

Marlin

by Todd Aki

Static : motionless, quiet, calm. The word itself is almost a remedy for a quick pulse - unless you're in Magdalena Bay on the western coast of the Baja Peninsula and the word is shouted by the captain who is scanning the clear blue waters for static, unmoving bait balls and the marlin that come to feed on them.

Bait balls in this area are schools of migratory sardines that form tight groups, constantly swimming in unison, hoping that their collective size will be enough to confuse predators and that individuals in the center won't be eaten. Bait balls attract predators and predators attract photographers.

We are here to snorkel with and photograph the marlin feeding, but finding a static bait ball is the trick. Many bait balls are naturally on the run. Your boat may stop and you might jump in just in time to see the feeder fish and marlin streak by at warp speed before a single shot is taken, but our captain is the ace up our sleeve.

Captain Gabino Zarabia, owner of Magbay Sport, has been plying these waters for 30 years first as a fisherman but now as a shark conservationist via



Striped marlin in attack mode. Canon 7D Mark II in a Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17. SS 1/320 at f/5.0 iso 400





*Canon 7D Mark II in a Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17.
SS 1/320 at f/5.0 iso 500
When a school of striped marlin work together, the baitball has no chance.*

*Canon 7D Mark II in a Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17.
SS 1/400 at f/7.1, iso 500
When a sailfish entered the fray, the striped marlin backed away.*

tourism. Gabino knows that if the bait balls he seeks are static, we will have time with the marlin, will be able to watch the marlin picking off the bait fish one by one, and be able photograph this interplay, adjusting our shots in real time, for hours. And we are not disappointed.

Gabino yells, “Static” and there are marlin. Lots of marlin. Scratch

that, literally TONS of marlin. Neon marlin light up the water like jewels. Marlin jump like skipping stones across the surface shredded by frenzied bills and dorsal fins. This water is alive.

The days on the ocean are long, leaving the shore at 7:30am and returning at 4pm. The ride out to the productive grounds can take up to





Striped marlin keeping the baitball tightly packed and at the surface. Canon 7D Mark II in a Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17. SS 1/320 at f/6.3, iso 500

two hours. At times the ocean seems dead, then all of a sudden the sky fills with the sight and sounds of gannets and shearwaters dive bombing the surface picking off fish from above and marlin pushing the bait ball up from the deep. We pass by many of these scenes, but when we hear Gabino yell, “Static!”, you better be suited up and ready to go. Some of these bait balls are massive and just watching them morph into constantly changing shapes is beautiful, mesmerizing. Other bait balls are small. We jump in on one “bait ball”

that is comprised of only two dozen fish and watch (and shoot) as all are eaten in just under a minute by a pack of 10 amped marlin.

Mag Bay is best known for the grey whale migration but there are also cool sand dunes, mangrove ecosystems, surf spots, and shark snorkel tours. We came to see the striped marlin but, because of Captain Gabino’s long history in this area, we left with a much fuller experience of the water and surrounding community. In a single day, we swam with marlin, sailfish, and sea



I could not have asked for a better way to end the day than to swim with a pod of orcas!

Canon 7D Mark II in a Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17. 1/250 at f/5.0, iso 320

lions. We watched as pilot fish hid under a turtle for cover from stalking dorados. We stopped and talked with a scallop fishermen, observed their methods of gathering, tried a delicious, raw sample, and ordered a few pounds to be delivered and cooked at the local restaurant that night. We untangled a turtle trapped in a fisherman’s buoy. We watched humpback and Bryde’s whales swim by. And we came in two hours late,

as we went overtime to snorkel with a pod of passing orcas.

My time in Magdalena Bay will not be soon forgotten. And despite Webster’s definition, when I now hear the word “static”, my heart beats a little faster.

Todd Aki

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