

Baja California

by Franco Banfi & Sabrina Belloni

The look of the Baja California Sur can appear tedious: cactus, desert, rocks, beaches and vice versa. But the underwater side of the coin reveals to be awesome. We came here with the spirit of the traveller, with curiosity, in search of the surprising underwater nature of Sea of Cortez and the wonderland of Pacific' coast shallow waters, and we felt in insane love of this charming destination.

It is a peninsula plenty of contradictions and striking chromatic contrasts, stretched between the mid-cold Pacific Ocean and the quieter Sea of Cortes. Among the parched lands, coloured of ochre, orange, fire red - the mountains of granite and sandstone - the long beaches of white and fine sand, with the shape of a crescent moon. Between the endless rows of columnar cactus and the long ribbon of asphalt, the Carretera Transpeninsular -that joints Tijuana, in the northern side of the peninsula, to Cabo San Lucas, in the south- going zigzag from one coast to the other side and crossing the desert canyons and the sierras.

The Baja is a sensational place, like the character of Mexican people : strong, friendly and smiling. We could not ask for something more.

Don't be distracted and lose your mind into the stories of Ernest Hemingway, thinking to be in the shade of a kiosk on a lofty and sandy beach, drinking Margarita, that is possible anyway.

The Sea of Cortez deserve more passion, it is more intriguing. Basically, it is nearly a primordial soup who feeds a perfect marine food chain and a great variety of marine birds (among them beautiful pelicans and flights of gulls). You will be



Diver surrounded by shoal of Big-eye jacks (Caranx sexfasciatus).

Canon EOS 5DS camera, Isotta housing, Canon EF 8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm. 1/200th sec @ F9. ISO 320. Manual exposure with available light.

surprised by the quantity and variety of fish thriving everywhere, albeit the dive spots seem to be the natural appendage of the land environment : an endless bare area, rocks, canyons wore away by the marine currents in the granitic blocks emerging from the sandy depth.

Divers who are looking for colourful coral gardens, gorgonians' sea-fans, soft-corals, critters

for macro-photography ... well, they will better go for the polichromy of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean because the Sea of Cortez Cortes is extraordinary and give great satisfaction to those people who looks for abundance of fish, behaviours and fast actions.



*A diver with a big Gulf grouper (Mycteroperca jordani).
Canon EOS 5DS camera, Isotta housing, Canon EF 8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm.
1/125th sec @ F16. ISO 320. Manual exposure with available light.*

Cabo Pulmo

One of the gem of the Baja California Sur is a true “hot spot” : the Cabo Pulmo reserve is considered to be one of the most successful marine protected areas in the world and is part of the Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California, UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since the reserve was established, after imposing a 15-years ban of fishing and other extractive activities, the fish populations biomass has increased more than 460 percent !. Capo Pulmo

was once depleted by fishing. In early 2000 there were only medium-sized fishes, but only ten years later it was full of parrotfish, trevally, groupers, snappers, and even sharks.... and their huge sizes reveal there are not youngers, but succeeded in living quite long life.

No other marine reserve in the world has shown such a fish recovery. Factors such as the protection on spawning areas for large predators have been of key importance to the reserve. Local leadership and self-



*Shoal of colorful yellow fish Panamic porkfish (Anisotremus taeniatus).
Canon EOS 5DS camera, Isotta housing, Canon EF 8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm.
1/200th sec @ F11. ISO 320. Manual exposure.*

enforcement, led by the determined action of few resident families, have been major factors in the park’s success. Everyone (boat captains, dive masters, etc.) works to enforce the park’s regulations and share surveillance, fauna protection and efforts. They are like vigilantes and more, and demonstrated that when people pull together not only with individual leaders but as a community working together, changes are possible.

Cabo Pulmo National Park is

home to over 6.000 marine species. Enormous groupers, turtles and large schools of jacks are easily found. Tropical fish are bountiful and if you move a bit off the reef, you’ll be pleasantly surprised by garden eels, sticking their head out of the sand to stare at new visitors.



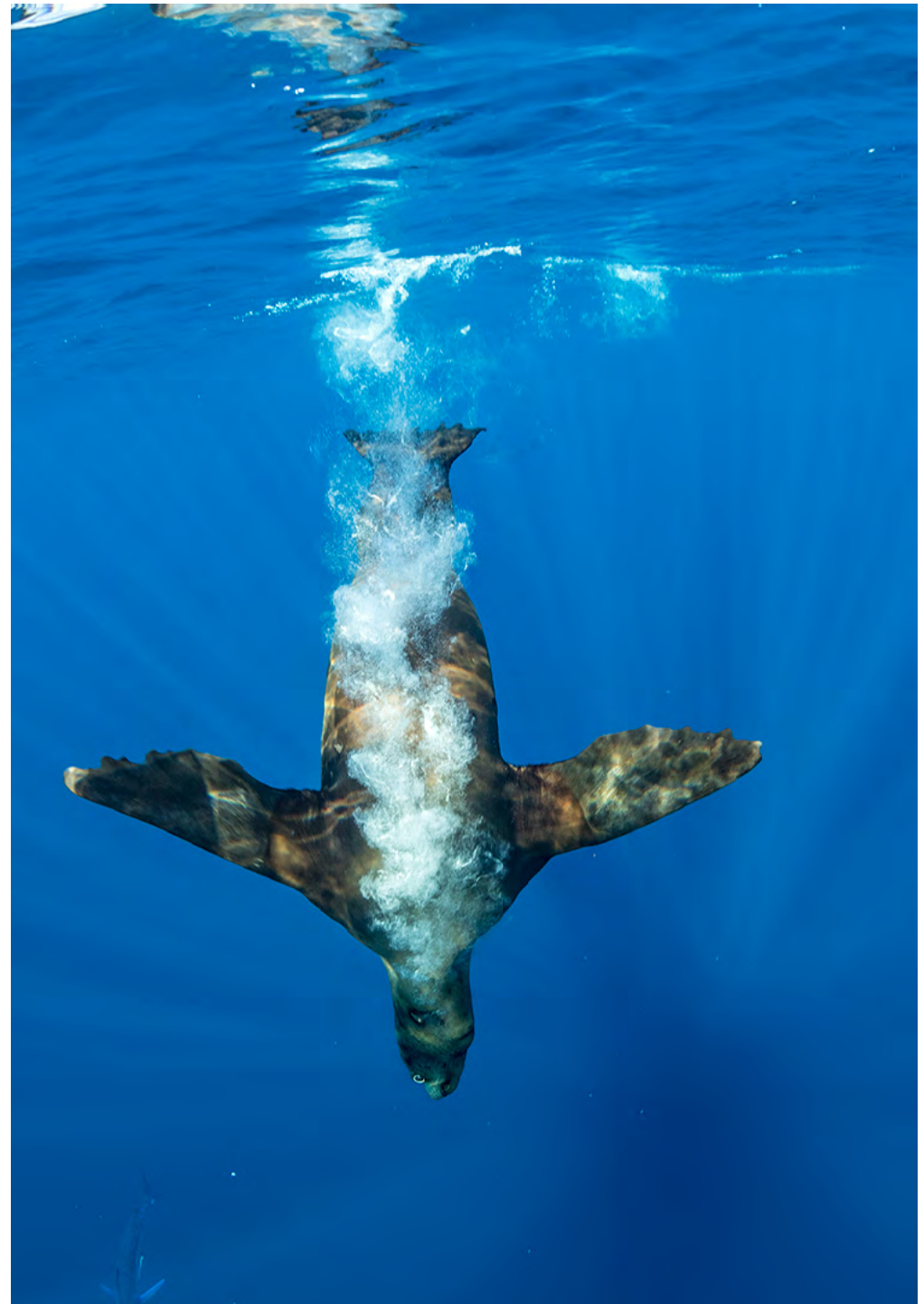
*California sea lion,
(Zalophus californianus)
swimming under the
surface
Canon EOS 5DS camera,
Isotta housing, Canon EF
8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm.
1/125th sec @ F16. ISO
320. Manual exposure with
available light.*

Espiritu Santo archipelago

Sailing to north, 27 miles from La Paz, after 1 ½ hours from the boarding at Pichilingue, sometimes two hours depending by the conditions of the sea, we reach Los Islotes. Above our heads, the gulls and the frigate birds whirls and plunge into the water looking for the daily meal to carry to their chicks, which are waiting into the nests built on the cliff, into the rifts of the rocks. This spot is made by monoliths of granite with vertical walls bleached by the guano. The southern side is home of a colony of sea-lions, the undoubted stars of the submerged stage. They are about 300 members, lively, vivacious, overwhelming and with endless energy. Dive into three metres of water, into the backwash, around these rocks, it is a sole and personal emotion. It is unavoidable to forget the time and let go completely to the pleasure of staying underwater among the pups of sea-lion (born early in the summer) and the calls of the dominant males. These cute and hyper-curious marine mammals, mostly the cubs and the juveniles, just want to play and to find something, or someone, to whom spend their time. The interaction of the sea-lions with scuba and free-divers are simply incredible.

In a moment we have been surrounded and dazed by the curiosity of these mammals, that seemed to ask us to play, while they were probably enjoying our blunder. They are used at the contact with the persons, because they are steadily studied and controlled by the researchers of the University of La Paz.

*A California Sea Lion
(Zalophus californianus)
dive fast to feed on
sardine's bait ball
(Sardinops sagax)
Canon EOS 5DS camera,
Isotta housing, Canon EF
8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm.
1/400th sec @ F11. ISO
640. Manual exposure with
available light.*



*A school of Munk's devil ray, pygmy devil ray, (Mobula munkiana), feeding on plankton at night, photographed on a long exposure.
Canon EOS 5DS camera, Isotta housing, Canon EF 8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm. 1/4 sec @ F4. ISO 360.
Manual exposure with available light.*

Another highlight of this destination is the encounters with a huge school of mobula munkiana feeding on plankton at night. Plunging or snorkelling in a handful metres of water, we are surrounded by dozens of mobula, attracted by the light of the torchs, which call for aggregation of plankton. The mobulas, mouth full open, are totally disinterested of divers, exhausted bubbles, strobes of underwater's cameras, lights of videographers, etc. and goes on feeding in front of our eyes until the lights are switched off.

Located in the Bay of La Paz, the Espiritu Santo archipelago and the surrounding waters provide habitat for algae, fish, marine mammals, birds and invertebrates, including some species at risk and 38 species of plants and animals that are not found anywhere else in the world.

Nearly 49.000 hectares of the surrounding sea have been declared marine reserve because of their great biological importance.

We suggest to visit this spot several time, because it is possible to do different kinds of dive. Swimming to northeast from the berth and leaving the granitic nose on the left, the sandy bottom slopes down till 25 / 30 mt. Among the blocks we have seen many green morays and groupers, damsel of Cortes, angelfishes and surgeon-fishes. A great school of barracuda performed in the blue, showing a wonderful carousel of silver shapes.



Franco's lens choice for most of his pictures is a Canon EF 8-15 mm f 4L Fisheye USM

The fisheye is the most important and powerful lens for underwater photography, for photographers who are addicted to sceneries, large animals, school of fish, wrecks, etc.

Fisheyes offer the widest angle of coverage of any lenses, allowing us to shoot the largest subjects and scenes through the least water, giving the most colourful and detailed pictures.

They are fabulous both in crystal clear water and in murky environments. The Canon EF 8-15mm f/4 L Fisheye lens delivers an exceptionally sharp picture underwater and it also focuses to just millimeters in front of the glass, reducing the quantity of particles suspended in the water so reducing backscatter.

Pacific Ocean

Driving north and crossing the peninsula towards the Pacific coast, about four hours driving from the city of La Paz, we headed to Magdalena Bay, for epic encounters with one of the more elusive fish in the world : the striped marlin. Striped marlin is a highly migratory pelagic species, broadly distributed throughout tropical, subtropical, and temperate waters, which shows considerable variation in spatial distribution as a consequence of habitat preference.

To document first hand this wonder of nature at its purest form, our choice was to touch bases with the more skilled captain and fisherman of Puerto San Carlos, a man whom wide experience made the difference and who shares a passion for the ocean unlike many we've met. During the months of November and December, 35 miles offshore, the stretch of the Pacific ocean becomes an hotspot for striped marlins actions, as they feed on large bait-balls of sardines on the surface, assaulted by frigate and marine birds' squadrons from the air. If you don't have the right man who spots the right bait-ball, side of which you can safely swim, then the game is over in a blink of an eye.

The bait-balls can disperse, and so will do the marlins ; the surface could be rough and you will never be in the right position to shot the pictures, since the scales of the fishes reflect the sun beams ; you might find yourself too close to the bait-ball, putting you in danger to be injured by the fish. But when everything is perfect, you will see striped marlins working along side sea lions and sometimes sailfish, mahi mahi and tunas, to push the bait-balls to the surface before hunting together is awe inspiring. The action is unreal and hard to really put to words.



Striped marlin (Tetrapturus audax) feeding on sardine's bait ball (Sardinops sagax)
Canon EOS 5DS camera,
Isotta housing, Canon EF
8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm.
1/400th sec @ F11. ISO
640. Manual exposure with
available light.





California Sea Lion (Zalophus californianus) and Striped marlin (Tetrapturus audax) feeding on sardine's bait ball (Sardinops sagax)
Canon EOS 5DS camera, Isotta housing, Canon EF 8-15mm F4 lens at 15mm. 1/400th sec @ F7. ISO 640. Manual exposure with available light.

Striped marlin is a surface-dwelling species, and spend the majority of its time in the surface “azul”, crystal clear waters. This room is something that I’ve always been fascinated, together with the most of underwater photographers specialized in wide angles pictures. It is by far the largest aquatic biome in terms of volume. Nevertheless, in comparison to many of the other biomes, it usually seems to be a desert. On the surface, we will never have the guarantee to find subjects and / or we will find

animals that are really wild, fast, shy, hypersensitive. Often we’ll have only one ops to take “The Picture” : a true challenging and thrilling environment that can be tamed with the right team of professional operators.

We are impatient to come back at the beginning of November 2019 and live some days in the purest wild experience the ocean will grant us. Best season : October and November
 Air companies : KLM and Aeromexico, via Amsterdam and Mexico City



Franco Banfi & Sabrina Belloni
www.wildlifephototours.ch



Wildlife Photo Tours

Franco Banfi and Sabrina organize small groups to make intimate encounters with fantastic animals.

 Action in Apes 28 August - 08 Sept 2019	 Humpback whales 17 Aug - 07 Sept 2019	 Medley four destinations 18 Oct - 10 Nov 2019	 Pelagics, marlins and more 09 - 15 November 2019
 Pelagics, marlins and more 09 - 15 November 2019	 Blue and baleen whales 04 - 14 March 2020	 Brazil- Mato grosso August 2019	 Sperm whales 01 May 2021

www.wildlifephototours.ch