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MARK RUSH Special to the Star-Telegram

Gray whales come within inches of the boats, and even swim under them in the sheltered Magdalena Bay, just off the coast of Baja California Sur.

MEXICO

Wowed on the water



MARK RUSH Special to the Star-Telegram

Watchers in skiffs come so close to the whales that they can smell the fishy tang of the spray from the blowhole.

A couple's whale-watching, sea-kayaking trip to the quiet beaches of Baja California makes memories of a lifetime

BY IRENE MIDDLEMAN THOMAS
Special to the Star-Telegram

LORETO, BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR

Funny how a sound can change from an irritation to a delight, just by knowing its source.

Recently, while camping in a little dome tent on a secluded beach near Loreto, in Mexico's state of Baja California Sur, my husband and I found it hard to sleep because of a repetitive "slapping" noise. We guessed it was a tent cover flapping in the breeze but were too exhausted to check.

The next morning, we discovered that the noise was being made by manta rays jumping out of the water — and wish we had investigated more closely during the night.

How magical it would have been to watch their acrobatics in the moonlight.

The middle-of-the-night mantas were just one of the highlights of a whale-watching/sea-kayak combo tour we took to the area.

Booked through ROW Adventures in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and its sister company, Sea Kayak Adventures, this popular wildlife adventure combines sea kayaking in the Loreto Bay National Marine

Park in the Sea of Cortez with whale watching in Magdalena Bay.

The bay is nestled by barrier islands off Mexico's Pacific coast, and it is one of the major calving and nursing lagoons for gray whales.

Gray whales make one of the longest migrations of any mammal. Every year, these enormous creatures, measuring up

SEE BAJA, 10D

Five beach destinations to put on your list for family travel

Terranea Resort has plenty of family dining options

The Resort at Longboat Key Club is great for golfers

See rare wildlife in the Galapagos Islands

BY LYNN O'ROURKE HAYES
The Dallas Morning News

Spring break provides options for seaside bonding. Here are five beach destinations to consider for future excursions:

1. Terranea Resort and Spa, Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. Perched above the Pacific on 102 acres, the stunning views from this oceanfront oasis are reason enough for a visit. Check in and enjoy sea

kayaking, strolling along the Discovery Trail, the Tide Pool Kids Club and a kid-friendly resort pool. There are plenty of family dining options on property, and the grown-ups might want to enjoy a romantic evening and take in the views from Mar'sel.

A seaside spa and fitness facility provide coastal-inspired wellness options. www.terranea.com.
2. The Resort at Longboat Key Club, Longboat Key, Fla. Soak up the sun

during your stay at this 410-acre beachfront playground near Sarasota.

Book the Up Your Game package for unlimited afternoon golf on either of two top-notch courses, use of stand-up paddleboards, kayaks or boogie boards as well as unlimited tennis in the highly regarded Tennis Garden.

Enjoy yoga on the beach, nature walks and the option to enroll the kids in Camp Loggerhead. www.longboatkeyclub.com.

3. Hyatt Regency Maui Resort and Spa, Maui, Hawaii. More than 1,000 years ago, adventuresome Polynesians were guided

SEE BEACH, 11D



LYNN O'ROURKE HAYES

Terranea Resort offers lots of family activities and beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean.

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BAJA

to 50 feet and weighting 30-40 tons, swim more than 10,000 miles round trip, from the feeding grounds of the Bering, Beaufort and Chukchi seas of the Arctic to the birthing and nursery lagoons in Mexico.

The Sea of Cortez was named to UNESCO's world cultural and natural heritage list in 2005, and is renowned throughout the world for its abundant and unique sea life.

Perhaps most beloved are the whales — gray, blue and others — that come to the warm waters of the Loreto Bay National Marine Park each winter. The park, which prohibits large fishing boats, extends over 38 miles along the coast and 21 miles

offshore. It is home to five desert islands, including the Coronado Islands.

EXPLORING LORETO

The tour we booked runs Saturdays from late January to mid March (the optimal whale-watching season).

After checking in to La Misión hotel, a four-star property in Loreto, we walked some 10 minutes down a pedestrian lane to the city's plaza and small shopping and dining area.

We were among the very few folks wandering about. When we asked a shop proprietor where everyone was, he laughed and said, "This is too cold for us locals! But we'll come out for the Carnival tonight. You come, too!"



The iconic gray whale's fluke, or tail, is especially beautiful when it rises up from the waters of the bay.

He explained that Loreto has its own very popular version of Mardi Gras, with a parade, concert and boxing matches on the boardwalk.

The stone Mission Loreto, founded in 1697 and reconstructed in Baroque style to repair severe earthquake damage, looms impressively over the town square.

The small museum is open daily. Many other missions within driving distance were worth visiting, including the Misión Santa Rosalía de Mulegé,

in the town of Mulegé. This beautiful stone building is considered "the jewel of the Baja California Missions" because of its stunning architecture.

Loreto is popular with American and Canadian sport fishermen, and we spotted plenty of cars and RVs with license plates from as far north as Alaska — numerous folks spend the entire winter season here. Yet, the town feels authentically Mexican.

Several floats in the Carnival parade later featured blue and gray whales, made of papier-mache and fabric, with little girls dressed as mermaids and baby whales. Nothing like New Orleans or Mazatlan, but festive and fun all the same.

An early dinner on the lush patio of Orlando's was an inexpensive treat (\$20 for two, including beer) featuring the best Chile rellenos and enchiladas poblanas we can remember enjoying.

WHALE OF A TIME

The next morning, we loaded into our van for a two-hour journey to another small town, Lopez Mateos, where we would embark on the whale-watching portion of the trip.

Our tour guide, Axel, who was educated as a marine biologist, explained that the expedition would be for whale watching, not whale touching.

"We don't want people to come with 'touching' as an expectation," he said. "If the whales approach us, that's fine, but it's up to them. We must stay 90 feet away from them, especially from the babies, but they can come to us."

We all whispered to each other that we hoped that would happen.

We loaded onto 12-passenger skiffs captained by rugged Lopez Mateos men and went off to find pods of gray whales. Moms and calves cavorted and jumped in unison around us, under us and next to us — to our unmitigated delight and whoops of joy. Spray shot up from their blowholes; we could feel and smell it, and in the distance, spouts from countless other whales could be seen.

"It's like a whale highway here!" someone enthused.

The gray whales are dark slate-gray colored and are covered by characteristic gray-white patterns and scars left by parasites. Many also had pinkish barnacles on their backs. Babies are darker gray and at least 16 feet long as newborns.

Cormorants, pelicans, gulls and frigate birds flew and swooped about, cawing and crying — while the salt air fragrance added to the exhilaration.

Somewhat, these enormous yet graceful creatures would repeatedly



A kayaker moves toward a rock with an osprey nest on it in Loreto Bay National Marine Park.

If you go

ROW Adventures offers many adventures in Baja California and in North America, Latin America and Europe year-round. The latest kayaking tour this spring is April 23-30. Kayaking trips begin again in September; combo tours start in late January and run through March; San Ignacio whale camp runs mid-January to mid-April.

Getting there: Alaska Airlines flies nonstop from DFW to Los Angeles, then connects to Loreto (a seven-hour trip).

Cost: The combo tour is \$2,136 per adult, not including airfare, tips or meals in town.

More information: 800-451-6034; www.rowadventures.com

Axel warned, "If you can make it together through this, your marriage will last!" Indeed, it took us all while to get "synched," but we were soon paddling as a group.

Each day we paddled some two to three hours, and also went on hikes and snorkeling excursions. One night, Axel gave us a laser pointer lesson on constellations — fantastic with only a sliver of moon, and with hundreds of hermit crabs scurrying silently around us.

Wild, loud seagull squawks awoke us much earlier than our alarms were set to do, after that sleepless night brought on by the mantas slapping the water. Outside the tents, a gorgeous, rosy sunrise moved down the high cliffs on the other side of the bay.

The clear, brilliant, turquoise-blue waters were dazzling, and snorkeling here was outstanding.

Brown, barren, cactus-dotted rocky cliffs in all directions made for surreal landscapes and highlighted the beautiful water below.

Our last night, we went as a group to a restaurant in Loreto — where we feasted, toasted and felt dazed, a bit, at our week spent in Baja.

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