



# Natural Wonder

The Sea of Cortés is home to a  
fantastic array of aquatic life

By Eric Lucas

Mexico's Sea of Cortés is a place of immensities. The sea-life-rich waters where pods of dolphins up to a hundred strong move through the water in unison is also a midwinter province of some of the world's great whales. Daytime brings views of craggy islands rising from the sea, juxtaposed with an expansive cornflower-blue sky. The vast night sky seems to invite all of the stars down to our humble earth.

Cosmological musing is inevitable on a Sea of Cortés journey aboard a ship such as American Safari Cruises' 22-passenger *Safari Quest*—particularly when you climb up to the top deck after dinner and settle into the hot tub to gaze at the stars and mull the day's events. On a weeklong cruise north out of La Paz—the capital of Baja California Sur—each experience brings a fascinating realization about the wonders of nature.

One afternoon, for instance, we spy the telltale spout of passing cetaceans and slow carefully to watch two pairs of fin whales bracket our boat. One of Earth's largest animals, they can reach a length of up to 79 feet in the Northern Hemisphere. Watching their long, arcing bodies leaves us awestruck. Fin whales can transmit their low-frequency vocalizations across the ocean and be heard for vast distances.

Later, bottlenose dolphins spy the ship and dash through the open sea to swim in our bow wave. Moving effortlessly up and down in the water, they match our speed for about 15 minutes. Our onboard naturalist, Nitakuwa Barrett, grabs her camera, seeking the elusive shot of a dolphin leaping out of a wave.

"You must have seen this a thousand times," I tell her.

"And I love it just as much every single time," she declares with a grin.

"So, are they playing? What nonentertainment purpose would there be for them to do this?" I inquire.

"I think they're just enjoying themselves."

As are we all.

One morning, *Safari Quest* brings us to Isla Santa Catalina, one of the desert islands along the east side of the Baja Peninsula. Since I believe deserts are for solitude, I set off by myself up an arroyo. Under mesquite trees no taller than 3 feet, I look for fallen mesquite beans but don't spot any. The ground squirrels must have gotten them all, and well they might, as this is one of earth's fiercest environments. Five inches of rain fall here in a good year.

Looking down, I notice a train of almost microscopic red ants busily moving in a line along a sandstone ledge. They are so tiny, I have to bend to clearly see them. Where are they going and why, and how did they get here? I wonder. We're five miles from the Baja mainland.

I also notice a 2-inch-wide ribbon of diagonal tracks in the sand between a jojoba bush and an ocotillo. A snake has scooted along this hollow, I surmise. In this place that has gone months without rain and is shielded from the wind, I cannot tell whether the snake came by an hour, a day or a month ago.

When I stand up, immensity presents



Opposite: A diver in the Sea of Cortés swims among colorful tropical fish. Above: Bottlenose dolphins leap out of the sea once referred to by Jacques Cousteau as "the world's aquarium."

itself again. I spot a huge barrel cactus, easily 12 feet tall and almost 3 feet in diameter, with flexible spines.

As it happens, this is one of the world's largest barrel cactus. No, not this exact one ... but this guy is huge. *Ferocactus diguetii* is its scientific name; *biznaga* in Spanish. The cactus is found only on this island and a handful of others in the Sea of Cortés. It stores up water to survive what may be almost a year without rain and is tall enough that it casts a dramatic shadow on the ground beneath.

Nearby, I happen on an equally impressive desert plant. *Torote* is a most graceful tree whose branches arc up from a 2-foot-wide trunk, spiral out 10 feet and dip back to ground level like a hoopskirt. Some of these trees may be decades old, yet no taller than me.

**ON THE SEA OF CORTÉS**, wildlife is abundant. During our first full day on *Safari Quest*, we encounter a broad ocean commotion heading our way in the Canal de San José. It turns out to be a dolphin parade.

It sounds like they are gasping, these 300 short-beaked common dolphins flashing through the water around our boat. Leap, gasp, move back into the water. Then it dawns on me that they are simply breathing while racing through the waves. We seafarers on this body of water, referred to by legendary underseas explorer Jacques Cousteau as “the world’s aquarium,” simply watch in awe.

“Hey.” My wife, Leslie, nudges me. “Isn’t that a sea lion in the middle?”



## Exploring La Paz

The 14th-hole tee boxes at the Gary Player Signature golf course at La Paz’s new CostaBaja Resort & Spa (877-392-5525; [www.costabajaresort.com](http://www.costabajaresort.com)) are poised along a ravine.

Birds of prey are circling, but it’s not an omen. I’m not looking skyward, anyhow.

Below me lies a hole that requires a drive straight and true at least 200 yards. Also, 90 feet down.

These tees are mounted at an altitude sufficient for hang gliding. The fairway courses through the bottom of the ravine like a distant vale, green and lush. On the left side is a forbidding slope, cactus-covered. On the right, a forbidding slope, scrub-covered. Driving straight is imperative.

Remarkably, I do. I barely reach the distant fairway of this par-5, 549-yard behemoth, but then my approach shots bring me to the point where I double-bogey (plenty good for me) because of a wimpy uphill putt.

With high-hill viewpoints showcasing the Sea of Cortés and tempting visitors to watch for whales while waiting to tee off, and a challenging layout that’s still user-friendly for a duffer like me, CostaBaja’s course beautifully represents La Paz itself. The capital of the Mexican state of Baja California Sur marries pizzazz and ease in a most comfortable fashion within its lovely bayside location.

The approximately 215,000 residents of La Paz, including a notable contingent of expat Americans, often cite the city’s peace and quiet as one of its chief virtues. Indeed, strolling one of the most aesthetically appealing *malecóns* among Mexico’s many such seafront promenades, with the moon rising over palm fronds on a 70-degree evening, is a delightfully serene experience.

Musicians perform romantic serenades from shoreline docks; couples stroll arm-in-arm;

and tiki torches light patios at waterfront bistros. Wander uphill into the city, and you’ll find families playing bingo alfresco in the cathedral square.

Yet 21st-century development is modernizing the city’s landscape. CostaBaja, the centerpiece of a 550-acre development along the bayshore, offers a condo tower, a fine hotel, shops and cafes surrounding a yacht-filled marina, and hillside townhouses overlooking the bay and golf course.

In downtown La Paz, the Cultural Center features the splendid Códex Peninsula, an area in which historical details about Baja California Sur are described, including how its original inhabitants managed to live in a region that Hernán Cortés—namesake of the nearby sea—later tried and failed to colonize. A few blocks away, what may be the most popular store in the city, La Fuente, sells gallons of *nieves y helados tradicionales*—handmade ice cream in dozens of flavors ranging from coconut (superb) to passion fruit (divine).

That evening, awaiting dinner in the courtyard of Las Tres Virgenes (52-612-123-2226), one of La Paz’s best new restaurants, I feel like I’ve stepped into a romantic painting. The full moon rises above pine trees in a velvet sky. Neighborhood cats prowl the tile roofs. Mid-20th century Mexican and Spanish songs play. Grapevines climb the building.

In a minute, our waiter brings my 2-inch-thick rib eye steak, which has just been grilled on a mesquite fire 15 feet from me in the chimneyed fireplace beside the patio. Smoky aromas waft on an evening breeze as Pedro Infante sings *Te Quiero Así* in the background. Peace, indeed.

For more information about La Paz, please visit [www.purelapaz.com](http://www.purelapaz.com) or [www.vivalapaz.net](http://www.vivalapaz.net). —E.L.

The 14th tee at the Gary Player Signature golf course, part of CostaBaja Resort & Spa, offers panoramic views of the Sea of Cortés.

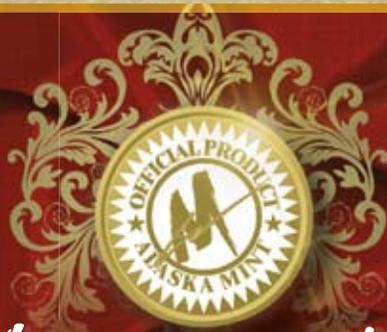
Indeed it is, a fellow traveling marine mammal trying to match the dolphins leap for leap and occasionally barking a modest bellow.

Common dolphins are ubiquitous around the world, but a wondrous sight nonetheless. Stupendous as this dolphin pod is, the pods in this area were even bigger during the 19th century, according to researchers.

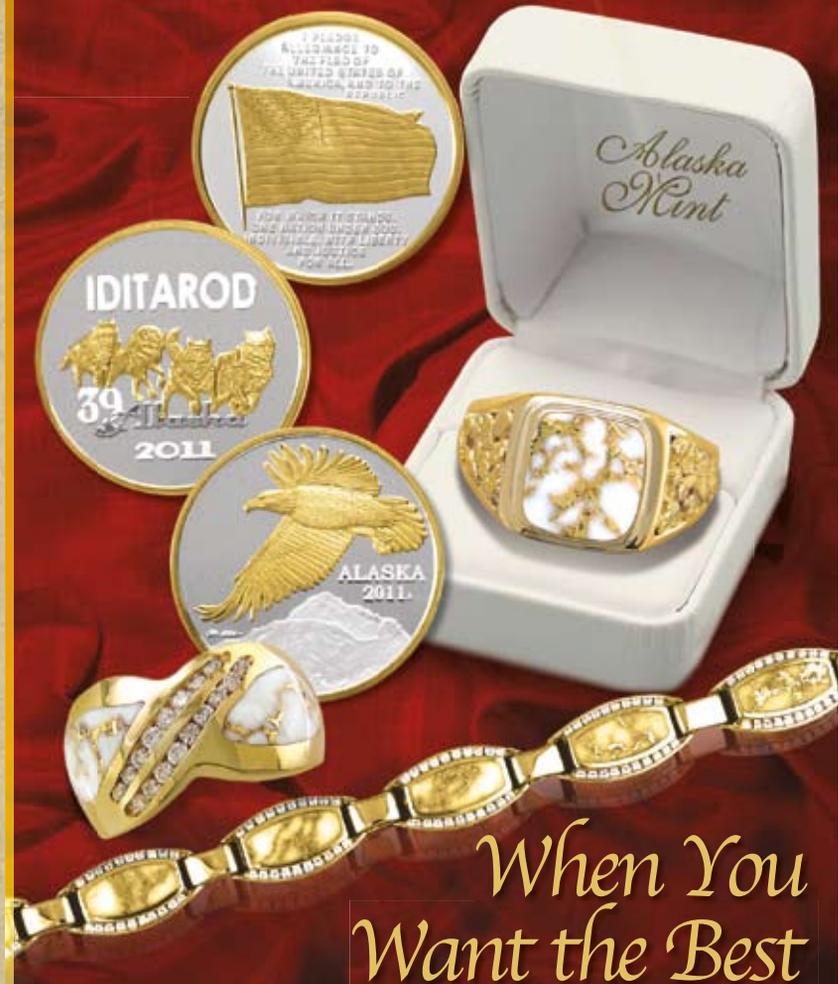
On another day, in another bay, we don snorkels and masks to explore the reefs, where we see fish including sergeant majors, king angelfish, parrotfish, puffer fish, balloonfish, cornetfish, vivid blue-yellow-and-maroon rainbow wrasses and neon-blue Cortés damselfish.

I pull myself around a boulder and come face-to-face with an exquisite 2-foot giant hawkfish. We both startle and pull back like cartoon characters. Ten minutes later, I return to the rock and find what looks like the same fish.

On yet a different afternoon, we catch a single glimpse of one of the Sea of Cortés’ most famous inhabitants, the humpback whale, as its characteristic Y-shaped tail disappears beneath the waves. Humpbacks are among the most studied cetaceans on Earth. Scientists have known for nearly four decades that male humpback whales vocalize a complex series of sounds in long, predictable patterns, apparently during the breeding season. The song is so loud that people above water can hear it on a quiet



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day. In the *Safari Quest* lounge one evening, Barrett plays a short excerpt from the famous, first-discovered 1973 humpback song. Like human songs, she tells us, it contains chords, melody, rhythm, keys. If I spent my winters in the balmy waters of Hawai'i or Mexico and my summers feasting on seafood in Alaska, I'd sing glorious songs, too.

Relaxing around the stern deck on a quiet morning, we watch an olive ridley sea turtle lounge around the bay, quietly surfacing periodically to breathe. A cluster of comb jellyfish—a group of these is called a “smack”—floats by, and even from the boat we notice the way they appear to light up when sunshine strikes their pulsating combs. A magnificent frigate bird with a sculpted 7-foot wingspan soars past, dropping a puffer fish. A Heermann's gull lands to check out the discarded fish, pecks at it experimentally, then wings away. Unidentified marine animals splash 100 yards in the distance.

**“YES! OFF HE GOES. HOO-WEE!”** So celebrates one of my fellow passengers, a 15-year-old Floridian who has just watched his older brother be towed off on an inner tube by a speeding skiff. It's morning-activity time, and we are participating in myriad adventures. On the nearby mainland, two groups of people hoist themselves onto mules to take a one-hour tour of the hills, palm oasis and peaceful beach. Leslie and I head over to the water near the shore to snorkel for an hour. Mom-and-daughter pairs paddle orange kayaks. Youngsters with good balance wend around the bay on paddleboards.

Back on the boat, I keep cool with innumerable plunges into the water, which in mid-March is about 65 degrees—brisk but tolerable, and offering that silken-fabric feel subtropical salt water has. Later, the crew hoists a rope swing above the second deck, and the more adventurous among us fly out into the air, then drop into water that, as we descend, swiftly turns from aquamarine to azure to cerulean.

**THE NEXT DAY,** Leslie and I decide to snorkel again, this time beneath a rose-tinted

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basalt cliff. I become particularly intrigued by a flower sea urchin, a member of the *Toxopneustes* genus of urchins—an energetic underwater fashionista that uses its appendages to decorate its body with bits of shells, rocks, algae and whatnot it gathers up.

The urchin I spy here, in 8 feet of water in the bay at Agua Verde, is adorned with an unusual item—a piece of vivid turquoise plastic. It seems to me that to the urchin, the item is a prize trophy, laid atop the very center of its shell. This presents me with an existential dilemma.

I am an inveterate trash collector. Plastic in all its forms—from net to cup to bag—is a major preventable cause of mortality today among marine mammals worldwide.

But here, should I seize Mr. Flower Urchin's prize, I'd be dismantling a world-class example of primitive folk art, probably the only one of its kind on earth. In the end I swim away with an interesting story to take home.

Later, Leslie and I relax on a steep-sided small-pebble beach, entertaining ourselves by making an art installation out of tiny shells and stones posed on my knee. In a place removed from telephones and TV news, we relax and appreciate the stillness.

Of course, on the Sea of Cortés, nothing is really still. The stiff northern breeze whisking sand on the shore, the vast schools of leaping dolphins and the plunging pelicans, the great whales swinging their tails high as they dive into the cobalt water—all these, and more, constantly refresh the visitor's view. ▲

*Eric Lucas writes from Seattle's Ballard neighborhood.*

#### GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers regular flights to La Paz. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, visit the Web at [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 800-468-2248.

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