The whale and the albatross created a very special end to a fabulous day. To make it even more special, some of us saw the “green flash” as the sun set into the sea......
Day 1: Monday 26th March
San Diego - Pacific Coast

San Diego lays claim to America’s “birdiest” city. The small group that joined David for an expedition in varied habitats had ample proof of that. Allen’s Hummingbird, Townsend’s Warbler and Western Bluebird were colorful gems at our first stop.

Mission Trails Park with chaparral and riparian habitats gave us another group of birds including wonderful views of the near endemic California Thrasher and Warrent as well as Nuttall’s Woodpecker. Santee Lakes provided close views of Great-tailed Grackle, Wood and Ring-necked Ducks. Two tidal areas were feeding areas for Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Little Blue Heron, Western Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher and other waders. In a brushy area, just north of the Mexican border, David hoped to find a Roadrunner for the group. Great luck was with us and one ran out on the dirt track several times for us. In total, we found 98 species.

Our excitement mounted as we boarded the Spirit of Adventure in the evening. After unpacking our gear, we enjoyed the dinner buffet and met fellow travelers. Scot Anderson and David gave us an orientation and outlined aspects of the journey. Later Captain Brian Evans explained the safety features of the boat and gave us a briefing. Shortly after leaving the dock we motored by the bait tanks where many California Sea Lions were barking at each other. Great Blue and Black-crowned Night Herons intently hunted from the tanks. The lights of Tijuana twinkled in the distance as the boat picked up speed and ventured into the ocean. We went to sleep full of anticipation for the forthcoming adventure.

Day 2: Tuesday 27th March
Todós Santos Island - Pacific Coast

Most everyone was still in bed as we cleared customs, left Ensenada harbor and headed towards Todós Santos Island. We had just enjoyed our first breakfast on the Spirit when the first announcement of “Dolphin” was heard over the PA. Possibly everyone on the ship had seen these small expressive cetaceans before, but we never tire of seeing these animals, looking down into their eyes as they ride the bow wave just feet below us and marveling at how they jump above the waves.

Our boat was not able to get as close to Todós Santos as we have in the past since there are now many fish pens made of netting that keep us further offshore. The local fishermen are raising Yellowtail, a type of jack, here. Many pelicans were perched on the rocks at the south end of the island. A small common tern flew by us, a Hegodic, whose breeding range does not extend any further south.

Soon we were headed to a large group of feeding birds to the south. As we approached we could see that there were many, hundreds, of Long-beaked Common Dolphins. Clearly, they were driving fish towards the surface as many Black-vented Shearwaters flew about and sat on the water near the boat. We were thrilled with all this activity and then someone yelled out, “It’s not even eight o’clock yet!” Indeed, this was a great way to start the day.

After only a short rest we were happy to see a large black seabird sailing by the boat, it was a Black-footed Albatross. These dramatic birds spend the first six years of their life along the eastern Pacific, before returning to breeding grounds on the Midway and Laysan islands, many hundreds of miles west of the main part of the Hawaiian archipelago.

In the afternoon we were alerted to the blow of a whale. It belonged to a Gray Whale. Soon we were following three Gray Whales headed north into the swell. One was quite a bit smaller making some of us feel that it was a calf, but we then realized that it was just juvenile. The group was thrilled with views of these unique whales through blue, clear water, but they were traveling the wrong direction for us so we left them to continue south.

Some of our keen observers next picked out a “white” albatross. Most of us ran to the stern and were soon treated to a view of a Laysan Albatross. This species also breeds in the Hawaiian islands, but recently has started to nest on islands south of Baja and are becoming more common here. Their massive pink bill and darkly smudged eyes give them an almost theatrical look. Although we were quite happy to see one albatross we soon realized that there were two following the boat.

While we were getting our sea legs and becoming used to the rhythms of the boat, some of the crew were perched high above in the crow’s nest looking for spouts. In the mid-afternoon, despite choppy seas, they found one. Once we got our bearing we could see the gray color of this large whale and its small dorsal fin helping to identify it as a Blue Whale. While we held on, Captain Brian drove carefully up swell following the whale on our sonar. We were thrilled to have views of the world’s largest animal. However, the wind was now blowing 15 to 20 knots creating difficult conditions. We continued south toward our destination for tomorrow knowing that our first day was an extremely good one indeed.
Day 3: Wednesday 28th March
San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast

After a good night's sleep with the ocean swells pushing us on, we awoke to a clear sky. The sun rose as a large orange ball over the calm sea. Soon the Spirit anchored in the lee of the wind on the south side of West San Benitos Island. Our crew did a great job of landing us safely on the rocky beach near the small fishing community. Fisherman visit the island for a few weeks at a time to harvest abalone and lobster.

On our ashore, David gave us an orientation to the geology of the Baja peninsula and the San Benitos islands in particular. These small jagged landforms have been isolated from the peninsula for tens of thousands of years, long enough for several endemic species to evolve. There are five endemic plants that are found only on this island and we saw most of them including the San Benitos Mallow, Tarweed and a small Primrose (Manzanita) cactus. Numerous large Agave dominated the landscape and we were just starting to grow new shoots. San Benitos receives only four inches of rain a year. Located near the middle of the Baja peninsula, it is far from the winter storms that bring rain to the northern areas and not close to the southern at Cape region that can receive a year's worth of moisture in one hurricane.

After walking to the south side of the island we were thrilled to see a group of Northern Elephant Seals. Although the winter breeding season was over, we saw many “weaners.” These small, cute pups were recently weaned from their mothers. Most of the other, sub adult seals were there to molt skin and fur which was peeling off in big pieces in what is known as a “catastrophic molt.” The seals must do this on land so they don’t lose body heat.

The island is riddled with seabird burrows. Cascarii Auklet and Screechi’s Murrelet are the main occupants. The primary reasons these nesting seabirds are nocturnal is to avoid predation by large and aggressive Western Gulls and Peregrine Falcons.

The sun and warming air brought out many of the endemic San Benito Side-blotched Lizards and we were able to get very good photographs of them. We headed back through the small town to the north end of the island. As soon as we get close to the shore we could see lots of weaners. Most of the group enjoyed simply sitting quietly only a few feet from these seals and experiencing their different behaviors, freezing, cranking, scratching and peering back at us with large, expressive black eyes.

Some of our group headed to the lighthouse while the rest stayed close to the shore. We looked for the Guadalupe Fur Seal, but they were not in the area we saw them in previous years. Later, we did manage to find one in a cove on the eastern side of the island. The lighthouse keepers luckily found one as well. These endangered pinnipeds, which had been hunted for their extremely fine fur, have only been seen at these islands in the last ten years.

The group was also happy to find Black and American Oystercatcher, Brant, and a couple of Black Turnstones feeding along the beach. Osprey were calling and flying overhead, while many endemic San Benitos Sparrows hopped about and flew among the small bushes. Double-crested Cormorant, Rock Wren, Common Raven and a Mockingbird were also seen.

At 11:30 the crew raised the anchor and the boat headed south. The wind had died down considerably and we all enjoyed a smooth ride. We had not gone far before a small group of Pinnipeds White-sided Dolphins were seen. These beautiful dolphins have large pectoral, dorsal fins and white bright whites which are boldly visible through the water. The species is mostly found in cold waters north to Alaska so the group was quite fortunate to see them this far south.

It had warmed enough that many of us were wearing shorts and all of us now were enjoying that smooth ride as we continued south passing Cedros and Natividad Islands. The former is an important breeding site for Black-vented Shearwater and many were streaming by us, arcing over the waves. Scot and David were wondering why we weren’t seeing more dolphins and whales just as the crew spotted a tall blow.

The blow had come from a long-winded whale diving deep or in this case feeding on krill a hundred feet below the surface. After twelve minutes the huge whale surfaced a large Blue Whale. It surfaced several times, exhaling a tall, robust column of vapor. After the last surfacing it raised its mammoth, twenty-foot-wide flukes clear of the sea. Gallons of water cascaded off its fluke in what has been called the “waterfall effect.” We were ecstatic to see the whales surface several more times and show its fluke again.

As we watched the whale some of us noticed a couple of Black-footed Albatross off in the distance. Then we saw a Layson Albatross. Even more exciting, this ocean wanderer flew directly at our boat and then wheeled around and arced over and around us flying loops around the Spirit. It was a treat to stand on the deck and watch whales spouting and occasionally spitting. Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans dove into the water not far from the boat. As the sun set we enjoyed another of Doris great diners. Afterwards, we went outside, enjoyed the near full moon and brilliant stars while listening to whales blowing all around us.

We were ecstatic to see the whales surface several more times and show their flukes. It is impossible to know what these whales were thinking or feeling, but we all wondered if they were enjoying us, as much as the other way around.

We enjoyed several more rides before lunch and in the afternoon. It’s hard to think of another example of a wild animal seeking the touch and connection of human beings. This lagoon, has been declared an International Biosphere Reserve, understandably so. Gray Whales were fortunate to see them this far south.

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On our way back we saw two to three-month-old calves. We were thrilled to see dozens of scoters, terns, cormorants and pelicans all flying by this iconic estuary.

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Back on the boat we enjoyed a fabulous lunch before going out again at 13:30. Most of the group enjoyed more playful whales from the panga. Quite a few Bottlenose Dolphins were seen chasing Smett the surface, while Royal Terns, California Gulls and Brown Pelicans dove from above. A few sea turtles were seen briefly at the surface but too quick to get an identification. One California Sea Lion was seen as well.

At 16:30 we took all three boats to the beach for a little beach combing and binding on the sand flats at low tide. The fine sand felt good on the feet as we walked towards some feeding Sandpipers and Western Sandpipers. Million of shells littered the shore and we found a sea turtle shell, whale bones, and a dolphin skeleton.

At 17:00 we said goodbye to our skiff drivers, thanking them for their expertise and care in sharing this incredibly unique place. Most of us watched excitedly as the Spirit traveled through the shallow channel and our route back to the ocean. Once we safely passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean waters the boat turned to the south and new adventures.

Day 4: Thursday 29th March
San Ignacio Lagoon - Pacific Ocean

Just before dawn we were cruising southward past Punta Arejco towards the entrance to San Ignacio lagoon. Soon Captain Brian expertly guided the Spirit through the narrow passageway over the shallow bar. Many Gray Whales surfacing all around us in the shallow water, even in the surf. They were all mothers with their two to three-month-old calves. We were thrilled to see dozens of scoters, terns, cormorants and pelicans all flying by this iconic spot.

Once inside the lagoon, we made our way up to Rocky Point where we dropped anchor and waited for our pangal skiff drivers. It wasn’t long before Romero, Jonas and Federico arrived. We dressed in rain pants and jackets as the wind had created sizable waves that we would soon be riding through.

In only a few minutes our drivers expertly drove us close enough to the whales that we enjoyed fantastic views, but very carefully so that they didn’t feel threatened. We were all thrilled to have curious and friendly mothers and calves swim close enough that many of us could touch the whales. It is impossible to know what these whales were thinking or feeling, but we all wondered if they were enjoying us, as much as the other way around.

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Day 6: Saturday 3rd March
Pacific Coast – offshore Magdalena Bay

At daybreak the Spirit was cruising in calm seas off Cabo San Lucas. That’s what we were told as a high fog prevented us from seeing much of the headlands. The rising sun peeked through an opening in the clouds as we finished breakfast. The first excitement of the day, at least for the birders, was several Block Storm Petrels. Although this small seabird breeds on many islands along our route typically we don’t see many until we enter the Sea of Cortez.

We had to cope with the fog and very limited visibility for most of the morning. However, our crew found several small groups of Long-beaked Common Dolphins for us to enjoy. A few of them jumped clear of the water and many photos were taken.

There were scattered groups of birds including Red-necked Phalaropes that breed far to the north and Pink-footed Shearwaters that breed off the coast of Chile. Most distinctive was a flock of about twenty Sabine’s Gulls.

A highlight of the morning was finding a sea turtle. The Captian turned the boat around and we were all able to see it well. It swam off and its gray color helped to identify it as a Green Sea Turtle.

After lunch our visibility increased quite a bit as a brisk wind picked up. Almost as if on cue, the boat turned ninety degrees, an indication that a whale had been spotted. We slowed down and could see a whole jumping out of the water and splapping its tail down, a sure sign of a Humpback. By the time most of us got to the bow the whale had sounded. We all excitedly waited. Manatees and other marine mammals are found in all the oceans around the world, but they are a species we never tire of seeing as they display so many unique behaviors.

When we did see the whale most of us remarked on how small it was and then we saw a tiny whale. It was a young Humpback, perhaps only four months old. The way it larched up the surface and frolicked made some of us feel that it was not totally healthy. In a few minutes its mother surfaced, quite large compared to its calf. We watched the pair for about twenty minutes. It was great to see almost the whole length of the calf through the water with its white bright pectoral flippers.

At 15:00, the crew spotted a fluking Blue Whale, which was great because only a small number of them raise their flukes out of the water when diving. We were all ecstatic to see the whale surface several times, arch its back and raise its massive fluke out of the water. Fortunately, the sea conditions were calmer than when we saw the previous Blue a few days ago. For the next hour and a half, we stayed with the whale, watching it come to the surface many times, arching its back, but not quite raising its fluke clear of the water. Obviously, we were disappointed, but then we realized that we were still getting spectacular views of the largest animal on the planet.

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just when we thought it was time to relax, we came across two more Humpback Whales. In contrast to the Blue Whale, humpbacks are much darker. While not as long they are robust and show their flukes repeatedly. We stayed with them for a while before we had to continue south.

Before sunset we found another Blue Whale. The group enjoyed great views of this whale, which was far larger than any we had seen earlier. We were disappointed that it didn’t fluke. However, the way it spouted in front of the setting sun was dramatic enough and a fitting end to the first half of our voyage.

Day 7: Sunday 1st April
Sea of Cortez – Los Frailes

This morning lots of folks got us up an hour early. Probably not to celebrate Easter or even April Fool’s day. Our cell phone alarms were fooled by the local time zone and most of us were too tired to know the difference. However, the ocean was beautiful and calm, the air warm from desert breezes. At day break we could see that we had already passed Cabo San Lucas and were almost to the Gorda Bank, often a reliable feeding area for Humpbacks. Instead we had to settle for a Blue Whale in the distance. Once we got close it turned out there were two! One was pale, larger and had a more erect dorsal fin. The other was smaller, darker, had a rounded fin. The pale one fluked several times and the smaller one would come right under the starboard bow and follow along with us. The radar saw several “Rain-blows” in the bright morning light. For over an hour we had amazing views of these cetaceans, especially as the darker one swam just along and behind the Spirit. However, the whales were headed west, perhaps traveling to the rich, upwelling zone off Central California, leading us away from the Gorda Bank. At 9:30 Brian turned the boat east and we continued searching for other wildlife.

The bright, early light illuminated the eastern side of the island dramatically. Every peak, turret, cliff and island stood out in the sharp light. The boat anchored at Punta Colorada at 7:00 am. This is one of the more magical sites we visit in the Sea of Cortez. Orange-pink cliffs of sedimentary rock rose above a sandy wash that was out our morning destination. After the crew launched the skiffs we climbed ashore on a rocky ledge scattered with fossilized scallop shells.

The group enjoyed a walk up the narrow, twisting arroyo. Palo Blanco, Palo Adon and Jojobo were some of the typical Baja plants that we walked by. The hard core birders were ahead of the main group and excitedly reported that they had seen a Grey Vireo, a bird seldom seen on our trips. Most of us had good views of Black-throated Sparrow, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Vermilion. The latter was feeding young in a balsam shaped nest in a mesquite tree. Even though it was barely after 8:00 am, it was already quite warm, a reminder of the reason we do our walks early in the day or later in the afternoon. Some lizards started moving about, they were the side-blotched. As we walked back down the canyon, it was warmer and several fast whipslans ran ahead.

After a short break onboard, most of us enjoyed skillful rides along the highly eroded coastal cliffs, alcoves and caves. We had all at first views of Yellow-billed Gulls, a local endemic to the Gulf of California. There were pelicans and frigatebirds flying overhead and several Eared/Black-necked Grebes diving near us as we drove along the cliffs.

The snorkelers in the group enjoyed many reef fish in the clear 72 degrees water including King Angelfish, Rainbow Wrasse, Mexican Goafish, Bandedelf, Giant Damselfish, Blue, Gold and Yellow Snappers. Blue Gorgonians festered the rock walls with lots of colorful marine algae. As usual, we had the place all to ourselves, and it felt great to cool off in the sea. From the Spirit we could see a large school of sandies that had colored the water dark, several pelicans dove into the mass of bait fish, usually returning to the surface with a full pouch.

All the activity gave us a good appetite and we enjoyed lunch as we drove away from the island. Just as we cleared our plates the crew spotted a group of大约二十斤的海龟 on the surface. Brian made the best possible for all speeds, which caused the dolphins to leap in the wake. Some did more than just jump, they did back flips and other spectacular leaps. On both sides of the boat they were coming out three or four at a time, high enough to break the horizon!
When we arrived, the water was being frothed by the motions of hundreds of Long-beaked Common Dolphins. We estimated there were about eight hundred, pocketed together in a tight group. There were lots of small hawks swimming with their mothers, keeping up with the fast moving herd. They were all around the boat leaping and chasing each other. At times one could see a few of them airborne leaping, doing dolphin style. Dolphins feed mostly at night and spread out in small groups. They come back together during the day in these large social groups. As we approached a large island, Carmen, some of us noticed large splashes in the distance. We knew they were whale blows and soon spotted the humpback whale! This view and concentration here was even more amazing as some of the crew and naturalists were concerned that the species might be hard to find this year.

Certainly, the keen-eyed crew were responsible for our next sighting. Beaked whales as a group are very difficult to find and see all over the world. Most of what is known about these mysterious small toothed whales comes from decades, stranded individuals. So, when the crew spotted a few of them on the surface at dawn they excitedly waited. After a long wait in the hot sun the animal was seen and we were able to see the diagnostic triangular fin and large presence of an animal that did not appear much larger than a dolphin, but it was still some distance away. We were some of the few people on the planet to see a Pygmy or Peruvian Beaked Whale (Mesoplodon peruvianus). Many of the recent sightings have come from Baja and the wonderful calm conditions today helped us see this rare cetacean quite well.

As we waited to get another view of the beaked whale we spotted a new cetacean species, the Dwarf Sperm Whale. These little-known whales, in the genus Kogia, are hard to spot unless the surface is glassy calm. Even in the best of circumstances, they are still hard to see. They look like an upside-down surfboard laying on the surface with the large dorsal fin showing above. Two of these mysterious animals gave us reasonably good views.

We continued towards the northern end of Espiritu Santo Island. Isolates, dramatic, volcanic spires here are certainly one of the most popular sites that we visit in the Sea of Cortez. The entire group enjoyed skiff rides around these picturesque rocks and took many photographs of frigatebirds, boobies and other birds, including an unusual wader, the Wandering Tattler, but the wonderful deep sea lobsters were clearly the main attraction.

The snorkelers had exceptionally close views of these playful pinnipeds, although some got an even closer view than they had dreamed of. After we entered the crystal clear water, some of these animals enjoyed swimming up to us, blowing bubbles and acting as excited to see us as the other way around. To see them coming zooming by with a few flipper stokes gave us a new appreciation for their hydrodynamic shape and muscular power.

Although the sea lions drew most of the snorkelers’ attention, the collection of fish was wonderfully impressive as well. Thousands of deserted dolphins were seen a few miles away. The sea lions do not eat. Instead they feed on schools of fish off shore, such as sardines or mackerel. The reason the fish are so abundant here is because of the high nutrient load that comes from the sea lions and seaward droppings on the rocks and water.

By late afternoon we headed south along the western shore of Espiritu Santo. The banded layers of volcanic rock were stunning as the sun started getting low. JP surprised us with servings of fresh cilantro margaritas that he had just made. Although we didn’t need the drinks to enhance our celebration of this wondrous place, everyone enjoyed this cold Mexican treat and toasted to our remarkable experience.

The crew dropped the anchor in a new place for a Wild Wings group. We split the group in two, those who were intrepid enough to climb down into the water and swim with the sharks and those who were satisfied just to see them from the panga. We headed into the brisk wind. We were taking spray in the chop, it was cold and we all were wondering what we got ourselves into?

As the sun started getting low for dinner Scott and David summarized our upcoming departure from the Sea of Cortez. The whole crew took incredible care of us and it was a challenge to keep up with the sharks, but it was incredible to see underwater as it swam gracefully at the surface. The second boat, with topside viewing were lucky to see five sharks! They were feeding, swimming at the surface for plankton, mainly copepods, which concentrates in the bay due to the prevailing winter north winds. The Whole Shark is in its own family, it is the largest fish and is protected in this area.

We thanked our guides, headed out of the bay, looking for more ocean life. Just after lunch the crew found us a group of Short-tailed Pilot Whales in the glassy sea. These squid feeders are actually a type of dolphin even though they have a blunt forehead. Our group counted twenty-two in what is known as a “crib” in which they live. These groups are led by the dominant female in a matrilineal society. We could see every detail through the clear calm water as they swam together. Hearing their blow as they all came up together was relaxing as well as beautiful.

At 15:00 there was a sighting of a humpback whale. We followed it for a while as it swam, furrowing several times. The underside of its flukes were distinctive bluish black and white, and what looked like Orcas tooth marks on the trailing edge. We continued cruising west of Cerrato island searching for more marine creatures. Three Laughing Gulls sitting on the water were a new and unexpected one for the list.

Brian found some groups of Smooth Tailed Mobula at 18:00 just before sunset. Once we got closer we were amazed to see these small rays leap as if they were trying to fly. Some of us could not help but laugh as they fell back into the water with a loud splash. Trying to photograph them was challenging, but with a little luck we all had some success. Clearly this is some kind of social behavior, perhaps related to mating.

As we cruised south to our final destination we enjoyed the last of Dan’s wonderful meals. The whole crew took incredible care of us and it was hard not to feel a bit upset that our fantastic trip would soon be over. After dinner Scot and David summarized our upcoming departure from the Spirit and important information for travel to the airport.
Day 12: Friday 6th April
Cabo San Lucas

At sunrise we slowly cruised just east of the dramatic granitic spires that mark the tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. One couldn't but notice several new hotels being built along the road to the airport. A small group detoured to the freshwater marsh in San Jose del Cabo where they saw several birds including the endemic Belding's Yellowthroat.

These buildings, the busy highway and many tourists here were a reminder that we were privileged to see a special Baja that the average visitor doesn’t. The abundance of marine mammals, birds and other creatures we had seen were so rich that few places rival it around the planet. We knew that soon we would be on flights home, however the memories of so many special experiences will linger on for a long, long time.

CLIENT QUOTES

“Some thank yous are in order. To Wendy and WildWings, thanks for getting us on this trip at the last minute, it was a blast. To the crew of the Spirit of Adventure: Captain Brian, Ann-Marie, Dan, Dean, JP, Evan, Scott, and Jethro - you guys are amazing. The spotless ship, fantastic meals, constant activities from sunup to sundown, and amazing wildlife spotting in a really big ocean - thank you so much for the trip.”... Bob Steele

“Thanks to all the crew... we had THE most fantastic experience...best ever x” Sylvia Hickling

“Mahoosive thanks to the Captain Brian, the crew and our naturalists who work tirelessly to find the cetaceans while keeping us safe and exceptionally well fed. The Spirit of Adventure will be forever in my heart (trying not to cry here!)” Jan Jordan

“This was a truly inspirational journey and wonderful to be on a boat with such lovely people and such a dedicated and clever crew. Treasured memories. I attach a couple of shots - when I look at the pics and films I almost cannot believe that we were there... Thank you all so much...” Linda Partridge

I would like to add my thanks to everyone for an amazing trip and a birthday like no other. Who else can claim to have had a birthday cake like mine? Thank you, Dean. You are brilliant. I will attempt to book my 80th on Spirit. Great memories...” Jill McGregor

“Thanks to all on board who made this a fantastic trip - Spirit just keeps on getting better. We thought our “5th and final” trip could not match some of our previous ones, wow were we wrong. The calm seas, the clear water and the variety of different encounters right beside the boat was I believe our best. Even the thought of all the albatross brings tears to my eyes, he was just so cool! Thanks again to all the crew who we know make this trip the best there is. The constant searching for something better is relentless and results in the great memories...” Julie Myatt

“Thanks to the crew and all the guests for making it a truly unforgettable experience. Good luck to all and we hope that our paths will cross again one day...” Ian Trippier