

Sea of Cortez

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

Board the Spirit of Adventure

After an evening arrival in San Diego the next day will be free to relax, explore San Diego, or join us on a daytrip to beautiful Cuyamaca National Park where amongst mountain woodlands are Mountain Bluebird, Steller's Jay, Pygmy Nuthatch, California Towhee and Red-shouldered Hawk. We usually see a Coyote or two as well as unobtrusive Mule Deer. In the evening we'll board the 'Spirit of Adventure', settle into our cabins, and have a chance to get to know other participants on the voyage, before enjoying the first of Dan's spectacular meals! Around eleven we'll motor out of San Diego harbour and head for Mexican waters.

Days 3 & 4

Islas Todos Santos and San Benitos

Dawn will find us quietly cruising out of Ensenada's harbour past flocks of Surf Scoter and Western Grebes to the beautiful island of Todos Santos. From the Spirit's skiffs (small boats) we'll have really close up views of breeding colonies of Brown Pelicans and stunning Brandt's Cormorants with their electric blue gular pouches. Steering southwards we'll soon encounter our first dolphins. Mike, the 'Spirits' captain for the past twenty years, can spot cetaceans that nobody else has yet suspected are in the same part of the ocean and slight course changes will alert us to 'something good'. He'll soon have groups of both Short-beaked and Long-beaked Common Dolphins bow-riding in spectacular fashion as Black-vented and Pink-footed Shearwaters and flocks of Red Phalaropes fly past. Occasionally Pacific White-sided Dolphins will join us too. A sighting of an Albatross along this stretch is likely, either one or both of Black-footed and Laysan can be expected. As we near Islas San Benitos we'll encounter both Craveri's and Xantus' Murrelets and the tiny Cassin's Auklet which breeds on these islands. We'll pull into a bay where Californian Sea Lions porpoise through Giant Kelp beds in acrobatic welcome. We'll hear the commotion on the island's beaches before we see what is making it, for the end of January is the very best time to experience San Benitos's Northern Elephant Seal rookeries. Many of the immense adults lie prone in sandy coves, however the males are likely to be putting on an impressive show, the alpha males have their work cut out from intrepid interlopers. These huge animals will show an impressive turn of speed as they noisily bulldoze their way through the colony in pursuit of the intruder. Meanwhile the females are pupping and we'll see plenty of newly emerged doe-eyed pups, the older ones will be just starting to learn about water and everything else - they'll come right up to you to see what kind of thing you are! As we walk round the island, carefully avoiding the prickly 'Cholla' cactuses, but admiring the lovely flowers of endemic *Mamillaria neopalmeri*

cactuses, we'll see beautiful Heerman's Gulls, and Black Oystercatchers with crazy mauve bills chasing Sally Lightfoot Crabs across the rocks. Ospreys have castles for nests every five hundred yards or so around the coast! The skiffs will take us to a Californian Sea Lion rookery on a nearby islet. This has recently been colonised by Guadalupe Fur Seals and watching these species interact in their characteristically boisterous fashion from such close range is amazing!

Days 5-7

San Ignacio Lagoon & Magdalena Bay

And that's what it's all about for the rest of the trip - unbelievable close up encounters! Having migrated from the cold waters of the Bering Strait, hundreds of Gray Whales congregate each winter in San Ignacio's Lagoon. Here their calves are born and nurtured before the spring migration back to the food-rich north. These whales are famously confiding and it is not so much that they allow close approach, more that they come to you! We'll be visiting as the first of years calves are borne and the lagoon is an extraordinarily active place as some of the large bulls are still present and they'll carouse enthusiastically through the waters. During several skiff rides in the lagoon we'll experience all sorts of Gray Whale behaviour. They like to 'spy-hop' with their heads straight up out of the water, and they often breach too. Luckily this tends to occur in a sequence of up to ten or so leaps out of the water so we can often position ourselves for that ultimate whale photograph. The experience of being so close to these creatures (whale breath and all!) is one that leaves most visitors awestruck. Even with such young babies some of the mothers will probably try and push their babies (already weighing several tonnes and twenty feet long) up to have their chins rubbed - something they clearly enjoy! Touching their skin is a most extraordinary experience - the sensation is of soft rubber interrupted here and there by tufts of bristly hairs! Indeed the adults often do the same and even the 'Spirit' becomes a scratching post for these great whales, one female stations herself by the Spirit just after the boat moors each year!

Great flocks of waders, particularly Willet and Marbled Godwit, roost in the lagoon. Pools lined with mangroves host brilliant orange Garibaldi Fish as well as Belted Kingfisher, White Ibis, Tri-coloured Heron, Snowy Egret, and the amazing dance of fishing Reddish Egrets. Caspian and Elegant Terns accompany us as we pass through the melée of Gray Whales at the lagoon's entrance. Once out in Magdalena Bay we'll soon find ourselves cruising alongside our first Bryde's Whales or perhaps the rarer Sei Whale. These sleek juggernauts of the ocean are feeding on swarms of Red Pelagic Crabs which colour the surface in places. We are likely to encounter our first Blue Whales here - these will be migrating north from the Sea of Cortez. It is also a great area for other marine life such as turtles, we've had memorable close-up encounters with Loggerhead, Green and even Hawksbill Turtles in recent years.

Days 8-12 The Sea of Cortez

Rounding the tip of the Baja Peninsula we'll be accompanied by Magnificent Frigatebirds and Red-billed Tropicbirds as we enter the tropical waters of the Sea of Cortez. Humpback Whales will already be much in evidence - they are very common here. We'll encounter several groups of these lively and entertaining leviathans and our captain is uncannily adept at putting us in the right place to observe them. The fifteen foot long white flippers slapping hard down on the water is an unforgettable sight. In still conditions it can be heard a long way away - as can the whales' breathing! Humpbacks also breach regularly so we're likely to see an airborne whale or two at some point. The Sea of Cortez is a magnificent place to see all sorts of marine life. As we cruise through the blue waters around San Jose Island we'll encounter Mako and Blue Sharks swimming quietly along the surface. Striped Marlin and the strange Dolphin Fish occasionally show on the surface and so too Sharpchin Flyingfish. Pacific Ridley Turtles sun bathe on the surface and allow us almost to within touching distance. Hammerhead Sharks are a marvellous sight and we'll encounter plenty of Mobullas, a kind of small Manta Ray, these often cart-wheeling across the surface.

The San Jose Channel is the place of dreams for whalewatchers. This deep channel offers great feeding grounds for several of the great whales. Foremost amongst them is the immense Blue Whale, the largest creature ever to have lived on Earth. They are making a steady comeback in eastern Pacific waters and we'll hopefully see calves with the adults that frequent this area. The size of these behemoths is difficult to appreciate - some are just about as long as our boat (which is 88 foot long) and weigh considerably more - the largest here may weigh around 170 tonnes. One sounding just metres away from the boat is a breathtaking spectacle. The column of water vapour and exhaled breath goes some twenty feet or more into the air. If we are lucky we'll see them lunge feeding when they rise through pockets of krill and break the surface in a powerful lunge of billowing pleats - a breath-taking sight. The world's second largest whale, the Finback, also feeds in this scenic channel and so too do Humpbacks, but it is another great whale that'll draw our attention next - the Sperm Whale. Altogether a strange animal, the Sperm Whale has a distinctive 45° blow which enables us to recognise them from a distance. Their elegant tail flukes are raised high in an almost balletic pose before they dive vertically into the depths of the channel. We will try and listen to the weird and wonderful sounds they make whilst down there with the aid of a hydrophone. Numbers of Sperm Whales have been impressive in recent years with up to seventy animals being seen on each trip, and one of Mike's 'party-pieces' is putting the group in position for photographs of these amazing whales, their tails held high above the water as another incredible sunset engulfs the mountains behind the San Jose Channel - sublime! Incredibly there are yet more whales to be seen in this channel. Large herds of sleek black Short-finned Pilot Whales cruise the clear waters, often coming to bow-ride with us. These

sometimes fall prey to the pods of Killer Whales that visit the channel - these are encountered on some but not all trips. Rarest of all are the diminutive Dwarf Sperm Whales which are tiny dolphin-sized whales that stay only briefly at the water's surface looking like an upside-down surfboard!

Schools of dolphins six hundred strong churn the waters into a frenzy when they feed. So dense are these groups that there doesn't seem to be enough room for them all in the water. Our captain knows just how to invite a good bow-riding session and soon they'll be bounding along at high speed with many cruising the bow wave and a phalanx of them leaping high into the air along the stern waves. It's a photographer's dream! Looking down from the boat's prow sleek Common and Bottlenose Dolphins slice through the water just a couple of metres from us showing off their high speed skills. Night time bioluminescence is a regular phenomenon here and if we find some our captain will go looking for some dolphins to bow-ride with. It is like a magnificent underwater fireworks show. Each dolphin is surrounded by brilliant light as it courses through the water and the phosphorescence trails off the fins and tail for many metres behind. The faster the dolphins swim the brighter it is. An unbelievable sight!

The desert islands through which we're cruising are almost completely uninhabited. They are part of a national park and we will have special permits to land on them. Unspoilt Isla Santa Catalina hosts the world's largest cactus, the Cardon, as well as the rare Giant Barrel Cactus, a metre and half tall barrel covered in spines! Both these will just be starting to flower as will a range of other cacti. Gila Woodpeckers drill holes in dead cacti from which brilliant red Cardinals sing. A range of fascinating birds include Verdin, Scot's Oriole, California Gnatcatcher, Canyon Wren, Phainopepla and endemics such as Xantus' Hummingbird and Gray Thrasher. Back at sea are Black and Least Storm-Petrels, the endemic Yellow-footed Gull, and Masked, Brown and Blue-footed Boobies. The last two breed on white-washed cliffs on tiny Los Islotes. This is one of a number of places where we can swim or snorkel amongst a wonderful array of tropical marine life. At Los Islotes the main attraction is the Californian Sea Lions which cavort in the waters around us. The youngsters just want to have fun and race around us, watching our inept attempts at being water babies with their puppy-like eyes. The fish are fantastic and we'll encounter such beauties as the Cortez Rainbow Wrasse, Coral Hawkfish and the very common King Angelfish. Amongst gorgeous corals are Gulf Sunstars, Crowned Urchins and pretty multi-coloured Peacock Worms. The Greybar Grunt and Barred Pargo add a touch of the surreal. Immaculate Guineafowl Puffers are everywhere and we'll see Pacific Boxfish, the aptly-named Balloonfish and Bullseye Stingrays. Fabulous Golden Groupers guard cave entrances and amazing Cortez Garden Eels wave at us from the sandy bottom. The 'Spirit's' glass bottomed boat can take you out to see this even if you don't want to snorkel or swim.

Days 13 & 14
Return

We'll depart from Cabo San Lucas, arriving back in the UK the next morning

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