

HEAD SOUTH WITH THE WHALES

MIGRATING IS MORE FUN WITH GIANT MAMMALS FOR COMPANIONS.



Each winter when we head south down Baja's Pacific coast, we find ourselves traveling in the company of whales. Hundreds of whales and boaters make the annual migration south together. The VHF comes alive: "There's a huge whale, and it's right next to our boat!" Everyone gets excited, especially the youngsters who may never have seen free-swimming whales this close. And prudent skippers want to make note of where the spouts are in order to avoid a whale collision and its side effects — a bent prop or stabilizer fin.

Are they dangerous? How do they behave in the open ocean? Do you have to keep 100 meters away from a whale in Mexico? Here's a primer on heading southbound with whales.

WHAT KINDS?

California gray whales (*eschrictius robustus*) make up about 85 percent of the whale sightings by boaters along Baja in late fall and winter. Adult grays average 52 feet in length and 36 tons; they have white barnacles on gray skin

but almost no dorsal fin. The mouth slot divides the blunt snout in half, and the small eye is near the end of the mouth slot. Grays are baleen filter feeders: no teeth.

Pods of pregnant female gray whales are the first to head south in late November, along with mother grays and their yearling calves born last winter. Juvenile male and female grays complete the southbound pods that migrate down coastal waters.

Adult gray males migrate solo five to

10 miles offshore, usually staying outside pods of females. But older males have been known to shepherd pods of females and juveniles through areas where threats are common — vessel traffic and orca whales.

Last year's gray whale calves now swim next to their mothers for protection from orca threats. If you spot a small gray or yearling, look around for its mother or for the glassy "footprint" on the water. She might be feeding below, but every three minutes she will surface to breathe and check on her baby. Note: Don't let your boat get between any species of whale calf and its mother.

Year round in Mexican Pacific waters, you may spot a finback, humpback, blue whale or sperm whale. Giant cetacea like blues, sperms and humpbacks mostly keep to the offshore deeps, but they do migrate to tropical latitudes to mate. Sperm whales favor the Hawaiian islands. Fin whales have a thumb-shaped fin and a white jaw on the right side.

Some blue whales (largest mammal on earth) have frequented the deeper south end of the Sea of Cortez.

WHERE ARE THEY GOING?

Each year, about 10,000 gray whales (half their population) must follow their instincts to mate or give birth. Only three places on Earth allow the grays to do both in safety, and they're all on Baja: Ojo de Liebre, Laguna San Ignacio and Estero Magdalena.

Why here? The gray's only natural predator is the orca or killer whale, and the orcas do not enter these lagoons. Only inside these sanctuaries can the grays find sufficient warm, protected waters to meet potential partners, to display by breaching and select mates. Mating dances can last days.

In the shallows, pregnant females who've delayed giving birth en route can finally deliver their calves. Here, the helpless newborns can safely nurse and learn from their mother for the first four months of their life.

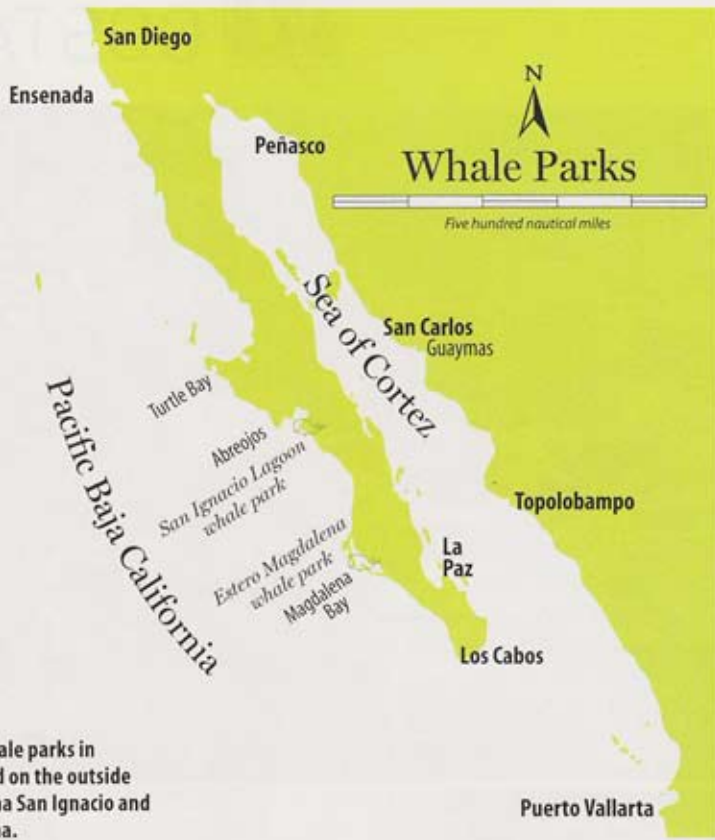
WHALE PARKS

Private boats are not allowed in Baja's whale sanctuaries. Ojo de Liebre, or Scammon's Lagoon, is accessible to humans only by land from Guerrero Negro, so reserve it for when you're coming down by car. San Ignacio Lagoon and Magdalena Estero are better choices for people arriving on oceangoing yachts.

For San Ignacio Lagoon, anchor off the east side of Punta Abreojos and join a uniformed park ranger or a naturalist guide in a special panga for an all-day visit with whales inside the vast sanctuary. Gray whales here are called "friendlies," because they are familiar with the pangas — so familiar, in fact, that you might get to kiss a baby gray whale. Some mothers have learned to lift their babies up to be petted by the whale watchers in the pangas.

For Estero Magdalena, it's best to anchor at Man of War Cove inside Magdalena Bay and link up with a certified whale-watching guide from

The two best whale parks in Mexico are found on the outside of Baja, at Laguna San Ignacio and Estero Magdalena.



nearby Puerto San Carlos or Lopez Mateos. The 30-mile estuary winds between Boca de Soledad and Puerto San Carlos, formed by 100 squiggly mangrove channels. You can rent a kayak at Lopez Mateos.

The number of guide boats in each park is limited to so many per day, in order to protect the whales. It's best to start early in the morning, because if the park is already full, you have to wait until the next day.

Note: Pregnant gray whales and newborns are especially susceptible to toxins, so don't let diesel, gas or laundry detergent escape your holding tank while you're anchored near these parks.

OUTSIDE THE PARKS

Whales are not normally aggressive, and they do seem to relax after they've reached safety. Inside the parks, whales often approach the guide boats with peaceful intentions. But outside the parks, keep your eyes peeled for a whale spout on the horizon, a white



Gray whales are baleen feeders — no teeth — as you can see in this close-up shot.

geyser briefly shooting 30 feet into the air. Keep track of its first and second spouting positions, so you can tell which direction it's traveling. In calm seas, set the radar's lot mode to track the whale by successive spouts. Notify all other boaters within VHF range of the whale's location, so they can avoid a collision.

Even in Mexican waters, boats are required to keep a safe 100-meter distance from a whale.

During one Baja Ha Ha voyage a few years back, a sailboat was smashed when it collided with a whale in steep seas about 30 miles offshore. The survivors had to be rescued, and some were injured.

If you do happen to approach a whale sleeping on the surface, sound horns every 15 seconds as you move away. When in close proximity to whales, aim the boat away and put the props in neutral. 🐳