

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

SEPTEMBER 2002



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Searcher passengers meet a "friendly" gray whale in Laguna San Ignacio.

## Communing with "Devilfish" in Baja California

by Darcy Hitchcock, *Searcher* passenger February 2002

Seven of us sat anxiously in the small *panga*, its small outboard idling quietly, rocking in the windswept waves of Laguna San Ignacio. It didn't matter where we looked—spouts could be seen in every direction. The bay was thick with gray whales that had come here to calve.

"Spyhop at two o'clock!" someone shouted, pointing. We turned to watch a massive head rise and slowly descend back into the water.

"Fin at four!" We watched in rapt attention as three massive grays, longer than our *panga*, spun and caressed. This dramatic display would have satisfied most whale watchers, but we had come for a more mystical experience, a chance to touch a wild gray whale.

As we slopped about under the Mexican sun, I thought about the Captain Art's warning. "This isn't a Disneyland ride. It's entirely on their terms." Three-quarters of the lagoon are off-limits to boats during the calving season, so the whales have no trouble avoiding human contact. But inexplicably, some "friendlies" seek out the pangas to interact with humans.

These are the "devilfish," the same whales feared by whalers, for they routinely rammed boats, smashed vessels with their powerful flukes, killed and maimed men. Whalers almost drove the gray whales to extinction twice in the last 150 years. And yet, some gently approach the pangas for nothing more than the mutual thrill of interacting with and touching another species. —continued inside

A TRADITION OF  
QUALITY ECOTOURISM  
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For nearly 20 years, the *Searcher* has conducted natural history expeditions to Baja California's coastal waters and islands. We are one of only a few U.S. businesses with special permission from the Mexican government to operate natural history cruises into Mexican ecological preserves and national parks.

### OUR MISSION:

"To observe marine animals in their natural environment, and to share that experience with our passengers."

2838 Garrison Street  
San Diego, CA 92106

Tel: 619-226-2403

Fax: 619-226-1332

Email: [searcher@bajawhale.com](mailto:searcher@bajawhale.com)

Web site: [www.bajawhale.com](http://www.bajawhale.com)





Letter from *Searcher*  
Owner/Operator  
Art Taylor



Our passengers are inspired and awed by the gray whales we encounter in Baja California's Laguna San Ignacio. In fact, after a close encounter with a gray whale, passengers often ask me, "What will you show us to top that?!"

But wildlife discovery doesn't end as we leave San Ignacio. As I turn the boat south, round the tip of Baja, and cruise into the magical, southern Sea of Cortez, the days seem to get better and better. There are never-ending blue whales—the largest of all whales, jumping mobula rays, feeding fin whales, circling killer whales, leaping common dolphins, soaring seabirds, deserted beaches, and fantastic snorkeling at a variety of islands. And wait till you see the sunrises and sunsets! After a few days in the rhythm of the Sea of Cortez, passengers realize that all of Baja has much to offer wildlife enthusiasts.

I hope you can join us aboard the *Searcher* for the "Ultimate Baja Adventure" and see for yourself how each day brings a new discovery.



A RECIPE  
FROM THE  
*SEARCHER*

### Butterscotch Saucepan Brownies

|                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1 cup flour    | 3/4 tsp baking powder    |
| 1/3 cup butter | 1 cup packed brown sugar |
| 1 egg          | 1 tsp vanilla            |
| nuts           |                          |

1. Butter and flour baking pan.
2. In a saucepan, melt butter with brown sugar until it bubbles. Set aside and let it completely cool.
3. Add egg and vanilla to cooled sugar mixture. Mix.
4. Fold in remaining ingredients. Pour into baking pan.
5. Bake at 350-degrees 20 minutes or until sides are firm.

### Devilfish

—continued from page one

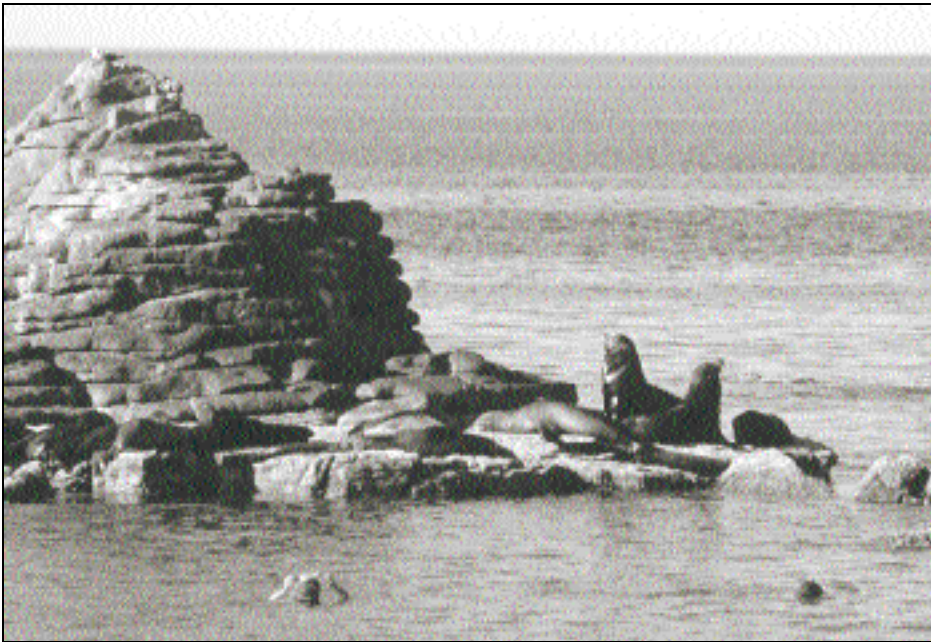
We sat quietly, expectantly, hopefully. Without warning, a huge cow approached the side of our boat, rising out of the water so close that her spout showered us. Then her baby appeared at the surface. We reached out as far as we could, hoping to touch it.

It happened. The baby poked his nose above water next to the panga. Eager hands reached out to rub his slick, rubbery skin. He twirled under water, and came up again, this time turning on his side so we could stroke the side of his face, his mouth, his spiky whiskers. Slowly mom and baby slipped under the boat and reappeared on the other side. This time, the mother presented her face, crusted with white barnacles and orange whale lice.

The population of gray whales is one of the few wonderful conservation success stories. They have come back in large numbers in the Pacific. The friendly behavior was first noticed in the mid-1970s. Biologists now estimate that perhaps 10 percent of the whales in the bay are now "friendlies."

Is this behavior just for the tactile pleasure of skin-to-skin contact? Is it a way to entertain the calf? Is it motherly pride, showing off her infant? Or is it an attempt to communicate with us? Whatever the whales' intentions, the effect on the 500 or so humans each year who are privileged to have this interaction is profound. To look into the gentle eyes of a gray whale, to witness their joy of contact, and to watch their powerful grace has touched us all deeply.

# Searcher Natural History Tours 2003 Schedule



Nine days in Baja:  
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas  
February 3-11, 2003

Magnificent gray whales, frolicking dolphins, and vast numbers of seabirds welcome you to Baja. Explore the offshore islands of *Islas Todos Santos* and *Islas San Benito* looking for harbor seals, sea lions, elephant seals, and nesting birds. Hikes reward you with breathtaking vistas and glimpses of rare plant life. We'll make *Laguna San Ignacio* our home for three days, where *pangas* bring us eye-to-eye with gray whale. You'll have time to explore pristine beaches and mangroves before we move south to spend more time at sea with gray whales and watch blue whales, common dolphins, and frigatebirds. Offshore Cabo San Lucas, we'll look for the acrobatic hump-back whales of *Gorda Banks* and explore the beautiful beaches of *Los Frailes*. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,200.



All photos this page by Frank S. Balthis

11 days in Baja:  
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

March 2-12, 2003 **SOLD OUT**

March 16-26, 2003

March 30-April 9, 2003

All the beauty and excitement of our nine-day trip, plus more! We'll explore some of the most beautiful islands in the Sea of Cortez and snorkel among brilliant reef fishes and California sea lions. We'll search for blue, fin, and sperm whales as well as bottlenose and common dolphins and sea lions. Explore and photograph pristine beaches, tide pools, island plants and bird life. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,700

12 days in Baja:  
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas  
February 16-27, 2003

Spend an additional day among the gray whales in *Laguna San Ignacio*. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,950

