

Cruising in the Sea of Cortés

By **Anne Z. Cooke** and **Steve Haggerty** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS FEBRUARY 15, 2014



STEVE HAGGERTY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Their cruise ship anchored, snorkelers suit up by the Sea of Cortés, along Baja California Sur, Mexico.



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SAN EVARISTO, Mexico — When it comes to steering ships — and conversations — Jill Russell, captain of the sailing ship Safari Endeavour, ranks among the best.

When unseasonal winds call for a light touch and quick timing, nothing sets a course like one of her favorite one-liners. Ask where her ship, an Un-Cruise Adventures vessel, is heading that evening, and she's on it without blinking.

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

The passengers laugh. They know when they've been led down the garden path. But on this particular February day, it's close to the truth. With clouds and a cold breeze moving in over the Sea of Cortés, tonight's safe harbor has yet to be identified. But it could be anywhere: a hidden cove near Espíritu Santo or a spot on the lee shore of Isla San Francisco. Here along the Baja Peninsula's ragged southeast coast, sheltering places abound.

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Meanwhile, passengers in the lounge, studying the Endeavour's position that is posted daily on the trip map, puzzle over the changes in the original itinerary. Cruise veterans, they're accustomed to the orderly progression of ports and tours. But the officers on the bridge, watching the whitecaps smacking against the bow, aren't surprised. Captain Jill, as everyone calls her, likes to keep her options open.

We had expected to be spending that day on the beach, snorkeling in search of angelfish, emerald wrasse, sea horses, even sea turtles. Some passengers planned to kayak across the bay; others had signed up to hike the foothills of the Sierra Giganta, a 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,'" naturalist and hike leader Paulino Perez said during the previous evening's slide show. But with choppy seas and heavy surf, beach landings were put on hold.

So I stood by the rail instead, searching for the airy water spouts that announce the presence of whales. Sperm whales and grey whales, humpbacks and blues, even fin whales and giant whale sharks frolic in these protected waters. The Sea of Cortés is "the world's aquarium," said the late famed marine biologist and diver Jacques Cousteau, supporting the push to have the area declared a World Heritage Site.

Idling near the rocky pinnacle called Los Islotes we spotted pods of dolphins, sea lion colonies sunning, and mobula rays splashing atop the waves. Brown pelicans perched on the rocks near the water, jockeying for position among gulls and blue-footed boobies.

On day three, the sunshine and blue sky returned. With our course now set for the village of Loreto, expedition leader Mark Hopkins announced sign-ups for the next day's activities. "You can tour Loreto's historic town center, with time for lunch and exploring. Or you can join the bus tour over to Magdalena Bay, on the Pacific Coast, to see the gray whales," he said. "It's a long drive, but you'll see where the whales come to breed and to have their babies."

The drive to Magdalena Bay, on a winding two-lane highway, took two hours. The peaks, as the bus climbed up and over a succession of steep canyons, were as magnificent as they were forbidding. Once over the top, it was an easy run straight down to the Pacific Ocean, and by mid-morning we were seated in four large boats, motoring slowly across the lagoon.

Just as we'd concluded that the trip was a bust, the first mottled hump broke the surface nearby and then a second black back rose beside the stern, each whale with its baby alongside.

As the day warmed, the whales did, too, rolling over and surging straight up. A few whales moved close to the boat, near enough for us to reach over and feel their backs and tails.

The trip ended with a late lunch at a local cafe, included in the outing. Plates heaped with Mexican food capped a wonderful day.

How much flexibility do you have when you want to arrange a last-minute tour like the one to Magdalena Bay, I asked Captain Jill.

"It's easy," she said. "And that's what I like about cruising here in the gulf. We're not tied to a rigid schedule the way most cruise ships are. The big ones, especially, depend on stopping at ports with docks, tour buses, and shops. They have to go where they're expected. But here in Baja I get to decide when and where to anchor and whether we're going to snorkel, or swim, or explore. Not many captains have that luxury, but our management trusts us to make the right decisions."

Three years ago, Un-Cruise was a modest Alaska-oriented cruise company with two names: InnerSea Discoveries (active expedition trips) and American Safari Cruises (luxury adventure yachts). During the winter months, its small, 22-passenger yacht Safari Quest sailed one-week charters in the Sea of Cortés.

Then in late 2010, Cruise West, Alaska's oldest and most venerable cruise line, announced it was going out of business and liquidating its assets, including seven small cruise ships.

"It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time," said Sarah Scoltock, a spokesman for Un-Cruise. By the time the deal and subsequent reorganization was complete, the company, renamed Un-Cruise, had doubled its fleet and its cruise portfolio.

"We've been busy ever since," said Scoltock. "Everything we've seen points to a growing demand for comfortable, expedition-style ships carrying fewer than, say, 100 passengers. Feedback tells us that our passengers want good food, a choice of wines, some luxuries, and a casual atmosphere. But they don't want to sit and look out a window. They want to get out and kayak in person, or paddle board, or snorkel, which is what we're all about."

The Safari Endeavour has returned to Alaska, and the newly-acquired Safari Voyager will head to Baja California Sur, sailing four new itineraries: three seven-night cruises and one 14-night cruise, out of San José del Cabo, or from Guaymas, on mainland Mexico's Pacific Coast.

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