

## Names for the Gulf of California

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(Compiled 2005; updated 2018)

### SUMMARY

The Gulf of California has been called many things, but collectively (with spelling variations aside) these boil down to four names (see chronology below):

(1) Mar Bermejo (Vermillion Sea). The original name given by Francisco Ulloa in 1539, the first person in historic times to sail to the head of the Gulf. The name also appears as Vermiglión, Vermijo, and Rojo in various documents from Ulloa, Alarcón, and Nuño de Guzmán. (Ulloa actually named it, *Ancón de San Andrés y Mar Bermejo*, because they arrived there on September 27, the day of San Andrés.)

(2) Mar de Cortés (Sea of Cortez, Sea of Cortés). The name adopted by the Spaniards shortly after Ulloa's journey. The person who is primarily responsible for this name is unclear, but it was most likely Ulloa himself. The "z" spelling was first used by the French in the mid-1700s. It later became a U.S. anglicization (as early as 1870), at first largely restricted to the popular press. However, the popularity and use of the "z" spelling has been increasing in recent decades, and the change from "s" to "z" has been made in both popular and professional texts since the late 1800s (hence, on the basis of common usage it seems to be a valid anglicization). There seems to be no evidence that Hernán Cortés ever spelled his own name with a "z."

(3) Mar Rojo (Red Sea). A name adopted by some Spaniards in the late 1500s, that never really caught on.

(4) Golfo de California (Gulf of California). A name adopted by the Spaniards sometime in the late 1500s, and which gradually grew in popularity over Mar de Cortés, Mar Rojo, and Mar Bermejo.

Contemporary usage today is split between, Mar de Cortés (Sea of Cortez, Sea of Cortés) and Golfo de California (Gulf of California). Modern Mexican government maps use both names (in the Spanish version, of course), whereas modern U.S. maps use Gulf of California (although maps in the English popular press often use Sea of Cortez).

### CHRONOLOGY OF NAMES FOR GULF OF CALIFORNIA

1539. Ulloa sailed to head of Gulf and is the first person (in historic times) to prove that Baja California is a peninsula. He named the Gulf, Mar Bermejo (= Vermillion Sea). His specific phrase was, "We named it the 'Ancon de San Andrés y Mar Bermejo' because it is that color and we arrived there on the day of San Andrés" (translation from

“Voyage of Francisco de Ulloa” by Henry R. Wagner, in “Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century,” California Historical Society, San Francisco, 1929). NOTE: In this sentence, Ulloa was naming the tidal channel at the head of the Gulf “Ancon de San Andrés” and the entire Gulf the “Mar Bermejo.” Almost certainly Ulloa, Alarcon, Consag, Ugarte, and others first used the term “Vermillion Sea” in reference to the brick-colored sediment-laden waters of the delta, and not to a discoloration of delta waters due to phytoplankton blooms. However, many explorers of the time also noted reddish-colored waters in the central and southern Gulf, which were, in fact, due to phytoplankton blooms. Hence, the name “Vermillion Sea” for the entire Gulf seems to have been appropriate (see T. H. Streets 1878 for an early clarification of this). The Castillo map of 1541, based on the Alarcón-Coronado expeditions sponsored by Viceroy Mendoza (by now a rival to Cortés), illustrated the results of the Ulloa 1539-1540 expedition, showing Baja as a peninsula; however, this map has neither the name “California” nor “Sea of Cortés” on it.

1562. Forlani’s “Universale descrittione di tutta la terra conosciuta fin qui,” show Baja as a peninsula but does not label the Gulf of California with a name.

1582. The Lok map of 1582 shows Baja as a peninsula, and the Gulf is labeled “Mar Berméjo.”

1601. “Historia de los Hechos de los Castellanos,” by Herrera y Tordesillas, used Cortés.

1602. Father Ascension accompanied Vizcaíno on his voyage in the Gulf; Ascension’s report referred to the Gulf by several names: Mar Vermejo, Mar Rojo, Mar de la California, Sea of California, Mediterranean Sea of California, and Mar de Cortés [because, Ascension stated, “he was the first to discover it”]. (From, Henry R. Wagner, Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century. California Historical Society, San Francisco. 1929.)

1625. The Briggs map of 1625 shows Baja as an island, labeled “California” and running from Cape Mendocino to Cabo San Lucas.

1632. Nicolas De Cardona called it Gulf of California. (“Descriptions of Many Northern and Southern Lands and Seas in the Indies, Specifically of the Discovery of the Kingdom of California.” Translated and edited by W. Michael Mathes. Dawson’s Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1974.)

1656. de Jansson’s “America Septentrionalis,” showing Baja as an island, labels it Mar Vermeio.

1668. Father Cavallero Carranco called it Vermillion Sea (“Juan Cavallero Carranco, The Pearl Hunters in the Gulf of California, 1668. Summary Report of the Voyage made to the Californias by Captain Francisco de Lucenilla.” Transcribed, translated and annotated by W. Michael Mathes. Dawson’s Book Shop, Los Angeles). An editorial footnote in the translation states, “The name Vermilion Sea (Mar Bermejo) was applied

to the Gulf because the waters sometimes are colored brilliant red during the warmer part of the year by extensive growths of micro-organisms. — Ronald L. Ives.” However, Ulloa assigned the name “Mar Bermejo” while in the region of Islas Montague and Pelicano, where his ship would have been in the red muddy waters of the Colorado River discharge; thus, it seem equally (or perhaps more) likely that the red color of the water was due to suspended river sediments. The 1668 map of Adam Aigenler (originally drawn in 1664) showed Baja as a peninsula called “California,” but left the Gulf unnamed.

Late 1600s/early 1700s. The great Jesuit explorer Padre Eusebio Kino prepared several maps of the region in which the term he most commonly used was Mar de la California (although he also used Mare de las Californias o Carolinas, Mar Vermeio, Mar Vermejo, Mar de California). In his writing he most often used Mar de California (Sea of California). A chronology of Kino’s name use on maps is as follows:

1683. “Mar de las Californias ó Carolinas” (apparently Kino’s first map of the region, which detailed mainly the region around La Paz)

1685. Kino’s 1685 map, as redrawn or traced by Heinrich Scherer, labels the Gulf as “Mar Vermeio ó de las Californias”.

1695. “Mar de la California ó Mar Vermejo”

1695-1696. “Mar de las Californias ó Carolinas” (Baja showed as an island).

1696. Kino’s map of the NW coast of Sonora labels the Gulf as “Mar de la California ó Mar Vermejo.”

1696-1697. “Mar de la California o Mar Vermejo”

1701. Kino’s 1701 map (published in Paris in 1705) showed Baja as a peninsula (“Californie”) and labeled the Gulf as “Mer de La Californie.” The original Spanish version of this map used the names “California” and “Mare de la California.”

1705. Kino’s 1705 map called the peninsula “California” and labeled the Gulf “Mare de California.”

1710. “Mare de California or Mar Vermejo”

Mid-1700s. Juan Nentvig called it Mar Roxo o California (“Rudo Ensayo: A Description of Sonora and Arizona,” translation published by University of Arizona Press, 1980).

1746. Nascimben’s redrawing of Consag’s early map (in The Huntington Library) shows Baja as a peninsula and labels it Mar de Californias.

1753. Buache's "Cartes de la Californie," showing Baja as a peninsula, uses Mer de la Californie.

1760. "Histoire Generale des Voyages," Bellin/Prevost d'Exiles, Paris [in French] uses the spelling "Cortez." Note: "Histoire Generale des Voyages," by Abbé Antoine Francois, was published in 20 quarto volumes from 1746 to 1789.

1762-1778. Wenceslaus Linck consistently used Gulf of California ("Wenceslaus Linck's Diary of his 1766 Expedition to Northern Baja California," translated into English, edited and annotated by Ernest J. Burrus, Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1966. AND "S.J. Wenceslaus Linck's Reports and Letters 1762-1778," translated into English, edited and annotated by Ernest J. Burrus, Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1967).

1764. Consag (in Zevallo) used "Mar Roxo or Gulf of California." (Francisco Zevallos, "The Apostolic Life of Fernando Consag: Explorer of Lower California," translated and annotated by Manuel P. Servin. Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles.)

1757. Miguel Venegas' "Noticia de la California," [in Spanish] uses (on his map) "Golfo de California ó Mar Roxo de Cortez."

1767. The Jesuit map of 1767 included the results of the Kino, Ugarte, and Consag voyages, and labeled the sea "Golfo de Californie ó Mer Rouge de Cortés."

1767. Venegas' "Historia Natural y Civil de la California," 1st ed., Paris [in French] uses the spelling "Cortez." (or 1757?)

1770. Francisco Antonio Lorenzana used "Golfo de California o Mar Vermejo." ("Viage de Hernán Cortés a la Península de Californias, y Noticia de todas las Expediciones, que á ella se han Hecho Hasta el Presente Año de 1769, para la Mejor Inteligencia de la Quarta Carta de Cortés, y Sus Designios." Joseph Antonio de Hogal, Mexico, D.F.).

1772. Vaugondy's "Carte de la Californie. Suivant," depicting Baja as a peninsula, uses both "Golfo de California" and "Mer Rouge."

1779. The Diderot Encyclopedia Maps of 1779 either shoed Baja as a peninsula or an island, but always labeled it "California."

1878. Thomas H. Streets, a medical doctor with the U.S. Navy, claimed the name "Vermilion Sea" came from plankton-rich waters near the mouth of the Gulf of California. However, given that Ulloa did not sail in that region, it is more likely his name came from the muddy-red waters of the Colorado River Delta.

1796. José Joaquín Arraillaga used Gulf of California ("Diary of His Surveys of the Frontier, 1796." Translated into English by Froy Tiscareno, edited and annotated by John W. Robinson. Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1969).

1853/1854. William Walker, the famous American filibuster, used Gulf of California on his maps.

1868. J. Ross Browne (“Explorations in Lower California” – reprinted from a series of three articles in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, 1868) used both Gulf of California and Sea of Cortez (noting the older uses of Mar Rojo and Vermillion Sea by the Spanish).

1884. The Bancroft map of 1884 showed a peninsula labeled “Baja California,” and the sea without a name.

1908. Arthur Walbridge North used Gulf of California and Sea of Cortez (“The Mother of California,” Paul Elder and Co., San Francisco & New York). North also implies that Ulloa gave it the name Sea of Cortés (shortly after naming it Mar Bermejo).

1922. Edward W. Nelson used Gulf of California, noting it was named “Mar de Cortés by the Spaniards” (“Lower California and its Natural Resources,” National Academy of Sciences, Wash. D.C.).

1929. Henry R. Wagner used Gulf of California. (“Voyage of Francisco de Ulloa,” in “Spanish Voyages to the Northwest Coast of America in the Sixteenth Century,” California Historical Society, San Francisco)

1936 (reissued in 1960). Herbert Eugene Bolton (in “Rim of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino, Pacific Coast Pioneer,” Russell & Russell, NY) iterated the many different names used by Kino on his various maps (see above), and noted the clear preference by Kino for “Mar de California” (“Sea of California”).

1937. Henry Wagner (“The Cartography of the Northwest Coast of America to the Year 1800”) showed copies of maps from 1535 to 1792, which use the names: Mar Vermeio, Mar Vermio, Mar Vermelho, Californie Mar Vermeille, Seno Californio o Mar de Cortés, Golfo de California, Golfo de Californias.

1949. Herbert E. Bolton (in “Coronado: Knight of Pueblos and Plains,” University of New Mexico Press) used Sea of Cortés.

1965. Ernest J. Burrus published a detailed summary of Kino’s cartography of the region (“Kino and the Cartography of Northwestern New Spain,” Arizona Pioneers’ Historical Society, Tucson). The earliest Kino map he noted is the 1683 map of La Paz and vicinity, which calls it “Mar de las Californias o Carolinas.”

1968. Francis J. Weber (“The Missions and Missionaries of Baja California: An Historical Perspective”) called it the “Sea of Cortes [no accent mark], more commonly known as the Gulf of California.”

1971. Alexander S. Taylor’s, “A Historical Summary of Baja California: from its Discovery in 1532 to 1867 (Edited by Walt Wheelock)” is deemed an unreliable source.

1973. Miguel Leon-Portilla's "Voyages of Francisco de Ortega: California 1632-1636" (Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles) reported on Ortega's three voyages to the peninsula, but it does not give a name to the Gulf.

1994. Harry W. Crosby ("Antigua California: Mission and Colony on the Peninsular Frontier, 1697-1768," University of New Mexico Press) noted that it has been called Mar de Cortés or Mar Bermejo.

## CORTÉS VS. CORTEZ

In historical Spanish works, the man's name is consistently spelled Cortés. In France, the "z" spelling has been used at least since 1760 (see above). In the U.S. the "z" spelling ("Sea of Cortez") has been used at least since 1870. For example:

1870. Newspaper articles in San Diego Union (reported in Shipek). Note: in 1870, the Union ran a series of nine articles describing the economic prospects of Lower California, the basic source of information coming from a report made to the government of Mexico in 1861 by José Matias Moreno, Commissioner of the Government and sub-prefect of La Frontera, Northern District of Lower California, titled "Statistical Accounts of La Frontera of Lower California, Comprising 100 leagues in Length and 40 in Breadth, Showing its Pueblos, Ranchos and Localities."

1876. Taylor stated it acquired its name of Golfo de Cortez or Mar de Cortez "from the great captain." (He also notes formerly used names of Mar Vermiglion, Mar Rojo, and Mar Vermijo.)

1868. Browne used both Sea of Cortez and Gulf of California.

1908. North, referring to Ulloa's voyage, implied that Ulloa gave it the name Sea of Cortez.

1922. Nelson called it Gulf of California ("or Sea of Cortez as it was named by the Spanish").

1941. Steinbeck and Ricketts (in "Sea of Cortez") used Sea of Cortez.

1961. Joseph Wood Krutch (in "The Forgotten Peninsula") used Sea of Cortez.

1966. Ray Cannon (in "The Sea of Cortez") used Sea of Cortez.

1969. John W. Robinson's translation of Arraillaga's "Diary of his Surveys of the Frontier, 1796" used the phrase Sea of Cortez (use of the "z" spelling was probably an editorial decision).

1982. Dix Brow (in "Sea of Cortez Guide") used Sea of Cortez.

1988. Neil Kelly and Gene Kira (in “The Baja Catch”) used Sea of Cortez.

1989. Alex Kerstitch (in “Sea of Cortez Marine Invertebrates”) used Sea of Cortez.

1992. Walt Peterson (in “The Baja Adventure Book”) used Sea of Cortez.

1994. Bernard L. Fontana (in “Entrada”) used Sea of Cortez.

1996. Ginger Potter (in “Baja Book IV”) used Sea of Cortez.

2000. Thomson, D. A., L. T. Findley and A. Kerstitch. (in Reef Fishes of the Sea of Cortez –the Rocky Shore Fishes of the Gulf of California. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX) used Sea of Cortez.

Professional writing (from the U.S.) also has used the “z” spelling, for example:

Case, T. J. and M. L. Cody (eds.). 1983. *Island Biogeography in the Sea of Cortez*. University California Press, Berkeley. 508 pp. [But, changed to “Cortés” for the second edition.]

Brusca, R. C. 1993. The Arizona/Sea of Cortez years of J. Laurens Barnard. *Journal Natural History* 27: 727-730.

Terry, A., G. Bucciarelli and G. Bernardi. 2000. Restricted gene flow and incipient speciation in disjunct Pacific Ocean and Sea of Cortez populations of a reef fish species, *Girella nigricans*. *Evolution* 54: 652-659.

Mitchell, D. R. and M. S. Foster. 2000. Hohokam shell middens along the Sea of Cortez, Puerto Peñasco, Sonora, Mexico. *Journal of Archaeology* 27: 41.

In Cortés’ own “*Cartas de Relación* (his letters to the King of Spain; available on the [www](http://www)), he wrote his own name in three different ways: Hernán Cortés, Hernando Cortés, and Fernando Cortés.

Modern Mexican atlases use a variety of names, including (most frequently) Golfo de California and Mar de Cortés (e.g., *Atlas de México: Educación Primaria*, 1994; *Atlas de Sonora*, 1993; *Atlas Nacional de Medio Físico*, 1998).

Some contemporary border region Mexican tourism brochures use “Sea of Cortez.” This is the only usage of the “z” spelling (“Cortez”) from Mexico that I have found, and it is clearly in deference to Norteamericanos (the Spanish version of the same brochures uses “Cortés,” thus acknowledging that the “s” spelling is Spanish and the “z” spelling is an anglicization).