

TRAVEL

Hard-working people of La Paz make Baja special

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Joanne Blacker is a people watcher. So when she went to visit her sister in Mexico's Baja California peninsula, it wasn't the casinos, yachts and ocean views that got her attention.

It was the hard-working Mexican people and their pleasant community in the sun.

Blacker, a 40-year resident of Garden City and co-founder of the Garden City Fine Arts Association, was invited down to La Paz in February of 1997 by her sister and brother-in-law to watch the construction of their new home in Comitan, a small town on the tip of a peninsula across from La Paz. She visited them again this past spring.

My sister lives in Portland, Oregon, where there's rain and gloom everywhere. Her husband used to motorcycle down in Mexico and suggested they go down and check it out," Blacker said.

La Paz is at the bottom of the (or lower) California peninsula, connected to the United States by a two-lane blacktop. For Blacker, La Paz is a repudiation of many stereotypes about Mexico. The city of approximately 46,000 is the capital of Baja California.

"All the buildings are colorful, in turquoise, green, yellow," she said. "Everything was very, very clean, modern cars, not a lot of poverty. Everyone was working."

The city is symbolized by a giant sculpture of a whale's tail superimposed with a dove, symbolizing the peace of its name.

Blacker said the city has attracted many foreigners — Americans, Canadians and Germany, especially. But it is also home to many prosperous Mexicans.

"I found a lot of Mexican professional people are very busy here, lawyers, doctors, dentists, architects," she said.

And the working-class people of the community have enjoyed healthy employment, much of it resulting from the building boom.

"The average Mexican person, it seemed everyone was working, very productive. They were maids, gardeners, but also very innovative about opening shops. There were a lot of new ideas. They don't seem to think American people are bossy," she said.

Blacker got to know some of the Mexican workers who built her sister's house. Blacker's sister, Nettie, and her husband lived in one trailer and Blacker



Home site: A bodega with a bathhouse was already on the property where Joanne Blacker's sister is building her home in La Paz, Mexico.

in another as work progressed on the adobe-style home made with concrete blocks. A bodega with bath and laundry rooms and an open area for weekend dances was already on the property and will remain when the work is done. A swimming pool will be added in September.

The recently completed home will be a part time residence during winter months. The southern Baja has become a prime area for retirees and the wealthy.

Blacker said some of the yachts in the La Paz harbor look like cruise ships.

"Bill Gates has a yacht at Cabo (at the tip of the peninsula), that's where the multi-billionaires go," she said.

When James Cameron needed credible looking passengers for the Titanic when he was filming the record-setting, Oscar-winning movie in Baja, he recruited the retirees and vacationers at La Paz, Blacker said.

As an artist and an art enthusiast, Blacker found several galleries to enjoy.

"One man, Garcia, I went to this gallery and was just amazed by his work," she said. "He comes from La Paz. They have wonderful tile work. We're used to the Powebie tiles we have here, but these tiles are shiny and very colorful. They do it in the open and they have their own wheels, all done by hand. It's very beautiful."

She is also fond of jewelry and discovered a fine variety of opals, silver and gold.

The traditional Mexican bullfight, however, was not a favorite activity for Blacker.

"I couldn't watch it, I had to leave," she said. "But one with a rodeo was funny to look at."

Cloves were also a big part of the Mardi Gras festivities. Blacker said the parade with its homemade floats, beautiful young women and unusually dressed clowns was a highlight of her trip.

In addition to the yearly fiestas, the people of the area like having a good time after their hard work, Blacker said. Every



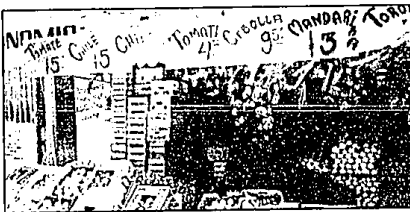
Observer goes south: Joanne Blacker proudly displays her hometown newspaper in La Paz. In the background is the city's famous dolphin/dove statue.

Friday evening, the local people head for the beach where they drink beer, dance and enjoy themselves until dawn.

As a people watcher, Blacker said she enjoyed watching how the young girls would flirt with the serious, disciplined young men of the Mexican coast guard. Blacker, who was widowed three years ago after 45 years of marriage, had enjoyed traveling

with her husband in a camper. After a period of mourning and depression, she decided it was time to enjoy her life again and remember the good life she's had. The Blackers raised five children in Garden City.

In March, Blacker plans to return for another visit to La Paz. In June, she will join her daughter for a trip to Wales and England.



Color: The outdoor markets in Mexico's Baja are ablaze with primary colors.

GREAT ESCAPES

WINTER'S COMING

Do you have some favorite winter vacation getaways? We'd like to hear about them for travel stories. Whether you enjoy escaping the wind and snow of Detroit by flying to a tropical isle or you believe in embracing winter by skiing Whistler or dog sledding Alaska, let us know. Call Hugh Gallagher at 734-952-2118, or fax him at 734-591-7279 or e-mail him at hgallagher@oe.com.

FINDING YOUR WAY

REI is sponsoring a program on navigating for hikers at the store, 17559 Haggerty Road, Northville.

At 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 8, Paul Vandover of the Southern Michigan Orienteering Club will teach "Navigating the Old Fashioned Way — the Basics of Map and Compass" and will discuss

the sport of orienteering.

All clinics are free and open to the public. For more information, call (248)347-2100.

FLORIDA CONDO RENTALS

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APPLE FESTIVAL

Charlevoix will host its annual Apple Festival Friday-Sunday, Oct. 9-11. Visitors will find more than 30 varieties, from popular

traditional apples to exciting new varieties. Other fall harvest items available will be pumpkins, squash, apple butter, jam, honey and cider. For more information, call the Charlevoix Area Chamber of Commerce at (616)547-2101.

HEMINGWAY WEEKEND

A celebration of Ernest Hemingway's life and work will be held in Potosky, Mich., Oct. 16-18. From an infant to the age of 22, the famous author spent his summers on Walloon Lake and Horton Bay (except for his year in Italy during World War I).

Hemingway married his first wife, Hadley Richardson, in Horton Bay in 1921. Many of his early short stories are set in this area.

Events include a writer's contest, a Running of the Bulls footrace and tours of Hemingway sites. Hemingway's 100th birthday is in 1999. For more information, call (616)347-4150.

SPANISH TRIP

Bob Chrysler will kick off the Southfield Travel World Series, 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 16, with his film "The Soul of Spain." Tickets are \$5 for the presenta-

tion at the Southfield Center for the Arts. For information, call (248)424-9022.

"The Soul of Spain" will encompass much of the country's history, from the Romans to present day. Explore this country rich in multi-cultural influences from Segovia to Grenada to Toledo.

LIGHTHOUSE FESTIVAL

October is Lighthouse Awareness Month. Alpena will host the

Third Annual Great Lakes Lighthouse Festival, Oct. 9-12 at Alpena's Civic Center near the shores of Lake Huron. Highlights include land and air lighthouse tours, museum tours, ship tours, excursions to offshore lighthouses, folk singers and more. A "Strictly Nautical" live auction is scheduled 1-5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 11, and features numerous choice maritime artifacts. For additional information, call (517)582-1908.

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