

Adventure on Baja's inner waterway

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 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 California 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 behind the ship.

Fifty yards off the right bow, a whale surfaced to breathe, blowing an airy spray of mist and leaving a widening circle of ripples. On the left, 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, the 700-mile-long finger of ocean separating the Baja California peninsula from the Mexican mainland. (It's also known as the Gulf of California and the Vermilion Sea as well as several names in Spanish.)

In nearly a week onboard and on land, we'd spotted three of the seven whale species that frequent the region, part of the abundant stew of marine residents, including dolphins, green turtles, mobula rays and dozens of birds. We'd walked

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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 of Cortes 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 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," 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 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.

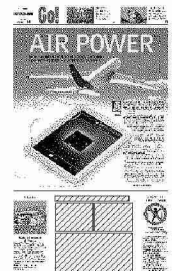
One thing was certain. The 86-passenger Endeavour, an Un-Cruise Adventures ship, was a solo act. At the present, only Holland America and Carnival sail anywhere close and only with one ship each, calling at larger towns with port facilities: La Paz, Loreto and San Jose del Cabo on the peninsula, and Topolobampo and Guaymas on the mainland's Pacific Coast.

A third cruise vessel, Lindblad Expedition's 62-passenger Sea Bird, also sails here in January and February, exploring Baja's beaches. But only Un-Cruise Adventures goes off the grid, leading shore expeditions to deserted bays and coves in places like Ensenada Grande, Bahia Aqua Verde, Espiritu Santo and El Cardonal.

We'd expected to spend that day ashore, wandering along the beach, looking for shells and driftwood, snorkeling among the rocks, looking for angelfish, emerald wrasses sea horses and even sea turtles. Some passengers planned to kayak across the bay; the Endeavour's techno-savvy, storage-and-launch rack lowers the 20 two-person kayaks to water level for easy loading. Other passengers had signed up for the guided hike through the brush-and cactus forest that looks like a desert – but isn't.

"We'll be exploring what scientists call a "low elevation deciduously treed jungle," promised the naturalist and hike leader Paulino Perez during the previous evening's slide show. But with choppy seas and heavy surf, beach landings were put off.

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 the marine biol-



ogist and diver Jacques Cousteau, who labeled the region the “Galápagos of North America.”

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

“Tomorrow we’re heading for the historic village of Loreto, where you’ll have two options,” said the expedition leader Mark Hopkins. “You can spend the day there, touring the old mission church or shopping. Or you can join the bus tour to Magdalena Bay on the peninsula’s Pacific Coast to see where the migrating gray whales spend the winter months. They come in February and March to breed and give birth,” he said. An obvious choice,” I thought, sign up for Magdalena Bay.

The drive was long, two hours on a continuously winding road. But by midmorning we and 40-odd other travelers were there and motored 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 nearby surface nearby. Then a second whale 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 our boats for 360-degree look. A few whales slid next to our craft, as if courting the touch of a human hand. Whales were everywhere, gently cruising, rising, breathing and diving.

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

How much leeway does a ship captain have in a place like the gulf, where the itinerary can be flexible, I wondered. 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 Cortes. 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.

Three years ago, Un-Cruise Adventures was a minor player. A small Alaska-oriented outfit, its four ships sailed under two names: Inner Sea Discoveries (active expedition trips) and American Safari Cruises (luxury yachts). Growing was a someday topic that was never seriously pursued. Then Cruise West, Alaska’s oldest and best-loved cruise line announced it was going out of business and selling its fleet of expedition-style ships.

“The vessels were already right there, in Alaska, and they came on the market at the right price,” said an Un-Cruise spokeswoman, Sarah Scoltock. “It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time.”

After the purchase, the company’s fleet had doubled. So, too, had the number of cruise itineraries, each designed with the idea that independent travelers want to be active participants.

“Comment cards and feedback say that our passengers want good food, a choice of wines and the little luxuries that matter,” Scoltock 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 Cortes, that goes without saying.

If you go

THE ROUTES: Starting this month, the 64-passenger Safari Voyager takes over the Safari Endeavour’s Sea of Cortes routes, sailing year around. Seven-night round-trip itineraries from San Jose del Cabo include Baja’s Whale Bounty and Cousteau’s Aquarium of the World tours. The seven-night round-trip cruise out Guaymas, Mexico, is called the Marine Miracles of Baja California. The 14-night one-way cruise between Guaymas and San Jose del Cabo is billed as 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 ships offer living history onboard and on shore.

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



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Passengers making a kayak excursion on the Sea of Cortez with Un-Cruise Adventures.



PHOTOS BY McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Much of the itinerary is up to the skippers on Un-Cruise Adventures ships like the Safari Endeavour, above. Excursions could include a beach on the Sea of Cortez or watching a gray whale up close.



