



## WildWings

### **Baja California and the Sea of Cortez**

The ultimate whale watching holiday!

Client quotes: “Thank you for one of the most memorable holidays we’ve ever had” G &R.S. April 2011  
“Thank you again for such a treat” R&C.C April 2011

This island-studded marine wilderness is often referred to as the ‘Mexican Galapagos’ and it boasts one of the greatest diversities of sea life anywhere on Earth. Baja California is one of the longest and wildest peninsulas in the world, stretching from the Californian border to the town of Cabo San Lucas, more than 800 miles to the south. It is flanked on one side by the cool waters of the North Pacific and on the other by the warm nutrient rich waters of the Sea of Cortez.

It is a truly outstanding area for whales and dolphins, quite simply one of the best in the world, and these waters provide rich feeding grounds for Blue, Fin, Humpback, Gray, Bryde’s, Minke, Sperm and Short-finned Pilot Whales. We also expect to see Pacific White-sided Dolphins, Bottlenose Dolphins (both inshore and offshore forms), and Short-beaked and Long-beaked Common Dolphins, and for the very keen, Dwarf Sperm Whale. In fact, we are frequently surrounded by herds of dolphins numbering well over a thousand individuals, bubbling out of the sea in every direction, with small groups frequently venturing in to bow ride with us. On previous trips we have been joined by pods of bow riding Orcas, lunge feeding Blue Whales and groups of up to 20 Sperm Whales. In addition to the female Gray Whales and their calves waiting for us even before we dropped anchor in their breeding lagoon, other memorable moments include male Humpbacks that repeatedly breach (one 60 times in succession) just a few metres from us, thirty tons of whale makes quite a noise and a splash when it hits the water! Our ever growing multi-year list also includes False Killer Whales, an hour long encounter with a Whale Shark and Spinner Dolphins, so surprises are more than possible too! A remarkable 13 species of cetacean were seen on one trip alone, including at least 300 whale sightings and well over 6000 dolphins. The endangered Guadalupe Fur Seal, endemic to this region, has also been seen well in the last few years. 2009 brought more breaching Humpbacks including a mother and calf in unison amongst the many sightings and amazing encounters. 2010 yielded all our favourites again, Grays, Blues (including a ‘fluker’), breaching Humpbacks, Sperm, Bryde’s and Pilot Whales plus lots of dolphins. 2011 mega-highlights included a group of over 20 Fin Whales together, our highest numbers of Gray Whales in the lagoon, lunge-feeding Blue Whales next to the vessel and for the birders, a Townsend’s Shearwater.

During this fabulous holiday we travel the length of Baja California and explore the Sea of Cortez. We cruise south from San Diego along the Pacific coast of the peninsula, stopping at remote offshore islands for nature walks, bird watching, visits to Guadalupe Fur and Northern Elephant Seal rookeries and exploring tide pools. We will also be looking for migrating whales, dolphins, as well as other marine

mammals and seabirds along the way. This is an excellent area for Blue Whales and we are likely to encounter several mother and calf pairs.

Every autumn, thousands of Gray Whales migrate from their summer feeding grounds in the Bering and Chukchi Seas, to the protected lagoons off the west coast of Baja California, where they mate and calve. We spend two whole days in San Ignacio Lagoon, one of their major calving lagoons, which attracts literally hundreds of whales. Our small Mexican boats, or 'pangas', allow us to approach the animals unobtrusively. Photographic opportunities are excellent, as here the 'friendly' Gray Whales are famous for approaching the pangas at arm's length. They often nudge the side of the boat and frequently lie alongside it waiting to be rubbed by your hands; their mouths open displaying huge fringed curtains of creamy white baleen plates. Eye to eye contact with these amazing animals is something you will never forget, we guarantee it! The lagoon is also a wintering ground for migrating birds and while exploring the mangrove channels, we will look out for Mangrove Warbler, White Ibis, Royal Terns, Reddish Egrets, Brown Pelicans and numerous waders.

Rounding the tip of the peninsula, we then enter the Sea of Cortez, the youngest and perhaps the richest sea in the world. Nutrients from deep submarine canyons feed abundant fish and plankton near the surface. We spend the remainder of the expedition cruising its tropical waters looking for cetaceans and other wildlife and exploring its fascinating islands. In this area we often encounter numerous Humpbacks feeding, and courting. We will usually spend time watching incredible displays of breaching, flipper slapping and lobtailing. There are also over 600 species of fish here, including huge Manta Rays, mobulas and several species of shark. We have had great views of Blue and Hammerhead Sharks, and we usually see turtles, Sailfish and huge Sunfish too. At night we may marvel at bioluminescent seas and watch seahorses, sea snakes and flying fish as they are drawn to the ship's lights and if you are really lucky, bioluminescent dolphins! The bird life is spectacular, the islands support a large number of tropical birds including Blue-footed Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Red-billed Tropicbirds and a variety of hummingbirds including the endemic Xantu's. On some islands, giant cacti such as the Cardon reach a height of over 65 feet (20 metres) and tower over a host of curiously shaped succulents. This is the territory of some intriguing bird species such as Cactus Wren, Grey Thrasher and Gila Woodpecker, as well as many other specialised desert inhabitants including various lizards and the endemic Rattlesnake (which are harmless).

Our transition from temperate to tropical waters makes this an extraordinarily rich and varied expedition. These are days packed with more superb whale and dolphin watching, shore walks to investigate spectacular forests of cacti, tide pools and mangroves, some excellent bird watching, and snorkelling with colourful fish and inquisitive California Sea Lions.

Mike and Brian, the skippers, the vessel and its crew combine with our leaders to make this, for many people, one of the best natural history trips. "Mind blowing", "Brilliant", "Fantastic", "Best wildlife encounters I have ever had anywhere in the world" are just a few examples of the post-trip comments we have received from previous clients. Our leaders have travelled on this amazing journey many times, Scot "Sharkman" Anderson and David Wimpfheimer are both superb all round naturalists with David having a special leaning towards birds. We pioneered this incredible voyage on this amazing vessel back in 1998 and have run it every year since. Baja is truly a life experience you cannot afford to miss.

## Itinerary

Day 1: Fly from London Heathrow to San Diego via Houston, transfer to hotel, overnight.

Day 2: Optional birding excursion by bus (6 am- 4 pm) or day at leisure, city sightseeing, shopping etc.  
Early evening board the *Spirit of Adventure* and sail

Day 3: Isla Todos Santos for nesting seabirds and Harbour Seals

Day 4: Isla San Benitos to view a Northern Elephant Seal rookery, California Sea Lions, Ospreys and desert plants and to seek the very rare and endemic Guadalupe Fur Seal.

Days 5-6: San Ignacio Lagoon for close encounters with 'friendly' Gray Whales

Day 7: Magdalena Bay area for more Gray Whales, as well as feeding Blue and Humpback Whales further offshore and around Cabo San Lucas.

Days 8-12: Whale watching, bird watching, snorkelling and other activities in the Sea of Cortez

Day 13: Expedition concludes at Cabo San Lucas, transfer to airport and depart for home via Houston.

Day 14: Arrive London Heathrow.

Sea itinerary subject to weather and local conditions.

## Holiday Information

Dates: 25th March – 7th April 2012

Naturalists/guides: Scot Anderson and David Wimpfheimer

Cost: £3775

Max no of participants: 26

Deposit: £500 per person

2013: 25th March – 7th April, you may advance register now for just £50 per person.

Price includes: Economy class flights including pre-paid taxes. Overnight hotel accommodation in San Diego in rooms with private facilities, on a room only basis. Travel and accommodation aboard the *Spirit of Adventure*, an 88-foot long, U.S registered boat, air-conditioned with mostly twin (two triple) cabins. Cabins are small (for sleeping and changing), with limited storage space only. There is a spacious salon for relaxing, socialising and eating. Four toilets and three hot freshwater showers. Three sturdy long Mexican pangas operated by local fishermen are used for close encounters with Gray Whales in San Ignacio Lagoon (the *Spirit of Adventure's* skiffs are used at all other times). All meals aboard the *Spirit of Adventure*, all transfers, services of leaders, shore excursions as described, lagoon permits, Mexican visas, WildOceans pre-trip information pack plus cetacean and bird checklist for use on tour.

Price excludes: Meals in San Diego, drinks, crew gratuities aboard vessel (we suggest \$15-25 per person per day), panga boatman tips (\$15-20 per person) and other items of a personal nature and travel insurance.

Single room supplement in San Diego £59. Optional birding excursion in San Diego £80.

WildOceans Baja California: selected previous trip sightings:

Gray Whale  
Minke Whale  
Sei Whale  
Bryde's Whale  
Blue Whale  
Fin Whale  
Humpback Whale  
Sperm Whale  
Dwarf Sperm Whale  
Pilot Whales  
Orca  
Long-beaked Common Dolphin  
Bottlenose Dolphin  
Pacific White-sided Dolphin  
Harbour Seal  
California Sea Lion  
Northern Elephant Seal  
Guadalupe Fur Seal  
Pacific Green Turtle  
Loggerhead Turtle  
California Flying Fish  
Humboldt Squid  
Rays (Mobula)  
Various sharks

Selected seabirds: Laysan Albatross and Black-footed Albatrosses, Pinked-footed and Black-vented Shearwaters, Black and Least Storm Petrels, Red-billed Tropicbird, Blue Footed and Brown Boobies, Brown Pelican, Brandt's Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants, Magnificent Frigatebird, Pomarine Skua, Heermann's, California, Yellow-footed, Western and Sabine's Gulls, Caspian and Royal Terns, Xantus' and Craveri's Murrelets, Cassin's Auklet plus shorebirds such as Surfbird, Wandering Tattler, Black Turnstone and Willet, land bird endemics such as Xantus' Hummingbird and Grey Thrasher. Landing on various desert islands, we also expect Gila Woodpeckers, Cactus Wrens and Phainopepla and many more species ashore.

Previous trip reports are available on our website or from us.

[www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)