

ADVENTURE

by Christopher Oleata - www.oleatavision.com



Tuna Ranch

After several years on the job, my brother, the sea captain, finally convinced me to make a trip to Ensenada México. He said I could join him and his crew on the ship, experience tuna ranching, and swim with a school of Blue Fin. He drives The Grand Dutches, a one hundred-ton King Crab ship changed a little so it can tow and harvest the tuna. It's an amazing operation where the ship tows the fish to a ranch of pens floating in the ocean near Ensenada. The boat tour alone, out Ensenada Harbor and by the Todos Santos Islands was something I really wanted to do.

Patrick lives in a secluded sanctuary of pleasant hills and flowers just a half mile from the ocean and hidden a few blocks back from the hellish industrial port of El Sauzal. There are several trailers and small houses nestled below hills and trees where it is quiet and beautiful. Just a mile away is the neighborhood, campground, beach, and perfect waves of Punta San Miguel. We surfed the evening I arrived and enjoyed a BBQ after dark at his house. We sat below trees and stars grilling tuna and vegetables. It was a relaxing evening and we were



off to bed early.

We woke at 2:20am had coffee and checked our gear. We made the short drive from El Sauzal to enter Ensenada Harbor where his captain's pass got us by the guard. It was three, still pitch dark, and the crew was already working unloading giant containers of whole tuna onto semi trucks bound for LAX and Japan. By 3:20 The Captain fired the engines of the ship and began the slow cruise out of the harbor where all kinds of ships lay or float in various stages of ruin. During the slow cruise out, Patrick showed me all the equipment at the helm. There were two kinds of radios, sonar, and multiple GPS com-



puters. It was really cool to see how he navigates the ship in the dark. Just eight miles out into the darkness of the Pacific we could see the low outline of Las Islas Todos Santos.

As the boat cruised we napped or talked, looking out into the darkness. The cook sent up some tacos to the bridge reminding me with those powerful flavors that I was in México. The sun rose as we rounded the rocky cliffs of the point, passing La Bufadora and continued south around a coast of sheer cliffs and rock pillars. We reached the tuna farm and everyone got ready to work. As Patrick backed the ship up to a pen other boats began to gather and tie up to our ship or the pen. Over the next hour the men covered the entire deck with blue tarps to prepare for all the blood.

For the harvest there are two teams. First is the group of divers in thick wet suits, hoods, gloves, masks, and snorkels. There are also divers standing on the railing of the pen reaching in to

help. Team two is the ship where twenty men perform an assembly line of killing, finally loading the fish into enormous tanks below. As a school of nearly a thousand or more swirls in a great circle the divers use smaller nets to peel off a few dozen at a time. Unbelievably the divers are able to grab the 80 to 100-pound fish and while holding the pectoral fins on the side direct the fish. In a slamming, splashing, rodeo the divers wrangle the fish towards the stern of the ship where men are waiting to grab them. Then a man holds the fish while another sends a thick wire through the forehead and down the spine, guts it, and slides it on to others creating a blood bath. The men wear full yellow plastic rain suits and are quickly covered in the bright red blood as they hand carry the fish one at a time to the holding tanks. There the Captain supervises as the fish are numbered, hooked onto a wire and attached to a bar hanging over the tank. The tank is filled with ocean water cooled down below freezing which keeps the fish perfectly fresh.

The epic moment of the trip was when I got to swim with the school of tuna. I put on my wet suit, mask, fins, and underwater camera and with the encouragement of the crew I jumped the rail into the cold pacific. The sea cliffs were not far off but the ocean floor sunk deep beyond view. The pen is a sixty-foot circle and 80-foot deep of net. Surrounding the pen were large sea lions, nearly 500-pound beasts. They are aggressive and have been known to rush the net,



biting hold of a big tuna through the ropes. Over the next hour I was free to swim and photograph in the pen. The crew was encouraging me to enter the small net where the wranglers were grabbing fish. I think they wanted me to be super macho and try to wrangle a fish. I figured I'd get hurt in there so I remained in the dream of the tuna whirlpool. Swimming near the edge of the net the tuna were not far away. They pulse and weave in a constant spin. Swimming in the center of the school and just above they swim down and out of view so I swim down in the center of the swirl and wait in the cold turquoise light. Soon they relax and swim nearer to me. These were amazing moments, but quickly gone as I need the surface to exhale and breath. Besides, the water was 52 degrees and I was nearly hypothermic.

So on the boat I slowly warmed and walked around, calmed by the awesome experience. In my mind I checked off another dream from the list: Swimming with a school of Blue Fin Tuna. But all things continue and now I'm off again towards another dream, through my journey of wonder; through cities and towns; through borders and menus where always I remember, the goal is the journey.

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