

Photo Itinerary - The Gray Whales of the Mexican Baja

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Every year the Gray Whales leave their northern feeding grounds off Alaska and the Beaufort Sea to make the long 6000-mile swim to breed in the warm waters off Baja California, Mexico. They depart around the month of October and can arrive as early as December. I have had the opportunity to view these great mammals in the Santa Barbara Channel some years ago but decided it was time to make my own long, albeit much less strenuous, journey from the northeastern US to the Mexican Baja to photograph them.



Upon my arrival in Cabos San Luca for a couple of days of relaxation I witnessed, at some distance, the whales' magnificent spouts as the seawater glistened in the clear pacific air. I anxiously awaited my journey northward to Magdalena Bay, one of the most popular breeding grounds of these wondrous giants.



If you head out to this sun-drenched part of the world, I might suggest that your destination be a bit closer to the whale breeding grounds. This will save you the six-hour trip from Cabos. The city of La Paz on the eastern shore of the Sea of Cortez is a mere 2-3 hour drive on relatively good roads. It is also in close proximity to Loreto - another popular whale watching site.



The drive out of Cabos San Luca takes you northeast on Route 19 and on to Route 1 - the Trans-Peninsula Highway. Mexico Route 19 meanders through the hills, overlooking the restless Pacific, then turns inland into the still Baja Desert. Some of the wildlife that can be seen as you travel inland include the beautiful Crested Caracara, often perched at the very tops of giant Cardon cacti, or Prairie Falcons soaring above an immense variety of desert vegetation in search of a late day's meal. Once you reach the city of La Paz and head westward toward the small town of Puerto San Carlos you know you are close to the Pacific when osprey begin to appear, sitting in their not-so-tidy but sturdy nests, or soaring toward the water for a succulent fish dinner.



Arriving in Puerto San Carlos is truly arriving into "Old Mexico", with its dirt roads and tiny cantinas. Let me say that without question the place to stay is the Brennan Hotel. It is quaint and comfortable, and the staff is accommodating and genuine. Also, don't forget to stop at the Alcatraz Hotel for some of the best authentic food you'll ever savor.

Whales... I almost forgot. Make sure you call ahead to the hotel to arrange for a guide. Enrique will be happy to assist by penciling in your date and getting the right guy for the job. By the way, a little knowledge of Spanish goes a long way since there are few English-speaking natives in Puerto San Carlos.



We got up, had a wonderful fresh breakfast and met Enrique promptly at 7 am for our short trip to the docks. We boarded Enrique's panga (Spanish for a 15ft. rowboat with a 50hp. outboard motor), and prepared for our rough trip into Magdalena Bay.

In what seemed like moments later, we had our first encounter! She seemed very curious and was easily lured toward the panga. It's my understanding that the whales want to investigate the whining of the engine. The gray gracefully maneuvered along side the boat and my friend was easily able to reach over and run her hands along the whale's barnacle-covered back. More whales seemed to appear, as if from nowhere, and in numbers that were amazing.

After a few close encounters we headed farther away from land toward the open Pacific. Enrique's knowledge of where to find the mammoths was uncanny. Suddenly we were in an area where mating activity was rampant and the surface breaches were many. The whales' great tails emerging from the sea, dripping and flowing with sparkling water, silhouetted against the mountain backdrop was a stunning sight. Often times they would hurl half their 40ft. torsos majestically upward against the clear blue sky. Gray whale

mating rituals involving multiple males twisting and writhing in a frenzy then erupting from the depths seemingly surrounded us. What an unforgettable 3-hour experience for a meager 800 pesos per person. (\$80 US Dollars).

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Gary Melnysyn resides in Connecticut and is mainly a wildlife photographer. His work is featured in Outdoor Photographer Magazine, and he's a frequent contributor to the Connecticut Audubon with images of Connecticut raptors. Gary exhibits his work in local New England galleries and establishments. To see more of his photographs and writing, visit fiddleheadfoto.com.



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