

Latitude 38

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WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



get to cruise Mexico in a year or two.
 [We'll continue with Part II of our interview with Chris and Lila in the March issue.]

— latitude/rs 12/15/2013

Return to Mazatlan The Wanderer

It had been about five years — way too long — since we'd been to Mazatlan, and upon our return we were shocked by the changes. As most of you know, Mazatlan, Mexico's second largest coastal city and home to the biggest shrimp fleet in the world, is located in Sinaloa, one of the most active narco trafficking regions in the world. A few years ago there was a much-publicized shooting in a nightclub, and after a street robbery two years ago, most of the cruise ships pulled out. So we expected a lifeless city in decline. What we found instead was what appeared to be a booming, safe city with lots of happy locals and expats. We've never seen Mazatlan looking so good.

We were in Mazatlan as part of a road trip from Tucson to Puerto Vallarta with a newly imported Honda Element — the choice for discerning motorists — so we pulled off the *auto piste* at a seemingly seldom-used turnout overgrown with weeds to the beach area at the north end of the city. Minutes later we were flabbergasted by the string of new high-rise hotels and condos lining the beaches. Then there was a big new shopping center a short distance away. Somebody obviously believes in the vibrant city.

Our first stop was El Cid Hotel and Marina, where we visited with Harbor-master Geronimo Cevallos. It's easy for new hotels to look good; the real test is how they are maintained over time. Whoever owns El Cid deserves a medal — along with Graziano, the owner of Paradise Resort and Marina — for doing such

The excellently maintained El Cid Hotel and Marina is just inside the breakwater from the Sea of Cortez. Deer Island is in the background.

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Spread; Chris burning trash. There are few garbage cans — or restrictions on beach fires — in the South Pacific. Insets left, from top: Lila with a nice mahi landed between Hawaii and Fanning. Locals included Chris and Lila in many of their activities and adventures. Fun at sea with Chris and Lila.

way people interact. We got along really well with everyone — although in French Polynesia it certainly helped that Lila speaks French. I stumbled with my French, but they appreciated my trying.

38: Not all French are so appreciative of such efforts.

Chris: The Tahitians are. They always want to bring you into their homes and make you part of their family.

Lila: After the Tuamotus, we returned to Tahiti, Bora Bora, and then kinda had to hide because our visas had expired.

Chris: If you have to hide out, it's smarter to stay at the smaller islands such as Maupiti and Mopelia. We made the mistake of going to Raiatea to provision and got caught. But we smiled a lot and the officials were nice about it. They didn't fine us or anything.

Lila: But we heard horror stories about boats that had overstayed their visas in Tahiti and some of the other big

islands. The three-month time limit is hard on cruisers because we have to wait for the end of hurricane season before we can safely move on.

Chris: Anyway, we just got back to Hawaii in November after a hard 6,000-mile trip back from New Zealand. We plan to stay on Oahu for awhile.

Lila: It's the first time we've stayed at a dock in three years!

Chris: It's nice. I was so happy to see the breakwater at the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor. The Ala Wai is still Hawaii-funky, with some very good slips and some really bad ones. But that's sort of why you like Hawaii. There's also good racing on Friday nights, they've got fireworks, and we're having a blast there. I have a job waiting for me at West Marine, where employees get super discounts. But we hope to



DRONE 38

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a great job of maintaining and constantly improving his property in Mexico. El Cid



Mazatlan is the shrimp capital of the world.

looked great, as everywhere you looked someone was sweeping, scrubbing, painting or improving. The staff was very friendly without being obsequious. Despite the fact it was between Christmas and New Year's and nearly sold out, we got a spacious one-bedroom fronting the marina for just over \$100 a night. We liked the room,

El Cid, and Mazatlan so much that we extended our stay for another night.

There are four marinas in Mazatlan. Ed Cid and Marina Mazatlan are the largest, while the Fonatur Marina and Isla Marina are smaller. All are accessed from the same channel on the north end of town. There is a sharp and narrow dogleg at the entrance, so if a huge swell is running, it's safer to go to the old harbor at the south end of town.

El Cid is the closest marina to the entrance, and thus is sometimes subject to considerable current. This needs to be taken into account when entering or leaving a berth. El Cid has a lovely setting, however, with a bunch of swimming pools, and is ideally located for strolling to restaurants in the upper scale Dorado (Gold) Zone. The other three marinas are farther up the channel, and while their facilities aren't quite as nice, they are still very pleasant.

A number of years ago, Fonatur, Mexico's tourist development agency, came up with the quarter-baked 'nautical stairway' plan, which would feature **Of the nine Fonatur marinas in Mexico, the one in Mazatlan is the most successful, thanks to excellent service providers.**



stops every 60 miles down the coast of Baja, as well as the creation of nine Fonatur marinas. The reality has pretty much been an expensive flop because of the of ridiculous assumptions made about the number of U.S. boats that would travel to Mexico each winter. Nonetheless, the nine marinas and facilities still were built. To the best of our knowledge, the only one that has been a big success is the one at Mazatlan. A big factor in the success has been the onsite presence of Total Yacht Works, which has a stellar reputation for engine repair and replacement throughout Mexico, and other service providers in the area.

Total Yacht Works' reputation is so good that La Cruz-based friends John and Gilly Foy of the Alameda-based Catalina 42 *Destiny* think nothing of making the 222-mile round trip to have engine work done on their boat in Mazatlan. In addition to engine work, they got a gorgeous set of new faux leather salon cushions, with new bot-

tom foam, for about \$1,000.

One of Mazatlan's signatures is her lovely six-mile *malecon*, which is a magnet for physical-fitness buffs and others. While walking there, we came across five young at heart *gringo* senior citizens taking a rest from hill climbing on their bicycles. We asked them what they liked about the city. The whole bunch of them, half from Canada and half from the States, reported they spend about six months a year in Mazatlan and like it most because, "It's not a tourist town like Puerto Vallarta." One gentleman explained to us that agriculture and fishing are economic engines numbers one and two, while tourism is just number four. "Did you know," he asked us, "that the propellers for U.S. Navy ships are made here in Mazatlan, and have been for decades?" We didn't know that.

All five seniors agreed that the cultural offerings in Mazatlan are superb, the weather great, and the cost of living a quarter of what it is "back home".

Yeah, but what about all the narco





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Clockwise from above. The El Cid Hotel and Marina, near the breakwater to the Sea of Cortez. Mazatlan's busy six-mile 'malecon'. Upscale dining and Mazatlan-loving expats on bikes. Mazatlan's old port at the south end of town. El Cid pools. "Why me?" wondered the pig in the 'mercado'.

violence? You ever hear five guys snort in unison? We did.

"I've been here 10 years and haven't seen as much as a fist fight in Mazatlan," said one, with the others nodding their heads in agreement. "The violence business got blown out of proportion and sensationalized in the U.S. and Canadian press. You know why? Because our home countries are mad because so many of their Social Security checks are being cashed down here in Mexico."

It's estimated that one million American and Canadian citizens live in Mexico.

There is one street in Mazatlan near the central *mercado* where vendors sell nothing but shrimp. The shrimp are sorted by size and kept in big tubs along the street. It's not the most appetizing display, but the deal is you buy a kilo or two, then you walk into one of the nearby restaurants that specializes in cooking them for you. We and friends

bought a kilo of medium large ones — which is about two pounds — for 200 pesos — which is about \$17 U.S. It cost another 50 pesos for preparation of each style and the use of their facilities, which included the near-mandatory karaoke jukebox at ultimate volume.

"The shrimp cost twice as much as they did a year ago," said Gilly, "but it's still about half of what they cost in the States." And because the shrimp are so fresh, they taste noticeably better.

After stuffing ourselves with shrimp and saving some for lunch the following day, we took a stroll to the old central *mercado*. While the arrival of Wal-Marts and such has reduced the importance of the *mercado*, it's still vital and still the real deal. This is particularly obvious at the various *carneceria* stands. When we looked down at a display case, we saw three

severed pigs' heads looking back at us with baleful expressions. "What did we do to deserve this?" they seemed to be asking. Hang around the *mercado* long enough and you'll become a veggie.

It's only a short stroll from the *mercado* to the beautiful main cathedral and then the theater district. The latter is on a very lovely square with restaurants in colonial-style buildings and spilling into the street, and hip new boutique hotels. After the sun goes down, the crowds appear and the fun begins.

So now you're on the other side of town, stuffed, and bushed. How much is a taxi back to the El Cid and the other marinas? Who cares? All you have to do is wait for a green bus, which will take you right back to your marina for about \$1. How convenient!

The old harbor of Mazatlan is much closer to Mazatlan's Old Town, which is home to the shrimp district, *mercado*, cathedral and theater district. It's possible to anchor out there and come ashore at the so-called Mazatlan YC, which is looking a little down in the dumps. We tried to ask for info, but the gate was locked. The downside of the area is that there was an outboard theft or two in recent years. The same is true for Stone Island, which is outside the harbor and about a mile south.

We like surprises, particularly good surprises. Mazatlan was one of them.

— *latitude/rs* 01/12/2014

Starship — Islander 36 Chris and Anne-Marie Fox Our Two Years of Cruising (Victoria, Canada)

After two years of being sea gypsies, Anne-Marie and I, now 30 and 29 respectively, are back in Canada and settling into life as landlubbers. Ours was an amazing two years of cruising, filled with a lot of emotional highs and lows, and

After participating in the 2012 Ha-Ha, Chris and Anne-Marie found themselves on the rocks — the dramatic rocks at Cabo San Lucas.



STARSHIP