

The aquarium of the world

Jocelyn Pride FROLICS WITH SEA LIONS AND TICKLES GREY WHALES ON A CRUISE IN THE REMARKABLE (YET REMARKABLY UNTOUCHED) SEA OF CORTEZ.



“MY INVITATION TO YOU IS PUT AWAY YOUR human gaze and take out your wild eyes,” says naturalist Bethany Ryals, her theatrical voice sending shivers down my spine. Outside the picture windows of our boutique cruise ship five pelicans dive bomb a school of fish. Gobbling the catch quickly, they take off, wings skimming the turquoise water. It’s easy to see why Jacques Cousteau called the Sea of Cortez, Baja California Sur, Mexico the aquarium of the world.

Despite being listed by UNESCO as one of the most significant biospheres in the world, the Sea of Cortez is relatively

untouched by tourism. That suits the 62 of us guests plus 29 crew onboard the Safari Endeavour just fine. We are here to hike through towering, ancient cactus forests, snorkel amongst hundreds of species of marine life, paddleboard and kayak water so clear it looks invisible. We are here as travelers not tourists.

The Safari Endeavour is the latest addition to the fleet of a company that “un-cruises”. Aimed at guests who want to get their feet wet, the motto of Un-Cruise Adventures is simple – unrushed, uncrowded and unbelievable. Small is big in the world of cruising »





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PHOTOGRAPH BY JOCELYN PRIDE



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Above clockwise from top left: Sea lions nap on a rock; Guests explore on sea kayaks; A blue-footed booby performs for some pelicans; The crystal clear water is perfect for snorkelling. Opposite page: Grey whales come close to tour boats in Magdalena Bay.

THE CRUISE
Un-Cruise Adventures will run the seven-night Safari Endeavour Baja Bounty voyage from 16 November 2013 to 5 April 2014, departing La Paz. Prices range from US\$2,995-6,795 (about A\$2,901-6,582) per person including all meals and beverages, transfers from La Paz or Los Cabos International airport, baggage handling, entry to National Parks, off-boat activities and equipment, yoga classes and a complimentary massage. The peak time for grey whale viewing is late January through to mid March. un-cruise.com

GETTING THERE
Qantas has direct flights to Los Angeles from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Return economy fares start from A\$1,297 and business class fares from A\$8,392. Flight time is around 13 and a half hours. qantas.com.au
The main airport in Baja California Sur is Los Cabos International. Alaska Airlines flies direct from Los Angeles to Los Cabos twice a day. Return economy fares start from US\$270 (about A\$261) and first class fares from US\$1,200 (about A\$1,162). The journey takes just over two hours. alaskaair.com

and with vessels ranging from just 22 to 86 berth, this relatively new company is gathering quite a fan club. Nearly half the guests onboard have cruised with them before in Alaska or Hawaii.

With an itinerary guided by nature the element of surprise is half the fun. Each day Captain Jill Russell navigates our floating home into sheltered coves of craggy, volcanic, desert islas rising straight from the sea waiting for us to explore in and out of the water. The all inclusive rate for well appointed staterooms, gourmet meals, open bar, excursions, massage, guides, wildlife and cultural lectures also includes the adventure gear – kayaks, paddleboards, skiffs, snorkels, flippers, plus personal comfort items – wetsuits, hiking poles, dry-bags, sunscreen, water bottles, binoculars and even floatation aids.

Expedition leader Matt Szymanowicz, with a smile as wide as his name, coordinates daily activities to cater for diversity. The age range of our

group is extreme – 21 to 94 (that is not a typo). Sylvia (94) and Joyce (86) are inspirational. They do everything – well almost. When the extreme adventurers are swinging on the Tarzan rope off the side of the boat and diving into oblivion, I look over half expecting to see these elderly livewires standing in the queue. Good to see they draw the line somewhere.

Snorkelling is popular, especially at the famed Los Islotes. The large colony of resident sea lions gives us a royal welcome. They sound like a kennel full of basset hounds. The sea lion pups are as playful as kittens. One tugs at my wetsuit, another tries to roll me over and they all want to play hide and seek with my hands (ever so gently).

After hiking, kayaking and snorkelling, collapsing into one of the hot tubs is bliss. There's also a massage suite and daily yoga classes. And as Mother Nature sets the Baja sky on fire, we gather around for happy hour sipping bartender extraor-



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Above: The Safari Endeavour.

dinaire Jenn Meyers' cocktails. Streaking across the horizon, deep reds, oranges and vibrant purples melt into a kaleidoscope of colour. The sky eventually darkens transforming into a spectacular light show.

One day we leave the boat moored in the pretty harbour of Loreto and cross the magnificent Sierra de la Giganta mountain range to the Pacific Ocean side of the peninsula. The two-hour trip is worth it. The lagoon of Magdalena Bay is an oasis for the heart. Kilometres of soft sand dip into the cobalt, mangrove-lined water, massive flocks of birds look like waves in the sky and one of the greatest mysteries of nature migrates the longest distance of any mammal to give birth here.

Thought to be extinct twice in the last 60 years, grey whales teach us about forgiveness. Called devilfish by whalers of the early 20th century because they smashed boats to protect their young, they now welcome humans to their home. No one knows why the whales swim up to the local tour boats (called pangas) wanting to be scratched, tickled, stroked and petted. But they do. It's like being in a bathtub filled with whales. Looking into the eye of a mother while her calf frolics next to the pangas is humbling. Experiencing this moment of trust is one of the most incredible wildlife encounters on earth.

Un-cruising is for nature lovers. Feel the spray from a whale exhaling, laugh at the comical mating dance of blue-footed booby birds, hear the buzz of a hummingbird's wings beating.

Once opened, wild eyes never close.



Above: The MSC Preziosa, the newest addition to Italian cruise line MSC Cruises.



NEW ROUTES

Quick cruising

Silversea Cruises has announced eight new four- to seven-day voyages in Northern Europe and the Mediterranean for time poor travellers. Routes include Hamburg to Copenhagen, Barcelona to Rome and Southampton to Hamburg onboard the Silver Wind, Silver Cloud or Silver Spirit. Prices range from US\$1,360 to US\$2,810 (about A\$1,329 to A\$2,745) per person. silversea.com

NEW SHIP

MSC Preziosa

Italian cruise line MSC Cruises has launched its newest ship, the MSC Preziosa. The ship was christened in Genoa on March 23 after being built in the French shipyards at St Nazaire. MSC Preziosa will operate Mediterranean itineraries from March to October and visit South America from November to February. The ship has an infinity garden pool (similar to that onboard sister ship MSC Divina), a 1,700 square metre spa with Himalayan salt crystal bed and an exclusive adults-only area on the top decks. The Preziosa will be the line's 12th ship and the fourth ship for its luxury Fantasia class. msccruises.com

DOWNSIZING

Seabourn halves its fleet

Seabourn has sold three of its six ships (Pride, Legend and Spirit) to luxury cruise line Windstar. The delivery will take place over the next two years with Seabourn Pride the first ship to be handed over in April 2014. The ships will undergo a renovation to bring them into line with the Windstar brand and be given new names. The new ships will enable the line to begin sailing to new destinations in South America and Asia. The project doubles the size of Windstar's fleet, bringing it up to 1,230 berths. Seabourn will likely add a fourth ship to their remaining fleet and, according to president Richard Meadows, is already in talks with shipbuilders.