

UnCruise in the Aquarium of the World

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Rain spattered my cheeks, a warm wind gently wafted and the sound of distant barking and braying of sea lions could be heard. 6:45 yoga on the top deck welcomed many of us to the Sea of Cortes. The instructor introduced herself and said “we stop for nature so if you want, take photos. We are coming up to a rock formation with a bird rookery and what looks like snow is actually deposits from the birds”. As we cruised closer, we could see that the rock was also covered in sea lions. All of the yoga poses were familiar except for the regional “Cactus pose.” As the stretching out of our travel knots came to a close, the smell of bacon lured us to the dining room for breakfast. Depending on where we were, the scenery and the movements changed, but yoga was something every member of the family could do to jumpstart the day.



UnCruise Ship and passengers1 Photo Melody Wren

Namaste, welcome to day one in the Sea of Cortes on UnCruise.

The Sea of Cortes is a dazzling spectacle of nature. This narrow sea between the Mexican mainland and the Baja California peninsula is one of the most biologically diverse bodies of water on the planet, home to more than 900 species of fish, thousands of species of invertebrates and a wide array of marine mammals such as sea lions, dolphins, whales and whale sharks. The late French explorer Jacques Cousteau called the Sea of Cortes “the world’s aquarium” for the diversity and sheer numbers of marine species found there.



Crown of thorns Photo Melody Wren

UnCruise’s 86 passenger ship, Safari Endeavour, sets sail from La Paz—which translates to “Bay of Peace.” Our seven-night itinerary was to weave around the islands in the Sea of Cortes. The focus is on the destination and outdoor adventures.

The first day we headed for Playa Isla on Isla Espiritu Santo (Holy Ghost). Espiritu Santo is the crown jewel of the Gulf of California islands, as its one of the largest islands, readily accessible and home to several endemic species. Playa Isla was an ideal adventure platform and introduction to the geology and desert environment.

That evening, we were running through introductions of all the ship’s guides when the captain announced that there were dolphins off the bow. Everyone ran outside to see and take photos. One to two hundred Long-beaked common Dolphins lunged and arced as Dolphins do- an action referred to as “porpoising,” according to the onboard marine-mammal specialist, Dr. Tom

Jefferson. They were travelling at approximately 20 knots per hour (about 25 mph). We listened to their whistles and shrieks after a hydrophone was dropped in the water while he talked us through their travel style and “subgroups”. Such thrilling displays brought Cousteau back many times, to film and showcase dolphin antics—wonderful learning opportunities for every family member.



Dolphin watching from deck Photo Melody Wren

The next day we went to a crew favourite, Aqua Verde, considered unique because it’s nestled between the Sierra de la Giganta mountains. Against the dramatic backdrop, there is a humble community of rancheros and fisherman. The Romero family has a long-running relationship with UnCruise and travel down the mountains from Rancho San Cosme bringing their burros with them. They have been living the ranching lifestyle for generations giving passengers a chance to get a window into their way of life. Aside from riding burros and talking to the rancheros, the natural setting is exquisite with lots of shorebirds, dramatic cliffs, a little something for everybody.



Burros Photo Melody Wren

We joined a guided kayak tour around Bahia Aqua Verde where we were surrounded by fiery mountains with Cacti clinging to rocks. The pace was relaxed as our kayaks dipped into large swells and rode the waves causing many of us to whoop loudly. Our knowledgeable guide, Wilson talked to us about geological formations, the unusual topography and for birders, there was plenty to see including cormorants, frigates, plovers, brown pelicans, a kingfisher and turkey vultures.



Kayaks loading on beach Photo Melody Wren

On a guided skiff tour out to a large rock dubbed “Solitary Rock” we were entertained by vibrant Sally Lightfoot Crab returning from outdoor activities, our appetites were once again ready for 5:30 Happy Hour where a daily speciality cocktail was available, accompanied by appetizers and a chat from the Captain about the next day’s destination and activities.



Sally Lightfoot Crab Photo Melody Wren

Arroyo Blanco drew us there for the geology—thin strata of fossil-bearing limestone, sandwiched between layers of volcanic rock giving the area its name. The highlight was the enormous sea cave that swallowed our skiff whole with plenty of space left over, giving the opportunity to see the cave walls covered with fossilised sand dollars and starfish.



Arroyo Blanco Photo Melody Wren

After emerging from the sea cave, we slipped into the water with full wetsuit gear on, while our guide Marika pointed out fish of interest including Giant Angel Fish, Sargent Majors, urchins, and starfish. Returning to the ship, the afternoon was spent on the top deck watching for signs of marine life and we saw a large school of bottle-nosed Dolphins at play and feeding with calves among them. Overall we saw approximately 1-200 Dolphins both off the bow and on the underwater bow camera. After dark, four dolphins put on amazing underwater firework display as they frolicked in the phosphorescence.



Zodiac in sea cave Photo Melody Wren

Midweek, we anchored at Isla San Francisco, well loved by crew members because it is so rugged compared to other islands, with challenging hiking options and gorgeous views of the surrounding seascapes. The type of rock is coloured from the variety of minerals, red from iron oxide, and green from copper. Snorkel groups saw jewelled morays, king angelfish, giant damsel fish, surgeon coronets, crown thorns and guineafowl puffers that look like a shrink-wrapped frozen chicken, either black with bright blue dots or bright yellow., and the purple Gorgonian coral that looks like a purple waving candelabra as well as the ubiquitous Sargent Majors.



Coral Photo Melody Wren

Anchored near Los Islotes we had the chance to get a close up look at the California sea lions, by either snorkelling amongst them or observing from a skiff.



Sea lion ready for his close-up! Photo Melody Wren

We followed that up with a tasty brunch followed by an afternoon beach party on Ensenada Grande, one of the top beaches in the world because of the beautiful geological formations. We snorkelled, paddle boarded, kayaked, sun-bathed and some of us took part in a short water yoga class.



Beach party and water yoga Photo Melody Wren

Our last full day, we docked at the old Mexico seaside town of La Paz so that we could board vessels provided by local vendors to explore the whale shark grounds. For those passengers who didn't want to jump in the water with whale sharks, there were walking tours of La Paz or a trip to the local Serpentarium. After going through many booms and busts due to fishing and mining, it is experiencing a sustainable boom of ecotourism. The city from the very beginning has gotten its life force from the ocean, in one form or another, through sailors, fisherman, scientists, and tourists that want to enjoy the islands of the sea of Cortes. That connection to the ocean is acknowledged by Le Paz city with a line of statues along the Malecon, statues showcasing that connection, of the fisherman, humpbacks, manta rays and Jacques Cousteau.

On this last day, I became part of the "world's aquarium" snorkelling alongside whale sharks, one of the most exhilarating activities I have ever done.



Waiting for a whale shark Photo Melody Wren

We were in full wetsuits, snorkels and masks and flippers, waiting for the sighting of a whale shark and were ready to jump in “paratrooper style” once our guide gave the “go”. Whale sharks push through the water, mouth agape and are the largest fish in the world. Called a shark because of the way it moves through the water, but it breathes underwater like a whale. Juveniles are 25 feet long and adults up to 40 feet long. Dark finned polka dotted animals, we were given firm instructions to stay with the guide, lay flat alongside the whale shark, but not too close and to stay six feet away. As we waited prepared, I wondered if I would have the nerve to jump in, then given the word “GO”, I swam as fast as possible, watching the guide, until she was pointing.



Photo Melody Wren

I looked and saw a bus-sized whale shark mere inches beside me. I had no idea the polka dot design would be so large or that he would be. I was suspended in the water awe-struck making a shrieking noise through my snorkel until he gently glided away. We climbed back in the boat all talking excitedly about our experience. The guide said “who wants to go again” and we all put up our hands. This time I was definitely ready... same instructions and “GO”, we swam but not very long until the guide was pointing at a larger whale shark right and I was next to his enormous tail fin. I was absolutely awestruck and filled with wonder, not fear, as the huge fish had a peacefulness surrounding it, earning the nickname “gentle giant.” I was honoured to have the experience, and one I will cherish always. It was the last full day of our UnCruise journey and it couldn’t have ended on a more memorable note. Cousteau was right.



Now that's a whale shark! Photo Melody Wren

Details on UnCruise:

The focus is on the destination, and outdoor activities, not on the ship. Many are repeat passengers and one woman I breakfasted with was on her fifth UnCruise. Meal times were filled with fascinating conversations with fellow passengers who love to travel, be active and adventurous.

Meals onboard were another highlight made with fresh local tuna, Mahi Mahi and rockfish and fresh produce from local farmers from La Paz. Lunch and dinner there were three choices including fish, chicken and vegetarian all with a local Mexican angle.

One day was Aztec chicken covered with real gold, and another choice was Poke bowls with seared local tuna. Because it was often difficult to make a choice, you could order half of one dish and half of another. It was impressive how well food allergies and intolerances were taken care of, with the chef making special dishes to accommodate at every meal. Gluten-free bread was baked daily and lactose-free desserts were available.

5:30 daily was "Happy Hour" with appetisers and the well-versed bartender, Lee always had a cocktail of the day. My personal favourite was the Strawberry Margarita with Jalapeño, but another passenger raved about the "Vote for San Pedro." Mingling with other passengers was a highlight of each meal, and particularly noted during Happy Hour.

The onboard library was well stocked with movies, books and games and the open bridge policy meant that you could wander up to the bridge and chat to Captain Doug at any time of night or day and enjoy a different view.

When you look at the price, keep in mind that it includes absolutely everything for the journey: massages for each passenger by the Wellness team, all the excursions (we had at least two a day), wetsuits and snorkelling equipment, all meals and alcoholic drinks, guides, lectures, and services.

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About The Author

Melody Wren

Melody is an Ontario based travel writer who believes travel stories are meant to encourage and inspire and considers her age (over 60) a gift in her journeys, bringing wisdom, experience, humour and a major 'if not now, when' attitude to her writing. A formerly nervous traveller, experiential travel has helped her conquer fears as she snorkelled through the Galapagos islands, glacier trekked in the Northwest Passage, danced around a fire in Africa, learned how to make the perfect tiramisu in Florence, kayaked amongst spawning salmon in Ontario, snow-shoed in Colorado, and sailed in the British Virgin Islands . Her work



appears in Canadian Yachting Magazine, Canadian Jewish News, The Toronto Star, Kitchener Waterloo Record, Caribbean Beat Magazine, Cottage Life Magazine, Waypoints Global, Active Over 50, and Inspired Seniors.