

Whale watching in Baja California, Mexico

The whale-watching trip of a lifetime!

Baja California, the 1,200km-long peninsula on the west coast of Mexico, is the top whale-watching destination on Earth. Whale expert and zoologist Mark Carwardine is the perfect tour leader to show it to you.



About our trip

Baja California is one of the best places in the world (if not the best) for whale and dolphin watching. During this superb holiday, we hope to see as many as 10-15 different cetacean species – as well as a host of other wildlife – and are likely to have life-changing encounters with some of the largest and most inquisitive animals on the planet.

Travelling aboard one of the few vessels with a special permit from the Mexican Government, we cruise along the entire 800-mile-long Pacific coast of Baja California and then explore the island-studded waters of the Sea of Cortez.

Travelling down the Pacific coast we visit the remote islands of Todos Santos, with their many harbour seals, and San Benitos, to observe a large rookery of northern elephant seals. We spend two days in San Ignacio Lagoon – a magical place beside the desert where literally hundreds of grey whales gather to breed. Local fishermen meet us at the entrance to the lagoon, and all our whale encounters are from their 3 pangas (10-person, 22-foot-long boats), which are amazingly stable and superb for close-up photography. February, March and April are the perfect times to see everything, and we hope to meet courting whales, females with their calves and some of the world famous 'friendlies', which will literally nudge the sides of our small boats. We then continue our marine safari south to an area off Magdalena Bay

where we hope to find feeding blue and courting humpback whales.

Rounding the tip of Baja, we enter the Sea of Cortez and spend the next days cruising its sub-tropical waters. We head for the best areas for blue, fin, humpback, Bryde's and sperm whales and along the way expect to encounter short-finned pilot whales and enormous herds of dolphins (long-beaked and short-beaked common and bottlenose among them). We could also see killer whales, dwarf sperm whales, rare beaked whales, whale sharks, Risso's dolphins, and more. It's one of those places where almost anything can happen.

We'll take nature walks on remote tropical islands, explore spectacular cactus forests, look for endemic hummingbirds, snorkel with colourful fish and California sea lions, and visit an outlying colony of rare Guadalupe fur

seals. We'll watch blue-footed boobies, magnificent frigatebirds, red-billed tropicbirds, brown pelicans, and many other bright and beautiful birds. And we'll even find time to marvel at bioluminescent seas and spectacular night skies.

Highlights

- Fabulous whale watching with a good variety of whales and dolphins and life-changing close encounters with some of the largest animals on the planet
- Good chance of seeing blue, humpback, fin, grey and sperm whales, among others
- Explore off-the-beaten-track on both sides of Baja California
- An exclusively chartered boat with a highly experienced crew
- Wide variety of other wildlife includes California sea lions and Guadalupe fur seals, northern elephant seals, whale sharks, mobula rays, blue-footed boobies, layson albatrosses, black-footed albatrosses, magnificent frigatebirds, hummingbirds and rattlesnakes
- Shore walks and snorkelling

Four annual dates

- TRIP 1:** 8 - 20 February
- TRIP 2:** 23 February - 7 March
- TRIP 3:** 10 - 22 March
- TRIP 4:** 9 - 21 April

Itinerary (exact day-to-day itinerary may change according to weather and whale sightings)

Day 1: Fly from the UK to San Diego and transfer to hotel, which is a 15-minute taxi drive from the airport, and 15-minute walk from H&M Landing, which is the marina



where our boat, the Spirit of Adventure, is moored.

Day 2: Welcome breakfast at 9.00am to meet the rest of the group and for a full briefing. Day at leisure in San Diego. We will re-meet at about 6pm to walk to the Spirit of Adventure, heading south down the Pacific after supper.

Days 3 - 4: We spend two days cruising down the Pacific coast of Baja California, whale watching in the daytime and travelling overnight. We make two stops en route. The first is at Todos Santos to view resting harbour seals and a variety of seabirds. The second is at San Benitos: a tiny archipelago comprising three small islands, which have a substantial colony of northern elephant seals. We will land on West Benitos and explore on foot, watching rookeries of Guadalupe fur seals, California sea lions and northern elephant seals, ospreys, ravens, and more.

Days 5 - 6: We have two full days in San Ignacio Lagoon with the friendly grey whales. Mexican fishermen meet us at the lagoon entrance, and we transfer from the Spirit of Adventure to their 10-person, 22-foot pangas, for all whale encounters. The fishermen have 3 pangas, which enables all of us to go out 2 or 3 times a day. There are literally hundreds of grey whales in San Ignacio at this time of year, so they are hard to miss as they spyhop, blow and breach in close proximity! This is also the best place to encounter the well-known 'friendlies' – individuals that repeatedly approach and nudge the small boats, encouraging us to scratch them.

Day 7: We have one more day on the Pacific coast and cruise past the Magdalena Bay area, which is a major feeding ground for blue whales and a number of other species.

Days 8 - 12: We round the tip of Baja, travelling through an important humpback whale breeding ground at Gorda Bank and enter the Sea of Cortez. We spend the next four days packing in as much whale and dolphin watching as possible. Fin, Bryde's, sperm and short-finned pilot whales are here year-round, humpback and blue whales visit in winter, and there are many other residents and visitors. We will make a few shore landings to explore the arid terrain, enjoy a beach walk or perhaps a snorkel.

Day 13: Our expedition concludes early in the morning at Cabo San Lucas, on the southern tip of Baja California (we are likely to disembark at 8am Mexican time). We

transfer by coach 30 miles northeast to Los Cabos (San Jose del Cabo) airport where the trip concludes.

[**Day 14:** Arrive back in the UK if flying straight home.]

Differences between our trips

All four trips are always utterly fabulous and, if Mark had to choose just one date, he honestly wouldn't know which to go for. Here are a few typical differences (but please bear in mind that nothing is fixed in stone when it comes to wildlife watching and every trip is different):

• NORTHERN ELEPHANT SEALS

In February, the huge males are defending their territories with vigour, clashing on the beaches of San Benitos. By March, most males have gone to sea, but females and pups are still there. By April all the males have usually gone to sea, but there are still females (returned to moult) and pups.

• **GREY WHALES** In February, there are more adults in San Ignacio and usually more breaching, spy-hopping and other surface activity. In March, there are still plenty of adults, and the calves are more confident. By April, many of the adults are on their way back north, but the remaining mothers and calves tend to be at their most confident and friendlier than earlier in the season.

• **BLUE WHALES** So far, we have never had a trip where we *haven't* seen a blue whale.

• **WHALE SHARKS** There is a chance to snorkel with whale sharks on all four trips.

• **WEATHER** This is similar for all the trips. Rain and fog are possible for the first couple of days, and there can sometimes be quite a swell. The average temperature here is about 18°C (64°F). Further south the average temperature rises to about 23°C (74°F) and in the Sea of Cortez, it can get very hot during the day (though cooling sea breezes help to make it comfortable).

Number of passengers:

Maximum is 27, minimum is 24. Plus two leaders and seven crew.

About the boat: the Spirit of Adventure (see photo right), at 88 feet in length, is perfect for whale watching, with a highly experienced crew (and fantastic food). While the cabins are small (all twin with two triples) and they have no en-suite facilities or portholes, it is a very clean and comfortable boat – and, of course, part of the holiday's charm is that it isn't a luxury cruise!





Price includes: Eleven nights' accommodation in cabin, all meals and some drinks on Spirit of Adventure; one night's bed and breakfast in hotel with private facilities in San Diego; excursions as described in the itinerary; pangas in San Ignacio Lagoon; Mexican tourist card; Mexican permits and fees; luggage transfer from hotel in San Diego to boat (for passengers this is a 15-minute walk along flat pavements); coach to Los Cabos airport from Cabo San Lucas at end of trip (depending on your flight time); guide services of Mark Carwardine/Rachel Ashton from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas; information pack; evening talks/slideshows; memory stick of photos and films taken by Mark and Rachel during the trip.

Price does not include: Flights; taxi transfers between San Diego airport and hotel; taxi from Cabo San Lucas to airport if your flight time does not fit with our coach transfer (about US\$80 per taxi); airport departure taxes; travel insurance; meals on shore (except breakfast); alcoholic drinks, bottled water [NB the boat's tap water is fine to drink], and canned sodas on board; crew gratuities aboard vessel (we suggest about

US\$25 per day); Panga boatman tips (approximately US\$20); visa to enter USA (ESTA), which is bought online and currently costs \$14 (you will be given a link with the full trip information); extra nights in hotel; laundry and phone calls, snorkelling with whale sharks (\$65 per person), personal items.

Price

2019: £4,895 per person sharing on boat (excluding flights)
£85 single supplement (San Diego hotel only)

Payment schedule

- Non-refundable deposit on booking; £500pp
- First-stage payment six months prior to departure
- Final balance (and single supplement if applicable) 90 days prior to departure

2020: Price to be confirmed

To book (and for more information)

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