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Life / Travel

## Baja, Sea of Cortes: Watching whales

Off the Baja California Peninsula, aboard a cruise, that decides where it wants to go day by day

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STEVE HAGGERTY / MCT

Going ashore at Bonanza Beach, Sea of Cortez, Baja California Sur, Mexico.

By: Anne Z. Cooke Steve Haggerty Special to the Star, Published on Fri Oct 18 2013

SAN EVARISTA, MEXICO—Risen early to catch the sunrise, cruise passengers watch as the Safari Endeavour glides past the Baja Peninsula's ragged coast.

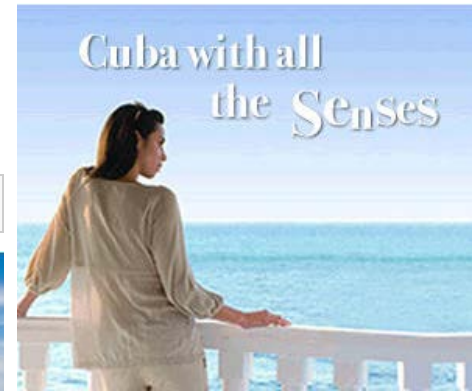
As the sun's rays play over the cliffs, each small cove and crescent beach comes into view then slides out of sight

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astern.

Fifty yards off the starboard bow, a whale surfaces to breathe, blowing an airy spray of mist and leaving a widening circle of ripples. On the port side, a squawking band of sea gulls hovers over a rocky islet populated by a colony of croaking sea lions.

They and the Endeavour are the only signs of life.

So it seems to the first-time visitor to the Sea of Cortez, the 700-mile-long finger of ocean separating the Baja California Peninsula from the Mexican mainland. (It's also known as the Sea of Cortez, Gulf of California, and Vermilion Sea. And it goes by various Spanish names, too.)

In nearly a week on the ship, touring at sea and on land, we've spotted three of the seven whale species that frequent the region.

They are part of the rich stew of marine life here, which includes dolphins, green turtles, mobula rays and dozens of birds. We've walked through a tiny fishing village, hiked the narrow trails to dusty cliff-top ridges, snorkeled in glass-clear coves.

Except for a brief glimpse of two small sailboats, we've had the lonely Sea of Cortez to ourselves.

Behind us on the bridge, Capt. Jill Russell, the Endeavour's 40-something skipper, is in her element, peering through binoculars and reading weather signs in the clouds. A chunky dynamo with energy to burn and a hands-on approach, she checks the wind, and weighs whether the day's planned expedition should go ahead.

Button-holed by a photographer who asks where the ship is heading, she replies, "I don't know." Then she grins. "I'll know when we get there."

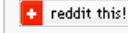
The officers on the bridge, watching the whitecaps smacking against the bow, know what to expect. Captain Jill waits and watches. Then she decides.

The 86-passenger Endeavour, an Un-Cruise Adventures ship, is a solo act.

Holland America and Carnival sail these waters, with one ship each, calling at larger ports: La Paz, Loreto and San Jose del Cabo on the Peninsula, and Topolobampo and Guaymas on mainland Mexico's Pacific coast. A cruise third cruise vessel, Lindblad Expedition's 62-passenger Sea Bird, also sails here in January and February, exploring Baja's virgin beaches.

The Endeavour leads shore expeditions to deserted bays and coves in places such as Ensenada Grande, Bahia Aqua Verde, Espiritu Santo and El Cardonal.

We expected to spend the day on shore, wandering along the beach, looking for shells and driftwood, snorkelling among the rocks, looking for angelfish, emerald wrasse, sea horses, sea turtles. Some passengers planned to kayak across the bay; the Endeavour's storage-and-launch rack lowers the 20 two-man kayaks to the water level. Other



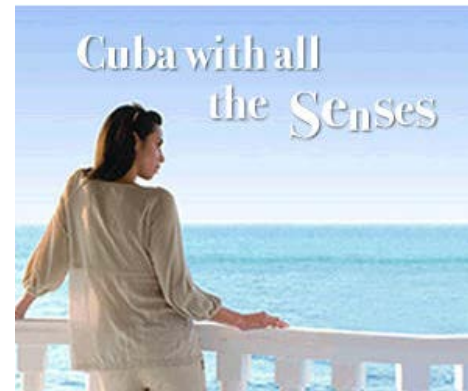
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passengers signed up for the guided hike through the brush-and cactus forest.

“We’ll be exploring what scientists call a “low elevation deciduously-treed jungle,” promises naturalist Paulino Perez a slide show. But with choppy seas and heavy surf, beach landings are put on hold.

I stand by the rail, searching for whales. Sperm whales and grey whales, humpbacks and blues, even fin whales and giant whale sharks frolic in these protected blue waters, “the world’s aquarium,” according to marine biologist and diver Jacques Cousteau, who labelled the region the “Galapagos of North America.”

Idling near the rocky pinnacles called Los Islotes, we spot pods of dolphins, sea lions sunning, and brown pelicans and blue-footed boobies jockeying for sunny perches.

The week’s highlight is the shore tour to Magdalena Bay, on Baja’s Pacific Coast, to see the migrating grey whales.

“We’re heading for the historic village of Loreto, where you’ll have two options,” said expedition leader, Mark Hopkins. “You can spend the day there, touring the old Mission church, or shopping. Or you can join the bus tour to Magdalena Bay on the Peninsula’s Pacific Coast, to see where the migrating grey whales spend the winter months. They come in February and March to breed and give birth,” he said.

I signed up for Magdalena Bay.

By mid-morning 40 or more travellers, seated in four large pangas, are motoring slowly across the lagoon. At first, it seems empty, the whales gone. But a mottled hump silently breaks the surface nearby. Then a second shiny slippery back emerges and she has a calf by her side.

As the day warms, so do the whales, rolling sideways to inspect us with one eye and popping straight up between the pangas for a 360-degree look-around. A few whales slide next to the panga, as if courting the touch of a human hand. Whales are everywhere, gently cruising, rising, breathing and diving.

By 1 o’clock, we are ready for lunch. We eat this at a local café. We’re served plates heaped with chicken enchiladas, tacos, rice, beans, chili verde, sliced mangoes and a fresh green salad, served with a soda or beer.

How much leeway does a ship captain have in a place like the Gulf.

“That’s what I like about out-of-the-way places like the Sea of Cortes,” said Russell. “The big cruise ships depend on stopping at ports with facilities, the docks, tour buses, guide services and shops. They have to go where they’re expected. But, here, in Baja, we get to decide when and where to anchor and what to do that day.”

### **McClatchy-Tribune News Service**

#### **Just the Facts**

**ROUTES:** Starting in December, the 64-passenger Safari Voyager takes over the Safari Endeavour’s Sea of Cortes routes, cruising year around. Seven-night roundtrip itineraries from San Jose del Cabo include “Baja’s Whale Bounty,” and “Cousteau’s Aquarium of the World.” The seven-night roundtrip cruise out of Guaymas, mainland Mexico, focuses on the “Marine Miracles of Baja California.” The 14-night one-way

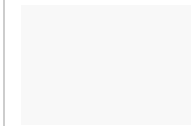
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**Jim By**

Jim's  
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cruise between Guaymas and San Jose del Cabo explores the “Essential islands of Baja California North and South.”

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