

Frolicking with finned locals off La Paz

Sea lions, dolphins and whales welcome day-tripping snorkellers on the Sea of Cortez

BY BRIAN J. CANTWELL, MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE DECEMBER 17, 2011



Kayakers paddle past a dive boat at guano-covered Los Islotes rocks in the Sea of Cortez near La Paz. Nearby Isla Espiritu Santo is a UNESCO biosphere reserve.
Photograph by: Brian J. Cantwell, Seattle Times, McClatchy Newspapers, McClatchy-Tribune

In the turquoise water of Mexico's Sea of Cortez, the sleek and tawny sea lion zoomed past us as if he were a Jacques Cousteau diver clinging to one of those hand-held aqua scooters.

When he saw our group of snorkellers he stopped like he'd broadsided a blue whale.

"Oh - you aren't sea lions, are you?" he seemed to be thinking, as he flipped and floated upside down just inches away, curiously studying us with soulful, basset-hound eyes. We could see every twitch of his whiskers.

In wetsuits and snorkel masks, we were surrounded by juvenile California sea lions, about a year old. Juvenile in age and behaviour - zipping up, down and around us, and at times hanging on our dive boat's mooring line - these guys just wanted to play.

"They're cute, in a disconcerting way!" a fellow snorkeller exclaimed as we clambered back aboard the boat.

We were moored at Los Islotes, a group of rocky islets about a 75-minute boat ride from La Paz, the capital of southern Baja California. Weirdly sculpted by wind and tide, with whorls of rock and minaretlike spires, these are sea stacks like Antonio Gaudi might design.

A snow-white coating of yeasty guano is evidence that frigate birds, boobies and other winged wonders take refuge here along with a colony of up to 400 sea lions - whose barking, incidentally, sounds a lot like basset hounds.

It's a popular day-trip tourist outing to "swim with the sea lions."

Once our masks dipped beneath the surface, we saw why fish-eaters like this place. We were in the middle of thousands of shimmering, light-blue anchovies, fish five to six centimetres long, schooling in waterballet unison.

For safety, we were told to stay well off the rocks and let the young sea lions come to us, keeping our distance from the big bulls jealously guarding their harems on shore. When one of the adult, 800-pound females swam by four metres from me underwater, barrelling like a dark torpedo, it was, yes, disconcerting - without so much cuteness.

However, only the youngsters seemed interested in us.

"They may come at you, they may even try to hug you, but they're just playing," said our dive guide. "They might even try to nibble - don't pull your hand away, their teeth are sharp."

In other words, swimming with sea lions is safe - until it's not. So, caveat emptor. (How do you say, "Let the swimmer beware"?) But thousands have done it with nothing to remember but grins.

Getting slimed by a dolphin was the day's other hazard.

But for that you get an unbridled show like you'll never see at Seaworld.

On the way to Los Islotes, our boat circled out beyond Isla Espiritu Santo (it means "Island of the Holy Spirit"), a sprawling, uninhabited outpost of striated pink and ochre promontories that in 2008 was named a marine national park. It's also part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve and World Heritage Site, in part because it and another nearby reserve harbour 38 unique plant and animal species - desert hares, ring-tailed cats, snakes and the like. Its pocket bays of warm water and caramelcoloured sand make it a fabled kayaking and sailing destination.

Along the way, our boatload of nine American and Mexican vacationers thrilled to the sight of flying mobulas, a type of ray that breaches out of the water like a place-kicked football.

"Researchers say it's males trying to impress females," said our guide, Chabelo Castillo.

"It's always about sex!" quipped passenger Lauren Seto, from San Francisco.

If we were lucky this day, Castillo said, we would see rays, dolphins, sea lions and maybe even whales. A third of the world's cetacean species hang out here.

Dolphins showed up, as if on cue, beyond Espiritu Santo.

"Get your cameras!" shouted Castillo.

We spent the next half-hour circling in the sea as bottlenose dolphins leaped the wake of our powerboat, flying as high as Flipper ever did to jump through a flaming hoop.

"I have seen dolphins thousands of times, but every time I see one leaping, it's 'woo-hoo!'" exulted Castillo.

The younger crowd delighted in lying on their bellies and peering down from the boat's bow to see dolphins riding the bow wave, close enough to touch.

Thrilling, yes, but remember that dolphins breathe through that blowhole right there. It's a lot like, well, your own nose. One young woman discovered that with some alarm.

"I looked down and saw that my finger was covered with goo, and I realized it was dolphin snot!" said Raluca Ioanid, another visitor from San Francisco.

Rounding out the day was an idyllic two-hour lunch break - after a good hand-washing - and kayaking at pretty Ensenada Grande beach, on Isla Partida, connected by a narrow isthmus to Espiritu Santo.

At 3 p.m. our boat headed back to its base at Costa Baja marina. We'd seen all on our wish list but whales, I noted to Castillo, who shrugged and smiled.

Oops, spoke too soon.

"Whale!" the cry went up. Every head turned.

Ahead, a fluked tail not a whole lot smaller than our eight-metre foot boat flipped up, then plopped back underwater with a splash of creamy foam. We sped toward it, then slowed, circling.

"Whissh!" A spout - then another tail flip.

"It's two humpbacks!" Ioanid cried.

Our boat zigzagged for 10 minutes as we watched, hushed, waiting for more. Finally, another tail flip, barely 30 metres away.

"Yes!" everyone cheered.

And, finally, the boat turned for home.

IF YOU GO

Finding a guide: From La Paz, a number of operators offer boat trips to swim with sea lions at Los Islotes and visit Espiritu Santo or Isla Partida. We went with a well-equipped outfitter called Fun Baja (funbaja.com). Costs were (in U.S. dollars) \$105 for the daylong tour; \$10 for wetsuit rental; \$25 for kayak rental, plus 11 per cent tax. Lunch provided.

Espiritu & Baja Tours offers trips for \$75 US; Espiritubaja.com.

El Tocolote Beach Club charges about \$70 US; www.clubdeplayaeltecolote.com.

For lower-cost trips, inquire in La Paz at the visitor information office in the park at the corner of Paseo Alvaro Obregón (along the malecon) and Calle Nicolas Bravo.

Protecting the resource: While battles over development continue,

Mexico has made some strides in protecting natural areas in the Sea of Cortez, in part with the help of the U.S.-based Nature Conservancy.

After Mexico protected Isla Espiritu Santo as a national park, the Nature Conservancy financed

conservation activities such as patrolling, tourism management and environmental education, working in co-operation with local groups.

Permits are now required for camping on Espiritu Santo, fees are collected to help support conservation efforts, and personal watercraft are prohibited in sensitive areas. At Los Islotes, permanent mooring buoys reduce underwater anchoring damage and rules prohibit going ashore. Learn more at www.parksinperil.org/wherewework/mexico/protectedarea/loreto.html.

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal