

# Acapulco

Linda and Mike had planned their Mexican trip for a long time. They had purchased a 39-foot yacht and joined the cruising course in the yacht club of Alameda. Both Mike and Linda enjoyed the classes and the friendship of the many prospective cruisers they met. Mike knew that the yacht he bought was mainly built for the charter market as a weekend sailing vessel. But he got it cheap.

Linda adored the boat with its spacious cabins, large galley with a modern gas oven and a comfortable lounge. But it was the bathroom that gave her the image of life on a yacht cruising along the Mexican coast and the sunny Sea of Cortez. In privacy, she could stand up and shower with both cold and hot water available.

‘The toilet is electric — can you imagine!’ she told her best friend.

Mike explained to her in technical terms that the previous owner had installed a water maker which would produce freshwater when cruising with the engine running. She was not interested. The only thing she cared about was that freshwater was available. All the technical stuff and how to sail the thing was Mike’s problem — she trusted him. What eventually convinced her that the yacht was the boat for her was the stern platform, which had a ladder and a hand shower. Linda could get in and out of the water easily and rinse herself off. She boasted to her

best friend as if she had to persuade her to come along. But for Linda, it was all about convincing herself — and her best friend — that the decision to take the Mexican cruising trip was hers and Mike's, and not Mike's alone.

Linda had no intention of joining the yacht captain classes. She was happy to join most of the other wives and just concentrate on a coxswain certificate. The instructors knew, of course, that a successful yachting course had to be for both spouses. The final issue of certificates had to be formal but leave everybody with a feeling of achievement. The participants did not doubt the courses were taught by professional maritime people, because they always wore smart Navy uniforms with gold stripes on their shoulder straps. For the instructors, it was all about securing satisfaction — the course fees and the number of participants were always on their mind.

The final test for the season's yachting group was a Sunday trip from Alameda to East Bay, Angel Island. Couples were organised in five sailing vessels, each with an instructor and a deckhand. The yachts were loaded with lunch provisions, including Champagne, to be consumed when the final certificates were awarded. Linda and Mike were allocated berths on the yacht "Tiburon", owned by one of the leading instructors. Before departure, the hopeful yacht students studied the day's tides, currents, and winds; it looked to be a fine day.

As they left the yacht harbour, the men admired the Tiburon and all the smart gadgets on board, while the women were chattering away discussing and admiring the recently bought foul weather gear. For them, looking smart and wearing the latest maritime fashion was important. For the men, it was all about sailing, because from now on, they were on their own. But they did not need to worry, the instructor and the deckhand had everything under control, and in sunshine and light winds, the fleet cruised leisurely towards East Bay and the lunch.

Upon arrival, anchors were dropped, and experiences loudly

communicated across the water to the wives on the other four boats. For those interested in going ashore, dinghies were launched to return when the lunch was ready. When everybody was back in their respective vessel, each yachting student was given a multiple-choice questionnaire — one for the yacht captain candidates and one for coxswain candidates. The instructor and the deckhand assisted if anybody found the questions difficult. The questionnaires were collected, and the deckhand disappeared below for assessment. Shortly after, he appeared with the marked questionnaires and a handful of signed certificates. Naturally, they all passed. The instructor congratulated all the new captains and coxswains and handed over the certificates. Then he opened his briefcase and pulled out a stack of licences in a watertight plastic envelope with a passport size photograph of each yachting student, signed by the director of The Diploma Company Yacht Training School. In relief, they all got stuck into the lunch and the Champagne. A couple of hours later, the armada of five sailing vessels zigzagged back to the Alameda Marina.

Mike and Linda joined a group of local yachties who had their sights on the annual migration to the blue waters of Mexico and the Sea of Cortez by signing up to the rally “Baja Ha-Ha” departing early November from San Diego. The group had several Sunday meetings in the yacht club to discuss their preparations and take advice from anybody who had previously made the trip. The men inspected one another’s boats, discussing everything from the top of the mast through the rigging down to the bolts securing the keel to the hull. Of particular interest were the electronic navigation gear and the latest VHF radios. Nearly all invested in brand new radar equipment, and of course, automatic steering equipment; the autopilot. The talk progressed to route and weather planning and whether paper charts were needed now that all had invested in the latest model of plotters.

The ladies of the yachties enjoyed the company of newfound friends and met at cafes to discuss food and provisions which they

brought to their boats by the supermarket trolley loads. They all had fridges on board and power from the dock ensured nothing was wasted. Linda asked her husband whether it was possible to install a freezer on board, but he politely declined, saying such a gadget would quickly exhaust their batteries. There was a small freezing compartment in their fridge, but Linda found the capacity far too little. Reluctantly, she carried her purchases of roasts, whole chickens, steaks, and packages of BBQ sausages back home. She swiftly rejected Mike's suggestion of buying bags of beef jerky they could store in the last available space under the bathroom sink.

'We have already decided that this space is for my toiletries!' she said with a stern, defensive look.

Mike knew that driving his argument further was a lost cause. Every Sunday, Mike nervously watched the water level creep up the sides of their 39-foot yacht, passing the waterline by two inches. His fellow yachties assured him it was not a worry. They were not heading into a storm or anything like it. They had been told many times that going south was a fair wind experience, as an extended holiday with parties planned at every anchorage.

Then Neil, the owner of Tiburon, appeared at their regular meetings. Neil was a retired Army officer who had commanded an armoured vehicle platoon in several conflicts. They all looked up to him because he was their leading instructor at the yacht training school.

'Guys,' he said while rolling the ends of his red moustache, 'I'm going to San Diego. If you want, we can cruise south together?'

There was a pause. Then Mike asked nervously, 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' was the response. 'I'm joining the Baja Ha-Ha to Cabo. It's more fun when you have company.'

When the yacht ladies joined the meeting, Neil introduced his wife Sue to the company.

Sue took over describing what lay ahead.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘cruising down the California coast in the long, lazy days of late summer is a joy. Bays and harbours dot the shore well-situated for comfortable day sailing with slow-paced mornings progressing into exhilarating afternoons galloping ahead of the sea breeze to reach the next anchorage by sundown. In every location, there are attractions to amuse even the most seasoned cruiser.’

Sue paused, enjoying the gasps of excitement from the lady yachties.

‘Well,’ said Neil, ‘are you coming with us or not?’ He eyed the yachties as if he had commanded an attack.

But there were no signs of retreat; they all clapped and thanked Sue and Neil for joining them.

‘We will leave early October, so we have lots of time before the Baja Ha-Ha departs in early November.’

Now the aspiring cruisers had reached the point of no return. Not going would cause them to lose face, which would likely leave them friendless.

At sunrise, they all gathered in the marina, ready to leave. During the previous evening, the last load of booze was stored onboard. All had a sleepless night. After a stressful departure, the yachts motored out of the marina in close pursuit of Tiburon, with Sue at the helm. Outside the breakwater, Neil hoisted all sails and in the light northerly breeze Tiburon sped away. The five yachts were left behind, but soon a flurry of febrile activity descended on the boats. With swearing and shouting, the mainsails were set followed by the furling genoas. They all had their autopilots and engines running, leaving the wives to be look-outs while their husbands attended the sails and sheets. There was screaming and swearing; only luck prevented major collisions. But soon, all boats settled down and followed Tiburon like a gaggle of geese.

Mike eventually got control over his yacht and was able to stop the engine. He adjusted the course on the autopilot and the sheets of the sails. Suddenly, the five yachts found themselves in a race to catch the Tiburon. Except for Tiburon, all men were at the helm with their wives sitting in the cockpit trying to find a comfortable spot avoiding saltwater spray.

At lunchtime, a brisk north-westerly picked up. Having left the pre-packed sandwiches below, Mike felt hungry after a long stressful morning and asked Linda to fetch his sandwiches. Linda looked firmly ahead and answered briskly,

‘Fetch them yourself!’

Within thirty minutes, Linda was lying down with a wet towel over her head. She had vomited twice in the cockpit. Mike had tried to get the ship bucket out, but Linda refused to move, preventing him from opening the hatch. Now the stern shower came in handy, and Mike washed the vomit overboard.

With Tiburon safely tucked in behind the breakwater at Half Moon Bay, the five pursuing yachts arrived one by one, with all the wives lying flat in the cockpit with wet towels over their faces.

A quiet evening descended on the yachts, arguments and yelling subsided to the sound of sizzling BBQs accompanied by loud giggling and talking as the late five o’clock martinis reached the bottom of empty stomachs. Sue visited all five cruising yachts, declining the offered drinks and nibbles. She diplomatically suggested to the seasoned yacht captains that maybe they should allow their wives at the helm to avoid, or at least reduce, the tendency of seasickness. After a bit of partying among the yachts, the armada fell asleep on their bunks to the raucous barking and snorting from the sea lion colony on the breakwater.

The Tiburon, with the five aspiring cruising yachts in tow, proceeded southwards to San Diego stopping overnight and rounding Point Conception, the “Cape Horn of California” as a milestone on the passage down the West Coast. After experiencing

the Channel Islands, they headed straight for San Diego and the protection of Shelter Island.

With great expectations, they entered La Playa Basin and eventually found their pre-booked berths in the yacht club marina. The excitement of arrival was overwhelming and hard to control. Shops with marine fashion were plentiful, and all had to be investigated. The five women made shopping their favourite pastime, and Mike soon discovered his budget had not considered the extravaganza in restaurants and cafes and the further need for additional dockside fashion. He, and the other now seasoned yacht captains, looked forward to their departure as the controlling agent for their out-of-control negative cash flow. Now there were only a few more obstacles: the Ha-Ha Welcome Party, the Annual Ha-Ha Kick-Off Costume Party and BBQ, and the Baja Ha-Ha Kick-Off Parade. It was a nervous time of preparation before departure south, a week later.

On November 1, a climax was reached. Mike ran around like a headless goose to skipper-check-in, mandatory skippers' meeting, and then to join his wife Linda at the Annual Ha-Ha Kick-Off Costume Party and BBQ outside a major marine store which sponsored the event. Linda had secured two costumes, one for herself as Dolly Parton, and one for Mike as Elvis Presley. The majority of attending crews seemed to prefer to be pirates, but that didn't bother Linda; she had been a fan of Elvis since she was a teenager. Mike had no costume preference at all; he just wanted to go back to his yacht and his bunk. Linda handed him a drink and as the party-goers absorbed a steady flow of long-drinks Mike enjoyed being Elvis.

It took time before the BBQ was ready. For many, the event was the first time they were introduced to the Mexican drink, the margarita. The tequila had an immediate effect, and the noisy crowd partied close to midnight until the first police patrol appeared.

At 10 a.m., the following morning, the America's Cup starting

gun from the Sport Fishing Association of California rang through the ears of some heavy-headed cruisers, launching the Baja Ha-Ha parade. The parade proceeded to the offshore start outside San Diego Bay off Point Loma. At 11 a.m. sharp, the fleet was off. A fresh north-westerly breeze brought the fleet to Ensenada, 65 miles south. For most boats, arrival in Ensenada, the first port of entry to Mexico, was a relief, and everyone looked forward to an early night.

The following weeks, the Baja Ha-Ha fleet proceeded south in a north-westerly breeze, jumping from harbour to anchorage, from anchorage to harbour, and from party to party, with no concerns about how they would go back. Few knew that going home, the infamous up-hill bash, was a slow motoring experience which could last weeks on end unless the cruisers decided to sail back via Hawaii!

Excitement and relief mounted among the Baja Ha-Ha fleet during the last leg from Bahia Santa Maria to Cabo San Lucas, and it reached an insurmountable high when Bahia San Lucas appeared ahead; the first taste of tropical paradise after 710 nautical miles since San Diego. More than 100 cruising yachts and big game sport fishers lined moorings and anchorages of the outer harbour. Boats came and went. The dream came alive.

After mooring and check-ins, the crews joined the “Can’t Believe We Cheated Death Again Dance and Party Madness for the Young Heart at Squid Roe until the Last Body Falls”. Mike, Linda, and their cruiser friends were in a state of exaggerated hilarity. They partied most of the night, only to wake up to reality at the awards presentations in Marina Cabo San Lucas. Days got slower and so did the final farewell. Tears and hugs flowed as boats, one by one, were farewelled. Most sailed into the Sea of Cortez to La Paz to meet again at the La Paz Beach Party at La Costa Restaurant to join in the Mexican folk dancing. Others had heard the consistent call from their exhausted livers and proceeded north to Puerto Escondido “hidden port” to rest.

Soon, there were only two boats left. The Tiburon with Sue and Neil and the 39-foot yacht with Linda and Mike on board.

One quiet afternoon, Linda and Mike invited Sue and Neil on their boat for a coffee. They sat around the table in the cockpit and watched the boats coming and going. They all had a couple of relaxed days and left Baja Ha-Ha behind them. The conversation revolved about the up-coming sailfish fishing competition as they watched all the fast fishing boats arrive with their long fishing rods on the sides of the wheelhouse and the flying bridge.

The conversation turned to the future and what plans they had. Mike said that they probably would spend a month or so with a lazy life in the Sea of Cortez.

‘What about you?’ Mike asked.

‘Well,’ said Neil, ‘we are going south to Acapulco. I have to meet a business associate, but we will just wander down the coast and enjoy all the anchorages. We will look forward to revisiting Banderas Bay, Las Hadas and Laguna de Navidad.’

‘Acapulco!’ cried Linda with excitement. ‘Can you remember the old Elvis movie “Fun in Acapulco”? — I just loved that movie. Remember how Elvis jumped from the cliffs and the beautiful Ursula Andrews, and all the fabulous songs? Gosh, that was great. I would like to go to Acapulco — imagine if Elvis turned up!’

Neil looked at Linda with a smile and said, ‘Elvis has surely died, but the Clavadistas are still jumping from the cliffs some 130 feet above the sea; it’s quite spectacular. Maybe you will see the ghost of Elvis.’

Mike joined their conversation. ‘I hate to disappoint you, but Elvis never went to Mexico; he was banned, and everything was shot elsewhere.’

Linda looked disappointed, but Sue came to her rescue.

‘Mike, how can you be that cruel? Whether it was shot in

Acapulco or not doesn't matter; we all have the right to live our dreams.'

'Yes,' said Linda, 'I want to go to Acapulco and look for the ghost of Elvis.'

She looked firmly at her husband. Neil opened his hands in gesture and said, 'If you want to go with us, you're welcome.'

Sue nodded.

After Sue and Neil had left, the couple discussed their prospects. Mike wanted to go north, but Linda wanted to go south.

'It's a long way to Acapulco,' said Mike.

But Linda had an argument and said, 'We are not experienced sailors, although you pretend to be. We now have the chance to sail with two very experienced sailors who have cruised in Mexico for many years, so why not?'

'All right, I give in,' Mike said with a sigh.

Back on the Tiburon, Sue asked Neil, 'Do you think the 39-foot yacht would be a good courier?'

'Why not?' said Neil. 'There are several hidden spaces below which are not that easy to find. It is a result of the sandwich construction they use for this type of bucket.'

Sue nodded and said, 'That's good; we will take them along.'

The following days, Neil and Sue outlined the route they had decided to take to reach Acapulco. They would make an overnight trip to Mazatlan on the mainland and spend a couple of days there before sailing on to Isla Isabela and San Blas. Sue became excited by the thought, but Mike and Linda worried about the overnight trip — they had never sailed at night before. But Sue said, 'Don't you worry, it will be fine. You can't imagine how beautiful Isla Isabela is. The island is full of nesting frigate birds and blue-footed boobies; there is a bird research station there.'

She looked at Linda, who got excited when she heard what Sue

said. Sue added, 'There are fishermen on the island, we might get a bucketload of lobsters, if not, then we will get them in San Blas. They are so nice on the barbie.'

After a couple of days in Cabo, where the girls shopped in the supermarket and browsed all the shops available, the two cruisers left for Mazatlan. The day was calm, and they motored along, setting sails with every puff of air. The fair weather continued during the night. After an evening meal, Mike rested on his bunk next to the navigation table while the motor was running and the auto-pilot was steering. The navigation lights were on. Linda sat comfortably on the cushions in the cockpit, reading a book under the small lamp Mike had installed. Occasionally, she looked at the radar where Mike had set the alarm to 2 nautical miles. Linda could see a blinking dot three miles ahead of them, which Mike had explained was the Tiburon. There was nothing else. Before midnight, Linda woke Mike as she slipped into bed while complaining about the noisy engine. Mike made himself a cup of coffee and took over Linda's cushions, stretching his legs on the cockpit bench, enjoying the sailing and the spectacular starry sky. During the night, he nodded on and off, but everything went well.

In the early morning, he spotted the coastline with the rising sun. They quickly found the narrow entrance to the marina and moored next to the Tiburon with Sue and Neil, who greeted them with a morning glass of Champagne. Several other cruisers joined in.

Sailing down the coast was mainly day cruises in light winds and motoring. They anchored every afternoon and Linda thought they were magical places, but Isla Isabela was her favourite. She wanted to stay on, but they needed provisions. The lobsters appeared in San Blas as Sue had promised and they enjoyed the small town and market. From there they reached the spectacular Banderas Bay, where large cruise ships came and went from the dock of Puerto Vallarta.

‘It is too busy there. I suggest we go to La Cruz on the other side. It is a cozy place,’ Neil said, and so they did.

Sue took Linda to a jewellery shop and showed her the Mexican fire opals. She was stunned by their beauty. Back on the boat, she persuaded Mike to buy some for her.

‘It’s soon our anniversary, remember!’ Linda exclaimed.

Mike obeyed when Sue told him the price. He knew nothing about fire opals but trusted her judgement. Linda was thrilled and showed the opals to her husband and Neil — she was happy.

The cruising south became even more magical as they visited Las Hadas and further on Laguna de Navidad. Linda and Sue spent two days in the hotel swimming pool while Mike and Neil were reading. Mike found it difficult to relax because he expected a large hotel bill. The two cruising yachts eventually reached a small, sheltered harbour. In Mike’s pilot, it was Puerto Escondido, while in Neil’s it was Papanoa. A visit to town cleared up the confusion; both names were on signs along the road. Neil explained that there are many small harbours in Mexico which were called Puerto Escondido, but he asked one of the locals, and they called the harbour Papanoa — the port for Noah’s Ark.

When they met on Tiburon for their usual five o’clock drinks, Neil said, ‘I’m sorry, but we must leave very early. I have this meeting with a business associate. I would like to get it out of the way. I had an email from him, and he will come from Mexico City. You shouldn’t have any problem sailing to Acapulco, which is just around the corner, so to speak.’

Mike and Linda sat quietly, holding on to their drinks. Sue looked at the couple and said, ‘Don’t look that worried. It’s just down the coast a bit from here. When you are in the bay, keep left, and you will see the anchorage outside several marinas and a large terminal. It’s easy!’

Mike toughened himself up and said, ‘We are not worried, it will be fine. We will take our time. We will stay here another day

before going to Acapulco. That will give you time to finish your business.'

They had another drink and said goodbye.

In their yacht, Mike and Linda left Papanoa at nine in the morning after a full day relaxing on the anchorage. The sea was flat calm. Under a blue sky and shining sun, they motored out of the harbour with Mike at the helm. Linda was in her usual position on pillows on the cockpit bench reading an old fashion magazine she picked up in the yacht club in Cabo San Lucas. Now and then she looked over the flat, calm sea.

After hours of sailing, Mike said with an excited voice, 'I think we have a couple of whales ahead.'

Linda jumped up. 'Give me the binoculars,' she said.

Mike handed her the glass and Linda looked ahead with excitement.

'Wow,' she said, 'isn't that fantastic? Can't you sail any closer?'

'I don't want to go too close, but I will try. They may just dive and disappear,' Mike said.

The whales did not move much and as they came closer, Linda, still excited, exclaimed, 'I think it's two whales and a little calf.'

John lowered the speed as they slowly sailed towards the whales, now only about 100 feet away.

Then, with a massive "bang" the stern of their yacht was lifted up. With a grinding sound, the engine stopped. The wheel was shaking and got stuck. As Mike looked over the side, he saw a giant whale tail smacking violently into the side of his yacht, turning the boat. He looked up in disbelief and saw Linda in complete shock.

At that moment, the boom with a sagging mainsail came swinging over the cockpit and hit Mike's bald head with a hollow sound. Mike fell backwards, and unconscious slid out through

the opening to the after platform and into the water. The last Linda saw of her husband was his naked feet sticking up in the air as his body disappeared.

Linda was at first mute but then screamed and screamed her lungs out.

‘Mike, Mike,’ she screamed, ‘come back!’

But Mike was way below.

Linda sat down wholly paralysed as the boat slowly drifted westward. She had little voice left. As Linda looked out, she saw a motor vessel in the distance. She shouted while jumping up and down, waving her arms. The motor vessel didn’t notice and continued its course. She looked down and saw a stream of water coming out of a hole in the hull. She heard the low noise of an electric motor running.

Linda calmed herself and started to think. *What to do, what to do?*

She grabbed the microphone of the VHF radio, pressed the button, and shouted, ‘Help, help!’

She suddenly remembered something from her coxswain course and shouted in the microphone, ‘Mayday, Mayday, Mayday’.

She looked at the radio and realised it had no power; she could not see the selected channel. She smashed the microphone into the cover and cried, ‘Bloody shit, bloody shit!’

*Now what?* she thought.

She remembered something about flares — the coloured sticks in a plastic bag. She had no idea how to use them, but looked around to see as if they were on display in the cockpit. Linda went below and looked everywhere but found none. She lifted every cushion and searched every corner of the boat but found none. Linda sat down on the soft bench while tears and mascara flowed down her cheeks. She dried them away with her hands,

grabbed a towel and cried more. The boat drifted further and further offshore.

Linda got up in the cockpit and looked over the calm ocean; there was not a boat in sight. She sat down and looked at the setting sun. The sounds of flowing water and the electric motor were gone. She needed a drink and went below. Her feet got wet, and she looked around. Plywood floorboards were floating. Linda sat down, pulled her feet up, supporting herself with pillows.

*Wait till I get hold of you, Mike — this time it will be a divorce,* she thought while biting a broken nail.

She poured herself a large tequila, had a sip and leaned back. It was getting dark. Linda had a few more tequilas and dozed a bit. Drunk, she forced herself through the water in the cabin and up on the deck and screamed,

‘I will get you, Mike!’

She could not stand up, grabbed the rail, and pulled herself down into the cabin to the soft cushions, which were now wet. Linda laid down after another couple of tequilas.

Two hours later, a 39-foot yacht reached the muddy bottom of the sea. There was one passenger on board. Before long, Linda had caught up with her husband, who introduced her to the Ghost of Elvis.

Early afternoon, the Tiburon, with Sue and Neil onboard anchored in Bahia Acapulco at Terminal Maritima off the two marinas. They motored their dinghy to a small beach and dragged it a bit up on the sand. After locking the dinghy to the dock, the couple walked up the steep cobblestoned Teniente José Azueta to La Quebrada. Neil could feel the weight of his money belt and the handgun he carried in a shoulder holster under his left arm.

After the long walk along La Quebrada, they arrived at a small plaza with the entry to the Clavadistas de La Quebrada. A group of tourists were waiting for diving performances to begin. Sue

and Neil sat down at a shaded table outside Hotel Mirador and ordered two marguerites. They waited. The sun was just above the horizon, and Neil's business associate had not arrived. Neil looked at Sue and gave a deep sigh. She looked back, worried, and said, 'I think we should go back before it is getting dark. You can call him tomorrow.'

The couple got up, and Neil paid their bill. They walked back down the cobblestoned La Quebrada.

In the early morning, just after sunrise, a fast police vessel carrying a Mexican flag came alongside the Tiburon. It had a dinghy with a small outboard in tow. A sailor jumped onboard while another jumped in the dinghy and took off the outboard. The sailors secured the outboard at its place on the cockpit rail. They dragged the dinghy up on the deck and prepared to tow the yacht. There were no other people on board. The police knew that. They had recovered two headless bodies lying in the gutter of Teniente José Azueta.