

Log Of The Sailing Vessel No Regrets

This is my story of finding gold along the coast of Baja-Mexico





The Lost Gold Mine of
Isla San Jose

One of the charts or books that I had as a reference for sailing in the Sea of Cortez contained an annotation that said, “evidence of gold mining.” Although I was intrigued I did not research that annotation and forgot about it until I ventured onto the Island of San Jose.

On that sailing voyage I was accompanied by Raphael Salamanca, who had joined my boat in Cabo San Lucas. Raphael was from Switzerland and was on a vision quest to travel around the world. He had already traveled through South America and the United States when I took him

on as a crew member. We quickly became friends and to this day we still have a bond cemented together through the adventures we shared in the Sea of Cortez.

When we sailed to San Jose we found an anchorage in a place called Punta Amortajadove, located at the southeast section of the island. After dropping and setting the anchor we lowered the dingy and went ashore. At the north end of the hook I noticed several abandoned buildings and what appeared to be several salt ponds.

The best way I can describe the structures we saw is that they reminded me of the Old West. Some were made from wood and others from adobe. One building seemed to have been

a small church or worship place; it contained an altar and a picture of the Virgin Mary. Below the picture were burnt candles and small stacks of Mexican coins left there as offerings. Some of these coins were very old and had been there for quite some time as the stacks looked like they were stuck together through oxidation.



One of the buildings contained old office furniture and appeared to have been the main office. The incredible thing was that many of the salt work documents were still lying on the floor. One document was dated 29 February 1964 and showed that 205,000 kilograms of salt had been produced that month.



Things like that have always fascinated me. I asked myself, "When did the people leave?" Why did they leave? Who were they? What happened here?

Unfortunately, the only answer forthcoming were the documents on the floor.



Old safe contained documents



After exploring that area we continued to follow the beach in a southerly direction. In the distance I noticed a large rusted-metal object lying in the water at the shoreline. We went over to investigate and saw that it was some type of grate that seemed to have been part of a large furnace structure. Exploring the area around the object I found another large and rusted circular object that looked like a boiler or large smoke stack. We saw a manufacturer's plate on the object and were completely flabbergasted to see the inscription: "Made in 1893, San Francisco, CA."

At that moment I recalled the annotation I had read on a chart or book several weeks previously that said, "Evidence of gold mining."



Mine Equipment Found On Beach-Dated 1893

We continued our search of the area and found a herd of goats under one of the few trees on the island. Near the tree I noticed a well and pulled up some water from a pail. With my finger I tasted the water and noticed that it was somewhat saline. The goats appeared domesticated although we did not see any signs

of human life. We continued our search and found several foundations in the immediate area of the well. The layout of the foundations and area indicated that at one time this spot had been some sort of inhabited work or dwelling zone.

It was early evening and we decided to return to the boat and continue our exploration the following day. When we returned to the boat we decided to go for a swim to cool down. As I was floating near the boat I saw a low-lying ledge of rock, stone, or coral interspersed with connecting holes. As I floated over one of these holes I saw some movement and dived down to see what it was. As I lowered myself to the hole I looked right into the face of a lobster hiding out in a small outcropping. What I had seen were his two

antenna feelers sticking out from the overhang. I returned to the surface to continue to float and noticed that there were dozens of lobsters lying under these small outcroppings. I returned to the boat and got an old broom handle to which I taped a kitchen knife. I now had a spear.

That night and many more afterwards Raphael and I feasted on lobster.



The following morning Raphael and I set out in my dingy to explore the southeastern mangrove area of the island. While there we encountered several fisherman who lived on a very small island just south of San Jose called Isla Coyote, but known locally as Isla Pardito or El Pardito.

It was a very hot day and we asked them if they had any cold beer. They said no, but that a half day sail along the north shore of the Bay of La Paz would take us to an old lady living in a pink house who sold cold beer. Since it was already a 100 degrees and the refrigeration unit on my boat was broken, we decided to take advantage of the wind to pull up anchor and sail to some cold beers.

We sailed a short distance offshore scanning the

horizon for a pink house. After several hours we saw a yellow house and decided to drop anchor at that spot. After coming ashore we walked over to the house and encountered a 65-year-old American who had a 22-year-old wife and three children. Next to the house was a small adobe structure where the very old and weather-beaten father and mother of the young wife lived. We asked them if they knew where we could get a cold beer and they pointed out a path that we should follow, which they said led to a pink house where we could buy beer. Raphael and I followed the path until we reached a pink house. Upon reaching the doorway I looked inside and saw an old woman lying in a raised bed. Raphael and I greeted her and asked her if she had any beer for sale. She said that she had and that we should sit down on her front porch. Several

minutes later she emerged from her house with two quart bottles of Pacifico beer. I remember being somewhat astonished as the house was in the middle of a desert landscape with no electricity, running water, or any other modern conveniences whatsoever. She sat down with us and we began talking.

Fortunately, Raphael's heritage was Spanish and he was completely fluent in the language. I was able to speak French, which has several words that are similar to Spanish. So, using sign language, French, English, hand motions, and Raphael to translate, we were all able to understand each other.

Curious as to the reference to gold that I had read about, I asked the old lady if there was



a gold mine on the Island of San Jose. In a matter of fact tone she said “Yes, my husband worked there.” I was a little stunned, and very excited. I then gestured as if I was digging a hole

in the ground and asked if the mine was an open pit or a cave. The old lady nodded and said the mine was a cave. She explained that many years ago there was much gold found in the mine and then one day operations ceased and the mine was closed. But, she insisted there was still a lot more gold to be found in that mine. When the mine closed all the workers left. At that time there was a lot of timber used for the construction and operation of the mine, and it was all intact when the island was abandoned. However, over the years the buildings, equipment, and all the lumber had been scavenged by the local fishermen and inhabitants from the region. She explained that the Baja was primarily a desert, and that wood was a scarce and expensive commodity.

I then asked her if she could give me directions to the mine. She said she could, but that the last time she visited the mine was in 1949. She explained that upon approaching the island I should drop anchor near the salt ponds. From there I should walk in a southerly direction and near the shore until I come upon a water well located near a tree. The water from the well would be saline, but still drinkable. In the immediate area of the well we would find some structures and then follow a road, which turned into a dry arroyo climbing toward the mountains that rose to the east. We should follow the arroyo as it meandered uphill and keep looking to our left until we come upon the entrance to the mine.

Raphael and I then drank another very cold beer and marveled at her story. We were both very

excited and eager to return to the Island of San Jose to find its lost gold mine.

One of the things I have always enjoyed about traveling is the people I met along the way. The old lady was kind, open, willing to share, and accepting of these two strangers showing up unannounced and asking for a cold beer.

The following day Raphael and I sailed back to San Jose and began our search for the gold mine. We traced our way back to the saline water well and were able to discern what appeared to be either a road or the bottom end of an arroyo, which had flushed down from the mountain during the rainy season. As we followed this trail I noticed on the ground a wide variety of stones lying on the ground that are often used for

jewelry. I found blue turquoise, green malachite, different colored quartz and many pieces of pyrite, which is commonly referred to as “Fool’s gold.” I took this as a good sign; I had read that many of these types of stone deposits are found in conjunction with gold. As we followed this trail we noticed that it started to branch off in many directions as we started uphill. Which should we follow? It was now the dry season, but during the rainy season there are torrential downpours that carve new paths as the water tumbles its way down the mountain and into the ocean. We searched all day, up and down numerous arroyos. We climbed many hills and worked our way to the top of the mountain.



On Mountain Top Searching For The Lost Gold Mine

From the mountain top we used our binoculars to search for any signs of man or a mine, but the trail and gold mine remained elusive. Although we did not find the gold mine we were not discouraged because we knew it was there and we had an eyewitness account of the general location. When I returned to the boat I scanned

the downward slope of the mountains for any signs of human activity. I could tell that there were many arroyos or washouts along the western slope. Continuing to scan the mountain I formulated an idea for a search pattern. Essentially, what Raphael and I had done that day was follow arroyos in a linear or vertical pattern up the mountain. And that was unsuccessful because there were too many washouts that tumbled down from the desert mountain. I remembered that the old lady told us that the mine was located a “short walk up” the arroyo. So, what I thought would be more effective was to choose a spot about 200 feet north of the well and then walk up toward the mountain and climb its initial slope for about 100 feet. Then we would walk south in a straight line using the top of the mountain and the shoreline

as a guide and point of reference. This way we would cross, down, up, and over each arroyo we would come across. And while we did this we could scan each arroyo for signs of the mine.

The following morning we were both excited to continue our search. I felt very confident that we would somehow find that mine. As I tell this story, I am reminded of those people who have spent their whole life searching for something they knew was “just around the corner.”

As I began my search pattern Raphael split off to follow his own instincts. Amazingly, within a very short period of time I came across a mound that appeared to be an area used for crushing large rock excavated from a mine. I searched the pile

and found pieces of quartz, turquoise, pyrite, and many other colored stones. I walked around this mound and when I looked further south I saw a pillar and walked over to it. The pillar contained various grid coordinates etched into the concrete. I knew I had found the mine. I called out several times to Raphael and luckily he was within my voice range. We re-united at the concrete marker and then went into an arroyo, located just south of the marker.

We started to climb upward toward the mountain and within five minutes we saw a cave entrance adjacent to the north wall of the arroyo.

I was amazed that some prospector in the late 1800's had somehow worked his way up to this

arroyo, literally in the middle of nowhere, and decide to dig for gold in this spot. Later, I found out that hundreds of mines similar to this one had been dug in the Baja during the era of the California Gold Rush.

As we came closer to the mine entrance I noticed that the mine was actually a shaft dug into and down the arroyo wall. Raphael and I looked down and could not see the bottom. We then threw a large rock into the shaft and eventually heard a thud. Near the front of the mine entrance shaft was an old tree, which presented us with an opportunity to enter the cave. We did what most young men, explorers and adventurers would do. We returned to the boat and got about 150 feet of boat line that we would use to climb down into the gold mine shaft.



Gold Mine Entrance

In retrospect what we did was foolish. There are 101 reasons why our venture could or should have spelled our demise. I am sure if we had disappeared in that mine that day, we would not have been found - ever. In fact I would not be

surprised if a present- day exploration of the mine would uncover some human skeletons.

When we returned to the mine entrance we secured a loop around the tree stump and dropped the line into the shaft. While Raphael watched the line, I began to rappel down into the mine shaft. I noticed that the tunnel wall was composed of hard sand formation containing many pebbles and large rocks. As I rappelled down some of these rocks became loose and tumble down with me. I continued to rappel down and finally reach the bottom. The shaft entrance from the arroyo was approximately 5 or 6 feet in diameter. But, as I stood at the bottom of the shaft gazed upwards to the top entrance, it looked like the size of a pie. I then examined the ground I was standing on and noticed that one

corner of the floor was concave and appeared to have been the lateral entrance to the mine. Over the years the lumber shoring up the shaft walls had been pilfered, and now the entrance was filling up from its collapsing walls. Consequently, the entrance to the mine was only 3 feet in diameter.



Raphael Looking Down Shaft Opening

While examining the entrance I heard a strange noise from inside the mine. I knelt down by the entrance and listened carefully. It sounded something like this, “Ooooh-shhhh-ooooh-shhhh.” It reminded me of the sound we make while impersonating ghosts and water being sprayed out of a garden hose

I pulled out my flashlight and decided to crawl into the entrance. I went in several feet, turned on the flashlight, and immediately let out a frightful yell. What I saw within a hair’s breath of my face were hundreds of bats flying about my body! The noise I’d heard was the sound of a million bats flapping their wings as they flew around the inside of the mine.

I quickly retreated and heard Raphael yelling

down to me, asking if everything was OK. Although I was momentarily startled we still decided to enter the mine. Raphael then rappelled down into the shaft and volunteered to be the first to enter.



Raphael Entering Gold Mine

As we entered the mine we followed the downward slope from the accumulated debris at the entrance to the floor of the mine. Using both our flashlights I could see that the main entrance was a large, cavernous room. There were hundreds of thousands of bats flying around, but because of their radar/night vision capabilities they did fly into our bodies. But, they came frighteningly close.

Inspecting the cavern, we saw that there were multiple levels to the mine with tunnels and shafts leading to many directions and levels. We also saw that many timber pieces had collapsed. At one time there must have been multiple stairways and a lot of timber to support the various shaft levels, but over the years the beams had simply been stripped away.

We decided to explore further and entered one of the tunnels. As we followed the tunnel route, bats were continuously flying over our bodies and very close to our faces. They were flying so close that we could actually feel the breeze from their flapping wings as they flew between our arms, our legs, and around our heads. With the light shining directly in front of us we could see these bats as they flew directly toward us. As we continued to follow the shaft, I noticed another tunnel directly to my right. I aimed the light to the new tunnel ceiling and was about to step into it when I pointed my flashlight onto the floor. I immediately stopped - what I was looking into was an abyss! It was not another tunnel; rather it was a very deep shaft leading to the very bowels of that mine.



Bats Flying Around Tunnel

Undeterred we continued to slowly walk further into the tunnel. The ground beneath us felt soft, and I focused closely on what we were walking on. It was then that I realized that we were

walking on 40 years of bat guano! The build up of this guano was well over several feet from the original mine floor. While examining the guano I saw a dead bat on the ground and asked myself if that bat had died from rabies, which can be fatal to humans if not immediately treated. I then remembered watching a TV documentary on rabies that suggested that rabies can possibly be contracted in caves by breathing infected bat guano dust particles. At that point, Raphael and I decided to exit the mine. As we were leaving the tunnel I noticed a glint along the tunnel wall and went over to examine it. To my complete joy and surprise, I realized I was looking at a gold vein. It was very distinct, and there was no doubt in my mind that there was still gold to be found in this mine. When we returned to the cavernous main entrance area, I picked up several rock

specimens that looked promising. I wanted to have them assayed for gold.

While in the cavern I heard a low-sounding rumble and noticed a light coating of dust or bat guano filtering out from one of the tunnels. Perhaps a cave in?

Raphael and I then crawled away from the collapsed main entrance and out into the entrance shaft. Using our rope we then climbed hand-over-hand back up to the arroyo.

Some people have asked me why I entered that mine. “Was that not foolish thing,” they ask? Perhaps, it was, but I am always reminded of what Edmund Hillary said about his explorations:

“Nobody climbs mountains for scientific reasons. Science is used to raise money for the expeditions, but you really climb for the hell of it.”



Gold Mine Tunnel