

Surfing Baja California: Is the Surf Up?

by Jeep Hardinge

Author Jeep Hardinge has been surfing Baja longer than he cares to mention. Surfer, artist and student of the ocean, Jeep moved to Baja California Sur a few years ago and makes a regular habit of catching a wave. Here are his tips and resources for knowing when the surf is up in Baja California.



As Summer approaches and with it the potential for Southern Hemisphere storms that produce significant waves in the Cape Region, let's discuss how to keep track of what is going on and how to know when and where the best surf will be.

Look at a map of the Pacific Ocean and you will see that the Peninsula of Baja California is a unique piece of

geography. Baja juts out into the Pacific and is exposed to storm generated swells that can come from the North Pacific in our winter and the South Pacific in their winter. The swell window for the Cape Region of Baja extends from approximately 300 degrees (Northwest) in winter all the way around the compass through South to approximately 130 degrees (Southeast) in summer. This is a huge area of ocean that extends all the way south to the icepack of Antarctica. Fortunately for surfers in the computer age there are many resources to keep track of weather all through the Pacific.



Surfline.com has developed its own wave forecast model that they call LOLA. They require a paid membership to access this model. LOLA is a very good model and is a different source than the models on Stormsurf.com which come from NOAA. Surfline.com offers a 30 day free trial for the Premium Membership.

Let me list a few sites that I find most helpful:

Stormsurf.com
Surfline.com
Wetsand.com
Bajainsider.com



I use these sites in combination to obtain a variety of data and interpretation. I believe Bajainsider.com is the single best site to watch weather in the Cape Region. When the tropical season is active, Bajainsider.com has gone out of their way to provide all the information possible in their Weather Pages. The other sites provide information for the greater Pacific Ocean.

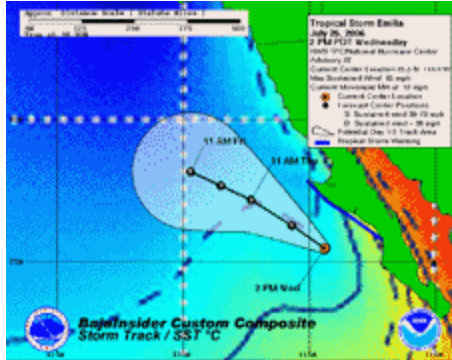
Go to Stormsurf.com. There you will find numerous pages of information, surf reports and surf forecasts. The Pacific Forecast gives you probably more details than you want, but they track each storm from its origin to its demise and interpret how it will affect the surf. The Pacific Quick cast is an abridged version of the Forecast. The Chartroom is where they show weather charts, satellite photos and animated forecast charts. I find that if you look at Surf Reports rather than Surf Forecasts in the Chartroom you get the most information.

What I find most informative are the charts showing the Wave Models. These charts are paired showing wave height and period (the interval between the swells). The Period Chart can be interpreted like a normal weather chart, but here you are looking at the "fronts" of energy passing through the Pacific rather than the



“fronts” of air pressure and direction that show on a regular weather chart. These wave fronts are presented in animation as well. You can watch the approach of a wave front as it moves away from the storm that generated it.

Wetsand.com is the least informative, but they give an easy to read graph of the major swell showing its height and the direction from which it comes.

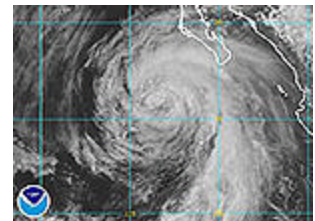


The direction of the swell is a key piece of information. Again, look at a map or visualize the rounded end of the peninsula, the Cape region. As the Cape gently curves, the many rocky points allow the swell to present itself in many different settings and across different bottoms. You can drive along the coast until you find a point that is producing a wave just the way you like it. As you become familiar with the terrain, you learn the optimum direction for each area and then you can keep track of incoming swells and do your own surf forecasting. The East Cape offers countless breaks, each reacting differently as the swell comes from different directions. A swell generated by a storm below New Zealand coming from approx. 200 degrees will break in the

Corridor and out the East Cape near Shipwrecks and 9 Palms. A swell coming from the Antarctic below Chile will come from approx. 130 degrees and may break as far around the Cape as Cabo Pulmo. And there are dozens of breaks that will pick up the same swell and create a variety of waves.

The same principle applies to the Pacific side of the Cape in the winter. The key factor for the Pacific side is that for a swell to get to Southern Baja directly it must come from west of 300 degrees. Such a storm would be located west of the International Dateline and optimally just off the coast of northern Asia around the Kamchatka Peninsula. When swells are generated east of the Dateline in the Gulf of Alaska the swell is blocked by the western most part of the North American Continent, the area that is Oregon and Northern California. Swells do refract or wrap around landmasses, but it takes a very strong swell to wrap far enough around North America to make it to Baja Sur. A map will show that Cabo San Lucas is on a line connecting Denver and Albuquerque and thus far east of true north. Thus a swell has to come from the northwest to affect Baja Sur.

In summer, the wildcard is tropical weather. There can be a dozen or more tropical systems that originate in the Eastern Pacific along the Mexican coast each summer between June and November. Often they move quickly to the west along 10 North latitude and are not noticed in Baja. But sometimes they form near Acapulco and come north along the coast. If such a storm stalls, it can generate a swell that produces waves in Baja. The key factors are how far away the storm is from the Cape, how long it stalls, how strong the winds are and how local weather conditions interfere with the waves. Tropical systems, or chubascos, often come ashore in the Cape Region. Then there are waves, but storm conditions make it unsurfable.



If you are in a position to get up and come to Baja at the approach of a swell, you can, in this day and age, keep track of what is going on from anywhere in the world. The Stormsurf.com site gives one more helpful piece of information. When a significant swell is generated, they give it a number, #1S for the first Southern Hemi swell and so on and #1N for the first winter swell from the north. This helps you to recognize when there is the potential for really good waves. And you don't have to guess when the surf's up!