

Sun, sealions and burritos

with Alex Tattersall

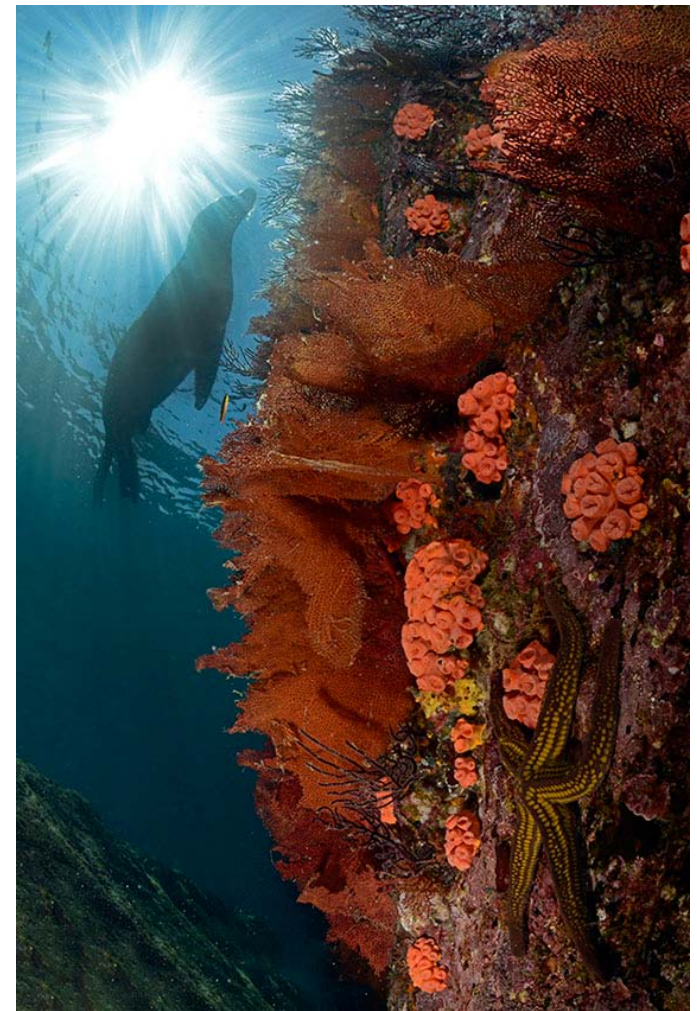
I love Latin America. I spent a colourful gap-year backpacking around Central and South America and, whilst I learnt to dive in Caribbean Venezuela, I was too empty of pocket to take advantage of the spectacular diving on offer. I was happy then to have the opportunity to make a visit to La Paz, on the Baja California peninsular to delight in the offerings of the Sea of Cortez, affectionately known (following a quote from the great Jacques Cousteau) as the World's Aquarium.

At close to 5 million years old, the Sea of Cortez is widely considered to be youngest of the seas, a long narrow stretch of water sheltered from the mighty Pacific by the Baja California Peninsular. As a result, it serves as a refuge for many large pelagic species, humpback whales, manta rays, whale sharks, Orca, leatherback turtles, whilst boasting an exceptional number of fish and invertebrate species. Moreover, the site contains more than a third of the world's total species of marine mammals and marine cetaceans. Biologically speaking the Sea of Cortez is the richest body of water on our planet with a significant area named as a UNESCO world marine heritage site. Above the surface, the desertified mountains drop into turquoise sea colours reminiscent in many ways of the Egyptian Red Sea.

Once underwater though, the topographical features, reef structures, coral species and marine life contrasts greatly with that of the Red Sea. The Sea of Cortez experiences far more substantial water movement resulting in a considerably larger variance in water temperature (between 15

degrees Celsius in the winter months to 30 degrees Celsius during the summer). As a result, coral reef structures are very different from those in the Red Sea. The richness of marine diversity in this body of water is a direct result of this significant water movement which washes up high levels of plankton to nourish and support a rich and diverse food chain. Water temperature and water clarity are two very important considerations when deciding upon the optimum seasonal period to visit the Sea of Cortez as a dive destination. After all, if we want to dive in chilly conditions with limited visibility, surely we can do that in the UK. Being informed in our choice of time to visit will also afford the best possible sightings and interactions with the species we wish to encounter.

We stayed at la Concha resort (<http://www.laconcha.com/>), host to the Cortez Club Dive Centre (<http://www.cortezclub.com/>), located a kilometre North of the vibrant little tourist town of La Paz. Diving from the centre is on small day boats as many of the best sites are within one hour from the resort. Limited numbers of liveaboard boats operate in the area but as far as I can I like to support the local economy and experience some of the local life, and with the choice of colourful eateries and tequila bars in the town we were very happy, if not a little light-headed, with our decision to be land-based. If you are thinking to visit La Paz and stay at la Concha resort, a word of advice, ask to stay in the newly refurbished side of the hotel. And, expect loud and colourful marriage fiestas during the weekends. A lovely side of Mexico where



The midmorning sun shines onto the face of the Isolotes outcrop resulting in excellent lighting conditions. At 5 meters, the D800 copes well with sunbursts.

D800, Sigma 15mm, Nauticam housing, Zen 200mm dome, 2x INON Z240, 1/250, F16, ISO250

you'll see locals dress up in traditional clothing and dance until the early hours. Also, I wouldn't recommend taking the honeymoon suite unless



*Poor vis is common with feeding whaleshark, the answer it seems is to get closer.
D800, Sigma 15mm, Nauticam housing, Zen 200mm dome, 1/400, F5, ISO500*

you can comfortably ‘perform’ with an open-air toilet surrounded by a one meter high wall and a cowboy style swing door within three paces from the bed. The Brit inside me meant that I, personally, feel this is stretching the love a little, especially with the omnipresent refried beans making appearances on plates at all times of the day. Incidentally, La Paz holds the world record for the world’s longest burrito weighing 5.8 tons and measuring 2.7km. (<http://blog.cbriveras.com/la-paz-news-the-worlds-largest-burrito-nov-9-2010/>).

To me, that shows how cool this little town is.

Day One, we emerged jetlagged and confused from our room and, after a breakfast of refried beans, guacamole, tortillas and cactus juice (olé), we found our way to the dive centre. Having dived several times with our wonderful UK grey seal colonies in the Farnes and Lundy island, I was very keen to see one of the area’s main attractions, the resident colony of 250+ Californian Sealions on the small outlying island of Los Isolotes and so requested this



*Wonderful interaction between wild animal and semi-wild human (my wife;).
- D800, Sigma 15mm, Nauticam housing, Zen 200mm dome, 2x INON Z240, 1/250, F9, ISO320*

to the very accommodating dive centre. We boarded the boat prepared for the 45 minute buzz up the coast to Los Isolotes. Within five minutes from leaving the jetty, our captain nonchalantly pointed out a whale shark on the surface and would have continued had he not been flagged down by us, frantically shouting ‘Stop’, ‘Stop’.

We visited the area in November, towards the tail end of the long five-month whale shark season in La Paz and the captain was clearly not

as excited as we were. Still being the customers, we spent a good 20 minutes in the plankton rich water with the majestic creature, which became two and then became three. We were the only boat in the area, with only four of us on board, a contrast to the increasingly familiar shots from the Maldives of whale sharks and mantas being chased down by armies of divers and snorkelers.

As we continued on, within another ten minutes we encountered a small pod of bottlenose dolphin and



How can you resist these eyes. I borrowed my wife's Olympus OMD-EM5 setup for one dive and was surprised by its competence.

Olympus OMD-EM5, Panasonic 8mm Fisheye, Nauticam NA-EM5 housing, FIT Pro 4.33" optical glass minidome, 2x Sea and Sea YS-D1, 1/200, F11, ISO 500

then to our absolute delight, a mother and baby humpback whale pair cut through the surface some 20 meters from our boat. The Sea of Cortez is one of the world hotspots for whale-watching, a season that starts late October and runs through until May with a peak in January/February. More than 20 species are seen in the area including Sperm Whales, Finback Whales, Minke Whales, Grey Wales and the magnificent Blue Whale. With a newfound glint of excitement in our

eyes and broad smiles on our faces, we finally arrived at our destination, the rocky outcrop of Los Isolotes and the Californian Sealion Colony. This was only Day One.

The journey North from La Paz to Los Isolotes can take from 45 minutes on a calm day to up to 90 minutes with rougher seas. With no toilet on the boat, this can challenge even the strongest of bladders. As the boat rounds the last of the headland, the final stretch of water



Charging bull sealion - This was a warning to me that I was too close to this 350Kg giant's family. I like to maintain fast shutter speeds with fast moving animals such as sealions. The D800 shows little difference in noise performance between ISO 100 and ISO 640 so I set ISO quite high to be able to have a more closed aperture.

-D800, Sigma 15mm, Nauticam housing, 200mm Zen dome, 2x INON Z240, 1/200, F11, ISO 640

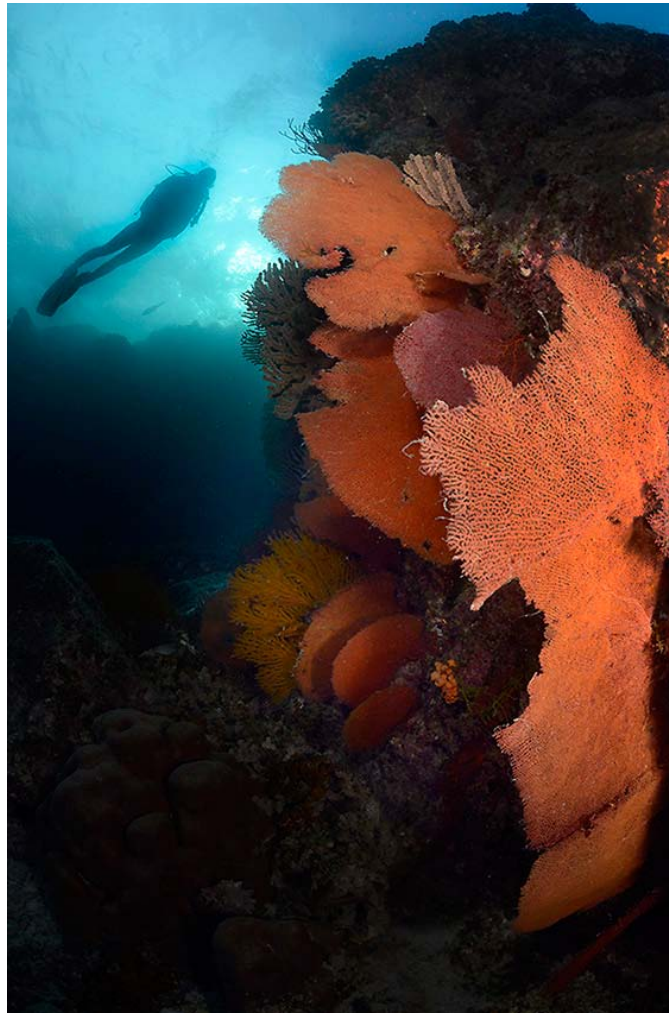
becomes exposed and the delightful odour of fresh sealion starts to waft along on the breeze. Approaching the pinnacle, the odour intensifies and is joined by the inimitable sound of barking, which to an underwater wildlife photographer like myself, causes great excitement, like a ringing bell to Pavlov's dogs. What photo

opportunities await!

Diving with Californian Sealions is like diving with UK grey seals, on steroids. It is a treat first to be able to fall into warm water in a thin wetsuit. As you jump in and approach the rocky shallows, the barking heard at the surface surrounds you underwater. The enormous bulls, weighing some



What a poser - This female was resting in a cave entrance and was curious to see me arrive. I'd put on the 60mm macro lens to get some nice sea lion portraits and she was very happy to oblige. Strobes were on long arms in front of me to get light onto her. I have found that with the larger field of view, the 60mm is a different tool on FX format cameras. D800, 60mm AF-S macro, Nauticam housing, macro port 60, 2x INON Z240, 1/250, F11, ISO 320



The rich colours of the gorgonians in the Sea of Cortez contrast wonderfully with the azure of its water (during the right season)

D800, Sigma 15mm, Nauticam housing, Zen 200mm dome, 2x INON Z240, 1/125, F14, ISO500

350kg, are very vocal in their territorial patrol displays moving with incredible agility. Their presence is certainly intimidating, especially as they charge with their teeth bared, and I did have a couple of 'heart in mouth' moments. Back on board, I told of my encounter with a large male that had me pinned to a rock and the captain showed me a large scar on his arm from a male sealion bite. The females, very graceful in their movement divide their time between basking on the surface in large harems and frolicking with their ever-playful pups. It is these juveniles though that are the highlight for many, cute and curious little nibblers that use divers and snorkelers as playthings, grabbing fins and mouthing bubbles, sometimes giving a playful nip, though at times a little too hard.

As ever, timing is important to get the optimum experience with the pups. Coming too early in the season would mean overprotective parents and overly-cautious pups, too late and territorial preparations would already be under way for the next brood. Opinion differs between boat captains but between early September and mid November is ideal, before the waters turn cold and visibility deteriorates. For photos, morning is ideal as the waters turn murky with sealion waste later in the day!

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I am organizing a return photo trip to La Paz at the end of September 2013 through Divequest for another week of sun, sealions and burritos.

www.divequest.co.uk/Focus-on-mexico-sea-of-cortez-alex-tattersall

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