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Did you know?

Sea lions are polygynous, meaning that one male mates with several females in the territory that he defends on land and sea. It takes an enormous amount of energy to defend this territory, and in the breeding season a territorial male, who is so focused on his job that he barely eats or sleeps, can lose up to 30% of his impressive body weight.

Diving Baja **CALIFOR**

Despite its arid climate, Baja California boasts some wonderfully rich biodiversity, with an eclectic mix of unique plant and animal species that have adapted to its desert and coastal environments. Those natural wonders are complemented beautifully by extensive desert and mountain landscapes, rugged coastal cliffs, and pristine beaches, combined with a rich cultural heritage steeped in indigenous history and Spanish colonial influences.

It truly is a special place, and you could easily spend three to four weeks exploring the many aspects of Baja California and still only scratch the surface. But there are some equally stunning experiences to be had underwater and those were what I was determined to explore as I planned my trip.

It started with Arturo...

Mexico is a large and interesting country with, it must be said, more than its fair share of problems... I have been fortunate to have been there several times now - and the more I do that, the more I like the place.

My very first trip was to dive the fabulous Revillagigedo Islands, aka Socorro. It was such a long journey to get there that I did two back-to-back trips and on both of those, the chief

Bounded to the north by the US state of California, to the west by the Pacific Ocean and to the east by the Sea of Cortez, the long and narrow Baja California peninsula is one of Mexico's most-visually spectacular and intriguing locations, as Don Silcock found out

Photographs by Don Silcock

dive guide was Arturo Bocos - whose day job is a marine biologist at the University of La Paz. Arturo is both very knowledgeable about the marine life of Baja California and a very experienced diver having spent considerable time at all the key locations. We spent many hours chatting as I developed my personal Mexican bucket list.

Subsequent trips to Mexico allowed me to work through that list as I ticked the box for American crocodiles in Chinchorro, whale sharks at Isla Mujeres and the cenotes in the Yucatan. But Baja remained somewhat of an enigma as the logistics of getting to the best spots at the right times can be quite challenging.

Road trip!

My Italian dive buddy Filippo Borghi and I had discussed a trip to Baja many times, ultimately deciding on a three-week road trip in December, starting with La Paz on the eastern side of Baja overlooking the Sea of Cortez.

Having a car allowed us to deal with most of the weather challenges that can happen in Baja which all hinge on the wind, with strong winds from the east ruling out any diving in the Sea of Cortez but producing wonderfully calm in-shore conditions on the Pacific coast.

Filippo has excellent connections with several Italians based in Baja so we could get great updates and change our plans at the last minute in true Italian style... ▶

NIA



Diving La Paz

La Paz is the somewhat laid-back capital city of Baja California Sur, the southern half of the Baja. It is located at the southern end of Bahía de La Paz, the large, sheltered bay on the east coast of the peninsula. Pleasant as La Paz is, the main reasons to go there are two large, but significantly different species – whale sharks *Rhincodon typus* and *Zalophus californianus*, California sea lions.

Whale sharks are regular visitors to the Sea of Cortez in the northern winter and the nutrient-rich waters of Bahía de La Paz are an important feeding ground for them. In-water encounters are allowed, but are limited to specific areas, and everything is tightly regulated by CONAMP (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas).

CONAMP is the Mexican government agency responsible for the management of Mexico's protected areas and they are very serious about what they do. So much so that La Paz is generally considered the best regulated place in the world to swim with whale sharks.

Strict rules apply to all aspects of the in-water encounters, which are monitored from shore by CONAMP through powerful binoculars. What that all means is that it can be quite difficult to get a guaranteed three-hour time slot and we only managed it once...

But the whale sharks were there, and we had good encounters despite the limited visibility. The California sea lion encounters were almost the complete opposite and although CONAMP were present, it appeared they had reached the conclusion that these wonderful creatures were quite capable of looking after themselves!

The main sea lion colony is at Los Islotes (The Islets) on the northern tip of Isla Partida, which together with the much-larger Isla Espíritu Santo Island provides the main shelter for Bahía de La Paz.

Said to number over 600 individuals, the colony is organized around 20 territories, ruled over by large bull males who patrol constantly, ensuring the females and their pups are safe and other males are kept out.

Sea lions are polygynous, where the bull male mates with several of the females in the territory - but not all of them to avoid in-breeding. Some females get pregnant through random encounters with other males, but the bull males still protect them and their pups.



Business end of a whaleshark



Sea lion making a fly past



Diver photographing schooling jacks

A huge rock formation with a swim through!



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Up close and personal with a blue shark

Before entering the water, you are comprehensively briefed about the potential danger from the bull males who grunt loudly to warn you are too close and if you don't back off, they will charge you. At almost three metres long and weighing around 400kg, they are significant creatures which need to be respected and avoided.

The pups on the other hand seem to love the interaction underwater and are an absolute delight to be with but are tough to photograph being so incredibly fast!

Diving Cabo Pulmo

Located on the southeast tip of the Baja Peninsula, about 160km south of La Paz, Cabo Pulmo is a small coastal village that comes complete with its own dedicated 70km² marine park! It's a laidback, rustic and off the grid location that is vaguely reminiscent of the final beach scene in the Shawshank Redemption movie...

If you do some research on Cabo Pulmo, you will find a lot of hype about 20,000 year old reef systems and 800 different species, but I have to say that I was a bit underwhelmed when compared to the reefs of the Indo-Pacific region. But peel the onion a little and the backstory behind the creation and management of the marine park is truly quite special!

The overall area is where the tropical waters of the Sea of Cortez meet the temperate ones of the Pacific and minerals from the land enrich the coastal waters. The small village was first established in the 1800s by settlers who discovered huge quantities of Mother of Pearl on the inshore reefs.

Over time the settlers turned to commercial fishing because of the abundance of marine life and the belief they had the equivalent of a magic garden that would keep on providing everything they needed and more... But, by the early 1980s, it became increasingly clear that commercial fishing was taking a heavy toll as catches declined and significant anchor damage degraded the reef systems.

With a lot of help from marine biologists, over a ten-year period the local community petitioned the Mexican government to protect the area and in 1995, the Cabo Pulmo National Park was finally created.

Good management of the park and strong community engagement have resulted in a huge improvement, with one recent assessment indicating that fish biomass in the park had increased by 460% since 1995.

Cabo Pulmo is now renowned for its huge schools of big-eyed jacks and resident colony of bull sharks plus seasonal visitors like the springtime aggregation of thousands of mobula rays that migrates up the east coast of the peninsula.

Cabo San Lucas

'Cabo' as everybody calls it, is the dynamic epicentre of mainstream tourism in Baja and is not my kind of place, I'm afraid. But it's the main airport on the peninsula and where all the liveaboards going to Socorro leave from.

It's also the departure point for one of the 'must-do' experiences in Baja – in-water encounters with blue and (possibly...) mako sharks. Both species are known to roam the deep waters off Cabo and chumming is used to lure them to the surface.

It takes under an hour to get out into the deep-water area from Cabo marina, and chumming starts straightaway. Both times we did it we had one or two blue sharks within 30 minutes, which stayed with us for a couple of hours. But unfortunately, no makos showed up... ▶

Cabo Pulmo topside



The encounters are done on snorkel and it's an interesting experience as blue sharks are intensely curious creatures that approach very close and show absolutely no fear.

They are medium-sized sharks at around three metres in length and have a slender build, so they don't really possess a significant and intimidating presence the way many other open-water sharks do. They are not considered particularly dangerous to humans, with only 13 known biting incidents ever recorded. But... four of those incidents ended fatally, so they are not Labrador puppies either!

The Mexican Sardine Run

The last part of our trip consumed all the final week and saw us drive some 270m north from La Paz to Magdalena Bay and the small fishing town of Puerto San Carlos.

Magdalena Bay is one of the largest bays on the Pacific coast of Baja California and stretches almost 80km from north to south. It is a stunning location that is renowned for its desert landscapes, dense mangroves, pristine beaches, and rich biodiversity. It is probably best known for the thousands of grey whales that migrate there every winter from the Arctic to give birth and nurse their calves in its warm and protected waters.

Puerto San Carlos is located on the eastern shore, halfway down the bay and it's a friendly, laidback place and as 'Mexican' as it gets. Commercial and sport fishing are the main occupations, but eco-tourism and whale watching is playing an increasing role. And from mid-October through to late-December, an incredible event occurs in the deep offshore waters, and sunrise each morning sees former fishermen taking groups out to experience the Mexican Sardine Run.

Back in 2018 I spent three weeks based from Coffee Bay on the east coast of Africa for the famous South African Sardine Run, which I had heard and read so much about. But I was greatly disappointed with the whole thing, so I went to Magdalena Bay with quite low expectations.

But it turned out to be quite exceptional – so much so that there will be a follow-up article to this one dedicated to the incredible Mexican Sardine Run!



Puerto San Carlos



Blue shark

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In summary...

Diving the best sites of Baja California is not without its challenges, as it's a big area to cover and different things are happening at different times. The weather plays a big role in what you can and can't do, and the conditions once underwater come with their own challenges. But it really is an interesting location with some great things to experience and it's no coincidence that Jacques Cousteau once called the Sea of Cortez 'the aquarium of the world'.

The three weeks we spent there feel like we just scratched the surface, but I always seem to go to the great locations at least twice... The first time to see what it's like, and the second to really savour it.

I am already planning my next trip to Baja, but I am pretty certain there will be more journeys there because it is so special – watch this space... ■

Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based on Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

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Sardine Run at Magdalena Bay