

UnCruise through the Sea of Cortes

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Jacques Cousteau referred to the Sea of Cortes as the “world’s aquarium”. What he didn’t write about was the beauty of the land surrounding it. On an UnCruise ship out of La Paz, we could enjoy the water with its diverse sea life while admiring the unique topography from the sea. The Sea of Cortes (also known as the Vermillion Sea) is known locally as the Gulf of California, a marginal sea of the Pacific Ocean that separates the Baja California Peninsula from the Mexican mainland.

UnCruises’ 86 passenger ship, the Safari Endeavour sets sail from La Paz, (Bay of Peace) glides through the tranquil waters at the tip of the Baja Peninsula. Our seven-night itinerary allowed us to explore the many unique islands off La Paz. The varying topography is a result of these islands being created from volcanic explosions that occurred during the early history of the Baja. With the concurrence of the coast and the desert, it creates truly rugged natural beauty.

Every day adventures included kayaking, snorkeling, hiking, zodiac tours, enjoying water sports and stunning scenery. Skies were constantly changing as were the unusual rock formations. The short, semitropical day made it easy to see both sunrise and sunset. Spectacular!

The first day, we headed for Playa Isla on Isla Espiritu Santo (Holy Ghost), which is the crown jewel of the Gulf of California islands, as its one of the largest islands and readily accessible. Playa Isla was chosen because of the beautiful beach and its natural platform to the first adventure, easing us into the surrounding geology and desert environment.

We anchored at Aqua Verde – a crew favourite – nestled between the Sierra De la Gigantide mountains against the dramatic backdrop of a humble community of rancheros and fisherman. The Romero family has a long running relationship with UnCruise and travels down the mountains from Rancho San Cosme with their burros. After living the ranching lifestyle for generations, they share their way of life with passengers, many taking the opportunity to ride along the dramatic cliffs overlooking the sea.

We spent a morning on a guided kayak tour surrounded by fiery mountains with Cacti clinging to rocks. Our guide, Wilson, shared his incredible knowledge of the geological formations. For birders there was plenty to see including cormorants, frigates, plovers, brown pelicans, a kingfisher and turkey vultures. After lunch, I took a guided skiff tour out to a large rock dubbed “Solitary Rock” where I was surprised to see several vibrantly coloured Sally Lightfoot crabs skittering quickly over a rock. Having returned to the ship, our appetites were ready for Happy Hour featuring a daily cocktail and appetizers.

Visiting Arroyo Blanco (white creek) the next day was a draw for its geology, a thin strata of fossil bearing limestone, sandwiched between layers of volcanic rock. On our way to a snorkeling site, the zodiac took us into a sea cave big enough to accommodate it. At 120-150,000 years old, the walls were covered with fossilized sand dollars and star fish.



Kayaking in front of Solitary Rock.



Aqua Verde.

Isla San Francisco is also well loved – more rugged than the other islands, with challenging hiking trails and gorgeous views of the surrounding seascape. The type of rock is called tuff –an igneous rock that forms from the products of an explosive volcanic eruption and the surrounding variety of minerals: red from iron oxide and green from copper. The white sandy beach is part of a tombolo, a sandy structure that forms a bridge between two islands.

The hiking groups were divided into two groups: those looking for a gentle amble on the beach and those who hiked along the high ridge, and the third group for those looking for a challenge with the “ Island Assault ” which had hikers scrambling up large rocks from an almost horizontal position.

Los Islotes offered several ways to enjoy the resident sea lions – either by snorkeling with them, or a guided skiff to see them frolicking in the water. We finished up with a beach party on Ensenada Grande Beach, voted by Traveler magazine as the most beautiful beach in Mexico, and one of the top 15 in the world due to the striking geologic formation from volcanic ash. With ash and rock dripping down rock formations, they are known locally as “veiled ladies”. Surrounded by fine white sand, turquoise blue water, it’s a popular area for sailing.

The final full day had us return to the old Mexican seaside town of La Paz to explore Whale Shark grounds. To snorkel on our last full day was a highlight of the week. Whale sharks eat plankton so thankfully they were not interested in me snorkeling beside them. The size of a small bus, I was filled with awe and wonder at the sheer magnitude and peacefulness as I met up with my first Whale Shark.

La Paz is special because as it was a Jesuit mission and old Spanish colony. After going through booms and busts with fishing and mining, it is now a hotspot for ecotourism. Three universities are located there with marine science programs; it has always gotten its life force from the ocean in one form or another, through sailors, fisherman, scientists and now tourists that want to enjoy the islands of the Sea of Cortes. Its connection to the



Playa-Isla-Isla-Espiritu.



Arroyo Blanco.

ocean is acknowledged by the city of La Paz with a line of statues along the Malecon.

UnCruise always focusses on the destination, not on the ship

The ship itself was very comfortable, and the small passenger size made it feel very intimate. Crew to passenger ratio was impressive , translating to incredible service at every level. An open bridge policy, a full onboard library and superb culinary offerings at every meal means there is a high percentage of repeat passengers including including one woman I spoke to at breakfast on her fifth UnCruise. Fellow passengers like to travel and engage in adventurous activities. The price might seem high at first glance, however all excursions, drinks, anything usually considered extra is all included.

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Veiled Ladies.



UnCruise Route.