

4/26/09

How a great vacation can go really wrong. This is my true story.

This is the time of the year that my family heads down to Cabo San Lucas for a week of sun and fun, mainly consisting of blowing up pool floaties, applying gallons of sunscreen, 2-for-1 boat drinks, and chasing kids around. This year, it was Jen and I, our 2 boys, and my parents. Each day before that family vacation routine begins, I take a little ME time in the morning before everyone gets up, and I head down to the beach for a little fishing. There is one mile of nice sandy beach in front of the Hacienda del Mar/Sheraton. It's not a beach conducive to swimming as the surf is pretty rough. It pounds the shore.

Last Sunday morning I went out to fish for sierra and snapper. The moon and stars were still out with a faint glow of the sunrise to the east. During the two hours I fished, I ran into two guys, one of whom I'd met last year: Joe Bibich from Arizona and Rich Kasunic from Ohio. Joe was a good ol' boy in the purest sense with a little high strung, in your face component to him. He was a big barrel-chested guy in his early 60's. His wife Pam and son Ryan were with him on this trip. Rich Kasunic was with his wife Sandi. Rich had just celebrated his 73'rd birthday, and they were down in Cabo on their second honeymoon. Rich and I hit it off well right from the start. Rich was a charismatic, easygoing and selfless kind of guy.

For the next few fishing mornings, we ran into each other out on the beach. For Rich and I we mostly just shared a hello wave from 75-100 yds away as we got out to our respective spots to fish, only chatting fishing when one of us was on the way back to the Hacienda to start the day. We were out there to fish, and we knew we'd chat later. Joe, on the other hand, liked to walk up and get the scoop from one of us before getting a line wet. Sometimes, that meant he had to walk quite a ways.

The surf was a lot bigger than usual Thursday morning. The night before we had had some drinks at a beach restaurant with Ivy and Brad, a family of four from California that we'd been meeting down there for the past 3 years. We had watched the surf pound the shore and come all the way up to the walls of the restaurant. By morning, the surf had created a strange sand contour on the beach. Instead of the water washing up on the shore and returning in unison to the sea, it curved from both sides into a central channel, created turbulence, and rushed back into the ocean. Similar to the white water rapids of a fast flowing river..... but with an undertow.

Thursday morning had started like all the others. I got up before sunrise, threw on my clothes, grabbed my gear backpack, and headed out to fish. I timed it perfectly to walk all the way down to the east end of the beach where the surf was a little calmer around the coral reef, and where more of the sierra hung out. In walking closer to this spot, I saw a man stand up from sitting in the sand. I only knew it was Rich by his hat and stature against the early sunrise behind him. I gave a quick overhead wave as I stopped to fish where I was, and he returned the gesture. Only a few minutes later the sun rose, and we were fishing. I noticed Rich's wife Sandi had made the outing with him. She was out taking pictures. Little did she know the importance of these pictures.

We had to stay higher on the beach to keep dry while fishing. I threw a few casts, and before I knew it, Joe was walking up to me for the morning chat. No one had caught anything yet, so Joe headed back in the direction he came, and started to fish. Joe had

chosen a spot with a large depression in the sand where the water flowed parallel to the beach into this depression, created turbulence, and flowed back into the ocean. A rather large riptide.

No sooner than Joe had stopped in his spot to fish, the large waves had forced enough water up onto the beach that the force of the returning water was so great, it swept him off his feet and he was violently dragged downhill into the riptide and out into the crashing surf. I only saw the top of his head as it dragged him off the beach. I quickly reeled up my gear, as I sprinted the 100 or so yards back towards Joe and the Hacienda. By the time I got to his area, he'd been pounded by the surf so many times, all of his clothes were gone. In between waves, he was sitting in the sand at the bottom of the swells, naked, screaming for me to help. I threw down my rod and timed my run to sprint downhill to him before the next wave hit. He was so weak, complete deadweight. But he got to his feet, and then we'd get hit by the water returning from the beach. Now both of us are fucked. I can't hold him up and stand against this rush of water. I take a breath, hold on to him for life, and we go under, getting tossed over and over. One of my shoes is gone, as are my hat, my glasses, my sunglasses and many other belongings. I manage to hold on to Joe and get to my feet again. The next thing I know, Rich, and another guy, Tommy, run downhill to help us. Joe is screaming, he is limp like a rag doll. The four of us are fighting against this rushing water to stay up on our feet, but it is too strong. Tommy goes down on all fours, and starts screaming that he can't swim. I let go of Joe and Rich so that I can pick up Tommy and shove him forward towards the shore. That's the last I saw of anyone.

The rushing water takes me under again. I can barely hold my breath. My pockets and backpack are filled with wet, rocky sand and they are dragging me down. I'm choking on saltwater. I manage to get my head above, take a deep breath, and go under just as another wave pounds me. I can hear and feel the pressure of the water empty my lungs. The next thing I remember, I am on my hands and knees in the sand, and someone is grabbing me by the shoulders and dragging me up the beach, yelling at me to crawl faster because more waves are coming. I am left safe and high up on the beach. I couldn't move and my head was in the sand, I was coughing up saltwater, gasping for breath. I threw off my sand-filled pack and looked around. There was a group of people gathered around down the beach. They had pulled someone else from the water. I was in shock and the only thing I could hear was Sandi, yelling "my husband is still out there." I was thinking they must have gotten Joe out and were working on him.

In a daze I got to my feet and stumbled back towards the Hacienda. Two workers came up to me on an ATV. I told them there were 4 guys, including me, in the water. Moments later, I found myself pounding on our door. I had gotten back to our room without anyone stopping to offer their aid. Jen frantically throws me into a hot shower and helps me to get the majority of the sand off. She says that the only thing I could say was "Rich is gone, the waves took him." I am in shock.

After making sure that my parents are caring me for, Jen heads down to the beach to see if she can find out what happened and what she can do to help. She is gone for over an hour before I hear anything. She has found out that Joe drowned and was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital. Apparently in trying to pull Joe's body to shore, a woman was injured and sent to the hospital as well. Tommy had made it back up onto the beach after I had shoved him and several bystanders had grabbed him by his

foot. She also told me that dozens of boats were still trying to find Rich. Jen spent the next few hours with Sandi and the many others out on the beach. They combed the shore with binoculars trying to spot Rich. After several miscommunications between those in the boats and those on shore, word came that they had found Rich's body. For another hour, they kept Rich's body in the water next to the boats because of some bull shit international marine law saying they could not remove his body from the water until they had the O.K. from the marine authority.

During this time, I had gotten up and dressed, and was upstairs with my boys and parents. I needed something other than saltwater in my stomach to keep from vomiting. News of the deaths spread poolside. Our friends, Ivy and Brad, knew that I was out fishing each morning. Hoping for the best, they came up to our unit. They were really glad to see me alive. Jen walked up as I was telling them the story of what had happened that morning. Jen brought us all up to speed on the events that were occurring down on the beach.

We gathered some items and headed back down to the beach to accompany Sandi for what lie ahead. She was all alone in Mexico. For those who ask why we went with her, we can only say because we owed it to her, because I survived. The rest of Thursday was spent driving between the Mexican Naval Station, the morgue to ID the bodies, and the Mexican Consulate for statements and release of his body for cremation and transport back to the states. It was a chaotic and disorganized at times and always utterly inconceivable. During the process we met up with Joe's family at the Consulate Office as we all had to give statements regarding what had transpired. It was only then that I learned the person who had pulled me from the beach was Ryan, Joe's youngest son.

I am lucky to be alive.

It is possible I shouldn't be.

I'm glad it wasn't me.

I feel guilty for feeling this way.

I wonder if Ryan would have pulled me to safety knowing he might have been able to save his father instead? I don't know, but I'm here today because he did.

Would I have done the same thing knowing that I could have lost my life as Rich did, just by trying to help, and hope my family would understand I was doing what needed to be done? Or do I do nothing, and hope a helpless man survives on his own?

In any given moment, you do what has to be done. I truly thought I could save Joe.

If the people around you know how you feel, they will eventually understand why we do what we do, no matter what happens.

Rich Kasunic, RIP, 4/23/09

Joe Bibich, RIP, 4/23/09

Rob Box, Snohomish, WA