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Wildlife and simple pleasures in Sea of Cortes

Visitors to Loreto and La Paz leave the night life behind

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The name of the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes meant death to Mexico's civilization. But the sea named after him, ironically, teems with life.

The Sea of Cortes, also known as the Gulf of California, lies between Mexico's west coast and the Baja Peninsula.

The best time to see it is December through March, when 17,000 grey whales arrive from their home in Alaska, 22,530 kilometres north. It's the greatest whale migration on Earth. In the lagoons of Baja California and the Sea of Cortes, the greys mate, give birth and frolic with abandon.

But in the 19th century, when these calving lagoons were discovered, the whales were slaughtered to the edge of extinction.

Our species turned them into shoe polish, corset frames and whale steaks.

Now, their numbers have rebounded here. And what a place to kick-start your sense of wonder.

"These surroundings may seem barren at first," says Reg, a photographer from Colorado, "but the Sea of Cortes is amazingly beautiful. At dawn and dusk, it's all turquoise waters and golden desert."

Its stark beauty was used to great advantage in the Brad Pitt movie *Troy*, where it passed for the Aegean coast of Turkey.

The best way to explore is by ship. From late December to early March, Seattle-based Cruise West offers a seven-day ecological adventure, Whales & Wildlife. The cruise focuses on marine life and a handful of the region's 200 protected islands, but also visits the ports of Cabo San Lucas, Loreto and La Paz.

It's literally a hands-on adventure. In addition to kayaking and snorkelling expeditions, the ship's resident marine biologist leads beach walks to reveal astonishing marine life under rocks and in tidal pools.



JEREMY FERGUSON PHOTOS

Grey whales were once nearly extinct in the Sea of Cortes but have made a strong comeback. Small ships can navigate narrow bays and shallow waters and take passengers close to the action.

Just the facts

For information on [Cruise West's Whales and Wildlife](#) excursions, follow the link or call 1-888-851-8133.

Follow the link for information on visiting [Mexico](#) or call 1-800-446-3942.

Passengers find themselves holding such creatures as black spiny brittle stars, bright red Bradley sea stars, gulf sun stars, purple urchins and the Veligero octopus.

"We're making a connection with nature," says Charlotte, from Portland, Ore.

"We become children again. It's exhilarating to see the minutiae of life. Normally, we'd be walking over these life forms without ever knowing they exist."

"I love the marine life, but I can't take my eyes off the pelicans," adds Monty, a stockbroker from Los Angeles. "They're everywhere. They're goofy. They're beautiful. They're ungainly on land and yet so graceful in flight."

Newbie passengers discover the pleasures of small-ship sailing. The ship is the 138-passenger Spirit of Yorktown. Bucking the megaship trend, its compact size allows it to explore out-of-the-way bays and lagoons impossible for behemoths to navigate.

"On a small ship, passengers have a common focus – in this case, wildlife and whales," says passenger Renee Goldhammer of California. "You're among people of like mind. You don't hide out at a table for two. People are easy to talk to and friendships are easily made."

It also means no glitter, no glitz, no spa, no casino, no espresso bar, no Vegas extravaganza, no souvenir bazaars, no midnight buffets and no tipping.

A sprightly young American crew brings warmth and professionalism to its task. In the kitchen, fresh fish gets respect and the rack of lamb is up there with the best. The wine list is a treat, with a solid slate of California and Washington State labels just a few dollars above the store price.

The ship's ports of call allow passengers to stretch their legs, search out colonial charm and find desperately needed espressos at street cafés.

At Loreto, the most attractive of the ports, passengers can take the two-hour excursion to the 17th century San Javier Mission. The landscape en route comes blanketed in cardone cactuses that live up to 150 years. Vultures are seen squatting atop the cactuses, basking in the sun to roast the ticks out of their feathers.

In La Paz, the largest of the ports, a handsome waterfront promenade welcomes passengers. It's hard to believe that British and Dutch privateers once used the bay to prey on Spanish galleons.

The latest wave of conquistadors is American retirees, mostly from California. La Paz shop windows advertise million-dollar manses, luxury condos and golf courses for people wanting to get away from it all – even though they may bring the "all" with them.

An optional experience involves the company's charity, the La Paz Children's Home for orphans and abused kids. Every cruise brings something to the orphanage.

Jeremy Ferguson is a Victoria, B.C.-based freelance writer. His trip was subsidized by Cruise West.