

Mexico's Sea of Cortez | Trip Report

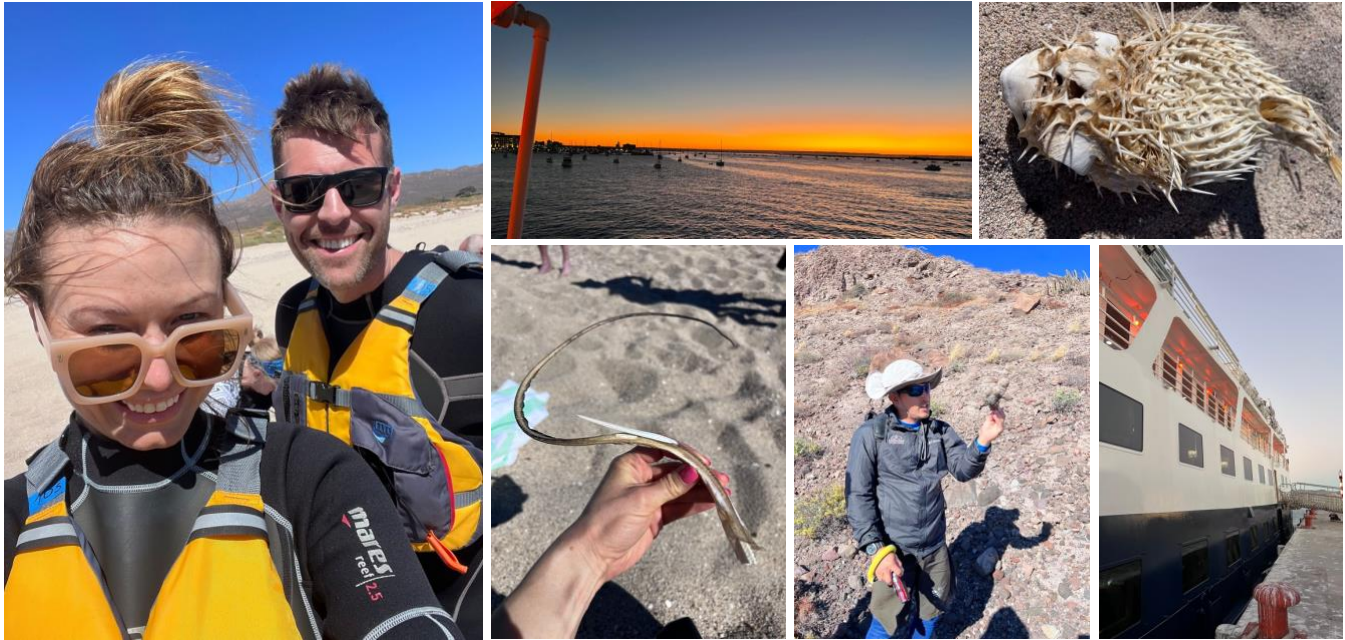
March 11 – 18, 2023 | with Naturalist Journeys



Sat., Mar. 11 Meet Up | La Paz | Embarkation

Mexico welcomed us with warm, open arms as we landed in Baja. The group assembled around 3:00 PM in our operator's hospitality suite where we had a quick intro and then boarded our large, comfortable bus for the scenic two-hour drive to La Paz. We drove up the west side of the peninsula before crossing over. Whales, most likely Humpbacks were breaching and blowing, and we had great views from the bus. We arrived in La Paz to a gorgeous red sunset with families out strolling along the malecon. We were greeted by the captain and crew and boarded the *Safari Voyager*.

We enjoyed getting to know each other over a delicious dinner of steak with chimichurri or fish and chocolate cake for dessert. Susan and Walter sat at our table and we were thrilled to learn that they had traveled with us to Thailand and Cuba in the past. A wander around the deck allowed us to witness stars shining so, so brightly and more time to chat with fellow passengers. Brown Pelicans trailed the boat, fishing over and over for what looked like flying fish that were attracted to the low lights of the boat. Snorkeling tomorrow!



Sun., Mar. 12 Snorkeling, Beach Walk, Beach Combing

Today started gently with an early risers breakfast and sunrise with humpbacks. Two or three individuals greeted us this morning with blows and flukes, but no breaching. Connie, Julie and guide Terra did some quiet yoga on the top deck before a delicious buffet breakfast of eggs, bacon, potatoes, and fruit. After our snorkeling safety briefing, we all got fitted for wetsuits and got our snorkeling gear ready for our afternoon excursion of guided snorkeling, snorkeling 101, or a guided beach walk. Cruising for wildlife before lunch brought a pod of about 50 dolphins swimming over to the boat to check us out, followed by a lone humpback making its presence known with a blow and a deep dive with tail flukes.

Lunch was falafel, pitas, and Greek salad, followed by a to-die-for mousse. Then, those of us who were snorkeling wet-suited up and headed to shore. With concern about the winds and chop, we stayed in a more sheltered cove to test our snorkel gear, while others opted for a guided beach walk. Testing out our snorkel gear proved uneventful with just a few starfish to be spotted, but everyone made sure they were comfortable in their masks, flippers, and wetsuits. A smaller group rounded the point to the better snorkeling area, and though the chop was rough, once we were in the water, it wasn't an issue. Masks in and a whole new world appeared, with different fish charging ahead. Trumpet fish, puffers, sergeant majors, and even an eel were highlights. We snorkeled our way back to the point before hauling out and strolling back to the beach set up. Along the way, we picked up a few of what Captain Andrea referred to as "gnarly" things that wash up on the beach. A dried and preserved puffer fish, a very large and bleached out skeleton of a porcupine fish, a few other odds and ends bone-wise, and the find of the day by Julie, a dried and sun-bleached sting ray tail with barb still attached! A few opted for a guided walk with Luis to see the salt flats where local fishermen were harvesting salt. Then it was back to the boat for cocktails, cookies, apps, and showers before another amazing dinner, this time duck or fish, followed by a stunning trifle. Guide Luis capped off dinner with a presentation on cell phone photography, and the stars were out bright, putting on a show.

Mon., Mar. 13 Agua Verde | Burro Rides | Snorkeling, Hikes, Free Time

Early risers watched the sunrise as we slowly motored into Agua Verde. Pelicans and endemic Yellow-footed Gulls escorted us in as we watched from the deck and scanned the waters. Agua Verde has a tiny town of about 90 residents, and hosts plenty of campers.



Huevos rancheros today for breakfast before we set out for our morning activities. A few chose the skiff tour, but most chose the hour and a half burro ride. These sleepy burros safely and patiently took us on a loop trail up the mountain and down into a stunning area full of stunted growth, scrubby trees and plenty of arroyos. We rode toward the beach, along the water, and then turned our burros back up and over the mountain. At the top, the view was just spectacular—aquamarine waters, sailboats, and rich desert complete with cardon cactuses made the viewpoint picture perfect. The burro riders were broken up into groups, one early morning, the other mid-morning. We snorkeled after the early morning ride, and were pleased to see a plethora of fish and other sea life, with massive starfish, anemones, coral, and more. Out of the water, the tidepools crawled with life. One only had to stop and watch to see an entirely different world in constant motion. Bernice showed us one tide pool that hosted five massive sea slugs, with eyes that were keen to poke out of the water to check us out.

It was back to the boat for a barbeque lunch in the lounge, then off we went again, back to Agua Verde's beach for quiet beach combing, snorkeling, kayaking, paddle boarding, and general free time. Some opted for a hike up the mountain for more unreal views and some extra exercise to work off lunch. We enjoyed a pre-happy hour happy hour on the beach before heading back to the boat for showers and the proper happy hour and coo kies. Dinner tonight was pork or fish with quinoa and cauliflower, and a shortbread tart with fruit and whipped cream for dessert.

Tues., Mar. 14

Skiffing & Snorkeling around Carmen Island | Parque Nacional Bahia de Loreto

Morning started before the sunrise, sipping coffee on the third aft with Matt, Greg, and Pia. The waters were calm as we slowly idled toward Carmen Island. The island is privately owned and has a large, reintroduced bighorn sheep population that attracts hunters year-round. There is no landing on the island, but the snorkeling around the edges is excellent. After breakfast we were out quickly on the skiff for a skiff and snorkel excursion, wetsuits required. While the skiff portion of the excursion was short, we did see a large number of cormorants, a lone Great Blue Heron, and the ever present Yellow-footed Gulls and Brown Pelicans. We motored into an incredible limestone cave, looking up at views of fossilized shells, and even whole fossilized sand dollars.



Then, it was fins up and into the most incredibly clear water. Guide Terra immediately found a small sea slug, Matt found a spiny lobster, and the schools of Sergeant Major fish were ever-present. Massive puffer fish, tiny day-glow blue fish, King Angelfish, and more kept us busy.

Taco Tuesday for lunch with a specialty blood orange margarita refueled us before we headed off to Parque National Bahia de Loreto with yellow sand beaches, incredible snorkeling, and quiet beach time. Snorkeling proved to be simply amazing, with large schools of big and bright tropical fish ... it felt like you were snorkeling in an aquarium. The mile-long beach was perfect for strolling, and refreshments and beach gear made for a fulfilling afternoon. Heading back to the boat, we saw two flotillas of cormorants at a distance, and then, all together splash and disappear underwater, probably 200 in all!

Dinner of chicken or coconut-crusted fish capped a good night, followed by key lime pie. Luis' Gray Whale presentation prepped us for our field trip tomorrow to Magdalena Bay.

Wed., Mar. 15 Gray Whales at Magdalena Bay

We were up a bit earlier today for our adventure on the west side of the peninsula. Breakfast was quick but filling and while we ate, we docked. A small charter bus picked us up right at the dock and whisked us up and over the Sierra Gigantes to the far side of the peninsula at Magdalena Bay. Cardones cactus were ever present, and a few times we spotted Crested Caracara on the tops.

Coming into town, extra telephone poles were set up with platforms for Ospreys, and nests were on nearly every one of these platforms. Escorted in by Ospreys and a few lively street dogs, we donned our life jackets and boarded our small boats out into the bay. It was a fascinating juxtaposition of mangroves on the inside of the bay and tall sand dunes on the outside. Arriving to the top of the bay, we immediately spotted whales. A Gray Whale mother and baby were making their presence known, and in fact, a baby was nosing and scratching on one of the boats that was already in the bay!

We were absolutely WOWed for nearly two hours with multiple whales, perhaps 10 in total, and the very most curious baby who kept approaching our boats, nudging them with its nose, scratching its back underneath,



spraying quite a few of us in the face and generally putting on the most amazing show. We could not have asked for me. Momma would eventually call the baby away for a bit, and off they'd swim, side by side.

After this unreal experience, our boat captain Saul offered to take us to one of his favorite places. We all readily agreed and off we boated to some stunning tidal mudflats amongst the mangroves where we saw dozens of waders and shorebirds all eating their fill, including Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Marbled Godwit, Curlew, American Oystercatcher, and more. It was spectacular.

Then, it was shopping and back on the bus for a local lunch followed by a scenic ride home and some free time to wander the port. Bright fish swam along the walkway and a large and loafing Eagle Ray swam alongside us as we walked for quite some time.

Dinner tonight celebrated Diane's birthday and Janet and Jeffrey's 42nd wedding anniversary. It was a great day.

Thurs., Mar. 16 Snorkeling with Sea Lions | Parque Nacional Bahia de Loreto

A large and playful pod of dolphins were curious about our anchored boat this morning, spending quite a bit of time exploring around our bow and putting on a show for our boat and the few others in the cove of Loreto National Park. The blindingly bright turquoise waters vied for our attention.

After breakfast, we all loaded onto the small boats of a local operator to snorkel with sea lions at a rookery about 20 minutes away by boat. And wow, did we have a fun time! In we went in our wetsuits and snorkel gear and were immediately greeted by curious sea lion pups. Some nibbled on wetsuits and hands and hair, while others rocketed around us. An added highlight for some of the group was snorkeling through a tunnel in the island and coming out above a reef that was absolutely breathtaking. The corals and fishes were animated and electric in color and we all wanted to spend more time just floating above the wonder! But alas, it was chilly and it was our time to say good bye to the sea lions (who continued to galivant even after we left the water), and head back to the boat. Blue-footed Boobies sent us off in style.

After lunch and a sea turtle show, we went in small groups to walk the middle of the island in in the park. It was a leisurely stroll at a birder's pace, and it was fascinating to have a full mangrove ecosystem on one side and



desert on the other. Lizards, chipmunks, hummingbirds, sparrows, and even a Northern Cardinal kept us busy. Reaching the other side of the island, we enjoyed an overlook out to sea and flying tortillas (jumping mobula rays) kept us guessing.

Bernice informed us about the neurotoxins that cone snails produce as we watched one make its path along the shallow sea floor. Then it was back in the skiff across the strikingly turquoise water for cookie hour, cocktail hour, dinner, and a fascinating presentation about Baja endemics by Terra. Another fantastic day in the books.

Fri., Mar. 17 Hiking Isla San Fransisco | Free Time

Morning options today included a proper long hike, a ridgeline hike, or a salt flat walk. Many of the group, including Matt, Julie, Elissa, Jeffrey, Janet, and Mike opted for the three-hour long hike and were rewarded with breathtaking 360-degree views from the top of Isla San Fransisco. After lunch, our crew set up our beach station with shade, chairs, paddle boards, kayaks, and snorkel gear and every had the free time to enjoy activities of their choice.

Snorkeling proved incredibly successful, with impressive schools of fish, an octopus, and a massive Panamic Green Moray eel. We celebrated with dinner and after hours in the lounge, enjoying the company of new friends.

Sat., Mar. 18 Departures

We docked early in La Paz, and while we ate breakfast, our crew took our bags to the waiting bus. From there we disembarked, said goodbye to the crew and Captain Andrea, and settled in for our drive back to Cabo.