

Road Trip

Surf, Shore and Mangrove fishing in Magdalena Bay

By, Bill Varney, Jr.



Magdalena Bay, located on the West coast of Baja California Mexico, is huge by any account—even larger than California's San Francisco Bay. Whalers in 1840 came all the way from Boston and Hawaii to frequent this bay looking for whales. After months at sea they would arrive here to find barren mountains and a desolate shore. Today, very little has changed (except that whales are now protected) but the bay itself is still as isolated as ever with areas so remote they appear to never have been visited.

As the largest natural bay in the northern hemisphere Magdalena Bay and surrounding waters are home to hundreds of different fish. Offshore, bay and beach fishing are spectacular here with catches of tuna, marlin, dorado, wahoo, yellowtail, grouper, bonefish, corbina, halibut, corvina and snook to name just a few.

Magdalena Bay is made up of four distinct areas and consists of two large bays. To the very south is Punta Tosca where you'll find a long island surrounded by sandy shores on one side and mangrove lined bays on the other. Just to the north (In Magdalena Bay proper) you will find the town of San Carlos and the anchorage at Puerto Magdalena and Man O'War Cove. Exit Magdalena Bay and turn to the north where you will find a smaller bay, Bahia Santa Maria, which is surrounded by a costal range of mountains that protects it from the onshore winds. In Santa Maria Cove (as with Punta Tosca) you will find mangrove lined inner waterways that hold some of the best fishing in Mexico.

October, November and December are my favorite months to visit the bay so we loaded up Don Hudzietz's Pacifica Sportfisher and made our way six hundred miles down the Mexican coast from Long Beach California to Central Baja. Arriving after dark we slowly and carefully made our way into the bay, weaving between the lobster pots and tuna pens to finally set anchor.



Inside the estuary is a perfect place to fish for cabrilla, grouper and halibut from the shore

In the morning we pulled anchor and made our way into the back waters of the bay. As we rounded the southern point into the inner bay our trolling rods went screaming off and we ran back to tend them. The boat slowed and we fought the fish to the rail—both a yellowtail and a sierra mackerel. A good sign that the day may bring us just what we had come so far to find.

As we skipped across the glassy surface of the bay we could see we were alone except for a couple of local fishing pangas tucked inside a small cove. As we passed, the pangero waved and held up lobster. As soon as we slowed he approached us and began to barter. Cash proved useless here. It was shoes, fresh water, soda, beer or T-shirts he wanted.

We also inquired as to whether he could take us well back into the mangroves to do some fishing. The pangero agreed to return after his shift on the lobster pots. So after a couple of T-shirts, beer and a soda the lobster were ours and he was off to work.

We proceeded farther into the bay and after anchoring near the river mouth, readied our fishing gear. I choose to use a steelhead rod matched with a 4000 series spinning reel loaded with fifty-pound braid and a short thirty-pound fluorocarbon leader. My tackle included 1oz leadheaded swimbaits, Krocadiles and Lucky Craft hard baits. All I needed was my camera, hat and suntan lotion and we were on our way.



One of Magdalena Bay's mangrove lined estuaries

Alex, our pangero, had come back to pick us up. In no time, we were headed straight toward shore where large surf was breaking near the mouth of the estuary. One swell passed beneath us and then another. Suddenly, it was time to hang on and we were off toward shore cascading over the top of one wave after another. After a few tense moments we were zipping up the mangrove-lined river and on our way to fishing.

It was December, one of the best months to fish in Magdalena, and even though a storm had dropped rain in the bay a few days earlier the water temperature was still 78 degrees. The water was unusually clear and we could see halibut blasting out of the sand as we passed over them on our way to the first fork in the river.

Once we reached the fork our pangero turned the boat back toward the bay and pulled us up close to the mangrove bushes that line the banks. Mangroves grow from the land and into the water forming

an overhang that fish hide within. The over hang makes for a good hiding place because of both the shade it projects and the labyrinth of roots that spread out beneath the water. We dropped our baits here and quickly drifted with the current toward the bay.

My shipmate and I alternated with bites then suddenly I was into something big. In a matter of seconds I was pinned to the rail and my rig was racked across the rocks and broke off.

Time to use a bit heavier gear! The farther we went up the mangroves the more cabrilla and grouper we found. Fish pulled from every direction it seemed and you wondered what huge fish must be waiting somewhere down below the bushes.



Beware: Some very toothy creatures live in the Mag Bay mangroves

Turning around we followed the current back down toward the bay and decided to take another tributary river that was much wider.

“This is a good place for halibut”, our pangero said. He wasn’t kidding—in no time we had a dozen halibut.

As the morning turned to afternoon we decided to fish our way back to the boat and had been told there was excellent halibut fishing in the surf. We tied on hard baits and began to slowly troll as we crashed back thorough the waves. Again, the clean clear water was exploding with halibut breaking out of the sand and rushing up to catch our bait.



Bret Hudzietz with a nice mangrove halibut

After boating a pair of halibut the attack of our baits became so rabid we reeled in our lures and held them out of the water so as not to hook into a big fish that might turn the boat sideways and capsize us in the surf. Now that’s a good problem to have!

As the sun began to fall behind the coastal range it was good to get back to the boat and talk about the day. Everyone had seen and done something they had never experienced before and knew how lucky they were to even be able to get here. As the blender chopped ice into our margaritas and the warm evening breeze blew across the deck it sure was nice to finish the day with the sun setting behind our smoking barbeque. After one very long day, the yellowtail, sierra and lobster were all we needed to guarantee a good night's sleep.

Every time I go here to fish I have a different and unbelievable experience. I am amazed at how many different fish live in this bay. When I first visited here we fished from shore and in the first four casts caught halibut, yellowtail, corvina and cabrilla. Since then there's been snook, bonefish, corbina, sierra, and dozens more fish I can't even identify.

If you ever have the chance to come to this very special place—*Do It*. But don't forget to bring plenty of lures and tackle because the truth is, no one knows what lives beneath the mangroves but whatever it is it now owns a few more of my lures!



Entrance to Santa Maria Cove