



home
ground

WILD WEST

PLAYING AWAY

“Punta San Carlos has the ingredients to make you feel like a legend even when the looks don’t match”

Skunked for wind in the UK and with the *Home Ground* mobile up on bricks, **Dave White** discovers where his wife has hidden his passport, dons Stetson, chaps and poncho and heads out to explore windsurfing’s Wild West, otherwise known as Punta San Carlos, Baja California, Mexico...





PLAYING AWAY

Two fuel gauges, both showing empty, were staring back at me from the cockpit. We'd left Brown Field runway only five minutes before. As I turned round to see the others, Jem Hall bellowed out what we were all thinking against the roar of the engine: *"I hope it's a bloody short flight!"*

A thumbs-up from the pilot eased the tension slightly, but alongside his smile there was definitely an undertone of cheeky enjoyment – a trait we were to become accustomed to over the coming weeks. The perfect waves that carry you from the Bombora to the Chilli Bowl and beyond may be Baja's calling card, but as we were to discover it's the character-building years of those who inhabit the cliff-tops that create the magic which is Punta San Carlos (PSC).

FIRST SIGHT

There's something about camping that ignites the kid in all of us, but with more aching bones than good ones I thought my nights under canvas were long since past.

Questions of discomfort diminished as quickly as our plane approached our home for the next two weeks. It wasn't really the tents themselves that caught my eye but their proximity to the water's edge. All too often we refer to the conditions being a 'stone's throw away', when we actually mean a two-minute walk. With the tents on the edge of a small cliff it looked more like a 'stone's drop' than a throw.

Trying to make sense of the vista through my window it felt like the cat had caught my tongue, and I hadn't been alone. If it weren't for the roar of the engine we'd have sat in silence as the pilot banked on his final approach for the gravel runway that not only backed the encampment but was closer to where I would be laying my head than I'd normally park at home.

With our feet on the ground we were welcomed with a who's who and what's what tour of the camp, and being only 45m by 30m it didn't take long. What I'd taken to be grass from the air turned out to be carpet! Our little oasis in the Mexican desert was just like an open-air living room. The dining room come lounge was the only building with a door, and that was only used for the evening meal or movie.

With just one wall to protect the camp from the prevailing wind, everything followed in a line of importance: food, drink, kit and shower. Two groups of tents at each end of the campsite broke the natural order to leave a central rigging area for the toys.

A sense of relief came over me as I unzipped my tent. It wasn't any bigger than those of my schoolboy memories, but it was spotlessly clean. Not only that, it also housed a comfortable mattress, pillow and freshly laundered sleeping bag.

With the first of my camping concerns put to bed it was time to take the second. My culinary skills rank from little to none, with none being the more accurate. While I shouldn't complain of my past camp meal encounters, let's say expectations weren't too high.

From that first morsel to pass my lips to the last one, just before take-off weeks later, the food was not only endless but had nothing in common with any camping experience I'd ever had before. Put a roof over the kitchen and plush chairs around the table and I could have been dining in my favourite restaurant. The food was not only excellent, it was fresh, varied and relentless.

“Picking up a wave is super-easy, and stamina is the only restriction on the number of bottom turns you make”





ELK: Kevin Trejo

AKA: Morrito (meaning 'little kid', named by some of our Mexican friends)

AGE: 50 years young!

OCCUPATION: Dream facilitator

BEACH: Punta San Carlos, Baja California, Mexico (a.k.a. paradise)

WINDSURFING: Yes please! Actually, being a surfer since age 10 I resisted the windsurfing nudge from friends at first. In 1984 I only knew windsurfing as flat water rail-rides and inside the boom sailing in the harbour, and thought why the heck would I do this dumb sport when you can go surfing and ride waves instead. Then I was kidnapped by some windsurfing friends and taken to a California hot-spot in Palm Springs called The Ponds! I was kicking and screaming the whole way until we pulled up to 30 knots and guys flying by doing the most insane high speed carving gybes you've ever seen. That's when I said "Holy shit, give me one of those!" I skipped the uphaul stage (I still don't know how to uphaul) and learned to waterstart in 15 minutes with the help of Streamlined (best booms on the planet) owner Dave Dominy, and the rest is history. Of course, 40 knots of wind didn't hurt either!

STYLE: Waves please! If you can ride it, it's for me. Surfboards, sailboards, kiteboards, skis, snowboards, mountain bikes, motos – love 'em all! I hate team sports. I hate ball-sports. If you can ride it, give me one. That's why my company name is SoloSports. A solo sport is something you do on your own – okay, not necessarily alone but just not as a team. No waiting around for enough guys to play ball and no getting mixed up with guys that suck. No silly racquets or nets or hoops – just give me a board and some waves and I'm in heaven. I know I'm not the only one out there like this, so if you feel the same way let's hear from you. Shoot me an email or a Facebook message and let me know how you really feel. SoloSports is not a crime! I can help you understand your feelings, you're not alone...

CRAIC: WTF? I can't find this in the dictionary! Whitey says it's a story about the local people and scene, but I could fill several books with stories from the past 26 years in PSC. We have a saying that one of our guests coined and it stuck: "You just don't know until you go!" I wouldn't want to cheat any potential visitors out of a morsel of their ultimate PSC experience, so if you want some craic then you're just going to have to join us and get it firsthand.

FACILITIES: PSC is so much more than world class, ridiculously long down-the-line wavesailing. It's the whole SoloSports experience that lasts a lifetime, from the private plane flight to camp over Baja checking out all the surf breaks on the way to the food, the people, the decompression you get from the real world, the camaraderie, the unbelievable beauty and unspoiled remoteness that's hard to get anywhere else.

SECRET: Wind and waves all year round baby!

TRAVEL: Even though PSC is in the middle of frigging nowhere half-way around the world from the UK, it's not that out of touch. We make it easy. Just get to San Diego, California, and jump on one of our planes and you're there in two hours. We'll feed you, make you comfortable, let you ride top-of-the-line toys from windsurf kit to surfboards, SUPs, mountain bikes, kayaks and more, and give you a nice cosy mini cabin tent fully loaded with everything you need. All you need to bring is your wetsuit, harness, clothes and a hankering for a great time! We've been doing it for over 25 years and know how to do it, so come join us. I'll admit it's not cheap but you've got to pay to play! I also know it's great value for the money considering that all you need is your wetsuit and harness – and the price even includes your bar tab.



TOY TOWN

Thankfully relentless was also an appropriate description for the conditions. The waves may change in magnitude but the ocean was never flat and the toy cupboard was fully equipped to take advantage of every condition.

Ezzy sails, RRD and Quatro boards packed out the racks I was interested in, though just as many options were offered to kitesurfers and stand-up paddlers. SoloSports count the camp as full with 20 campers, so you'll never have to squabble over equipment. There's more than enough to go around, and the only thing you won't share is your boom. Rodney fits you out with your own lines and carbon Streamline boom and a place to hang it on your first outing.

Right in front of the campsite is the first and friendliest of the four breaks. At high tide the beach-break touches the cliff base of the camp, but even then it's an easy launch. The same can be said for low tide, except for an occasional stumble as you wade out to the break through knee-deep water that obscures the odd slippery rock below its surface.

Getting out back was super-easy, and at no point during the trip did anyone have an issue. Even those who were just being introduced to wavesailing on Jem's course slipped out back without any problems. Once there it was a doddle to pick up a wave, and stamina is the only restriction on the number of bottom turns you make.

With the wind being cross-offshore it was easy enough to make it back up to start it all over again in one tack if you point upwind reasonably well. Drift off the wind and you'd be putting in a tack or two as a bank of kelp blocks you from sailing too far out.

Continue to push upwind beyond the beach-break and the kelp starts to thin out by the small island. This is where you'll find the Bombora, the outermost of the reefs where deep water hits a shallow shelf to create a more powerful wave. Neither popular with nor ideal for beginners, it does provide a few with great opportunities to get some height into their jumps on the way out while only offering a one hit wonder on the way in.

Had we spent the entire trip on these two breaks, PSC would have already made it into my all-time sailing spots. Yet with talk of a new swell coming in, it was set to rank even higher on my list. To mention my sailing and waves in the same sentence usually fills me with dread, but PSC has the ingredients to make you feel like a legend even when the looks don't match.

I'd already had my fill of sailing and was relaxing behind my lens with a glass or two on the camp cliff when the swell started to show on the point. Jem was out having his 'hour of power', so we made our way along the cliff to where we dispatched Jem downwind to join Kevin McGillivray and a few other Point and Chilli Bowl regulars who already knew what was coming.

While I have the pictures to prove that both spots match the evening bar talk, it wasn't until the next day that I found the view through my lens fell woefully short of the experience. The next two days are now firmly placed at the top of my all-time chart.

“From the first turn in the Chilli Bowl to the last the experience is like no other I’ve enjoyed”





ELK: Clark Bradley Merritt

AKA: Che Potle

Our local cooking staff nicknamed me 'Clarkito en el dia, Che Potle en la noche'. Apparently it has something to do with my chipotle chilli pepper personality at night when fuelled on yerba matte and dark rum.

AGE: 60

I agree with Satchel Paige, the famous golden era black baseball player who pontificated: "If you didn't know how old you was, how old would you be?"

OCCUPATION: Director of sales and marketing – SoloSports Adventure Holidays

Most scoff when they learn this, but it IS a full time job. They see me in PSC and think "WOW, what a life!" I have an office in Huntington Beach, complete with leg irons under the desk and an office door just high enough off the floor to slide in quesadillas when I'm creating. It's a nice balance. At camp I document the guest action with digital stills and video. I live vicariously through the lens when standing out there on the point freezing my arse off. I feel very fortunate that I have a job that sells itself. It also helps that I love the product.

BEACH: PSC, but part of my heart still lies in between Secos and Countyline Malibu

My first time at PSC was 1987. I was working for Pleasant Hawaiian Holidays with great Hawaii perks, but after that first trip to PSC I never went to Maui again. Every four-day plus block of free time had me eating dirt on the Point. It just gets better every time I go.

WINDSURFING: I discovered wavesailing in 1983 while surfing at Secos one afternoon. I'd been fighting off a pack of rude surf piranha groms while hanging on to a piece of kelp to keep from being blown out of the line-up from a wicked cross-off wind. I noticed two wavesailors smacking the lip on the downwind peak – Rich Myers and Dave Daly. They were catching seven waves to my one and hooting and hollering. I looked at the groms, growled, paddled to the beach, found the local shop owner and said "Sign me up". I learnt to wavesail in cross-off starboard tack conditions. It was a bootcamp for a yet to be discovered PSC. Rich and I became friends, and it was Rich who soon afterward would discover PSC as a wavesailing spot and beg me to follow him down to 'El Dorado'. Being a weenie I waited until 1987 to see for myself. Okay, now I'm going on record – Jalama is the worst place I've ever sailed. I don't know what's worse – 0-60 and a doldrums in the wave impact zone or hearing all the locals chanting "You really missed it. You should have been here yesterday". PSC bro Kevin McGillivray will enthusiastically disagree – the bastard has scored countless epic sessions there and has always lived to tell the tale. To its credit the Jalama Campstore has one of the best burgers in the western hemisphere. Well worth the trip in.

STYLE: I've been a surfer for more years than most wavesailors have been alive. Although sailing tricks are impressive, for me they pale against a true surfing wavesailing style. Rich Myers to me had the consummate surf style in the waves. Rich's friend Jason Polakow is right up there at the top, and rubber man Francisco Goya drops my jaw every time he bottom turns. Brian Caserio deserves an honourable mention for surf style mostly because he abandoned the boom for a kitebar. Rumour has it Brian's coming back around. So when I wavesail it's just an extension of my surfing style, albeit I ain't no Richie or Brian. Of course, if you ask any of my friends they'll tell you that I not only have no style – I've got no class.

CRAIC: I'm writing a book on my 25 years romping at PSC. I do have a million tall tales and consider it a dead heat when challenged to a verbal duel with fellow yarn spinner, Santa Cruz sailor Kirby Fosgate. Kirby makes me work for the bacon and somehow our campfire competitions are always called a draw because both parties are too drunk to speak clearly. Okay, did I ever tell you about my worst moment at PSC? I never, ever go to the 'Brown House' at night. Once I couldn't go on without a brief visit. Nervously finishing my business, I pulled up my boxers not knowing that a large spider was in the gusset. Didn't take me long to realise what was tickling my brown star. Did a Bennie Hill all the way to camp, much to the chagrin of the guests and my hitchhiker. Wouldn't you?

FACILITIES: PSC has been branded Baja's ultimate adventure sports destination. There are so many activities, weather permitting, that it shuts down every other windsurfing destination I've been to. I've spent the last 10 years exploring the desert and the mesa. The cultural and natural aspects are astounding. Windsurfing, surfing, kiting, stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking, mountain biking, hiking – PSC has it all. And they're all world class.

SECRET: Solo camp life – tip 1. When you get up in the morning and it isn't what you hoped for, go do something for two hours and check it again. Chances are things will change in your favour more often than not. Tip 2. In light wind forget kiting – SUP with a sail. Best water alternative I've experienced in years. Tip 3. Join the 'first to bed – first to shred' club by slipping graciously into the good night after 9:30pm, avoiding the chilli-bomb cantina. Tip 4. Leave the cologne at home on your Adventure Holiday. Nothing good can come of it.

TRAVEL: I've sailed around a bit. Like I said, nothing tops PSC. Barbados was nice, and Malibu is my second favourite. I don't travel much anymore, but now that the TSA is x-raying and groping airline passengers I've been tempted to pick up my travelling shoes with a pissed ferret in my shorts. That should put me into the front of the line.





The wave on the Point was bigger and steeper than the two uppermost breaks, and the stronger, more consistent wind would have allowed me to drop a board size if it wasn't for where I was heading. While the sensation of size was intoxicating, the Point felt like an aperitif before the main event.

A quick but short burst of speed links one diminishing wave to another that's just starting to build. From the first turn in the Chilli Bowl to the last the experience is like no other I've enjoyed. I'm sure my lines were far from impressive for the viewer, but sometimes it's your own perspective that counts.

The wave seems endless, and while it inevitably starts to lose its power you're always offered another turn. But tempting as it may seem, each successive turn comes at a cost, as the Chilli Bowl sits in the lee of the point – so the further you ride it, the harder it is to get back out.

While the Point offered the opportunity to drop a board size, the Chilli Bowl suggested the opposite. The occasional silhouette of a lone sailor taking the long road home on the cliff-top was enough to cut my rides short despite upping the volume beneath my feet.

DAY-TO-DAY

Some may think two weeks is too high a price for two days in the Chilli Bowl. Personally I'd do it again even if there wasn't anything else to do, which is about as far from the truth as you can get.

Camp life soon finds its routine, and being an insomniac mine started by watching the sunrise from the comfort of the lounge bar's sofa. While the atmosphere in the camp is very chilled and I was never alone for long, even those who enjoy a good lie-in were unzipping tents long before the sun was high in the sky.

The real wake-up call came with the pre-breakfast SUP session. The water here is cold compared to the air temperature, and even during the day you'll want a wetsuit. Breakfast was generally followed by more SUPing or a mountain bike ride while we waited for the wind to arrive.

Windsurfing went on long into the afternoon. Sailing was only brought to an end by physical fitness or the call of a cool beer on the cliff-top watching the hardy few catching their last rides.

With everyone ashore there's always a treat waiting on the bar courtesy of the kitchen, though more often than not it's a reminder that your first 'Baja fog' is long overdue. The Baja fog is a shot and chaser all in one. With the aid of barman Neil Foley's steady hand, the tequila is held atop the beer in the bottle neck, just waiting to be quickly upturned and swallowed.

Baja fog or not, the meal that followed always came with a wow factor and the reliving of the day's stories as we sat as one group around the dining room's huge table. Occasionally a movie interrupted the inevitable journey back to the bar, but that's where our night would end.

“Your sailing is only brought to an end by physical fitness or the call of a cool beer on the cliff”





DISCOVERY

Just waiting for wind would waste what PSC has to offer. Everyone took to the water at least once a day for a SUP session, but for me the real surprise was the moment between SUPing and windsurfing. If it wasn't exactly what they did in the '80s I'd be wondering why no-one thought of it before: windSUPing.

Windsurfing has changed so much since we first discovered it. The motivation of our first steps seem to have been lost with the passing of time. Nothing is going to change the days in the Chilli Bowl, but despite having endless days that came a close second it was the ease of windSUPing that sticks in my mind.

It didn't matter which sport took me to the water, but the windSUPing sessions were growing in time. First it was adding the rig earlier into the SUP session and then extending into what we all see as windsurfing. SUPing is great until you're paddling against the wind more than catching rides, and with the winds being cross-offshore that came early. On the other hand with a sail attached I could get out back, catch a wave and do it all over again before Jem had wobbled out.

I don't doubt Jem had the better ride with a small board beneath his feet, but in marginal conditions my time was better spent riding than swimming. I questioned if this was just a size issue, but those in Jem's group who experienced windsurfing history for the first time made sure the next day was their second.

BADLANDS

Beyond the comfort of our carpeted camp the land is dry and rugged, though you only have to join the man behind SoloSports for one mountain bike session to know there's more than just water keeping him here.

With several hundred feet of elevation and endless miles of soft dirt-tracks into the desert, mountain biking is a must. Kevin Trejo took us up, down and around more tracks than my legs were prepared for. To be fair, it was only the first climb out of camp that took the toll.

If riding's not your game I wouldn't push him too far. He shares the same sick humour as our pilot, and there are far too many hills to climb if that's your tipple. Seeing a few crazy riders taking on natural but skatepark-looking Badlands wouldn't have gone amiss, but for me it was all about the journey home.

Hurting downhill with turns that not only seemed endless but linked seamlessly together, it's only when you hit the last few hundred metres of flat that you realise just how much effort gets put into going downhill.

ALWAYS REMEMBER

We're not only 275 miles out of San Diego but the nearest shop is 50 miles away by road. Nothing here but the enjoyment is natural; everything including the water has to be brought in, so if you like to take a shower after every dip in the ocean you'll be in for a surprise. Showers are but once a day, and that includes any dusty dirt riding, though you'll be given a sports wipe when you get out of the saddle.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that if there's no plumbed-in services there'll be nothing plumbed-out either. Taking care of business is done beyond the campsites boundaries, so expect to stretch your legs before you find the outhouse door.

Electricity is generated on site, and while there was no limit on how much you use, what you can actually do with it comes with natural restrictions. Charge your phone all you like – it won't be ringing again until you're back in the US. Contact with the outside world is strictly via the internet, and that's in short supply.

The World Wide Web doesn't seem so worldly when it's beamed in from outer space. Emails and a few barely audible Skype conversations squeeze their way through the satellite connection, but attempts to watch videos can bring the system to its knees. To keep the camp connected everyone is asked to restrict their use, and self-policing clearly hasn't worked over wi-fi so expect your connection to come via cable.



INVISIBLE PAST

I couldn't agree more with SoloSports' motto "You just don't know until you go", but listening to some of the stories of old I'm glad the world was initially blissfully unaware. While Clark Merritt may be the last of the four amigos to get a mention, his tales of old are no less relevant than the others, and being camp photographer he can back them up with an arsenal of pictures.

While the cliff-top campers are still doing their own thing between our camp and the Point, old disused motorhomes gently rusting away were the only signs of the first PSC pioneers.

A Baja fog or two in the fading light of day was usually enough to loosen the tales of the past from our hosts' lips. The first windsurfer to experience the joys of PSC arrived in 1981, and three years later the action was caught on camera for the first time. But rather than offer the delights to the rest of the world, PSC's real name was carefully concealed to protect its location in a 'Baja Adventure' article printed in *Californian Boardrider*.

Amazingly the deception continued for the next 13 years, and it wasn't until 1997 that the name Punta San Carlos made it into print. Before this it was variously referred to as Punta Roca, Saint Baja, Punta Tierra, Punta Panico, Centenario, La Punta, and La Bombora, to name a few.

With the secret out it wasn't long before word spread, and within two years the world's best were tearing it up as the PWA pulled into PSC. In the days of secrecy it's easy to answer SoloSports' motto "You just don't know until you go" with a simple "We didn't, because we couldn't". But would we have wanted to?

With buildings being destroyed in the dead of night and different factions vying for control, PSC sounded more like an outpost in the Wild West than the chilled-out surf camp it is today.

As entertaining as they are, the stories are too numerous for the pages of this issue, and with them being part of the trip I wouldn't want to diminish your experience. All I'll say is that it feels like I missed very little of the past, but as history made it what it is today I'm thankful for the result, which for me was perfect.

WHEN AND WHAT?

There doesn't seem a bad time to head for PSC as the wind blows all year, albeit at varying strengths. The strongest winds occur around March/April time when they hit the 20-35 knot mark, you can drop that by another five knots for May/June/July, with a further five being lost in August, September and October.

While your call could be based solely on the wind strength, it's worth noting that many riders prefer the slightly lighter times of year, when the wave-face is cleaner and smoother. We were there in August, and while we sailed almost every day I never ventured above 6.2m, with my average sail size being 5.8m.

Packing an extra item or two will improve your stay, so take something warm for the evening along with a steamer for days in the water. If you have your own MTB pedals and shoes then pack them; if not bring something that you can ride in as you'd really be missing out.

A camp mug wouldn't go amiss, while a torch is essential, and for any fellow insomniacs I'd strongly recommend you update your iTunes and pack the hard drive full of books and videos. ☺



If you fancy a slice of PSC paradise and need more information, check out solosports.net, email baja@solosports.net or search for SoloSports Adventure Holidays on Facebook.

Better still, combine that slice with a generous helping of tuition from our very own Jem Hall, who rates PSC as one of his favourite places in the world to sail. His wave clinic happens every August, and sells out 10 months in advance, so book early for 2012 as most people rebook this clinic. More at jemhall.com