

## Adventures in kayaking

### Sea of Cortez abounds with life

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About an hour into our seven-day kayaking trip, we spotted the dolphins.

We were paddling through the turquoise, swimming pool-calm Sea of Cortez. At first, a group of about six dolphins jumped and glided in the water. Soon another group appeared, romping among us. Then another and another. They stayed with us for a long while at fairly close range.

I felt blessed. I've heard dolphins bring good luck to seafarers. And I needed it. I'd never kayaked seriously before.

I'd tried it for a couple of hours several years ago. Now here I was in Baja California, Mexico, about to circumnavigate Isla Espiritu Santo (Holy Spirit Island). Legendary diver Jacques Cousteau famously described the Sea of Cortez as the "world's aquarium" and the "Galapagos of North America."

Over the next seven days, my British companions, Simon and Emili Perry, and I would cover almost 70 kilometres on that ocean, exploring the coves and crannies of the uninhabited island. Ben Gillam, owner of Baja Outdoor Activities (BOA) and the outfitter for the excursion, joined us for the first few days.

We were on what BOA calls a "co-operatively catered" trip. That meant we hauled all of our equipment in our kayaks, helped set up camp, cook, clean and perform other tasks.

Tulio Gonzalez led the expedition. The young biologist from Mexico City had fallen for the deserts and oceans,



CREDIT: Anne Georg  
Isla Espiritu Santo



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sea-cortez3.jpg



wildlife and lifestyle of Baja California. Besides his expertise in local marine, bird, plant and wildlife, Tulio was a good cook and he mixed a mean margarita. He had an impish sense of humour and was serene and competent.



CREDIT: Anne Georg  
A fresh water shower

When we reached the island by skiff, Tulio gave us basic dry-land training and simple safety tips, including "always wear sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses."

Not a sliver of shade was in sight.

He took us into the sea to teach us the wet exit. We capsized our kayaks by leaning over one side, turned them upside down and released ourselves. The idea of being upside down under water was more daunting than was the manoeuvre itself. We aced it and got ready for lunch.

Our skiff captain went to search for the sweet red fruit of the pitaya cactus, a local delicacy.

We heard him yell as he was stopped cold in his tracks by a coiled rattlesnake, ready to attack. We gathered around to watch as it retreated under the cactus, tracking us with wary serpentine eyes.

The excitement subsided and we made do with lunch without pitaya fruit.

We packed our kayaks and began to paddle to our first camp.

"Become one with your kayak," Tulio advised as he saw me struggle.

"Push, don't pull," he repeated as I tried to grasp the mechanics of paddling.

The idea, Tulio explained, is to avoid arm fatigue by pushing the paddle with the large back muscles, instead of pulling with the smaller, weaker biceps.

I appreciated the advice at the end of each day when my muscles felt well worked, but not sore.

The still water of the Sea of Cortez is a perfect training ground for novice kayakers like me.

The area has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its striking natural beauty and abundance of bird and marine life create a unique eco-region.

Shortly after we were surrounded by the luck-bearing dolphins, we had the good fortune to witness four sea turtles bobbing alongside us. The timid creatures quickly disappeared.

And avian life was just as ubiquitous. Tulio constantly pointed out ospreys, herons, egrets, blue-footed boobies and red-throated frigates.

As we paddled we scanned the horizon for marine life, often spotting schools of silver flying fish leaping over the sea's surface.

Below the surface thrives the aquarium Jacques Cousteau spoke about. It is home to 891 species of fish, 39 per cent of the world's total number of marine mammal species and one-third of the world's whale and dolphin species. It's a snorkeller's nirvana and a pelican's feast.

At sunset, when they can see their prey exceptionally well, the ungainly birds hunt in shallow water near the beach.

Large groups of pelicans cruise the sky; one or another plunges headfirst into the ocean and lands with a loud, inelegant "splosh." It emerges, fish in beak and flies off again.

The scene repeats itself as the sun sets, an enthralling and funny spectacle against a visually stunning backdrop.

We watched them and other avian hunters from the beach as we drank our happy hour cocktail, a rum concoction with diced tropical fruit which we called Pelican Punch in honour of the entertainment.

On our second day of paddling, Ben pointed ahead and shouted "Whale!"

In the distance was a fountain of spray and we heard the signature huffing. A long, black back skimmed the surface.

We lingered, hoping for a second view. We were rewarded.

The whale had a partner and the two of them swam in a large, lazy circle around us, at times less than a city block away from the kayaks.

Tulio identified them as minke whales, one of the smaller local species. The largest of the duo was about eight metres long.

More natural encounters lay ahead. The Sea of Cortez is home to a sea lion colony; on Day 3, when the skiff came to resupply us, we grabbed our snorkels and caught a ride to Los Islotes island to get a close-up look.

We became beach bums, camping on five of the numerous wild, white-sand beaches of Isla Espiritu Santo.

Behind us were inhospitable deserts, barren moonscapes, red cliffs, or a rumble of boulders strewn haphazardly about by an ancient volcano.

Walks into the cliffs and deserts revealed several varieties of cacti, among them the world's largest; the Cardon, which can live for hundreds of years. On one trip into a red canyon, Tulio showed us rock paintings left by aboriginals thousands of years ago.

We spent long evenings preparing our dinner, always a nourishing feast, complete with dessert and wine. We had shrimp, fish, chicken and beef, prepared with Mexican flavours and lots of fresh ingredients.

Then we'd sit on the beach and look into a night sky brimming with stars.

The final morning I awoke to a soft sunrise. We enjoyed our breakfast of fruit, granola and a mushroom omelette. We packed our gear one last time and headed across the channel back to the Baja Peninsula.

As I paddled away from the enchanted Isla Espiritu Santo, gliding over the sparkling Sea of Cortez, I noticed my paddle stroke was seamless, smooth and silent. I had "become one" with my kayak.

Our expedition had been magical, adventurous and safe.

## **IF YOU GO**

- Baja Outdoor Activities is based in La Paz, Baja California, Mexico, on the east coast of the Baja peninsula. In business for 15 years, BOA offers multi-day kayaking expeditions from October to May, ranging from a weekend to 10 days.

- BOA offers a fully catered trip, where a skiff hauls all the gear and meals are prepared for the guests, or you can choose the co-operatively catered trip, where guests help prepare meals and haul their own gear in their kayaks.

- BOA also offers whale- watching tours and fishing expeditions. For more information, including prices, schedules and offerings, go to:  
[www.kayactivities.com](http://www.kayactivities.com)

How to get there:

- Flights to the Baja generally land in San Jose del Cabo, from which El Iguila bus service takes you to La Paz for about \$20. The trip takes about three hours. Flights also land in La Paz, but not as frequently. The people at BOA will help you with the logistics of arranging hotel rooms and transportation.

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