

Baja

by Gregory Sweeney

Underwater photographers will find the Mexican peninsula of Baja California Sur to be a surprising destination full of wonderful rich marine life encounters and overall wild beauty.

The Baja peninsula extends into the Pacific Ocean from the southern end of California and presents the visitor with diving opportunities in the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez on the east coast. Beautiful beaches and expansive coastline and deserts are packed with a surprising range of wildlife not all of which is underwater.

Land based beauty is found in the sand dunes and dry rocky expanses with large cacti photographed at sunset with a caracara eagle silhouetted on top. Coastal coyotes prowl the mangroves along the shorelines as we traverse in the dive boat. Sea birds and shore birds are abundant.

The abundant wildlife underwater draws divers and photographers especially in the winter when Baja becomes the perfect food chain and gives rise to the dramatic sardine run and its predators of all sizes. Visitors drawn to Baja by the exciting predator and prey action can also have an adventure at the



many different marine habitats along the peninsula. Baja has established protected marine habitats that give the gift of pristine coral reefs. Each unique location also offers close up encounters with marine mammals, sharks, large fish, and massive schools of fish. Encounters with the largest of marine inhabitants; whales, orcas, dolphins, pelagic sharks are a pleasant bonus and yet another

*Photographing Mega
Schools at Cabo Pulmo
Canon 5D MKII
EF16 – 35mm f/2.8 II USM
ISO 640
Focal length 16mm
1/80 sec at F 8.0 – 1/3 EV*





Sea Lions and Striped Marlin hunt sardines. Canon 5D MKII, EF16 – 35mm f/2.8 II USM. ISO 1250 Focal length 16mm 1/250 sec at F 10



Humpback Whale in Magdalena Bay. Canon 5D MKII, EF100 – 400mm f 4.5 – 5.6 I IS II USM. ISO 1000. 1/1000 sec at F 16

reason to enjoy exploring all the wonders on offer. For underwater photographers Baja California Sur in Mexico is a must experience destination full of wildlife on land and in the water.

Sardine Run Magdalena Bay

From October to January, Magdalena Bay on the Pacific side of Baja manifests the world's 2nd largest sardine migration after South Africa. Clear water and more

intense action by the marlin and sea lions differentiate this sardine run from that in South Africa. Illusive striped marlin are drawn into the bay by the concentration of prey then work together to trap them at the surface preventing the sardines from escaping. Snorkelers and photographers are in the midst of a real cooperative hunting scenario with the action surrounding them.

Each day on the water can bring a surprise before we even find the

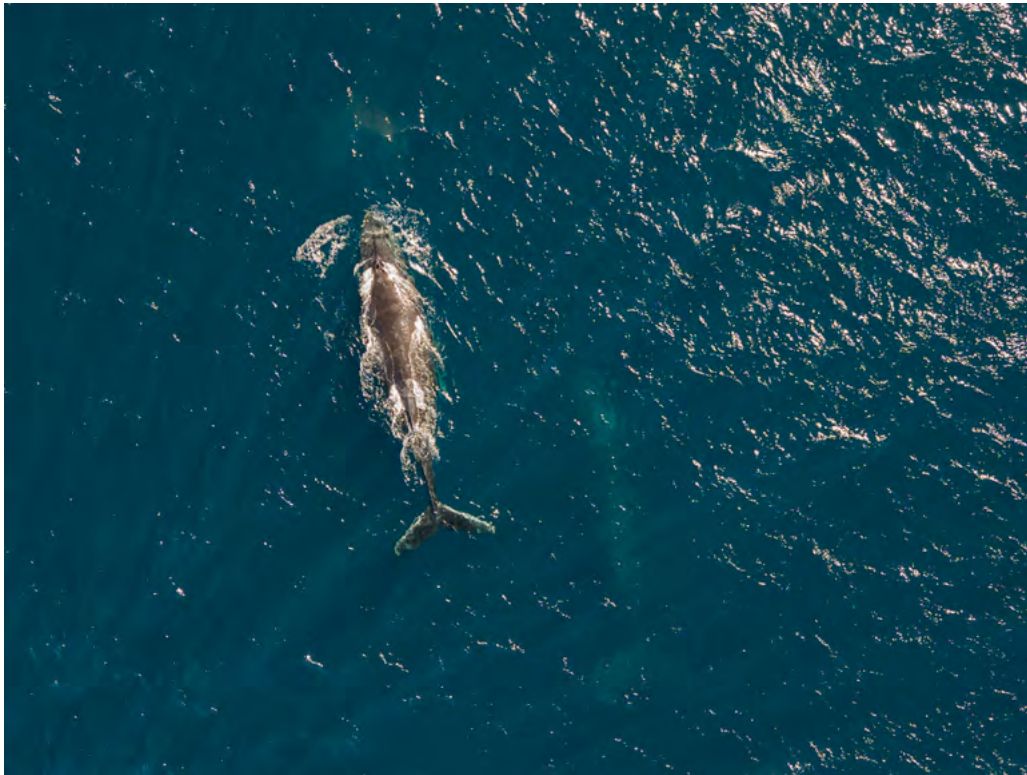
bait balls. Super pods of dolphins, orcas, and humpback whales are all part of the gathering. The first sign is squadrons of frigate birds diving and assaulting the surface.

Under the water the shiny silver mackerel spin and pulse in a ball close to the surface. Striped marlin work together circling the bait ball to keep it tight together and close to the surface. They take turns making a run at the edge of the bait ball swatting their sword nose to stun fish grabbing them

in the mouth to munch them.

As we photograph the mackerel will seek to hide from the predators among us and our cameras. An encounter with static bait ball can be over and hour before it dissipates, or the marlin leave. Larger schools of sardines often attract sea lions in addition to the striped marlin.

Sea lions have a contrasting hunting technique whereby they swim passes straight through the bait ball cutting it in two. Often they



Drone View of Humpbacked Whale. DJI Mavik Pro. 24 mm 1/160th f2.8. ISO 100

seem to be more interested in playful swimming among the sardine school than actually eating. This makes it harder for the marlins to hunt effectively but for the photographer it adds another dynamic element to the whole drama.

The frenzied and powerful beauty of this natural behavior puts a photographer in awe and is the ultimate underwater photography experience. Magdalena Bay is always a wonderous experience and consistently delivers top predator action and surprises.

Premiere Diving Locations

Cabo Pulmo Marine Park is considered to be on of the most successful marine protected areas in the world and is part of UNESCO's world Heritage sites.

After the ban on fishing the fish populations of this once depleted reef system have increased more than 460% and scientists see evidence that the top predator species of tiger sharks, bull sharks, black tip reef sharks have increased significantly. Size and number of larger fish has also increased pointing to the success of



A young sea lion comes to close to nibble my camera. . Canon 5D MKII. EF16 – 35mm f/2.8 II USM. Focal length 16mm. 1/200 sec at F 7.1. ISO 2500

the reserve program.

Divers visiting Cabo Pulmo Marine Park now experience wrecks and mega schools of colorful fish with bull sharks lurking among the wrecks dotted with hard corals and sea fans. Large fish including gulf groupers, dog snappers, and leopard groupers pose in the clear blue waters for photographers. Divers become lost in mega schools of fish moving in coordination around the suspended divers.

Like Cabo Pulmo, La Paz is located on the opposite coast of the

Baja Peninsula from Magdalena Bay. Visiting divers are delighted with amazing orca encounters and the charismatic California Sea Lions.

The coast is dominated by monoliths of granite and sheer vertical walls white with the evidence of nesting sea birds. On the rocks at the tideline the playful sea lions gather as a colony. We dive among the rocks in a protected cove with the hyper curious marine mammals all around us. Cubs and juveniles are curious and want to play and interact with us by swimming through our bubbles



Cabo Pulmo Coastal Scenery . Panasonic DMC-ZS30

and striking crazy contorted poses for our cameras. Some nip at our fins and gaze into reflections in our dome ports. The barking of adults up on the rocks is audible even underwater. This dive is full of joy and fun and we observe the swimming ability and personality of these animals. It is a relaxed encounter in contrast with watching the sea lions hunting the sardine bait balls.

The La Paz coast attracts mega schools of mobula rays who gather to feed on the abundant plankton in the water. An exciting way to experience the mobula rays is to dive at night where the plankton is drawn to our torches and the mobula soon appear. We hope to encounter orcas hunting the mobula.

The Baja Peninsula experiences the sardine run and the explosion of food and predators in the winter months, but wildlife is abundant all year round. Underwater photographers visit throughout the year to find mako, blue sharks, orcas, humpbacked whales, fin whales, and pods of dolphins.

The sardine run draws many to Baja, Mexico.



Striped Marlin. Canon 5D MKII. EF16 – 35mm f/2.8 II USM. ISO 1000. Focal length 27mm. 1/320 sec at F 7.1

This spectacle is one of the most exciting things you can witness and photograph underwater and is truly an experience not to miss. Visitors will not fully appreciate the natural jewel that is the whole of the Baja Mexico peninsula if they don't explore beyond Magdalena Bay. Baja Mexico has plenty of marine wildlife encounters and photo opportunities to satisfy all divers and photographers.

Photography guide

Equipment:

Lenses

Topside Lens - EF 100 – 400 F/4.5 – 5.6L

Striped Marlins & Sea Lions - 16 – 35mm F 2.8L

Cabo Pulmo schools of fish - EF15mm

Strobes can be used in Mag Bay and at La Paz, but

not permitted in Cabo Pulmo park

Using strobes with the baitballs will only be effective if the target is very close, but keep in mind the marlin and the sardines are very reflective and easily overexposed by a strobe burst.

Drones are permitted in many of the locations.

Video is excellent for the striped marlins and sea lion colony to capture the continuous action.

The water is pleasant all year round and a 3mm full wetsuits with vest and hood is standard

Full foot fins are recommended for easy on and off while in the Mag Bay boats.

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