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Swimming with sea lions in Mexico

Jocelyn Pride | Jun 21 2014 at 5:00 PM



The sea lions' curiosity is insatiable. Photo: Jocelyn Pride

ONE OF NATURE'S GREATEST JOURNEYS

Heron Island

As soon as the boat anchors, we are surrounded. The soft eyes of sea lion pups peer up, beckoning me to come and play. My inner child wants to jump straight in, but I fumble with my wetsuit and wonder how many floatation aids can fit on one body.

Jacques Cousteau called this water "the aquarium of the world".

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John Steinbeck described it as "ferocious with life" and UNESCO lists it as one of the most significant biospheres on the planet.

The Sea of Cortez in Mexico is all of the above. Separating the mainland from the Mexican state of Baja California Sur, the sea is dotted with islands and teems with wildlife.

Located a short boat ride from La Paz, the state capital of Baja California Sur, lies the tiny island of Los Islotes. It is a mecca for divers and snorkellers, but stringent regulations restrict the number of visitors.

On rocky outcrops jutting straight out of the aquamarine water, blue-footed boobies perform their complicated mating dance, brown pelicans fly low and dive bomb into the water and the slap of manta rays bounces across the stillness, but it's the large sea lion colony that's the main attraction.

They sound like a kennel full of basset hounds. The bull males hang out on the rocky ledges sun-baking. Every now and then there is a huge splash as push comes to shove to gain control of the best rock. The females relax and lie piled up together wriggling and flapping their flippers while keeping a watchful eye over their pups. Stars of the sea, the pups are as playful as kittens.

Twisting and turning, they glide effortlessly through water that is so clear it looks invisible. They are persistent. Circling the boat, they duck under, swim through the suspended ladder and make "please come and play" barks.

"These sea lions have no fear of humans," says dive master Chabelo Castillo, his perfect English matching his movie-star smile. "They have only ever known love." These words lure me, the world's most reluctant snorkeller, to take the plunge.

Plunge is an exaggeration. With mask, snorkel, flippers, water wings, two floatation noodles and Castillo holding a lifebuoy, it's more like a stage production. To the sea lions, I'm a novelty. Their curiosity is insatiable and, sensing my fear, they take me under their flippers. One tugs at the noodles and two more try to gently roll me over. They want me to swim. The insightfulness of these animals is hard to fathom.

My entourage guides me and I swim, really swim. I feel light and free as the sea lions pirouette beside me. I even dive under.

Beneath the water the reef teems with brightly coloured fish – iridescent blue, orange with white stripes, black with white stripes and orange tails.

As the world's youngest sea, it also has one of the highest concentrations of fish.

A few bulls start to slide into the water and Castillo indicates it's time to head back to the boat. I want to thank the pups but somehow they seem to know. Even as we move away, a couple of them follow the boat, dancing through the wake, slapping their tails.

Move over, Cousteau. Sea lions today – the whale sharks of La Paz tomorrow.

Fun Baja offers a range of excursions year round from La Paz in Baja California Sur, Mexico. See funbaja.com.

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