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Travel

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Mighty cliffs dwarf kayakers in Ensenada Grande Cove in the Sea of Cortes.

STEVE HAGGERTY | COLOR WORLD

Route through the **Sea of Cortes** offers beauty and variety for those eager to be flexible

Scenic solitude

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty
 McClatchy-Tribune News Service

SAN EVARISTO, Mexico — Rising at dawn to catch the sunrise, cruise passengers nursing cups of coffee watched as the Safari Endeavour glided past the Baja California peninsula's ragged coast.

Fifty yards off the starboard bow, a whale surfaced, blowing a spray of mist and leaving a widening circle of ripples. On the port side, a squawking band of gulls hovered over a rocky islet shared by a colony of croaking sea lions.

They — and the Endeavour — were the only signs of life, or so it seemed to this first-time visitor to the Sea of Cortes,



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Cortes

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the 700-mile-long finger of ocean separating the peninsula from the Mexican mainland. (It's also known as the Sea of Cortez, Gulf of California and Vermilion Sea.)

In almost a week on the ship, touring at sea and on land, we had spotted three of the seven whale species that frequent the region, along with dolphins, green turtles, mobula rays and dozens of birds.

We had walked through a tiny fishing village, hiked the narrow trails to dusty cliff-top ridges and snorkeled in glass-clear coves. Except for a brief glimpse of two small sailboats, we had had the lonely Sea of Cortez to ourselves.

Behind us on the bridge, Capt. Jill Russell, the Endeavour's skipper, was peering through binoculars and reading weather signs in the clouds. She checked the wind, wondering whether the day's expedition should be canceled.

Button-holed by a photographer who asked where the ship was heading, she was ready:

"I don't know," she answered, pausing for effect. "But I'll know when we get there."

A few of the passengers felt unmoored.

"Can they change the route just like that?" asked a retired lawyer from Maryland.

But the officers on the bridge, watching the white-caps smacking against the bow, knew what to expect. The captain would wait and watch, then decide.

One thing was certain: The 86-passenger Endeavour, an Un-Cruise Adventures ship, was a solo act. Only Holland America and Carnival sail anywhere nearby, calling at larger towns with ports.

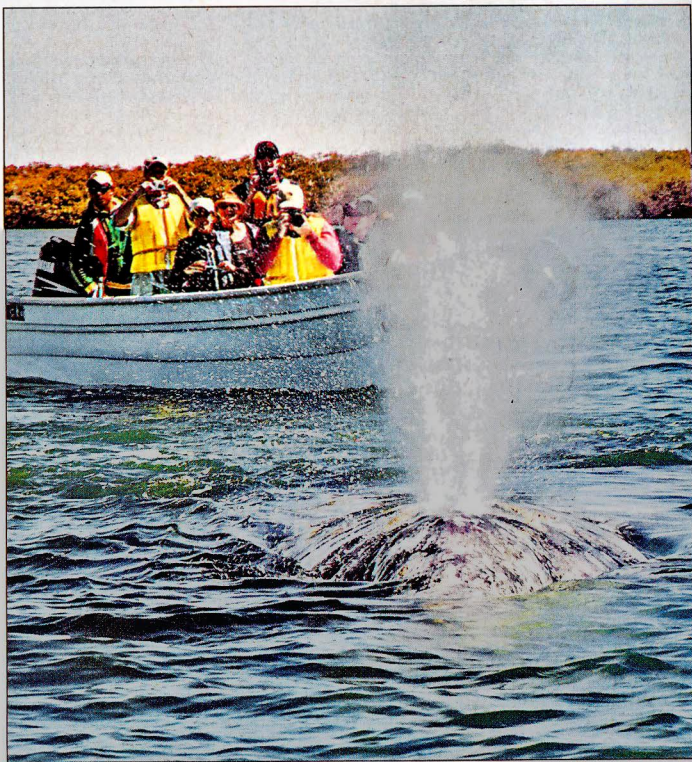
The Endeavour's only real competition is Lindblad Expedition's 62-passenger Sea Bird. Both ships explore Baja's virgin beaches and lead expeditions onshore and in bays and coves.

The difference is that the Sea Bird sails in the area for two months, from mid-January through mid-March. The Un-Cruise ship sails there year-round.

We had expected to spend that day onshore, wandering along the beach and snorkeling among the rocks.

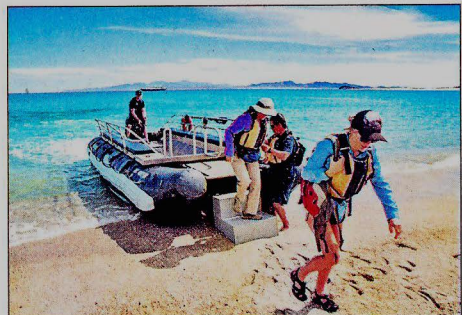
But with choppy seas and heavy surf, beach landings were put on hold.

So I stood by the rail, searching for leviathans. Sperm whales and gray whales, humpbacks and blues, even fin whales and giant whale sharks frolic in the protected blue waters, "the world's aquarium," according to marine biologist and diver Jacques Cousteau.



STEVE HAGGERTY | COLORWORLD PHOTOS

A whale surfaces in Magdalena Bay to the delight of travelers positioned for close-up photos in a large panga, or fishing boat. Seven whale species frequent the region.



Travelers go ashore at Bonanza Beach on the Sea of Cortez, which separates the Baja peninsula and the Mexican mainland.

While the ship idled near the rocky pinnacles called Los Islotes, we spotted pods of dolphins, sea lions sunning, and brown pelicans and blue-footed boobies jockeying for sunny perches.

But the week's highlight was the shore tour to Magdalena Bay, on Baja's Pacific Coast, to see the migrating gray whales.

The drive was long, two hours on a winding road. But by midmorning we and 40 other travelers were motoring slowly across the lagoon in four large pangas, or fishing boats.

At first, the lagoon seemed empty.

But just as we had decided

the trip was a bust, a mottled hump silently broke the surface nearby. Then a second emerged with a calf by its side.

As the day warmed, so did the whales. They were everywhere — gently cruising, rising, breathing and diving.

We were ready for lunch by 1, served at a cafe that offered plates heaped with chicken enchiladas, tacos, rice, beans, chili verde, sliced mangoes and a fresh green salad, served with soda or beer.

I wondered how much leeway a ship captain has in a place like the gulf, where the itinerary can be flexible. Was the Magdalena Bay tour available on a day's notice?

IF YOU GO

Sea of Cortez cruise

In December, Un-Cruise Adventures' 64-passenger ship Safari Voyager took over the Sea of Cortez route and will cruise there year-round.

Cabins are priced per-person double occupancy starting at \$2,995 in low season.

Valid passports are required to enter Mexico. Call 1-888-862-8881 or visit www.un-cruise.com.

"It's rarely a problem," expedition leader Mark Russell said. "That's what I like about out-of-the-way places like the Sea of Cortez. The big cruise ships depend on stopping at ports with facilities, the docks, tour buses, guide services and shops. They have to go where they're expected. But here in Baja we get to decide when and where to anchor and what to do that day."

Un-Cruise cultivates that flexibility.

"Comment cards and feedback say that our passengers want good food, a choice of wines and the little luxuries that matter," said Un-Cruise spokeswoman Sarah Scoltock.

"But they don't want to sit in the lounge and look out the window. They want to make their own adventure."