

Whale Sharks, Humpbacks & Grey Whales of Baja Mexico

February 15-23, 2025 4 graduate credit hours

\$3400. With credit. \$3225. Without credit.

Does not include airfare.

Day 1: Fly into Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Settle into our hotel and set off to enjoy the culture of Mexico as we tour the local Cabo Museum of History and walk the historic waterfront where we can see the famous Rock at the Land's End. This is the very tip of the Baja Peninsula, where waters from the Pacific Ocean meet the waters of the Sea of Cortez. This rich swirling of ocean currents causes much upwelling and one of the richest ocean habitats in the Americas. Here the great whales come to give breed and to give birth. The songs of the Humpbacks fill the seas as the males call out their beautiful melodies in search of mates. Sea Lions sun themselves on the rocks, and beneath the waves an entirely different fauna of tropical fish dance in splendid colors. Local musicians play Spanish guitars and mariachi instruments, while vendors sell their brightly colored artworks. Enjoy the end of the day as the sun brilliantly sinks into the Pacific Ocean.

Day 2: Grab your cameras and binoculars as we board our Humpback Whale Watching Tour. In these crystal blue waters, Humpbacks are often seen breaching, fin slapping, and tail thumping. Scientists aren't sure if breaching is a way of attracting mates, a way of communication, a way of ridding parasites or just a pure jump for the joy of life. Our tour guide is a Marine Biologist with a love of these giant mammals and an underwater microphone that will enable us to hear these haunting songs. Humpbacks and their calves often breathe and swim in unison, so photos of mothers and babies together are common. Keep your eyes open, since Blue Whales, Gray Whales, and Orcas also inhabit these waters. On our way back from the tour, we will see Pelican Rock, the colony of resident Sea Lions, and the famous Cabo Sea Arch.

Snorkeling and diving are favorite past times of this tropical paradise, so our afternoon will be spent on a tour out to the best sites, where sea lions dive into the waters and swim with groupers and angelfish. The tropical reef ecosystem originated in Malaysia and spread across the Pacific Ocean. The fish with short larvae stages did not live long enough in the open ocean to make it to the next landmass and reef, so the fish diversity here is very different from the Great Barrier Reef, Hawaii or the Meso American reef. The fish that did make it to the Baja, have since evolved into many beautiful species that are indigenous to this area. Here we will see species unlike anywhere else. We will keep a list of fish, invertebrate, and coral species that we find here. The skies are filled with cormorants, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigate Birds and hundreds of other species. Again, we will keep a species list of birds, so bring your cameras and binoculars.

Day 3: Whale Sharks – Whale Sharks – Whale Sharks, the world's biggest fish at 30 feet long eat only plankton and come into the shallow bays to gulp delicious mouthfuls of phytoplankton and

zooplankton soup. Our tour will take us up the coast through the stunning Sonoran desert cactus ecosystem, to the Bay where the Whale Sharks come to gorge. During the recon trip, we saw close to 20 Whale Sharks, who totally ignored the bubbling snorkelers who were busy clicking underwater photos. Since Whale Sharks eat photosynthesizing plankton, the biggest concentrations are at the surface, so this is a snorkel tour. After our swim with Whale Sharks, we will tour the beautiful coastal city of La Paz.

Day 4: We will continue our drive north through the Sonoran Desert to Magdalena Bay, one of the few places in the world where Gray Whales give birth. The Bay is sheltered and calm, with a small seaward entrance, so historically this is where the whalers would trap the mothers and calves. Today the whale watching boats pay homage to this great whale and its incredible migration and tender parenting. Occasionally, the Gray Whales show insatiable curiosity about humans and come right up to the boats to be touched and caressed. Our knowledgeable local guides will give us a personalized tour of both the Sonoran Desert Ecosystem and of the lives and migrations of the Gray Whale. We will spend the night in Magdalena Bay.

Day 5: Grab your cameras for a second tour in Magdalena Bay with the Gray Whales in the morning and then head back to Cabo in the afternoon. Often the mother Gray Whales bring their newborn calves right up to the boats. They often spy hop, which is raising their majestic heads out of the water to survey the activity on the ocean and shore.

Day 6: Back into the waters we go for another day of species identification further down the coast from Cabo. While diving this site during the recon trip, I saw hundreds of Look-Downs, several octopus, and huge schools of silversides and octopus. Snorkelers are in for a treat as well, with the beautiful orange sponges and huge schools of fish.

Returning from our snorkel / dive adventure, we will walk some of the local beaches such as Honeymoon and Divorce Beach and study how recent tropical storms have redistributed sand bars and realigned the beaches. We will study how the watery intersection of the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez creates such a rich blend of currents and nutrients to enable this plethora of life and diversity. This is a time to study the local Mexican culture of arts and crafts sold on the beaches, as well as view the intricate water taxi service of the small boats. A Pacific Ocean sunset is a perfect way to end the day.

Day 7: Another day in paradise will find us boarding a Whale Watching Tour along the coastal waters. During the recon trip, I took 3 Humpback Whale Watching Tours and saw completely different behaviors and species on each tour. Although the great whales may migrate 3000 miles to breed and give birth in these warm waters, the food supply is very scarce here. A mother whale may lose a third of her body mass during the migration, birth and nursing phase of the summer. As soon as the baby whale is strong enough in the spring, the Humpbacks return along the Pacific coast to the nutrient rich waters of Alaska. Whale biologists have tagged whales in both the Baja and around Hawaii and seen them playing the waters of Glacier Bay and Prince William Sound.

This afternoon is a chose your own adventure – not counted as credit. Divers may want to get in another dive; snorkelers may want to swim with sea lions; beach bums may want to just rest and relax on a white sand beach.

Day 8: After picking up our rental vehicle, we are off to explore the surging, wave pounding Pacific Coast of the Baja. This is beautiful scenery with hundreds of birds flitting along the sea stacks and nesting in the giant Serrano Cactus. This is a geology lesson extraordinaire as we study how an extension of the San Andreas fault has rifted the Baja apart from mainland Mexico. A study of geologic history of the area will show a land that has been isolated for millions of years and has developed many of its own indigenous species. Hopefully, we will catch sight of a Blue Footed Boobie and maybe see some of our familiar migratory birds who are toasty warm during the cold winters of the U.S. Keep eyes out for Roadrunners and many species of lizards.

Day 9: Pack up and fly back home with wonderful, warm memories.