

OTRO PUERTO

About the same drive distance as Rocky Point—just add a few days of shipboard time

by Joe Sage



The drive to Puerto Peñasco, Sonora—commonly known here as Rocky Point—is a classic Arizona road trip, about two hours south from Phoenix to the Mexican border, then another four hours to the white, sandy beaches at the Sea of Cortez. You can hop in your truck and go any time. But with just a little more planning, in about the same drive time—about two hours to the California line, another four hours or so to the Port of Long Beach—you can board a ship to Ensenada, on the Pacific Coast of Baja California.

The drive is easy—west on I-10 from the Valley, south at I-215 near San Bernardino or I-605 near Covina, and a beeline to Long Beach.

A cruise can be good for one or two people, but also for a larger group. Twelve of us went.

PHOENIX TO LONG BEACH

Since the cruise would entail one formal dinner (our group was committed, though you could skip this), it required each of the two guys to bring one suit bag, in addition to the usual single suitcase and gear bag. Ten ladies generated their own above average volume of luggage suitable for a four-night trip. Two drove over in a Ford Escape, four in a Subaru Forester, and six rented a three-row Ford Expedition EL at Sky Harbor Airport. Our big and little SUVs gobbled up all those belongings, and we were off.

Because we would embark on our cruise late Monday afternoon, we drove over on Sunday, rather than try to drive and embark the same day. (After all, our standard answer to how long it

takes to drive to greater LA is “six hours, but the last hour can take three or four hours.”) Our only delay was in southwest metro Phoenix, at the construction of the I-10 and Loop 303 interchange. Traffic on the Interstate barely slowed for one substantial sandstorm en route.

Some stopped in Blythe, California, others in Indio, to fill our gas tanks and our bellies—there are several easy options just off the Interstate.

We beat the rest to the coast by quite a bit, so we headed to Newport Beach to get our toes wet.

Long Beach—primarily a shipping port, not a beach resort—has a number of reasonable lodging choices. We stayed at the better of two Best Westerns, two per room (a chance to acclimate to shipboard cabin roomies) for just under \$65 each.

CRUISE BASICS

The basic cost for our Carnival Cruise would be just \$365 each, for four nights aboard—our departure evening, three full days including one on Catalina Island, one in Ensenada, one at sea, then one more night and one last quick breakfast aboard. The mastermind of our trip was able to wrangle us upgraded rooms on a better deck, still under \$400.

Carnival offers a variety of add-ons, easily ordered in advance online. We bought four 12-bottle flats of water for our cabin (just \$4 each). This would be more than we needed, and it turns out you can buy it onboard for the same price, so plan ahead, but don't overdo it. We each bought the ship's WiFi plan. Over the course of the cruise, we treated a couple of people to drinks and sent a few

items in for laundry. A \$12.95 per day gratuity is mandatory. All of the above totaled under \$180.

We knew we might have to check on a phone message or text while in Ensenada, so we added an international component to our cell plan for one month for \$40, to avoid huge roaming charges.

We had been curious about the ship's logistics, path and timing. You can drive from Long Beach to San Diego in under two hours and from there to Ensenada in about the same (it's little more than half again the distance, but with a border crossing). By sea, we would leave late Monday afternoon, boarding next to the historic Queen Mary in Long Beach Harbor and setting sail at sunset, arriving at our first stop—Catalina Island—Tuesday morning. Since it looks like a 20-minute swim to Catalina, we wondered whether we would do donuts all night, or just drift over, to kill time. Catalina to Ensenada would take from late afternoon until dawn Wednesday, which seemed about right. On our return, we would leave Ensenada late Wednesday afternoon, but not arrive back in Long Beach until Friday morning—with no stops. This is the Day at Sea. We wondered whether we might toy with the international limit well out to sea.

Once in motion, all that is largely forgotten. It's a relaxing pace, and you're largely oblivious to time and place, other than generally during the ports of call, and even those allow quite a bit of flexibility. If you spend time in clubs and theaters



on board, you can be quite unaware of your aquatic surroundings, though we spent lots of time cruising the decks, where you definitely know you are at sea, only occasionally passing another distant cruise, very much like two ships in the night. Everyone had brought something for seasickness. Nobody needed it. We felt nary a ripple.

AVALON, CATALINA ISLAND

Catalina is much bigger up close than it may seem when viewed on a clear day from the hills above Malibu, and it has the same rugged terrain as Baja (or Southern California before irrigation). The ship anchors offshore, and power launches shuttle to circumnavigate the island, maybe stopping for some zip-lining along the way, gave way to reality. Time goes quickly in Avalon. Four of us walked

along the waterfront to the landmark casino and movie theater, with a couple of quick shop stops, then grabbed a sit-down fish taco



Our ship, the Carnival Inspiration—a 70,367 gross tonnage vessel from Carnival Cruise Lines, well known in our region for the affordable dash to Baja—docked at the port of Ensenada.





Your world is about to get *Larger*



Your travel center
MEMBER OF THE FROSCH TRAVEL GROUP



Treat yourself to the life of luxury travel

Your Travel Center's phenomenal relationships and reputation within the travel industry provide a bridge from YOU to executives of over 1,000 of the world's finest hotels, cruise lines and tour outfitters. You will be recognized as a VIP guest with privileged access to special amenities and services when available, such as:

- Complimentary room upgrades
- Food & beverage credit
- Cocktail partys
- And much more...
- Breakfast for two daily
- Hosted tours
- Private transfers

Our travel experts

Our Advisors are certified Travel Agents and experienced travelers. Depending on your specific needs, you will be directed to a travel expert who knows your destination and can provide you with the guidance that can best fulfill your travel expectations. Using the latest technology, they keep up with the latest enhancements that will save you time and money.

Our experienced leisure travel specialists can help with all your travel desires, including but not limited to all-inclusive luxury cruise vacations, luxury resort getaways, customized travel vacations, safaris and even guided travel to China, Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa and beyond. Our preferred relationship with the Four Seasons Hotels, Ritz-Carlton Hotels and the Belmond group allow us to offer our luxury hotel clients amazing perks and value-added amenities when available, such as hotel credit, complimentary breakfasts, hotel room upgrades and more! This is also true with many of our luxury and premium cruise partners as well as many of our destination management companies located throughout the world.

We also have a dedicated corporate travel team that handles large accounts across the United States. Our partnership with The Frosch Travel Group gives us the tools necessary to tailor a corporate travel plan for your company, provide travel savings for your employees and give you the personal attention you need in this technology driven era. Our personal commitment to providing you the tools you need to travel safely and at the lowest cost is unmatched.

Arizona headquarters

With 40+ years in the travel business, our travel agency offices in Arizona have a reputation for an outstanding passion regarding the world of travel. Our attention to personal service, along with our preferred travel relationships with many airlines, car rental agencies, hotels, cruise and tour vendors, ensures that we will exceed your travel needs.

Whatever your travel needs may be, allow Your Travel Center the opportunity to serve you.

Your Travel Center

MEMBER OF THE FROSCH TRAVEL GROUP
414 South Mill Avenue, Suite 125
Tempe, AZ 85281
480-496-0160 / 800-952-3174 Toll Free
www.ytc.com
CST# 2019108-10

lunch along Crescent Avenue, the main strip. Then back to the ship, to come about and head toward Mexico as the sun dipped low.

Meals on board are plentiful, varied and generous. Your passage includes all you can handle at restaurants, buffets, cafés, pizza bars, burger bars and more. Dinner in the main dining room is top notch, with impeccable service from an international crew with plenty of personality and flair, who also cut loose with song and dance routines. Save room for dessert, if you can, because if they all look good to you, they will bring them all.

There are also swimming pools and a giant waterslide, so bring your surf trunks.

ENSENADA, BAJA CALIFORNIA

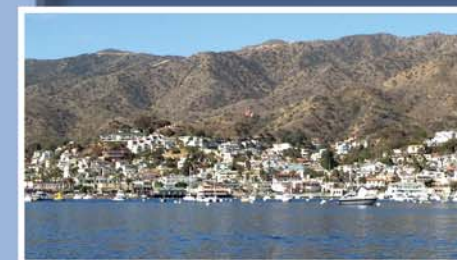
We awoke on our second full day to a motionless ship and opened our cabin's curtains. Today, we were tied up tight to the pier, our side facing parks and parking lots, with a wider view of the coastal hills and mountains of Baja California and a corner of Ensenada. We headed to the top deck, where Mexico's flag now flew, to take in the view. The harbor is relatively small but vibrant, with a mix of fishing and pleasure boats, a couple of cargo cranes, our pier and a waterfront park with fountains. Beyond that lay the town proper, and we took guesses about spots we might visit if we disembarked, and how we might best get there.

Four in our group left early by bus for La Bufadora, the famous Ensenada Blowhole south of town, a rock formation that gushes seawater sky high. Several of our group had already decided



they'd just stay aboard. They didn't feel like dealing with customs—although cruise ship customs is a streamlined process—and had the general idea that Ensenada is like Tijuana, a place most everybody had already seen enough of.

A couple of us set off for a random tour of town. Immediately adjacent to the ship is a collection of shop stalls in Cruiseport Village (sí, es en inglés). Anyone on board should at least check out that much. We passed through a minimal checkpoint and found a horse-drawn carriage and driver waiting for someone just like us. A quick conversation had us on board for five or ten bucks, cantering into town via a circuit with several highlights—Acuario Oceanico, a beautiful new aquarium nearing completion; the Caracol Museum; several historic government, school and church buildings—then up Avenida Alvarado (Alvarado Street, by the Pioneer Chicken Stand, in Warren Zevon's "Carmelita"). We were bemused as we passed an incongruous pair of adjacent businesses—Maya Cacao, "Chocolate from the bean to the belly!" (inglés otra vez),



and the X-rated Fantasias Intimas Sex Boutique.

As fate would have it, our carriage circled around and dropped us off on the other side of the street, at the corner of Alvarado y Avenida Adolfo López Mateos (named after Mexico's president from 1958 to 1964). This is Zona Centro, downtown Ensenada, the main drag for tourists.

We forgot the aforementioned delights, as one of many farmacias caught our eye (its sign once again en inglés: pharmacy). These shops are spacious, well lit, well organized, as tidy as a boutique shoe shop in Fashion Square. Some meds are bargains, while others were pretty close to here, often based on generic availability. If you find what you need, cheap, that alone could pay for you to take a periodic cruise. (Don't overstock in one trip. We heard that someone not in our group bought so much, customs took it all away, as they presume too much is for illegal resale.)

Ensenada did not remind us of Tijuana in the least. Sure, there are some T-shirt and trinket vendors, but uncrowded and uncluttered. Most of the vendors spoke inglés, and we considered a few choice souvenir possibilities. Our long carriage ride had actually brought us back to only a few blocks from the harbor, so we walked back, enjoyed a classical-music-responsive fountain display in the waterfront park and reboarded our ship.

It's kind of silly, in a way, to travel all the way to a town on the Baja coast and just spend a couple of hours there, but that's the nature of the beast, on the Long Beach-Ensenada cruise.

DAY AT SEA

We sailed out of Ensenada as darkness fell, past moored ships of the Mexican Navy, out beyond Las Islas de Todos Santos (the Islands of All Saints) and out into the wide open Pacific, as another over-the-top endless dinner was served.

Somewhere along the way, we did find a satellite track of our route. Unlike Long Beach to Catalina, and unlike our other conjectures, we neither

Ensenada looks relatively small from the vantage point of its avenida de los turistas, but is a city of over half a million people. (Tijuana is closer to a million and a half.)



drifted nor did donuts, but rather thrust and parried, hither and yon, through the night and the next day, our full Day at Sea. The oddities of route and timing are not noticeable. We passed the day easily, with a little miniature golf on the top deck, some laps on the exercise track, more restaurants and pizza bars to work off that exercise, and just zoning in the lounge chairs, staring out to sea.

The Ensenada-Long Beach run feels much like a distance cruise, though in a straight path at normal speed, we could have covered eight or nine hundred miles in those 36 hours, bringing us, say, up to Eureka, California or down to Puerto Vallarta.

Hmm. Those routes sound pretty good. One thing about a commercial cruise. It has its good points and its lesser points, but you inevitably start thinking about other cruises you might take.

ROAD TRIP FINALE

The drive back was easy. As on the drive over, we grabbed quick fuel and food in Blythe. And back in Arizona, skies were blue with light clouds, and the rugged peaks were dramatically lit.

If you'd rather drive to Ensenada from Arizona, it's not far—about seven hours, probably easier than driving to San Diego, considering traffic. The border crossing at Calexico, California (population 40,000) and Mexicali, Baja California (700,000) may slow you down but is part of the adventure.

The trip made us realize we haven't been to Rocky Point—Puerto Peñasco—in awhile and are overdue for a weekend there. But now we're also thinking about that road trip to Ensenada. ■

