

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

Mexico – Great Whales of Mexico's Pacific Coast

7-18 April 2022

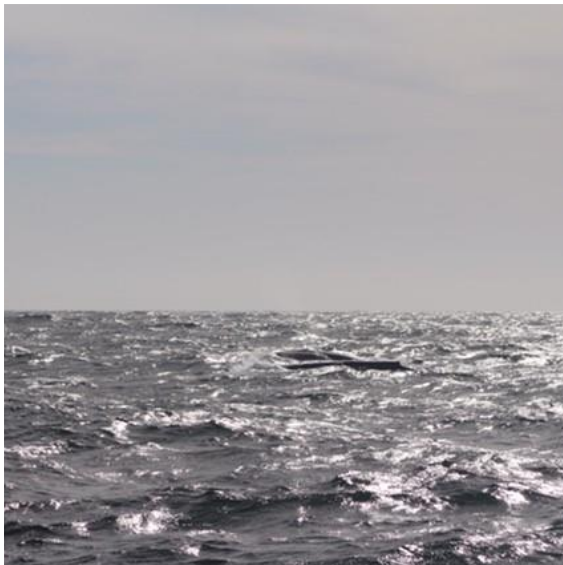
Grey whale



Humpback whale



Blue whale



Guadalupe fur seal



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Our ever-popular Great Whales of Mexico's Pacific Coast holiday is an annual private charter of the vessel, Searcher, commencing in San Diego and ending at Cabo San Lucas on the southern tip of the Baja peninsula. We spent seven nights sailing down the Pacific Coast coming across humpback, Bryde's, grey, blue and fin whales en route in addition to other cetaceans, pinnipeds, pelagic birds and marine life. A highlight was visiting the 'friendly' grey whales of San Ignacio Lagoon.

Day 1: London Heathrow to San Diego

Thursday 7 April 2022

Weather: Sunny, 28°C

Our smooth (and on time) ten-hour flight from Heathrow to San Diego afforded us clear views of Greenland, Hudson Bay, the Rockies and the Grand Canyon before arriving into San Diego around 16:00 local time. It was a stunning afternoon, and we took taxis to our overnight hotel, The Bay Club Hotel & Marina on Shelter Island. Close to the naval base, we were able to watch the comings and goings of numerous large ships and after check-in, we enjoyed dinner overlooking the marina before retiring to bed around 21:00 (05:00 for us)!

Day 2: San Diego and boarding Searcher

Friday 8 April 2022

Weather: Sunny, 30°C

Waking to a beautiful clear blue sky, the group had a free day to spend as they wished. A number of us visited Cabrillo National Monument, a restored lighthouse and coastal walkway, that offered our first views of the mighty Pacific as well as San Diego's impressive harbour. Returning to the hotel to check out by 12:00, we left our luggage securely there and enjoyed an extended lunch in the sun by the pool whilst others experienced San Diego's hop on, hop off bus tour and/or visited the Aircraft Carrier Museum.

Making our own way to Fisherman's Landing, we were able to board Searcher from 15:00. We had our passports and temperature checked before crew helped carry luggage to everyone's respective cabins. We sat on the stern deck, taking in the busy wharf around us and then most of the group headed across to Mitch's Seafood Restaurant for dinner, which is highly recommended year on year. Sports fishing vessels were loading up around us as we returned to Searcher for our 20:00 safety meeting and introduction to life onboard. We met the crew, Captain Mike Todter, assisted by Captains Ryan Lindahn, Armando Marquez, Shaun Allen and crewman Shane Tuschen, plus our chefs Dan Cramer and Josh Evans. We also met one of our two naturalists, Sula Vanderplank (the other joining us from Ensenada tomorrow). We set sail around 21:00 admiring the night skies and San Diego's beautifully lit skyline, as well as sea lions bellowing next to herons at bait stations in the harbour, before entering the Pacific which was surprisingly calm. We were lulled to sleep by its gentle rocking.

Day 3: Enter Mexico

Saturday 9 April 2022

Weather: Sunny to start then intermittent fog and an overcast afternoon

With most of us wide awake around 04:30, the 24 hour tea and coffee station was well utilised whilst we waited, docked at Ensenada, to enter Mexico. We watched the sunrise as well as sea lions and shorebirds going about their morning business whilst arrival formalities were handled by the crew. We had our temperatures taken once again and tucked into hearty breakfasts of fruit and cereal followed by eggs, bacon, hash browns or porridge. Tabata Olavarrieta, our second naturalist was welcomed onboard and we were officially in Baja. By 07:30 we were off!

An 'at sea' day lay ahead and leaving clear skies and bright sunshine behind us, we sailed into a thick sea fog that lifted and fell again repeatedly during the morning. By 08:30 we had what we were waiting to hear, "Whale 11 o'clock!" We raced to the bow and sure enough, to our port side was the distinctive dorsal fin of a humpback! Shortly afterwards came a smaller version, and we watched enthralled as a mother and calf

slowly moved from south to north. As they came in front of the bow, we noticed a third adult followed by a pod of common dolphins heading right towards them. In what seemed like an instant, but was in fact 50 minutes, we watched them breathe, tail slap and raise their tails in flat, calm, perfect conditions. Carrying on, more dolphin sightings ensued and shortly after lunch (chicken stir fry over rice), we had a call for a mola mola ocean sunfish. Swimming on its side across the bow, the calm seas enabled us to see its puffy lips and face in profile. About a metre long, this strange looking creature usually subsists on jellyfish. Sure enough, small jellyfish began to appear and a while later, we had disturbed seas ahead of us and a series of blue fin tuna on the surface, fins clearly visible. Later still, a brown-footed albatross increased to two and then three before being joined by Laysan's albatross too. We couldn't believe we were seeing them together! Shortly before our dinner of beef stew with garlic mash and greens was served, we were joined by a pod of common dolphins before jet lag ensured another early night.

Day 4: West San Benito

Sunday 10 April 2022

Weather: Overcast, then sunny, then overcast

Once again we were awake early and whilst enjoying French toast with sausage and eggs, we anchored off West San Benito island around 07:30. Whilst the crew lowered skiffs into the water, Sula gave us a 10-15 minute presentation on what we may expect to see on the island. One wet landing later and we were enjoying our first sighting of a Northern elephant seal on the beach. We walked through the small fishing village there (the abalone season was about to begin and there were only two or three fishermen around), admiring a few endemic plants (island bushmallow and tarweed) as well as the endemic savanna sparrow, before coming across beaches strewn with elephant seal females and their pups. Common ravens and Western gulls were all around and a sperm whale jawbone and skull also provided interest before we started our walk around the island. We found more beaches strewn with elephant seal pups and began to hear the very different cry of a Guadalupe fur seal. We came across cove after cove of them (they are only found here and on Guadalupe Island) and enjoyed watching them swimming and interacting with each other. Glancing inland afforded us sightings of osprey and we had a peregrine falcon fly overhead.

Later, three quarters of the group began to climb up to a disused lighthouse to enjoy a packed lunch with a view, whilst the other quarter went back to spend time in the elephant seal rookeries. Halfway up, a humpback whale was spotted breaching in the distance, followed by her calf, and they provided an extended show throughout our lunch break. We walked back down to the village admiring more endemic plants; fishhook cactus, agave century plant and barrel cactus before being transferred back to Searcher via her skiffs.

We set sail at 14:30 and by 14:50, we had a call for humpbacks. A little while, and a few breeches later, came another call for common dolphins. A little later yet, and we had another call for a whale yet to be identified. It transpired we had two pairs of fin whales, two adults and a mother and calf and we were fortunate to stay with them through to 16:30. A fly by from a brown booby completed our sightings for the day.

Day 5: San Ignacio Lagoon

Monday 11 April 2022

Weather: Grey to start, clearing later

After a smooth night's sailing, we woke early, eager to be on deck to watch our arrival into San Ignacio Lagoon. Navigating the sand bars that guard the entrance to the lagoon, the calm ocean was reflected in a beautiful silvery light and before we knew it, we were dropping anchor. Three pangas were waiting for us and after mooring alongside Searcher, we immediately boarded them and by 08:30 were meeting our panguerros (drivers) and were out on the lagoon eager for close encounters with Baja's friendly grey whales! By the end of the morning and two 90 minute outings later (returning to Searcher in between for a snack of fruit, nuts, shredded coconut and yoghurt), most of the group had experienced touching a grey whale for the first time! There was general euphoria as we boarded the pangas after lunch (ravioli with pesto sauce and

garlic bread - absolutely delicious!) for a choppiest ride. No touches were to be had this time but it was fabulous being out on the water and we had several close encounters. Seeing whales from a vantage point of about half a metre off the water's surface is, in itself, a wonderful experience. After a fabulous dinner of pork tenderloin, we all gathered outside on deck and the engine was turned off allowing us to experience the night skies silently as we pondered what we had experienced so far, listening for the blow of any passing whales.

Day 6: San Ignacio Lagoon

Tuesday 12 April 2022

Weather: Sunny

To Sula's delight, the group opted to swap the first whale watch of the day and head to the mangroves on the northern shore of the lagoon to experience the serenity found there. A washed up dead grey whale was seen at the entrance which gave us an opportunity to view the entire creature up close, and to pay our respects to it. Many birds call these mangroves home and continuing on, we came across a ridiculous number of mangrove warblers in clear sight, as well as cormorants, white ibis and egrets (we even saw the reddish egret 'dance')! A variety of waders (yellow legs, willets and marbled godwits amongst others) completed our sightings.

Returning to Searcher for a quick comfort break, we enjoyed freshly baked blueberry muffins (still warm from the oven), before setting off once again for a really productive grey whale search. Heading out to the breakers at the entrance to the lagoon, we enjoyed multiple sightings and one group saw breeches and had extended interaction with one calf in particular. We also achieved 100% success as the final few members of the group got their first touches. Hoorah!

Lunch was chicken enchilada casserole, after which we boarded the pangas for our final whale watching outing in the lagoon. We all enjoyed close sightings, but no interaction this time, and then we embarked on a beach walk where our arrival was welcomed by a solo coyote! We were thrilled to bits and watched it walk unconcerned across the dunes before disappearing behind them. We then viewed a grey whale skeleton and multitudes of beautiful shells, scattered amongst crab skeletons (alas, no sand dollars although Helen did all she could to find one!) and Sula dug out ghost shrimps and pointed out sea pens, before we returned to Searcher. Leaving our anchorage around 17:00, we headed south overnight in choppiest seas. Dinner was a triumph of seared tuna followed by pineapple upside down cake. What a wonderful few days we had had!

Day 7: Off shore Magdalena Bay

Wednesday 13 April 2022

Weather: Sunny

After a beautiful sunrise and delicious breakfast of pancakes and bacon, we were joined by a super pod of short beaked common dolphins (more than 1,000) and this became a real highlight. We enjoyed their company for 25 minutes or so as they initially came towards us head on, before turning to enjoy our wake and ride the bow. Much oohing and aahing ensued before we were treated to coffee cake for morning tea, after which almost everyone relaxed on deck in the sunshine after a busy few days of excursions.

Around an hour later, whales were called off the starboard side of the bow. Not one, not two, but it transpired that we had three Bryde's whales with us! Notoriously erratic and difficult to follow, we turned 180 degrees and journeyed north with them for at least 45 minutes. They surfaced to breathe regularly and Tabata was ecstatic, saying it was the best Bryde's sighting she'd ever had! With happy hearts, thoughts were turning towards lunch at 12:00 when Captain Mike called a breaching humpback way off the bow. It took a while before it we saw it blow again up ahead of us and as we slowly approached, we realised we had three individuals. We caught glimpses of them for 20 minutes or so before the smells from the galley became too much and we headed inside for a sensational lunch of cheeseburgers and fries.

Cruising south again, safe in the knowledge that the crew would notify us of any sightings as they were glued to their super binoculars from the bridge deck and the crow's nest, Tabata began two back-to-back presentations. The first covered her bachelor thesis on feeding behaviour of Bryde's whales in this part of the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez. The second, her masters thesis, covered micro plastics and fin whales. Just as she was wrapping up, she glanced out of the window and said she'd seen a blow. Almost immediately, Searcher shifted direction and we knew the crew had seen it too. What followed was nothing short of remarkable.

We all headed out on deck, and it transpired we had five blue whales (a mother calf pair, a pair and a single). Three whale species in a day? We couldn't believe our luck! It didn't stop there though and for the next two hours, we were at all times surrounded by more and more blues, well in excess of 15 individuals. We were in the midst of a gathering! For those that could bear to leave the bow, fresh San Ignacio Lagoon oysters were served mid-afternoon but for the majority, it was a blustery but sunny afternoon of sensational cetacean watching that went on until 18:30! The show wasn't over though as when retiring to the salon for dinner (duck with greens and quinoa), starters were interrupted by two fin whales heading down the starboard side. Four whale species in one day and a spectacular sunset to boot, it doesn't get much better than this!

Day 8: Offshore Los Cabos

Thursday 14 April 2022

Weather: Sunny

Expectations were high today as we cruised off the southern tip of the Baja peninsula, a breeding ground for humpback whales. We were hoping for the 'showy whales' to live up to their name and we weren't disappointed. At 09:00, yet another turtle cruised down our starboard side (it was becoming a running joke that we would all launch ourselves to the relevant deck only to find it long gone!) and by 09:30, the humpback show began. Two individuals were followed by more at 10:00 and then breachers at 11:50 just as lunch was called (gyro with salad, flatbread and tzatziki). Most of us ate on deck to avoid missing anything.

At 13:15, we came across a cow and calf pair and throughout the afternoon, yet more sightings were to be had. Around 16:00, we had a series of breachers and then a hydrophone was put into the water, the engines were cut and we were transfixed for at least 15 minutes by the song of an adult male. Moving and utterly captivating.

As we approached 17:00, the stern was a hive of activity as the crew prepared margaritas and our last night outdoor barbecue of ribs, corn bread, coleslaw and corn on the cob, follows by chocolate brownies. Afterwards, Captain Mike asked us all to mention our wildlife highlight of the trip and the grey whales, coyote and the overall group dynamic (which was fabulous), were all mentioned. Everyone agreed it was a hard task to just pinpoint one highlight! The crew then said their thanks to the group and us to them, and we retired feeling thankful for the week we had just experienced.

Day 9: Disembark Searcher and commence Sea of Cortez extension

Friday 15 April 2022

Weather: Sunny

Up bright and early, we awoke in Marina del Ray, Cabó San Lucas with mixed feelings as our time on Searcher was coming to an end. All but two of the group, were continuing on to La Paz for three nights to explore the southern Sea of Cortez. After a continental breakfast of fruit followed by bagels with salmon and cream cheese, the crew took our bags from our cabins, across the marina, to the bus waiting to take us to La Paz, two hours away. We said our goodbyes to them and met Claudia, our guide for the next few days.



Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	AVES							
1	Snowy egret	<i>Egretta tula</i>	✓						
2	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓						
3	Western gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓						
4	Sooty shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>		✓					
5	Pink-footed shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>		✓					
6	Laysan albatross	<i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>		✓					
7	Black-footed albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>		✓					
8	Heerman's gull	<i>Larus heermani</i>		✓					
9	Scripp's murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus scrippsi</i>		✓					
10	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓					
11	Red-necked phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓					
12	Cassin's auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>		✓					
13	Black oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		✓					
14	Reddish egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>		✓					

15	Royal tern	<i>Thalaseus maximus</i>		✓					
16	Double crested cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>			✓				
17	Brandt's cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>			✓				
18	Black crowned night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			✓				
19	Pomerine jaegar	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>			✓				
20	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓				
21	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			✓				
22	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓				
23	Little blue heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>			✓				
24	Savanna sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>			✓				
25	Brown booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>			✓				
26	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>				✓			
27	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>				✓			
28	Long billed curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>					✓		
29	Marbled godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>					✓		
30	Lesser yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>					✓		
31	Mangrove warbler	<i>Setophaga castaneiceps</i>					✓		
32	American oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>					✓		
33	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>					✓		

34	White ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>					✓		
35	Common loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>					✓		
36	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					✓		
37	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓		
38	Snowy plover	<i>Charadrius nivosus</i>					✓		
30	Parasitic jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>					✓		
40	Yellow footed gull	<i>Larus livens</i>						✓	
41	Laughing gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>							✓
42	Tricoloured heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>							✓
43	Phainopepla	<i>Phainopepla nitens</i>							✓
44	Turkey vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>							✓
45	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>							✓
46	Costa's hummingbird	<i>Calypte costae</i>							✓
47	Blue footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>							✓
48	Gila woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>							✓
49	Eared grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>							
	MAMMALS								
1	California sealion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓						
2	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		✓					

3	Common dolphin (short beaked)	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓					
4	Northern elephant seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>			✓				
4	Guadalupe fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>			✓				
5	Fin whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>			✓				
6	Grey whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>				✓			
7	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				✓			
8	Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>				✓			
9	Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>						✓	
10	Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>						✓	
	OTHER								
1	Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		✓					
2	Blue fin tuna	<i>Thunnus thynnus</i>		✓					
3	Green turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>							✓
4	Mobula ray	<i>Mobula birostris</i>							✓
5	San Benito Islands Side-blotched lizard	<i>Uta stellata</i>			✓				