Eye to eye with Orca in the Sea of Cortez

By Matthew Jaffe

When an orca makes eye contact, it doesn't blink, and you can't look away. In that instant, there is a temptation to put a human stamp on the moment, to claim some kind of communion with the whale. But as I stared into the eye of a male orca swimming just a few feet away, it seemed futile to impose such conceits on this creature, with his 10 tons of physical superiority.
and obvious though separate intelligence. He was assessing me entirely on his own indefinable terms. 

Breaking the dead calm water with the great triangle of his dorsal fin, the ocella had surfaced, rolled slightly for a better look, and fixed me in his gaze as he cruised alongside our panga, the traditional high-sided fishing skiff of the Sea of Cortez. All around the panga, a pod of 20 orcas surged through the water. Huge, fast, and playful, the whales disappeared and reappeared, strutting their stuff in a display of pure power and grace.

Back on the 10-foot Don Juan, the Baja Expeditions boat that served as our hotel, restaurant, and classroom for this natural history trip through 500 miles of Mexico's 800-mile-long desert sea, it struck me that the orcas and our boatload of 18 tourists had come to this spot near the rocky outcrop of Los Islotes for the same reason: sea lions. We had come to snorkel at the 300-animal rookery, whose members dangled us with their swimming prowess. The orcas no doubt appreciated the sea lions less for their grace and more for their taste.

The orca encounter, it had seemed easy to watch with detachment as the Cortez served up its truly movable feast. On that day, however, my assumed position at the apex of the food chain had depended entirely on the whales' ability to distinguish between their preferred prey and my wet-suited hide. As I bit into a fish taco made from the morning's catch, I understood more clearly, to paraphrase The Beatles, that the lunch you take is potentially equal to the lunch you'll make. That's the way "ecotourism" works: you gain the perspective that comes not only from observing but also from occasionally being observed; from being part of the system, not separate from it.

For many years, the Sea of Cortez (identified on some maps as the Sea of Cortez or the Gulf of California) was known, if at all, as a playground for a Hollywood crowd that came for the best sportfishing in the world. Sportfishing enthusiasts still make their way to the sea in large numbers to pursue the objects of their desire: marlin, yellowtail, dorado, and roosterfish. But, increasingly, another kind of traveler is being drawn here for ecotourism trips that focus on the sea's incomparable combination of rare desert creatures and abundant marine wildlife.

After a week on the Sea of Cortez, these travelers don't tend to talk about getting back to "the real world," the useful if rationalized term for resuming our daily lives following a break in routine. After all, it's difficult to argue that the exhaust fumes of a truck on the freeway are somehow more real than the salty, fishy scent of a blue whale spout wafting over you as the 120-ton animal swims just yards away.

"Most people live in an urban world, filled with cars and streets and houses," says Ron Stroebel-Patterson, whose tour company Biological Journeys has run ecotour-oriented Cortez trips since 1979. "The Sea of Cortez is a wake-up call from a world of a different time, place, and rhythm. Nature dominates."

On Isla San Esteban, one of 50 or so islands arrayed like steppingstones across the sea's narrow Midriff region, the desert blooms alongside a row dyed by surging runoff from a recent storm. A 30-foot-long pinto cholla cactus, a lizard found nowhere else in the world, makes its way along a spine-covered organpipe cactus, now swollen with the rain. From rocky offshore islands veiled by low clouds, the muffled banks of sea lions reach over the water to the desert wash.

Both the sea lions and the cholla cacti owe their survival to the geologic forces that created the ocean basin, one of the world's youngest. About 5 million years ago, the San Andreas Fault tore off what is now the Baja peninsula from mainland Mexico. The Pacific Ocean filled the gap, making islands out of the chunks of land that had broken off from both land masses. Volcanoes created still more islands.

Tough as deep as 10,000 feet score the seafloor. The sea's remarkably prolific food chain starts with upwellings of cold, nutrient-rich water from these submarine canyons. This water promotes growth of the phytoplankton that feeds the simple creatures that in turn set the table for the sea's more advanced diners: sportfishing, marine mammals such as sea lions, and humans.

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Sea lions keep watch, kayaker keeps her distance at Los Islotes near La Paz.

Vermilion sea star lies low on seafloor.

Dolphins ply the sea's clear blue waters. Some schools total in the thousands.

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An ecotourist's guide to the Sea of Cortez

It probably comes as no surprise that the best way to experience the Sea of Cortez is from on the water. While there are many fine beaches along the shores of both the Baja peninsula and the Mexican mainland, the real action is accessible only by boat. This guide focuses on boat-based outings, because of easier access to offshore attractions from motorized watercraft.

There are direct flights daily to Los Cobos from cities throughout the West. You can also fly directly to Loreto and La Paz daily from Los Angeles.

ORGANIZED TRIPS

If you have the time and are willing to pay for access to remote areas, organized natural history tours can be an unforgettable experience. But don't expect these tours to be luxurious in terms of vessel-based trips. Expect a simple and the food is more basic than gourmet. The emphasis is on doing, not taking back. Trip leaders usually offer a range of activities, such as hiking, snorkeling, and bird-watching.

The best trips start from November through May and range from a few days to two weeks. They cost less than $1,000, but that includes all food, accommodations, and often round-trip airfare from Los Angeles.

Four outfits offer small-scale natural history trips that focus specifically on the Sea of Cortez. Many, especially in California, are sponsored by local organizations, also sponsor annual Cortez trips.

Boat Expeditions, (604) 441-1106. The San Francisco-based environmental organization conducts small-scale, boat-based and camping trips.

Sea Trek, (604) 394-3222. Six-day kayak trips, designed for both experts and novices, explore remote bays north of Loreto. They're somewhat less expensive ($2,100 for a 1,000-day round trip on larger boats.

DAY TRIPS

Even if you're planning just a few days in the main tourist centers of Loreto, La Paz, and Los Cobos (San José del Cabo and Los Cabos San Lucas), you can get past the resorts to the pristine sea and undeveloped islands. Chartering a 20-foot panga for three or four people will cost $60 to $75 for 4 to 6 hours, usually including beverages and someone to drive. These boats are reasonably comfortable in calm conditions, and about when they're operating, you're better off staying ashore. More basic than our own, these boats can help you with destinations in Loreto. The original capital of California, Loreto still has a rustic feel, though that may change in the next few years. The population of Loreto has grown from 250,000 to 750,000 and is expected to grow to 1,000,000 in the next ten years. The city is expected to be a tourist destination.

A GIANT AQUARIUM

Although it has the greatest concentration and variety of southern seas, the Sea of Cortez is home to more than 500 species of fish. Anglers have long looked to the sea, considered to be the best for both fishing and other bidders. But commercial fishing is a problem, with the majority of the fish caught from long lines and gill nets.

LABORATORIES FOR NATURAL SELECTION

Thanks to their isolation from predators found on the mainland, animals on the island show remarkable diversity and local adaptations. Among the 34 endemic reptile species is a wondrously robust system.

A WHALE OF A SEA

While Baja's Pacific coast is better known for its marine life, the whale watches are a delight. The whale watching season extends from early spring to late fall, and is a popular activity among visitors. The large mammals are visible from shore, and the guided tours allow for a closer view.

SOME LIKE IT DRY

Though the Sea of Cortez is vast, the landmass is limited. In fact, the only island is Isla Espiritu Santo, which has no water. Most of the larger hotels in the area have information about the beaches and other destinations. If you're thinking about renting a condominium or villa, try local companies like Elite Villas (604) 745-2226, they will book activities as well as lodging.

THE WORLD WAS HIS OYSTER

Hemingway's Conchita, the jungles for whom the sea was named, landed at the site of La Paz in 1936, searching for Amazon women and pearls. He found the latter. More than four centuries later, the local pearl oyster population died out within a few years, victim of either an environmental or political disruption.

Marc Lacy's Sargent
Inhabited by unique plants and animals, the sea's islands are Mexico's answer to the Galápagos.

Brown pelicans show breeding season coloration. Pelicans nest on several Cormorant islands.

Day-tripper explores water-curved cave on south end of Isla del Carmen. Hired boat that brought her anchored offshore.

Harsh Island Santa Catalina blossoms into a colorful desert garden after rare rains.

In the world's back yard, a large net along the seafloor to scoop up bottom-dwelling animals—has also come under sharp attack. The problem, according to marine biologist Alex Kerstich, is that to net a small amount of shrimp (and dwindling, because of overfishing), these operations each year throw away 1.5 billion pounds of fish, not to mention other incidental kill ranging from invertebrates to larger endangered animals like sea turtles. Shrimping and gill-netting have also decimated the population of vaquita, a small porpoise found only in the northern gulf. In a sea considered one of the world's best for whales, dolphins, and porpoises, it's a sad irony that its one endemic cetacean species is now considered the world's most endangered marine mammal.

Some environmentalists would like to see the Mexican government impose tighter restrictions on fishing. But many express concern that these measures would merely be a short-term fix aimed at saving the vaquita.