



TRAVEL



PEOPLE



LEISURE

agenda

WHERE ARE YOU?

wild CURIOSITY

BY SUZANNE MORPHET

THE SLEEK CREATURE that glides past our motorboat is big enough to be a whale. It's actually a whale *shark* and I'm about to jump in the water after it. Minutes later, I'm within arm's reach of this gentle giant, the biggest fish in the sea. And it's only day two of my week-long adventure. This narrow, cactus-covered peninsula looks dry and lifeless on land, but the waters surrounding it are teeming with life. "Mexico is the most underrated destination for wildlife on the planet," a biologist told me on our first evening on board a small cruiser that island hops in the Sea of Cortez.

With its two long coastlines, the Baja peninsula seems particularly blessed. After a morning kayaking on the turquoise waters off Espirtu Island and admiring its sculptured coastline, we meet more wildlife. About 400 noisy sea lions make some nearby islets ▶

Play the day away on the sea. Discover abundant wildlife and adventure off the coast of Mexico.

BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR MEXICO

POPULATION 741,000

LOCATION The southern tip of Mexico's northwestern peninsula

DID YOU KNOW? Stretching more than 2,000 kilometres, Baja California Sur's coastline is the longest of any Mexican state

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SWIM WITH playful sea lions in the Sea of Cortez

Baja California Sur continued

their home. Enormous bulls lounge on boulders and pelicans roost in the cliffs overhead while we snorkel and dive with frolicsome sea lion pups. One pup comes so close I can see the spiny arms of a starfish dangling from its mouth.

Over on Baja's Pacific coast, we take to the water again, this time to surf. *No problema*, I get up! Then it's off to Magdalena Bay where we weigh and measure green sea turtles before releasing them back into the ocean. We hike up sand dunes and kayak through mangrove channels.

Further north, the San Ignacio Lagoon is where once-feared gray whales come each winter to mate and give birth. No one knows why, but these whales like people. Often, mothers will push their babies right up beside whale-watching boats. "We watch them and they watch us," says our guide, Orloff Nagorski, laughing. We don't just watch; we pet and stroke them, totally smitten.

Driving inland, we see a different side of Baja California. Tucked into the cactus-studded mountainsides of the Sierra de San Francisco are rock paintings that bear witness to the indigenous people who lived here thousands of years ago. Vivid orange and black drawings cover the walls. Today it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the towns along our route—San Ignacio, Mulege, Loreto, La Paz—we stop to admire more recent history: the churches built by Jesuit missionaries who colonized Baja beginning in 1697. Each one is beautiful and unique, just like Baja itself. ■