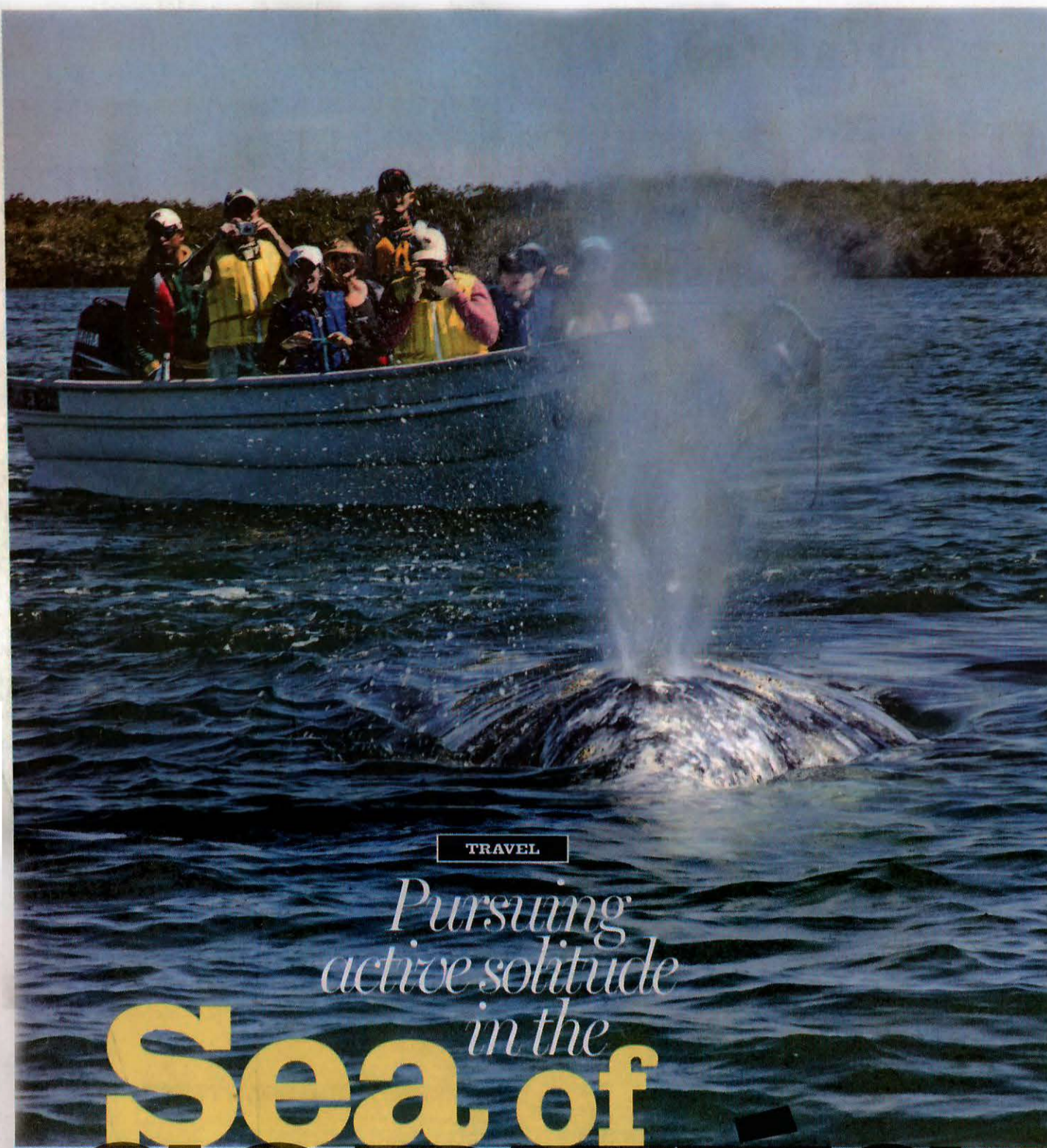


## TRAVEL



TRAVEL

Pursuing  
active solitude  
in the

# Sea of CORTÉS

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY  
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

SAN EVARISTA, MEXICO—

Rising at dawn to catch the sunrise, cruise passengers nursing coffee cups watched as the Safari Endeavour glided past the Baja Peninsula's ragged coast. As the rays played over the cliffs, each thumb-shaped cove and crescent beach came into view for a minute or two, then slid out of sight, disappearing astern.

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

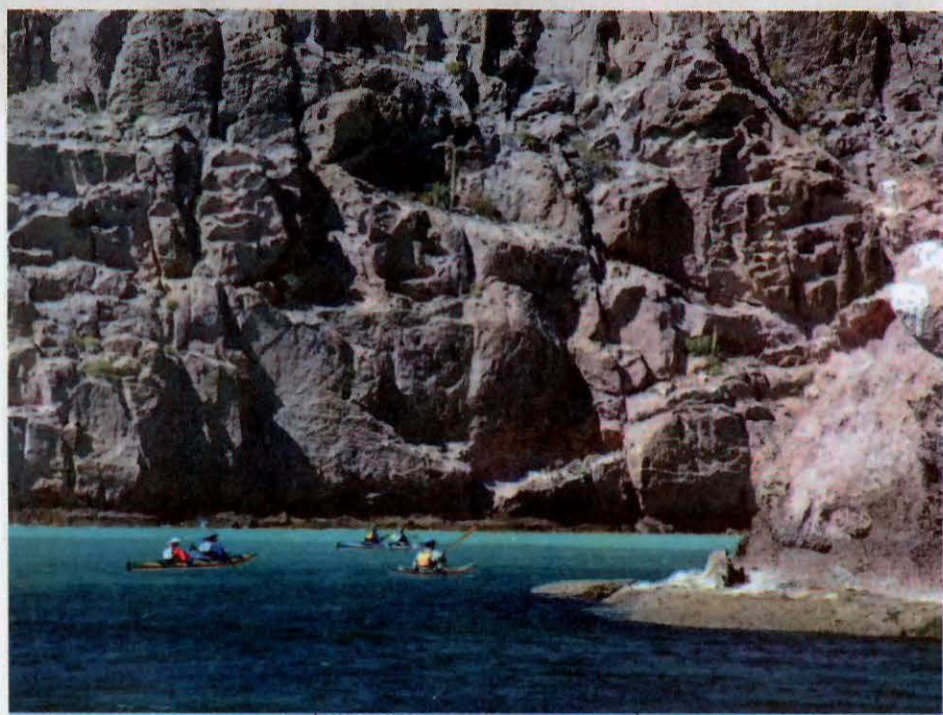
They – and the Endeavour – were the only signs of life, or so it seemed to this first-time visitor to the Sea of Cortés, the 700-mile-long finger of ocean separating the Baja California Peninsula from the Mexican mainland. (It's also known as the Sea of Cortez, Gulf of California, and Vermilion Sea, in addition to its various Spanish-language names.)

In nearly a week on the ship, touring at sea and on land, we'd spotted three of the seven whale species that frequent the region, part of the abundant stew of marine residents that includes dolphins, green turtles, mobula rays and dozens of birds. We'd walked through a tiny fishing village. Hiked the narrow trails to dusty cliff-top ridges. Snorkeled in glass-clear coves. But except for a brief glimpse of two small sailboats, we'd had the lonely sea all to ourselves.

Behind us on the bridge, Capt. Jill Russell, the Endeavour's 40-something skipper, was in her element, peering through binoculars and reading weather signs in the clouds. A chunky dynamo with energy to burn and a hands-on approach to management, she checked the wind, wondering if the day's planned expedition should be canceled.

Button-holed by a photographer who asked where the ship was heading, she was ready with a snappy come-back. "I don't know," she answered, pausing for comic effect. Then she grinned. "But I'll know when we get there."

A few of the passengers, mostly cruise veterans expecting an orderly progression of ports and tours, suddenly felt



Cliffs dwarf kayakers in Ensenada Grande Cove, Isla Partida, on Mexico's Sea of Cortés.

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

But the officers on the bridge, watching the whitecaps smacking against the bow, knew what to expect. Captain Jill, as they called her, 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 close by and do so with one ship each, calling only on larger towns with port facilities: La Paz, Loreto and San Jose del Cabo on the Peninsula, and Topolobampo and Guaymas on mainland Mexico's Pacific coast.

A third cruise vessel, Lindblad Expedition's 62-passenger Sea Bird, sails here in January and

February. But only Un-Cruise Adventures goes off the grid, leading shore expeditions to deserted bays and coves "in country," places such as Ensenada Grande, Bahia Aqua Verde, Espiritu Santo and El Cardonal.

We'd expected to spend that day on shore, wandering along the beach looking for shells and driftwood, snorkeling among the rocks looking for angelfish, emerald wrasse, sea horses and sea turtles. Some passengers planned to kayak across the bay; the Endeavour's high-tech storage-and-launch rack (nicknamed the "pickle fork") lowers the 20 two-man kayaks to the water level for easy loading. Other passengers had signed up for the guided hike through the brush-and-cactus forest called a low-elevation deciduously treed jungle. But with choppy

seas and heavy surf, such activities were put on hold.

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

Idling near the rocky pinnacles called Los Islotes, we spotted pods of dolphins, sea lion colonies 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.

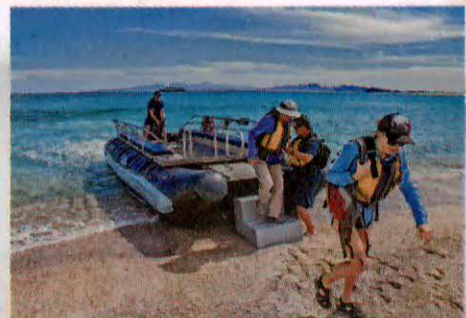
The drive was long – two hours on a continuously winding road. But by mid-

### IF YOU GO

**THE ROUTES:** Starting in December, the 64-passenger Safari Voyager takes over the Safari Endeavour's year-round Sea of Cortés routes. Seven-night roundtrip itineraries from San Jose del Cabo include "Baja's Whale Bounty" and "Cousteau's Aquarium of the World." The seven-night roundtrip cruise out of Guaymas, mainland Mexico, focuses on the "Marine Miracles of Baja California." The 14-night one-way cruise between Guaymas and San Jose del Cabo explores the "Essential Islands of Baja California North and South."

**THREE CRUISE STYLES:** Ships in the "Wilderness" category focus on active adventure. "Safari" designated ships offer soft adventure with a touch of luxury. The "Heritage" designation offers living history aboard ship and port-side.

**RATES AND SERVICES:** Cabins are priced per person, double occupancy, starting at \$2,995 in low season. Rates include port fees and taxes, airport transfers, park entrance fees, sports equipment, guided hikes, yoga classes, a wellness program and all onboard guide services. Valid passports are required to enter Mexico. Call 888-862-8881 or visit [un-cruise.com](http://un-cruise.com).



Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY/MCT

Left: Visitors snap pictures of a surfacing whale at Magdalena Bay on the Pacific coast of Baja California Sur, Mexico.

Above: Going ashore at Bonanza Beach on the Sea of Cortés.

**Croaking sea lions – and the Endeavour – were the only signs of life, or so it seemed to this first-time visitor to the Sea of Cortés, the 700-mile-long finger of ocean separating the Baja California Peninsula from the Mexican mainland.**

morning we and 40-odd other travelers were there, seated in four large pangas and motoring slowly across the lagoon. At first, the lagoon seemed empty, the whales gone. But just as we'd decided the trip was a bust, a mottled hump silently broke the surface nearby. Then a second shiny back emerged with a calf by her side.

As the day warmed, so did the whales, rolling sideways to inspect us with one eye and "spy hopping" straight up between the pangas for 360-degree look-around. A few whales slid next to the panga, as if courting the touch of a human hand. Whales were everywhere, gently cruising, rising, breathing and diving.

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?

"It's rarely a problem," said Russell. "That's what I like about out-of-the-way places like the Sea of Cortés. 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."

It's the kind of flexibility that Un-Cruise cultivates. "Comment cards and feedback say that our passengers want good food, a choice of wines and the little luxuries that matter," she said. "But they don't want to sit in the lounge and look out the window. They want to make their own adventure."

In the lonely Sea of Cortés, that goes without saying.