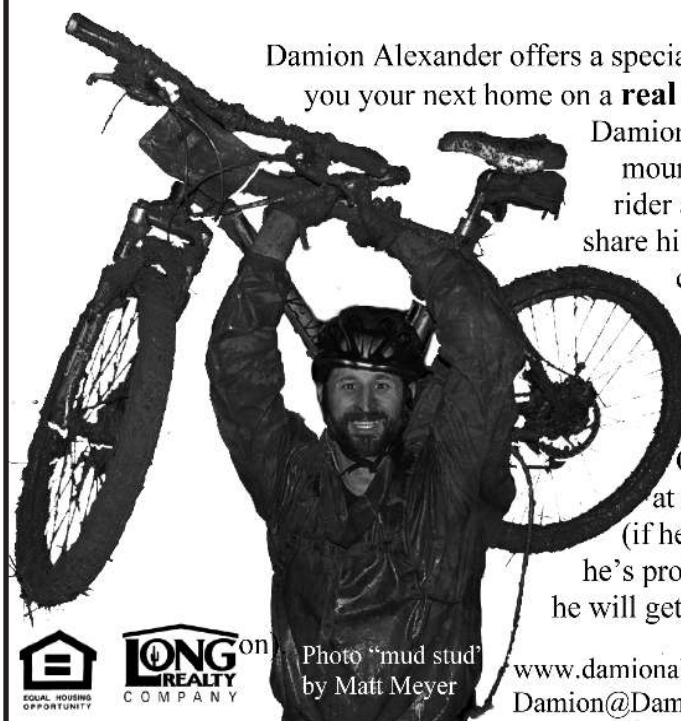


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