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What's SUP?

An Ideal—And Idyllic—Way to Enjoy the Sea of Cortez

~by Ardith Stephanson~

*~photos courtesy of Francisco Estrada, Ardith Stephanson,
Mauricio Balderrama, Cutback Surf Photography & Cabo SUP~*



When it comes to water sports, surfing gets all the glory and attention. Anybody who loves the ocean has a desire to catch a wave and ride it into shore. Enter its less glamorous offspring, standup paddling or SUP, also known as paddleboarding.

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(ABOVE) | Lee Vosburgh of Cabo SUP, at Medano Beach in Cabo San Lucas.

While there are records of ancient people standing up to paddle using rafts, the modern version is said to have splashed onto the scene in the 1940s in Hawaii. The story is that a local surfer got older and couldn't get up and down from his board, so he stood up and used a canoe paddle to catch the waves.

Wherever it began, SUP has become a sport in its own right, with claims that in 2013 it was the outdoor sporting activity

with the most first-time participants in the United States that year.

Whether you already love SUP, or you'd like to learn, the Sea of Cortez is an ideal location for paddlers, with various spots along the Baja where you can launch a board and get out and enjoy the calm, clear waters teeming with marine life.

Cabo San Lucas Bay is one of the top SUP places in Los Cabos, and in fact around the world, according to Lee Vosburgh. He started the first permitted paddleboard company on Medano Beach, Cabo SUP, which hit the water in the Bay in 2009.

Cabo SUP rode the wave of paddling popularity and now remains a fixture in the Bay, offering board rentals, lessons, private

tours, retreats and hosting popular SUP events. Vosburgh and his wife Meredith have combined Cabo SUP with their other business ventures in Cabo San Lucas, as they are the on-site partners of the Bahia Hotel, Bar Esquina and SUR Beach House.

Cabo SUP began as an added amenity for guests at the Bahia Hotel. It also gave rise to Vosburgh's close relationship with the Reyes family, which has now led to the SUR Beach House. Vosburgh's love of the water and the area is as clear as the waters of the Bay.

"This is one of the most unique bays in the world," Vosburgh says. "It's one of the deepest bays and everyone has heard the story of Jacques Cousteau's aquarium. It's an



incredible environment with an abundance of marine life. It's where the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean meet, with the energy of the ocean and the calmness of the sea."

Vosburgh first came to the Baja on a surf vacation, and later put together an investor group to purchase the Bahia Hotel. When he arrived to finish closing the deal, he brought surfboards and paddleboards with him. The calm, inviting waters of the Bay sent him out on his paddleboard, which was unseen back in 2007. When someone asked what it cost to rent the board, another business idea was born.

Paddling has also become second nature to Mauricio Balderrama, owner of the Cabo Surf Hotel and Spa, part of the

Mexican owned and operated Balderrama Hotel Collection. He too has watched the explosion in popularity of paddling in the 20+ years he has been running this seaside resort near San Jose Del Cabo. While the hotel caters to surfers, they have cruising paddleboards available too. Surfers will always look for waves, but paddling provides a chance to get on the water when it's calm, for surfers and non-surfers alike.

"I think paddleboarding is the new kayaking," says Balderrama, for whom surfing became "part of his job" as he learned to surf when he took over the hotel. He also enjoys paddling when he has time. "You're able to feel the water and see into the water. In a kayak you don't

(BELOW) | *Calm water surfaces are great for SUP. Mauricio Balderrama of Cabo Surf Hotel and Spa.*

have that angle. As a result, paddling has exploded. People really enjoy that. It's more than exercise. It's a delightful entertainment experience, a way to enjoy nature."

Vosburgh echoes that sentiment, and he's another good candidate to compare water

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sports. He grew up sailing with his father and later discovered surfing as a way to spend weekends away from the bustle of his Wall Street job, staying and surfing at his home at Montauk Point, Long Island. A paddle helped in small waves, and when the water was really calm—like when he discovered

the Cabo San Lucas Bay—he would switch to SUP.

Either way, he got to satisfy his joy of being on the water, without needing a motorized vehicle. He now loves to help others discover the beauty of being on the water on a paddleboard.

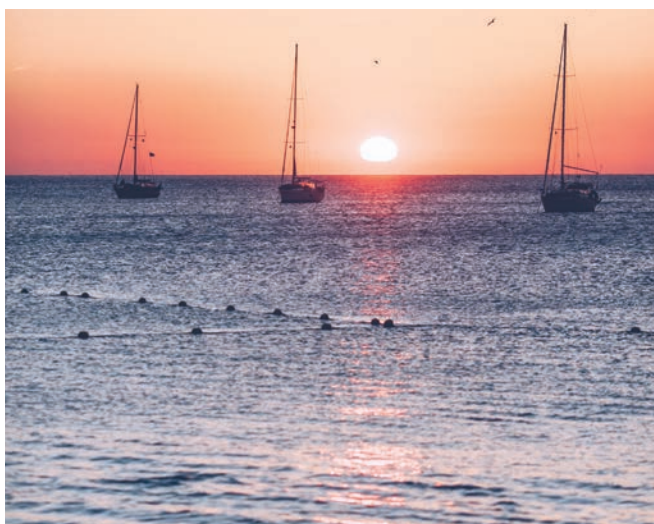
“Everybody wants to surf but it takes a lot of time to learn,” Vosburgh says. “We know anybody can SUP. There’s no right way or wrong way to SUP. Just go out and enjoy nature.”

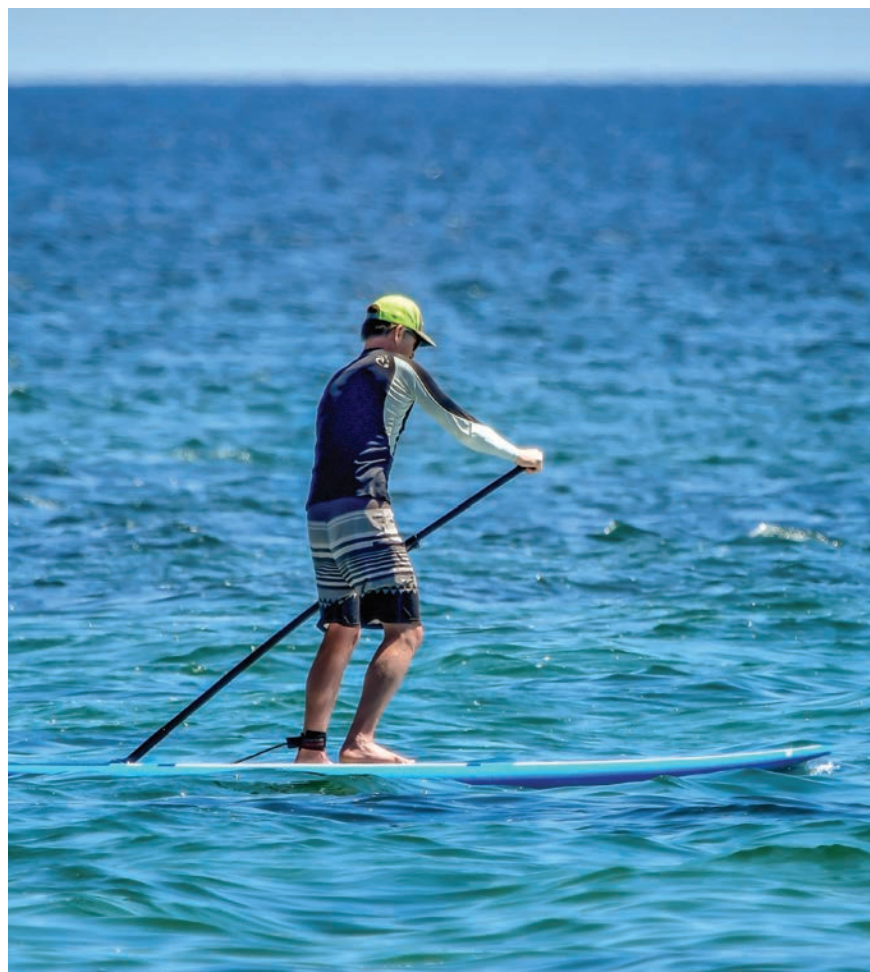
There are numerous places along the Sea of Cortez where paddlers can get on the water. The chosen location depends on a

few factors, like where you live or stay when in Los Cabos; whether you have your own board and can transport it; how far you want to carry your board to get to the location; whether you’ll need a rental and if one is available where and when you plan to paddle; and perhaps most importantly, how skilled you are at getting in and out of the water.

The rocky formations at many beaches make them treacherous to launch and land a paddleboard, especially for beginners. As Vosburgh points out, the Sea of Cortez also has a lot of shore break that adds to the difficulty. Boards can be heavy and bulky to carry down to the beach, but there are also

(BELOW) | *Mornings can offer ideal conditions for SUP. Aerial view of Palmilla Beach and “Old Man’s Beach.”*





inflatable options too, perfect for travelers.

Considering those factors and with a little planning, there are plenty of places to stop and paddle along the peninsula.

“In the Baja it’s a perfect thing to do—put your board on your roof, find a sandy patch and paddleboard at will,” Balderrama says. “On the Sea of Cortez, if you see a good cove, you want to go explore. It’s a different view than when you drive to the beach in your car and sit on the beach. When you get out on the water and look back at the shore, it’s a totally different experience.”

There are plenty of places where the paddling is perfect, and if you don’t have your own gear, or you want to travel without your board, there are some locations with the opportunity to rent boards.

Balderrama’s Cabo Surf Hotel and Spa is situated in one such location, Acapulquito Beach (also called Old Man’s Beach), where paddlers can rent boards and get out when the waves are calm. Good SUP conditions for that location are best from mid-November to mid-March. A favorite is to paddle along the coast from Old Man’s Beach to Palmilla point and back. You may find good snorkeling sites along the route as well.

Just south of Balderrama’s hotel is Palmilla Beach, an ideal boarding spot with the opportunity to rent boards from Cooperativa Palmilla/Palmilla Fishing Charters, as Edgar Zarate has four SUPs available for rent. From there you can follow the reverse route, going to Old Man’s Beach and back.

Balderrama cautions paddlers to watch

(ABOVE) | Edgar Zarate at Palmilla Beach. Stand-up paddleboarder near Cabo Surf Hotel.

for changing wind conditions in this part of the sea, especially on day trips. He points out that standing on a board can create enough resistance, even in a mild wind, to make it more difficult to paddle on the return leg.

Nearby Costa Azul is also a surf beach that is sometimes appropriate for paddling.

Heading south from San Jose to Cabo San Lucas, you can board at El Tule Beach, Santa Maria Beach, or Chileno Bay, all

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(ABOVE) | *Cabo SUP instructor giving paddleboarding lesson on the beach.*

located close to the hotel zones of the Los Cabos area. Close to Cabo is Misiones Beach, looking back at the Bay, but it's more suited to surfing. The smaller bay behind it is better for paddling, but it's a fair distance to hike down to the beach with your board.

Heading north from San Jose Del Cabo, Arbolitos Beach near Cabo Pulmo is calm enough to SUP, but the marine preserve sometimes frowns upon external watercraft entering that Bay. Farther up the East Cape are areas like Los Barriles, but the wind

makes them more popular for kiteboarding and windsurfing in the winter months when visitors flock to Baja California Sur.

The famous beaches near La Paz like Balandra and Pichilingue are all possibilities, with their calm, shallow waters. Balderrama has paddled off a boat at Isla Espíritu Santo outside of La Paz, stating it was the most incredible experience looking into the water and its brimming, protected marine life.

Your choice may be impacted by the time of year, or even the time of day. Balderrama recommends paddling in the morning when the waters tend to be calm, particularly in spots along the East Cape. Summer months offer different conditions than winter months in some locales too. Some of the beaches we have mentioned don't have rentals on a consistent basis. You can also choose a

holiday location based on its proximity to a boarding spot, or at a resort that includes paddleboarding.

Because of its location, calm waters and relatively calm break, Medano Beach and the Cabo San Lucas Bay remains a top choice, with rentals in many places on the beach and the chance to see so much under the water, while you're standing up *on* the water. If you already SUP, you don't have to bring your equipment with you, and haul it down the sand to the shore.

In the Bay you get to enjoy a taste of "the world's aquarium," as the famed oceanographer and marine conservationist Jacques Cousteau once called the Sea of Cortez. A sampling of that immense biodiversity is nestled in the depths of the Bay, and the visibility of the water makes it

easy to enjoy what's below. While you'll get similar experiences in other places, the Bay seems to bring it all together.

The sea lion colony at Land's End is well known, and you may even see one frolicking in the water, swimming beside you, or occasionally zipping under your board. The water is clear enough to see "Pancho," as the sea lions are called, but there's also the chance to see other marine life, like sea turtles, or some of the hundreds of varieties of fish that live in the sea. You'll also see segments of the similarly extensive number of birds that nest or migrate through the area.

Paddlers can stop at Pelican Rock, now roped to keep motorized vehicles out, allowing snorkelers and scuba divers to safely swim in one of the most iconic snorkel spots in the Bay.

There are beaches where you can take a

break, sunning on Lover's Beach or parking the board and strolling over to Divorce Beach. There are also the stunning rock formations themselves, displaying their own beauty all along the ride out, before the famous El Arco, or the arch at Land's End, caps off the trip. The aquamarine of the water against the sand and rock is breathtaking.

And it's all done in peace and tranquility, as your workout can be vigorous, or you can simply float and enjoy the serenity.

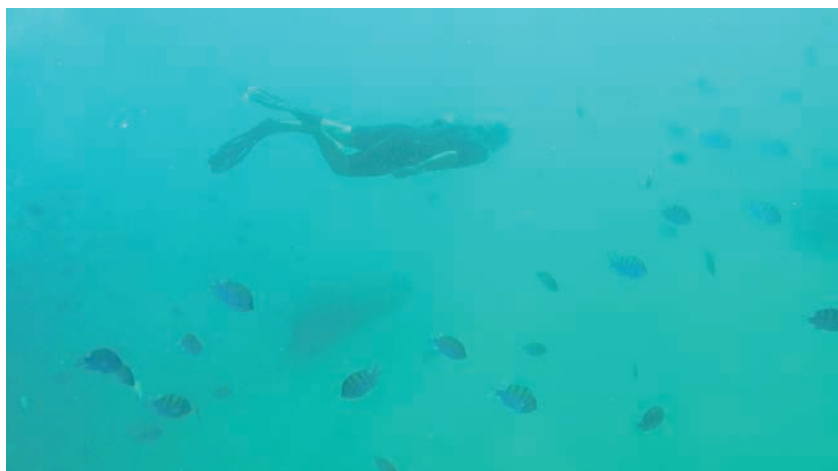
"There are only three or four destinations I've been to that have this type of environment within a 15-minute paddle in the Bay," Vosburgh marvels. "Usually you have to fly, take a panga, get dropped in a location. Here you can see incredible marine life 15 minutes from your hotel. I tell people to give me five minutes, and just go out in

the Bay on the board. You can't take a phone; you can't worry about anything. It's a natural way to get away while you're traveling."

SUP has expanded to include paddle racing, paddleboard yoga, taking your dog boarding, and even fishing off the board. There are paddling events and festivals, like Paddle to the End, which Vosburgh hopes to bring back to life at Medano Beach after being on hiatus the last few years.

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(BELOW) | Snorkeling by Pelican Rock. Ardith Stephanson (the author) paddleboarding near Land's End.



If you haven't tried SUP, ask for a lesson first. Vosburgh's Cabo SUP, for instance, is for anyone, locals and tourists, guests of the hotel and walk-ups, and every rental includes a lesson.

SUP doesn't have to be a workout, but it can be. It all depends how hard you push. It works the core muscles, the legs, and of course the arms and upper body. It can be a very social activity, or a quiet meditative time. You can take along your goggles and link it with snorkeling, stopping and parking the board when you see reef fish. Or you can simply get out and float and give it a try.

In the end, wherever and however you choose to do it, SUP is a way to enjoy nature, get out on the water, get some exercise, and socialize and build relationships with like-minded paddlers.

"Health and wellness have changed the

way people travel," says Vosburgh, who was also a voice for creating swimming lanes on Medano Beach and roping off Pelican Rock and the beaches to provide safe swimming and boarding areas. "People want to go away and feel better when they get home, not worse. We can enable the average person to be out on the water.

"Paddleboarding is also an all-around fitness activity, compared to kayaking for instance. Plus, on a board you're standing up, and with the 100-foot visibility in the Bay, you can see a lot better than sitting down. I can't guarantee I can teach anybody to surf. I can teach anybody to paddle board. That's the biggest thing behind boarding. If we brought anything to the destination, we feel we created a safe and fun area for paddleboarding and non-motorized activity. We think Cabo SUP allows tourists and

locals to get access to nature and the beauty of SUP."

Time on a SUP may change your perspective of the ocean and alter the stereotype of Medano Beach. It's not just a party Bay. It's a gateway to calm waters and closeness to nature, and it's where I learned to love paddling. But if you *do* want to get away from this popular and well-populated spot at the tip of the peninsula, there are plenty of other locations to enjoy the beauty of the Sea of Cortez, "the world's aquarium," on the tranquility of a paddleboard.

"When you say paddleboard, I immediately relate it to nature," Balderrama concludes. "It's a great way to enjoy the outdoors. Do not be intimidated. The boards are wide enough to be stable. It's really an easy sport to learn. On days with no waves, it is the perfect escape."

El Fin!

