

## BRIEFLY

**Soon, hotel signs may glow underfoot**

AMSTERDAM

Ever wish your hotel room could be marked "Do Not Disturb" in glowing lights to drive the message home? That option is on its way.

Two European companies have developed a system in which colored LEDs are combined with specialized carpets to make tailored hotel signs that appear underfoot instead of on walls.

Obvious uses include having glowing red arrows direct guests to the nearest escape or exit in case of emergency. Ed Huibers, sales director at Royal Philips NV, the world's biggest lighting maker, says hotel tests are under way.

**Southwest boosts fee for pets that fly**

DALLAS

It'll soon cost more to bring your pet with you when you fly on Southwest Airlines.

The airline is citing higher costs in raising its pet fee to \$95 per flight from \$75 beginning with flights on Jan. 15.

Southwest Airlines Co. lets passengers bring a vaccinated dog or cat that fits in a carrier that goes under an airline seat.

Southwest, which began carrying pets in 2009, charges less for the service than many other airlines.

**Liberace exhibit a trove of glittery memorabilia**

LAS VEGAS

A casino on the Las Vegas Strip is bringing some of Liberace's most decadent possessions back into the public eye.

Visitors to the exhibit at the Cosmopolitan Las Vegas can gaze upon the flamboyant entertainer's rhinestone piano, sequined jumpsuits and opulent European candelabra.

The installation is titled "Too Much of a Good Thing Is Wonderful" and will be open through Jan. 2, from 3 to 10 p.m.

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**CRUISE UNLOCKS TREASURES OF SEA OF CORTES**

86-passenger ship offers flexibility and rare chance to enjoy sea life sans crowds

ANNE Z. COOKE

MCT NEWS SERVICE

SAN EVARISTA, MEXICO

Rising early to catch the sunrise, cruise passengers nursing coffee cups watched as the Safari Endeavour glided past the Baja Peninsula's ragged coast. As the rays played over the cliffs, each thumb-shaped cove and crescent beach came into view for a minute or two, then slid out of sight, disappearing astern.

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

They — and the Endeavour — were the only signs of life, or so it seemed to these first-time visitors to the Sea of Cortes, 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, in addition to its various Spanish-language names.)

In nearly a week on the ship, touring at sea and on land, we'd spotted three of the seven whale species that frequent the region, part of the abundant stew of marine residents, including dolphins, green turtles, mobula rays and dozens of birds. We'd walked through a tiny fishing village, hiked the narrow trails to dusty cliff-top ridges and snorkeled in glass-clear coves. But except for a brief glimpse of two small sailboats, we'd had the lonely Sea of Cortes all to ourselves.

Behind us on the bridge, Capt. Jill Russell, the Endeavour's 40-something skipper, was in her element, peering through



Passengers from the Endeavour go ashore on a day trip at Bonanza Beach on the Sea of Cortes. STEVE HAGGERTY • MCT NEWS SERVICE

binoculars and reading weather signs in the clouds. A chunky dynamo with energy to burn and a hands-on approach to management, she checked the wind, wondering if the day's planned expedition should be canceled.

Buttonholed by a photographer who asked where the ship was heading, she was ready with a snappy comeback. "I don't know," she answered, pausing for comic effect. Then she grinned. "But I'll know when we get there."

A few of the passengers, mostly cruise veterans expecting an orderly progression of ports and tours, suddenly felt unmoored. "Now what?" asked a retired lawyer from Maryland. "Can they change the route just like that?"

But the officers on the bridge, watching the whitecaps smacking against the bow, knew what to expect. Captain Jill, as they called her, would wait and watch, then decide.

One thing was certain. The 86-passenger Endeavour, an Un-Cruise Adventures ship, was a solo act. At the present, only Holland America and Carnival sail anywhere close by, and

that with one ship each, calling only at larger towns with port facilities: La Paz, Loreto and San Jose del Cabo on the Peninsula, and Topolobampo and Guaymas on mainland Mexico's Pacific coast.

A third cruise vessel, Lindblad Expedition's 62-passenger Sea Bird, also sails here in January and February, exploring Baja's virgin beaches. But only Un-Cruise Adventures goes off the grid, leading shore expeditions to deserted bays and coves "in country," places like Ensenada Grande, Bania Aqua Verde, Espiritu Santo and El Cardonal.

I'd expected to spend that day on shore, wandering along the beach, looking for shells and driftwood, snorkeling among the rocks, looking for angelfish, emerald wrasse, sea horses and even sea turtles. Some passengers planned to kayak across the bay; the Endeavour's techno-savvy, storage-and-launch rack (nicknamed the "pickle fork") lowers the 20, two-man kayaks to the water level for easy loading. Other passengers had signed up for the guided hike through the brush-and-cactus forest that looks like a desert but isn't.

"We'll be exploring what scientists call a 'low-elevation deciduously-treed jungle,'" promised naturalist and hike leader Paulino Perez during the previous evening's slide show. But with choppy seas and heavy surf, beach landings were put on hold.

So we stood by the rail instead, searching for leviathans. Sperm whales and gray whales, humpbacks and blues, even fin whales and giant whale sharks frolic in these protected blue waters, "the world's aquarium," accord-

ing to marine biologist and diver Jacques Cousteau, who labeled the region the "Galapagos of North America."

Idling near the rocky pinnacles called Los Islotes we spotted pods of dolphins, sea lion colonies sunning, and brown pelicans and blue-footed boobies jockeying for sunny perches. But the week's highlight was the shore tour to Magdalena Bay, on Baja's Pacific Coast, to see the migrating gray whales.

"Tomorrow 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 gray whales spend the winter months. They come in February and March to breed and give birth," he said.

An obvious choice, I thought, signing up for Magdalena Bay.

The drive was long, two hours on a continuously winding road. But by mid-morning I was there with 40-odd other travelers, seated in four large pangas and motoring slowly across the lagoon. At first, the lagoon seemed empty, the whales gone. But just as we'd decided the trip was a bust, a mottled hump silently broke the surface nearby. Then a second shiny wet back emerged with a calf by her side.

As the day warmed, so did the whales, rolling sideways to inspect us with one eye and "spy hopping" straight up between the pangas for a 360-degree look-around. A few whales slid next to the panga, as if courting the touch of a human hand. Whales were everywhere, gently cruising, rising, breathing and diving.

Whaled out, I was ready for lunch by 1 p.m., served at a local cafe that offered plates heaped with chicken enchiladas, tacos, rice, beans, chile verde, sliced mangoes and a fresh green salad.

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

**If you go**

**The routes:** Starting in December, the 64-passenger Safari Voyager takes over the Safari Endeavour's Sea of Cortes routes, cruising year-round. Seven-night round-trip itineraries from San Jose del Cabo include "Baja's Whale Bounty," and "Cousteau's Aquarium of the World." The seven-night round-trip cruise from Guaymas, mainland Mexico, focuses on the "Marine Miracles of Baja California." The 14-night one-way cruise between Guaymas and San Jose del Cabo explores the "Essential islands of Baja California North and South."

**Three cruise styles:** Ships in the "Wilderness" category focus on active adventure. "Safari" designated ships offer soft adventure with a touch of luxury. The "Heritage" designation offers living history aboard ship and port-side.

**Rates and services:** Cabins are priced per person, double occupancy starting at \$2,995 in low season. Rates include port fees and taxes, airport transfers, park entrance fees, sports equipment, guided hikes, yoga classes, a wellness program and all onboard guide services. Valid passports are required to enter Mexico. Call (888) 862-8881 or visit [www.un-cruise.com](http://www.un-cruise.com)

the itinerary can be flexible? Was the Magdalena Bay tour available on a day's notice?

"It's rarely a problem," said Russell. "That's what I like about out-of-the-way places like the Sea of Cortes. 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."

It's the kind of flexibility that Un-Cruise cultivates. Three years ago, Un-Cruise Adventures was a minor player. A small Alaska-oriented outfit, its four ships sailed under two names: Inner Sea Discoveries (active expedition trips) and American Safari Cruises (luxury yachts). Growing was a someday topic that was never seriously pursued. Then Cruise West, Alaska's oldest and best-loved cruise line, announced it was going out of business and selling its fleet of expedition-style ships.

"The vessels were already right there, in Alaska, and they came on the market at the right price," said Un-Cruise spokeswoman Sarah Scoltock. "It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

**\$759 for 3 nights per person, based on double occupancy, including air on Alaska Airlines from Los Angeles**

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