

Friday 1st March

Our taxi to Heathrow was quick and the check-in was smooth so we had plenty of time for lunch in the lounge before boarding our long flight to LA. We had premium seats in an Airbus A380. There was some turbulence en-route and the cabin was very warm. Our arrival into LAX was very smooth – with Global Entry we didn't even need to show our passports. A bit of a wait for bags and then we caught the hotel shuttle through very bad traffic to the Airport Hilton. The room was large and comfortable, but we were close to the lifts and it was very noisy. We met Alex and Steve for a drink and a chat, and then went to bed after a very long day. If I was coming back I'd pick a different hotel.

Saturday 2nd March

I woke up at 2:30am and carried on processing photos from our previous trip (Kenya) before we headed into the airport. Our flight had been rescheduled and it was now arriving in Loreto 4 hours later than what we booked. We were close to the front of the plane and immigration was fairly quick, but we then got stopped by customs who wanted to charge us \$150USD to bring the underwater camera housing into Mexico. We argued for around 30 minutes, but we knew we had a five hour drive in the dark ahead of us, so were forced to give up and concede. We paid on credit card in the hope of getting the money back from the credit card company. Extremely frustrating and not a great start to the trip.

We collected Rob and Christina from a hotel in Loreto where they had gone to get a few hours sleep and then drove up to Antonio's Eco-tours on San Antonio lagoon. The drive was fairly uneventful. The road was fairly empty, some large trucks, but the driving of the other vehicles was safe enough and we didn't encounter any livestock. The road was, in places, steep and winding, and we were sad that we were missing some lovely scenery in the dark. The road surface was smooth until we got close to San Ignacio Lagoon, when it descended into an extremely rutted gravel track. Our speed dropped dramatically as Rob, who has 2 metal rods in his back, was finding it extremely uncomfortable. We eventually arrived at around 11pm, were given a quick dinner, and went to bed, utterly exhausted.

Sunday 3rd March

We woke up at around 5am (still feeling the time difference) and got ourselves ready for the day's activities. We headed off **Grey whale** watching at 9am after breakfast. The water was choppy, and it started off slowly, but we ended up with whales playing right next to and under the boat which was amazing although they stayed just out of touching distance. We also saw some **Common Bottlenose dolphins**.

In the afternoon we did another whale watching trip. The wind had dropped and it was much calmer. The whales seemed more sedate, but there were plenty of them around. Eventually a mother and calf let us get close and, again came right next to the boat so we got some great views. By now we'd seen some lovely behaviour including some fin slapping, very distant breaching and spy-hopping. A great day!





Monday 4th March



We had two whale watching trips this morning with a break on a beach in between. The forecast was for the wind to pick up significantly in the afternoon. Lots more whales, but no close encounters today.

We did a trip to the salt flats in the afternoon which were very beautiful.



Tuesday 5th March

We did a morning whale watching trip – lots of whales but they didn't want to play with the boat. However, in the afternoon we finally got the trip that we were imagining. We went back out to the mouth of the lagoon and found a mother and calf who we spent the rest of the afternoon excursion with. They kept coming over to the boat, coming really close and going under the boat many times. They even came close enough for me to touch – which was an amazing feeling – I might have squealed a bit from the sheer excitement! They completely ignored all the other boats and only wanted to come and play with us! We also had bottlenose dolphins and some new seabirds. It was a magical experience. It was just a shame that Rob and Christina decided to give this one a miss because Rob's back was hurting too much.



Wednesday 6th March

Our final morning of whale watching today. The first trip was our best one. We had close encounters with 2 mother and calf pairs, and this time we all got to touch a whale, and Andy even got a kiss! The second baby whale kept coming back for more, and we all loved it. After a while it would get told off by Mum with a tail slap, and they would carry on, before the baby would get curious and come back in.

The second trip was less exciting with the whales not coming so close. We had a quick lunch and then started the 5 hour drive back to Loreto, with a quick stop at San Ignacio Mission church on the way, checked into Posada del Cortes (nice hotel - wish we had a bit longer to appreciate it!) and headed to Mi Loreto for a nice dinner with great cocktails!

Overall, I would recommend Antonio's Eco-tours (<https://cabanassanignacio.com/>) for Grey whale watching. The food was good, the drinks were free, and we stayed in the Beach House which was comfortable enough. The only down side of staying here for mammal watchers is that they have dogs, so there is absolutely no chance of seeing any foxes at night here, unless you get in the car and drive. However, we had only a very fleeting glance of one on our long and late drive in, and I asked the camp manager and he said he sees them very rarely from the road and they always disappear very quickly. The free margaritas also meant we didn't really want to drive anywhere after dinner so we didn't go looking ...

Unfortunately this year there were only 12 baby whales born in the lagoon (compared to the previous year of 88). Given that only a third to a half of the baby whales will be curious and friendly, getting really close encounters was a challenge, and many people missed out this year. No-one knows why the number of babies was so low this year – it could be due to climate change combined with El Nino, or it could be something else. So if you come to San Ignacio, do give yourself plenty of time if you want to get up close and personal with the whales. Out of our 8 boat trips I got to touch a whale on two and Andy on one. There were other groups who had stayed for longer than us and no-one had touched a whale yet.

I was also very impressed by how well regulated the whale watching was. There are only 16 small boats allowed in the lagoon at once, and the boats aren't allowed to chase the whales, they can only get up to a certain distance, and then it's up to the whales to approach the boats. Also, only one boat can be with a whale at a time. It never felt like the boats were disturbing the whales, and all the interactions were completely on the whale's terms – it is their choice how close they come.

Thursday 7th March

We were up early to go whale watching. We left the marina at 7am and 5 minutes later we found our first whales – **humpbacks**. We had just started continuing on, when we spotted some breaching whales in the distance. To start with we thought they were humpbacks, but when we got closer we were told they were fin whales. Seeing them breach is rare, so we were very lucky.

However, when we got back and looked through the photos and video, it was very obvious that one of the whales was definitely not in fact a fin whale at all, but looked more like a blue whale. So we sent the picture to Claudia from Wild About Colombia (she is a cetacean specialist and we travelled with Wild About Colombia last year – excellent trip!) to check. She confirmed that the blue whale was in fact a blue whale, and also that the fin whale was in fact a **blue whale/fin whale hybrid** that was the subject of this scientific research paper. <https://irispublishers.com/aomb/pdf/AOMB.MS.ID.000545.pdf>



We watched them for a while and then carried on to a **blue whale**. Again, we watched for a while, with a mobula putting in a brief appearance, before heading out to look for more whales. Next we came across a pair of humpbacks. They were joined briefly by a third, who breached just behind the boat. We spent a long time with the humpbacks, then headed off to take a look at some **bottlenose dolphins**. Our last stop before lunch was with some **California Sea-lions** and some people from other boats were swimming with these. On our way back to Loreto there were more dolphins. We all agreed it was a great trip. I would definitely recommend <https://loretobluewhales.com/> who gave us such a great day. It is a local husband and wife team who run it and you book directly with them.







We had a smooth 4 and a half hour drive to La Paz and checked into our accommodation, and then went for dinner. We stayed at Departamentos Varmen through booking.com. It suited us well except that it was one floor up, and the only way up was via a very narrow spiral staircase that is not in anyway suited to carrying up large bags! If you are travelling light I would recommend it. Dinner was at Mariscos El Toro Güero, just up the road, which we really enjoyed. The mixed ceviche was lovely, as was the lemonade with mint (limonada menta).

Friday 8th March

We were up early to head to the dive centre (The Cortez Club) for our pre-arranged start time. However, we got there and were told that since we were doing a night dive plus a two tank trip it would be better to go out in the afternoon. We walked along the seafront in the sunshine admiring all the statues before heading back to the apartment for a couple of hours to process photos and have a nap. We headed back to the dive centre a midday and put on our wetsuits, then after several delays we headed out to Los Islotes for our first dive with the California sea lions. They were very cute and playful and we all had close encounters. They were biting our fins (they are very strong – you can really feel them pulling you), and investigating our cameras, regulators and hoses. One came so close to my hand he touched me with his whiskers! It was lots of fun, although the water was a bit murky and a chilly 21 degrees Celsius.

After that we carried onto the Fang Min shipwreck. This was a fairly poor dive as the visibility was pretty dreadful. There was a very chilled **green turtle** asleep on the top of the wreck who was very obliging. It was also definitely not suitable for beginner divers. We were both completely ok, but Rob and Christina only have a handful of dives, and taking inexperienced divers inside a wreck is really irresponsible.

We then did a night dive. This was supposed to be to look for mobulas, but it turned into a standard night dive (no lights hung behind the boat) with a few critters (**scorpion fish**, a couple of morays, a flatworm, and a **bullseye stingray**), but again, the water was murky and it was cold.

There was a string wind blowing on all of the boat trips and surface intervals. We all agreed that, in hindsight, we wish we'd dived in the morning, when it was warmer, and either just done one dive with the sealions or done both dives with the sealions. We would have skipped the night dive altogether had we known in advance it wasn't going to be looking for mobulas. I definitely wouldn't recommend The Cortez Club as a dive centre. Our dive guide did a really bad job of monitoring the inexperienced divers air, there was a lot of miscommunication and the price we paid for what we actually got made it terrible value.





Saturday 9th March

We were supposed to go snorkelling with whale sharks this morning but when we arrived we were told that it was cancelled due to bad weather. The dive centre had our numbers and e-mail but didn't let us know, so we didn't find out until we arrived there at midday which effectively wasted the day for us so we just headed to Todos Santos and chilled for a bit before exploring the small town. There are some expensive touristy shops and a few restaurants but that's about it. We had a really nice dinner at Mejibó and the intention was to go to bed early and get a good night's sleep before the liveboard, but there was music pounding from somewhere until 1am so that didn't happen. For this reason, I wouldn't recommend the accommodation. Apart from that it was really nice, but the music was painfully loud.

Sunday 10th March

We had a lazy morning in Todos Santos and then dropped Rob and Christina at the airport for their flight home. From there, we headed into Cabo San Lucas to check in for our liveboard – the Nautalis Belle Amie. The boat didn't sail until 8pm, so we had the rest of the day to wander around Cabo, which is very touristy and not in a good way (unless you want to buy Viagra). I was glad we weren't spending much time here.

Monday 11th March

Today was a sailing day to the Revillagigedo Islands. Luckily the wind was low and the water was calm, so it was a calm and easy journey out. It meant I could catch up on processing all the photos from the last few days!

Tuesday 12th March

Our first diving day – we started with a check dive at Fondeadero off San Benedicto Island before 3 dives at The Boiler. The Revillagigedo Islands are famous for its Oceanic Manta Rays who seem to like the bubbles made by divers. It also has a reputation for friendly dolphins. I've been diving for quite a few years and up until this point I'd never had a good dolphin encounter under water. I'd seen them a few times, but it was always pretty fleeting – a brief glimpse and they were gone – I was hoping for something better this time.

There were lots of Mantas and sharks on the dives, however the main highlight was on the last dive of the day. As soon as we got into the water we could hear the high pitched squeaks of dolphins, so we were all on high alert trying to spot them. A few minutes later a small pod of dolphins swam past, coming very close, and then one dolphin peeled off from the rest and came right up to us. It looked at us for a bit, and then hung vertically in the water, head up and tail down, right in front of us. We looked over at our dive guide, who mimed that we could touch the dolphin. So we did – it seemed like the dolphin was like a dog who wanted his tummy tickled! The dolphin seemed to really enjoy it – we were always careful never to crowd it, and give it plenty of space to swim away if it wished to, but it

just kept coming back for more! It was a completely magical experience and we felt incredibly privileged to have had it.

Later on in the trip we made return visits to the same dive site and I saw an entire pod of dolphins swim down to the sea-bed and hang vertically just above it (head up tail down) and it looked like some fish then came over to clean them and remove parasites. Since fish would not normally swim close to dolphins, my theory is that the vertical, still position in the water is an invitation by the dolphin that they want to be cleaned, and that one particular dolphin in the area has worked out that human hands do this quite well, and seeks out divers for this reason. I'd be interested to know if anyone else has seen the same behaviour in other dolphin populations or if it is unique to the area.



Top: Frigatebird (we think this is a great frigatebird, but happy to be corrected if this isn't right)

Next page: Masked Booby



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Bigeye Trevally

Wednesday 13th March



Today we did four dives at The Canyon off San Benedicto Island. Visibility was murky throughout the day, so the diving wasn't great, and it involved a lot of swimming. However, on the final dive we did see a school of scalloped hammerheads. There were also plenty of Galapagos sharks too.

Burrito Grunt



Cottonmouth Jacks, Scalloped Hammerheads, Galapagos Sharks

Thursday 14th March

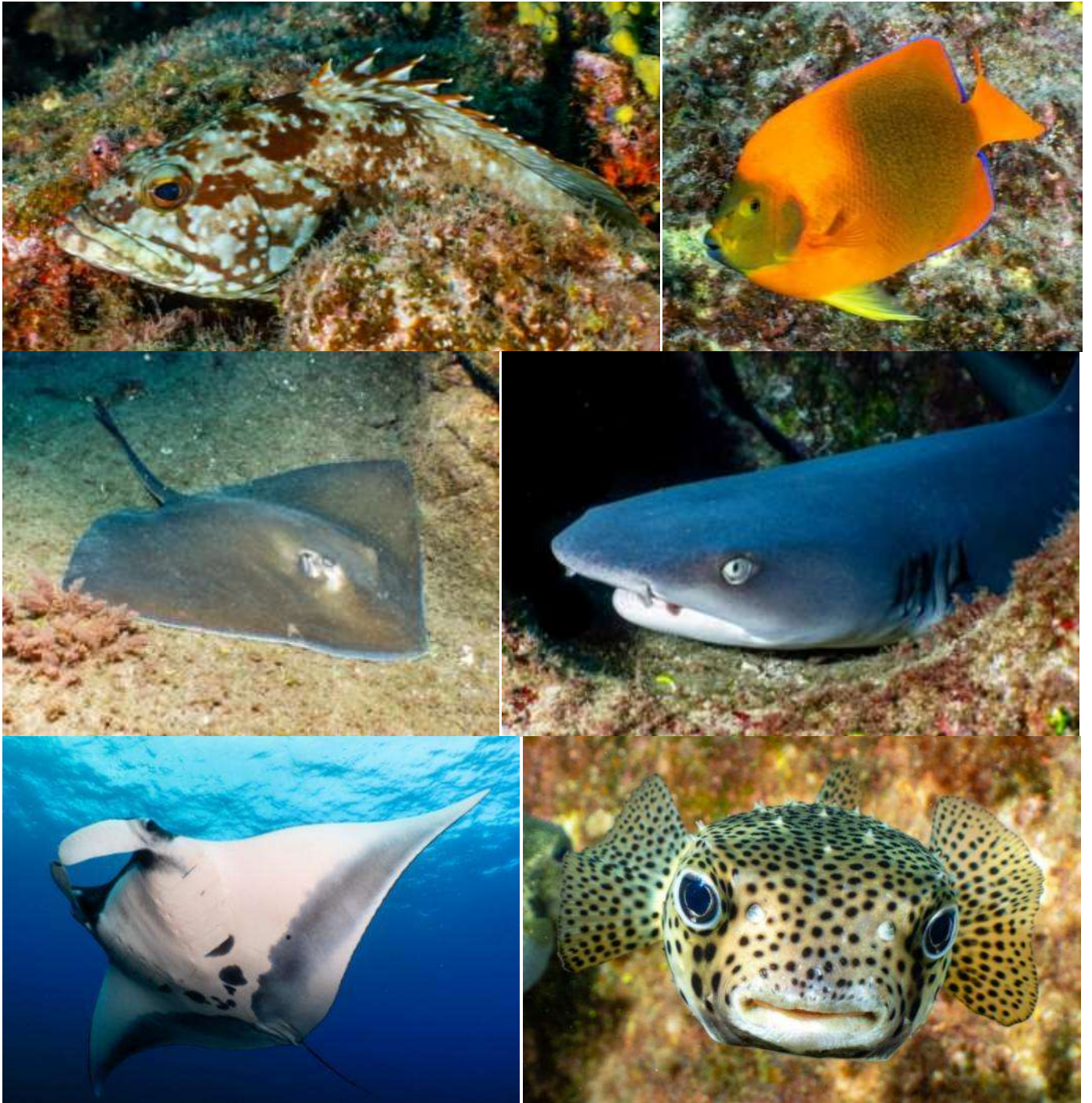
We spent the day diving at Cabo Pearce off Socorro island. There were occasional pelagic sightings, but overall it was a bit cold and mediocre due to relatively low visibility in the water.

I think this is a Hubb's Octopus

Friday 15th March

Another day at Cabo Pearce with more of the same – cold with low visibility, however, there were patches where the visibility cleared up when we were above the thermocline, and we were rewarded with some nice sightings of the Giant Oceanic Manta Rays.





Clockwise from Top Left: Pacific Mutton Hamlet, Clarion Angelfish, Whitetip Reef Shark, Porcupinefish, Giant Oceanic Manta Ray, Diamond Stingray

Saturday 16th March

Three dives at Punta Tosca off Socorro Island (still cold with poor visibility) then we motored around the other side of the island to do our check with the navy. It was enlivened by breaching humpbacks on the way there and back which was nice.

Crosshatch Triggerfish





Top: Giant Electric Ray

Sunday 17th March

We motored overnight to Roca Partida, an isolated outcrop of rock a very long way from anywhere. The visibility here was better, however it was still very cold in the water. There are hundreds of white-tip reef sharks that hang around the rock, resting during the day in ledges. There were also pods of dolphins on a couple of dives, although they didn't hang around. Occasional Galapagos and silvertip sharks made an appearance, and there were also lots of large pelagic fish including schools of yellow-fin tuna, wahoo and an assortment of jacks.



Black Jack



Whitetip Reef Sharks



Silvertip Shark and Bigeye Trevally

Monday 18th March

We motored overnight back to San Benedicto and then spent the day diving the boiler. The first two dives of the day were fabulous – loads of dolphins and mantas, plus occasional sightings of hammerheads and Galapagos sharks. The visibility got worse for the second half of the day so we didn't see a lot on the final two dives

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Tuesday 19th March

Today was spent travelling back to Cabo San Lucas, so it was a day for relaxing and catching up with photo processing and video editing.

Wednesday 20th March

We disembarked the Belle Amie this morning. We got a minibus to the airport and picked up our hire car (provided by Budget – quite beaten up and rattly, complete with warning messages about gear box problems, we also had to wait for ages for it to be ready). We stopped at a supermarket for provisions and drove to Cabo Pulmo – a very sleepy place with not much here that caters mostly for divers.

We stopped to fill up the car with fuel just after collecting it from the airport and paid with a credit card. They didn't show Andy how much he was being charged, just gave him the machine to put his pin in, so he asked for a receipt and they had entered an amount that was 200 pesos (£10) more than the price on the petrol pump. Andy queried it and was told it was "commission". They wouldn't do anything about it, but we took a photo of the petrol pump showing the price, and we got the difference refunded by the credit card company when we got home. So be vigilant when using card machines in Mexico that the amount you are being charged is what you are expecting!

We didn't do much for the rest of the day – just enjoyed the lovely ambiance around our accommodation – The Baja Bungalows Palapa Suite, before we headed out to dinner at La Palapa. Our favourite things were our starters of guacomale and shrimp aguachile. Both our fish main courses weren't great – a bit salty and overcooked.

Thursday 21st March

We did two dives this morning, the first at El Islotes to look for Bull Sharks (which we saw, but the visibility wasn't good enough for decent photos), and the second at Los Moros. Our surface hour was enlivened by yet more whales, who really put on a show for us. It started with some humpbacks breaching and fin slapping, and then a grey whale showed up. Our boat captain got very excited as grey whales are only rarely seen here.

The diving was decent – there were loads of fish in the water – you can really tell it's been a marine reserve for the last 30 years. We dived with Karina from Mar y Sierra. She was excellent and we would have no hesitation in recommending her. Do note that the marine park rules mean that dives are restricted to 50 minutes and no more than 2 boats are allowed on a single dive site at a time. Like all the Mexican marine national parks, it seemed to be very well run and everyone kept to the rules. <https://www.cabopulmoscubadiving.com/english/>

We had a relaxed afternoon then headed out for some very easy birding and a walk along the beach before dinner at Pelicano's. The mixed ceviche was huge and fabulous and the shrimp tacos were good. The only downside were the happy hour margaritas weren't great – if you come here you are best off sticking with beer!



Giant Hawkfish, Mexican Panamic Porkfish, Starry Grouper



Humpback and Grey Whales (Bottom Right)



Northern Cardinal, Hooded Oriole, House Finch, Brown Pelicans, Heermann's Gull

Friday 22nd March

Another two dives in the marine park today, this time at El Bajo (a nice rocky reef), followed by El Vencedor (a broken up wreck in the sand now inhabited by shoals of baby fish and used as a cleaning station by the bull sharks). They were two excellent dives with plenty of bull sharks making close (but not aggressive) passes at us.

We had another relaxed afternoon processing photos and videos before heading out in the late afternoon again for more relaxed birding and then dinner, once again at Pelicanos. This time we had shrimp aguachile and the campechana, both of which were fabulous.

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Clockwise from Top: Long-nosed Hawkfish, Wounded Wrasse, Jewel Moray, Mexican Hogfish



Bull Shark, Pixie Hawkfish, Coast Night Snake, California Scrub-Jay, Scott's Oriole, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Xantus's Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Brown Pelicans, Elegant Tern

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Banded Guitarfish

Saturday 23rd March

We were sad to leave Cabo Pulmo this morning. We really enjoyed the incredibly peaceful and relaxed vibe, the excellent and easy birding for amateurs like us, and the very relaxed scuba diving. Our accommodation was lovely too, it was beautifully done, with loads of local touches, without being cutesy, and was still completely functional. We loved the patio and outside kitchen with the constant soundtrack of birdsong. It helped that the weather was also perfect – hot during the day, but not so hot you didn't want to do anything, then cooling down nicely at night to be able to sleep. If you want somewhere completely relaxing and very quiet then I would definitely recommend a visit. The only downside is it's not so good for mammal watching!

Our first stop on our way back to civilisation was Cañón de la Zorra near Santiago. This is another protected area, famous for its beautiful waterfall. It really was stunning. We enjoyed the waterfall and then carried on walking further upstream for more stunning views and a quiet swim in the river. We got there a bit too late for good birds, but we did see some nice lizards.

To relax after our walk we went to the Santa Rita hot springs. These are natural hot springs in a lovely river setting that we also really enjoyed.

We finally arrived in San Jose del Cabo for our final night. We stayed at the Six Two Four Urban Beach hotel which I don't recommend – it is all a bit style over substance – it was incredibly badly lit, the wifi didn't work and there was only one very uncomfortable pillow each. There was also no lift for getting the luggage upstairs. It looked modern but it had no soul. We went for dinner at Latino 8. Nice Mexican Ceviche, but the cocktails, tacos and main courses of 24 hour marinated fish and the prawns left a lot to be desired. If I was doing this trip again I would have stayed in a less touristy part of town and tried to go somewhere more local for our final meal.





Hunsaker's Spiny Lizard



Ornate Tree Lizard, Elegant Earless Lizard



Orange-throated Whiptail

Sunday 24th March

We checked out and returned the car back to Budget and then headed through the airport to the lounge. All smooth and uneventful. Note that the only lounge in Cabo Pulmo is a priority pass/lounge key one, and there are a lot of flights, so the queues can be monumental. We arrived at the airport fairly early, so walked straight in, but by the time we left there would have been around 100 people queuing to get in. There wasn't much in the way of food in there, but there was a good bar, and tables and chairs with power so I could keep working my way through all the photos.

Our flights back to the UK were via Dallas, which did have an excellent American Airlines lounge, with a great choice of food. Then we boarded our overnight flight back to the UK. The service on the flight was mediocre and the plane was way too hot to sleep. We arrived at Heathrow at around 9am, desperate to get home, have a shower and sort our lives out before starting work that afternoon, but British Airways were having a luggage nightmare. We arrived at the carousel and were told that Andy's bag was still in Dallas, but mine was in Heathrow. Three hours after landing it still hadn't materialised and no-one seemed to know where it was, so we eventually gave up and got an uber home. Both bags were eventually delivered to us later that week.

Final Thoughts:

Not everything about the trip was perfect, but I would have no hesitation in recommending Baja as a great destination for wildlife tourism. El Nino was probably the cause of the low number of baby whales in San Ignacio, and also the poor visibility in and around Socorro, so it could be even better in a different year. However, the highlights of the trip were completely amazing, the memories will stay with me forever, and I would not have swapped them for anything.

Driving around was easy – the roads were remarkably free of traffic outside of Cabo, and the other vehicles courteous and well behaved. Based on our experience I would spend as much time as possible in the smaller, quiet, rural places and try and avoid the cities as much as possible. So if you want to put your own itinerary together I would suggest hiring a car in the same way that we did and driving yourself around. If you don't fancy the 5 hour drive each way between San Ignacio and Loretto, San Antonio's do offer transfers.

If you are bored and have a spare 45 minutes, the video of our trip is on youtube here:

https://youtu.be/hDj0h_ahbTY?si=ZHJdb-Rz1XY8eHuZ