

BAJA AIRVENTURES AND SAN DIEGO CA

February 21 – March 5

This year Mike and I planned a whale watching trip called “Best of Baja” with Baja Airventures. Baja Airventures was highly recommended by a fellow traveler on another trip we were on. We decided to arrive early in San Diego and stay a few days before and after the trip to enjoy the area and get away from winter. It did not get very warm in San Diego or the Baja till we were back at home. But we had a good time anyway.

Every year, the California gray whales set off on the longest migration made by any mammal. They travel along the west coast of Canada and the United States on their way to Baja México to spend a few months enjoying the Pacific lagoons along the Baja coast. The gray whales were once hunted to near extinction in the very waters they work so hard to visit. They are now protected in the U.S. and México; it is thought that the population is now over 20,000 strong.

There are only three places in the world the gray whales will give birth to their babies, all three are in Baja. The Baja lagoons are protected from the strong waves and currents of the Pacific Ocean and the lagoons are shallow. The only predator of the gray whale, the orca, will not enter into such shallow water. It is the perfect environment for the mothers to nurse their newly born calves. It is also easy for the mothers to supervise while the young whales learn how to swim, how to breathe properly, feed, dive and teach them how to interact with other whales.

The whale watching experience in Baja is much different than in other places on the whale’s journey to Baja. Along the U.S. Pacific coast, crowds get into large boats and cruise along next to a group of whales. Whale watching on the Pacific side of Baja is done in pangas. These are locally made 22 foot boats, which are open and can accommodate up to ten people.

In Baja, the mother whales, along with their young, seem to really enjoy interaction with humans. Amazingly, they will seek out the pangas. This happens right next to the boats and the whales do not seem to mind being touched. The whales actually seem to enjoy the experience as much as the humans do. The comfort level of the whales, while in the lagoons, also makes for some incredible photo opportunities.

OUR TRIP STARTED OFF IN SAN DIEGO ON OUR OWN. We stayed at the Westin Gaslamp Quarter Hotel on Broadway Circle. We were centrally located in the downtown area called the Gaslamp Quarter near popular attractions. After settling in our room and a good night’s sleep we started the new day. We took an Uber to the San Diego Zoo.

The San Diego Zoo is located in the northwest corner of Balboa Park housing over 3,700 animals of more than 650 species and subspecies. The San Diego Zoo was a pioneer in the concept of open-air, cage less exhibits that re-create natural animal habitats. It is one of the few zoos in the world that houses and successfully breeds the giant panda.

We followed the map given to us at the entrance. First thing we saw was a lagoon filled with marching flamingos. The reptile house was next on the path. Because of my love of monkeys we headed straight for monkey trail. Lots of different species of monkeys with a stop at the gorilla and orangutan exhibits. Saw lots of other animals and birds on the way to the panda exhibit. We should have purchased the two day pass as this zoo is very large. We didn't even cover half of the zoo when it started to rain on our way to ride the aerial tram. We decided to leave the zoo and go to 'The Prado Restaurant' at Balboa Park and have lunch. We had a nice lunch, drinks and dried off.

We saw a board advertising the play 'The Importance of Being Earnest' by Oscar Wilde showing at The Old Globe theater in Balboa Park so we got tickets for two seats in the balcony for the next night's performance. The Old Globe Theater in Balboa Park was modeled after Shakespeare's Old Globe in London. The Old Globe Theatre was built in 1935 for the presentation of abridged versions of Shakespeare's plays as part of the California Pacific International Exposition. At the conclusion of the exposition in 1937, a non-profit producing corporation, the San Diego Community Theatre, leased the theatre and adjacent buildings from the City of San Diego (an arrangement that continues today) and renovated the theatre for ongoing use.

We started early with a great breakfast at Westin Gaslamp Quarter's dining room. Expensive but the best eggs benedict, hash browns and Starbucks coffee to start the day. The hotel gave us \$50.00 in food coupons to be used in their hotel dining rooms. We spent it all and more on breakfast.

Today was to be spent exploring the gardens and museums in Balboa Park. Our route started at the Botanical Building and Lily Pond with tropical and flowering varieties of plants housed beneath the domed wooden-lath structure of the Botanical Building. Built for the 1915-16 Exposition, along with the adjacent lily pond and lagoon, the historic building is one of the largest lath structures in the world. The botanical building plantings include more than 2,100 permanent plants, featuring fascinating collections of cycads, ferns, orchids, other tropical plants and palms. Then we went to the San Diego Museum of Man housed in the historic landmark buildings of the California Quadrangle. The building was designed for the Exposition by American architect Bertram G. Goodhue, and the California Tower, is one of the most prominent landmarks in San Diego. We purchased the combo tickets to enter the museum and climb the California Tower. The tower offered a magnificent 360 degree panorama of the ocean, the mountains, Mexico, the harbor, the zoo, gardens and more. After we finished this museum we went to the vast San Diego Natural History Museum to see the life-sized T-Rex skeleton, fossil exhibits and 3-D theater to explore the natural world with a focus on Southern California. The play at the Old Globe Theater did not start till the evening so we wanted to have dinner before the show. We went back to 'The Prado Restaurant' for dinner and drinks and hung out there till the doors opened at the theater. Sitting in the balcony was quaint and we enjoyed the play.

The next morning we rented a car and drove to Cabrillo National Monument at the southern tip of the Point Loma Peninsula in San Diego. The monument commemorates the landing of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo at San Diego Bay on September 28, 1542. This event marked the first time a European expedition had set foot on what later became the West Coast of the United States. The park offers a view of San Diego's harbor and skyline, as well as Coronado and Naval Air Station North Island. On clear days, a wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean, Tijuana, and Mexico's Coronado Islands are also visible. Our first stop was at the tidepools home to anemones and crabs. We parked at the visitors center and stopped to see the Cabrillo monument. Walked up the highest point to the Old Point Loma Lighthouse that has been a San Diego icon since 1855. The old lighthouse is now a museum, and visitors may enter it and view some of the living areas. On the way to the lighthouse we entered a coastal artillery battery, built to protect the harbor of San Diego from enemy warships during WWII. As we left the park we drove around in the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. Rows and rows of white marble tombstone line the hills. Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery is a federal military cemetery in the city of San Diego, California. It is located on the grounds of the former Army coastal artillery station Fort Rosecrans and is administered by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. The cemetery overlooks San Diego Bay and the city from one side, and the Pacific Ocean on the other. Fort Rosecrans is named after William Starke Rosecrans, a Union general in the American Civil War.

Next stop La Jolla village lined with high-end boutiques, antique stores and art galleries. We walked down to the coast line to see what people were looking at in groups. We found a large group of sea lions and seals lounging around on the sandy beach, barking on the rocks and swimming in the ocean. Afterwards we walked the streets of La Jolla village and stopped in the boutiques. Later we walked outside of the village to an excellent sea food restaurant called El Pescador Fish Market. Nothing fancy but the fresh seafood in glass cases was fantastic. The chowders, sour dough rolls, shrimp, fish and roasted vegetables were cooked just right and delicious. Topped off the night with a stop at the local ice cream store on the way to our rental car.

We spent the last day exploring the Gaslamp Quarter and its historic buildings, shops, bars and restaurants, covering some 16 city blocks. The Gaslamp Quarter features many Victorian-style commercial buildings built between the Civil War and WWI. We followed a neighborhood walk using my tour book as a guide and I took photos of these historic buildings and read aloud about the history of them...very interesting. Stopped to enjoy a outdoor Chinese New Year Fair Celebration with the Lucky Lion Dancers and Dragon Dancers performing on stage. Then purchased a nice bronze four-way expressions head from a Chinese woman's booth for my garden at home. We were surprised to come across a small courtyard next to the Gaslamp Museum at the Davis-Horton House. In the courtyard were two bronze dogs. The dogs were the 'Brother Dogs' project began more than a decade ago when the citizens of Edinburgh, Scotland created the only bronze copy of the famous "Greyfriars Bobby" statue which has stood in Edinburgh since 1873. We were surprised because one of our future planned trips is to visit Scotland which starts out in Edinburgh. These two historic dogs now sit in close proximity to one another in both Edinburgh and San Diego as "Brother Dogs" in "sister

cities.” Although these dogs never knew one another, their stories, although similar in certain aspects, differ in many interesting way. The fierce loyalty of Greyfriars Bobby brought the people of Edinburgh together, and Bum’s personality, survival skills, and independence brought San Diego together.

START OF BEST OF BAJA’S WHALES, DOLPHINS AND SEA LIONS TRIP to Laguna Ojo de Liebra, Pacific coast and Midriff island region, Sea of Cortez with Baja Airventures. We met our group at San Diego Brown Field at 7:00 a.m. for aircraft loading. We were able to store our luggage at the airport in a secure hanger. Each person was allowed an 18”x12”x12” soft-sided bag weighing 15 lbs. and one 5 lb. personal item. At the airport were two Piper Lance aircrafts for our group of nine. Mike and I and two other people from our group were in one plane, our pilot’s name was Gray. The other pilot was Bill and his plane was right behind us in flight. When both planes were airborne we flew side by side for a few minutes to wave to each other. Gray gave us a nice aerial tour as he took us to San Felipe, approx. 1.5 hrs to land in order to clear customs. Our aerial tour continued as Gray flew us along the Sea of Cortez to the Midriff Island region, approx. 1 hr.

A van was waiting for us after we landed. The van took us to a boat launch. A boat was waiting for us to transfer our group to Las Animas Wilderness Retreat accessible only by boat. On the way to the retreat we saw a group of dolphins and some sea birds. At the retreat guests were assigned their private yurt equipped with bathroom, composting toilet, shower area (heated rinse kit on request) and a king sized bed. No running water, a pitcher and bowl for cleaning up and safe drinking water in two bottles filled each day at room clean-up. Comfortable for a rural retreat. We were hoping for a bit warmer weather but were glad the only time it rained was a night when we were sleeping. The staff had lunch and beverages ready for us. We were introduced to the staff and our guide Horoshi told us about our activities we would be able to participate in during our stay at Las Animas Wilderness Retreat. First on the list was to go fishing and get some fresh fish for dinner. Some of the group took advantage of the activity and went fishing. I caught two fish..lol. Mike snagged some and between us and the rest of the fishers we caught a dozen good sized fish. Some fish had to be put back in the water as they were too small or were not to be kept per the guide.

Next day was the opportunity to go fishing at 6:30 a.m., we skipped it. Then it was time to go snorkel with the sea lions and other sea creatures. Only Mike, Horoshi, myself and our group guest visiting from China wanted to go snorkeling. Mike and I brought our own mask, snorkel and short fins from home and we got a full wet suit, including head and glove covers. Other guests came on the boat with us just for the ride and could view the sea lions from the boat. I figured the water would be cold even with a full wet suit but it was not that bad. I saw a group of sea lions jumping around in an area and headed for them. Mike was busying trying to use his mask equipped with an underwater camera to take some videos of what he saw. I had swum with seals and penguins before in the Galapagos Island but I was amazed at what I saw this time. A large male sea lion was right in front of me and he was huge! I muttered “Oh My” in my snorkel knowing that no one was going to hear me. I was tapped on the arm and saw Mike, he pointed down

on the sea floor at a large turtle....then Mike was gone again. I saw Horoshi and the other guest near me. I continued to breath and watch the sea lions...big and small. The big male came back around me and gave me a look with those big eyes. I had enough excitement and swam back to the boat, seeing a few fish I recognized from our fishing catches. Got on board and watched as a group of sea lions came over to the boat and flipped around in the water near us. The guys came back a little later and we all went back to the lodge. Nice outing! Stripping off the wet suit and headed to our yurt and found two hot water rinse kits waiting for Mike and I. Afterwards a nice lunch....we had good food the whole time we were here. Horoshi had our group gather each night to give us lectures on the Baja, it history, geography and wildlife.

I had a wonderful relaxing time strolling the deserted private beach. I took pictures of the birds and searched for interesting shells, stones and sand dollars an extremely flattened, burrowing sea urchin, also known as a sea cookie or snapper biscuit. The soft pristine sand felt so nice on my bare feet. No one else was around...except the two rescue dogs that belonged to the lodge that followed me sometimes. I was determined to get to the end of the beach before lunch.

Next on the activity list was a hike in the natural habitat behind our complex. Horoshi pointed out huge cactus in this diverse Sonoran desert. He told us about the plants and wildlife in this desert, he was very knowledgeable. Many plants not only survive, but thrive in the harsh conditions of the Sonoran Desert. Many have evolved to have specialized adaptations to the desert climate. The desert's biseasonal rainfall pattern results in more plant species than any other desert in the world. It includes plant genera and species from the agave family, palm family, cactus family, legume family, and numerous others.

Next day was fishing at 6:30 a.m., skipped that again. The first activity was to go snorkeling again. I decided not to go but Mike and one other guest geared up for another snorkeling trip. Mike had not been able to get the video he wanted so he was going to try a second time. When Mike was gone snorkeling I thought about my nice time strolling the beach and wanted to do it again. I got my I Pod and played songs by Amy Winehouse and went for my walk...the dogs followed me again. I saw a zodiac approaching the beach with a driver and four people in it. Earlier I saw a ship in the bay with 'Seashepherd.org' painted on the side of the ship and thought maybe the people in the zodiac were from that ship. They landed on the beach and there were three ladies and a man. They asked if the dogs belonged to me and I told them no they belong to the lodge. Oh, a girl said I want to stay there, looking at the yurts, is it a private place and I told her yes. She said they came from the ship 'Sharpie'. They were volunteers of a non-profit marine wildlife conservation organization. Established in 1977, their mission is to end the destruction of habitat and slaughter of wildlife in the world's oceans in order to conserve and protect ecosystems and species. They use innovative direct-action tactics to investigate, document, and take action when necessary to expose and confront illegal activities on the high seas. By safeguarding the biodiversity of our delicately balanced ocean ecosystems, Sea Shepherd works to ensure their survival for future generations. The girl told me that they were in the area because of illegal fishing. The fishermen use

nets and the nets trap the endangered vaquita porpoise. Their job was to investigate and take action as needed to protect this species. I saw two of them were getting in the water to snorkel and warned them about the string rays in the sand. We were told to shuffle our feet when we were on the sea floor so as not to step on one and get stung by the ray.

Every morning I got up at 5:15 a.m. to see the sun rise. We could not view sun set because of our location and get photos so sun rise was our opportunity to get some good photos. The sun rise was nice but not spectacular as the clouds were too many. But I tried every morning and got a good sun rise the last day. The sky at night was nice with many stars but the full moon was very bright blocking a lot of the sky.

Last day our activity was to go by boat to a place that had a massive desert mangrove. In Baja there are mangroves that are surrounded by steep mountains. The mangroves can't expand horizontally, so as sea level rises, they grow on top of themselves and the soil accumulates carbon in the form of peat below them. Our group marched through the mangroves in muddy soil and water. The mud can suck off shoes, stick to the body and swallow people up to their knees. We stayed in areas not as muddy. It was very interesting being surrounded by the mangroves and seeing various birds, crabs, small fish and other water creatures. Some of the mangroves had buds that would bloom into flowers on them. On the way back our guide pointed out on a rocky hill island loaded with birds, such as the Blue Footed Booby, Double-crested Cormorant and the White Pelican. Mike and I took a short kayak trip after we got back in the bay in front of the lodge. Afterwards we packed up for our early departure to the experience our next half of the trip.

Our group left after breakfast and after our boat ride to town we piled into the van to get ready for our next leg of the trip. On the way Horoshi had us stop for a short hike into the Valle De Los Cirrios protected desert reserve to see the world's tallest cactus and the Boojum forest. The Boojum forest is an area in central Baja California known for endemic flora so bizarre and grotesque in appearance that the area was named after mathematician/logician Lewis Carroll's imaginary landscape story, *The Hunting of the Snark*. I asked Horoshi to take a group picture by very huge cacti for me. We stopped at the small airport and were met by another van. Out hopped a group of people that were going to where we just were at for their second leg of their trip. We exchanged our experiences at each place we visited and after the exchange of luggage we were off again. Fresh hot chicken sandwiches and cold beverages were given to us for our trip to a very nice Bed and Breakfast (Casa Laguna) on the Pacific side at Guerro Negro. Our new guide Andy told us it was a Bed-Breakfast-and Dinner place as we would eat all our meals there.

On the way to Guerro Negro we geared up for our first gray whale watching adventure at the Laguna Ojo De Liebre's inner lagoon and whale nursery area. Each October, as the northern ice pushes southward, small groups of eastern gray whales in the eastern Pacific start a two-to-three-month, (5,000–6,800 mi) trip south. Beginning in the Bering and Chukchi seas and ending in the warm-water lagoons of Mexico's Baja California Peninsula and the southern Gulf of California, they travel along the west coast of Canada,

the United States and Mexico. By late December to early January, eastern grays begin to arrive in the calving lagoons and bays on the west coast of Baja California Sur. The three most popular are San Ignacio, Magdalena Bay to the south, and, to the north, Laguna Ojo de Liebre (formerly known in English as Scammon's Lagoon after whaleman Charles Melville Scammon, who discovered the lagoons in the 1850s and hunted the grays). The first whales to arrive are usually pregnant mothers looking for the protection of the lagoons to bear their calves, along with single females seeking mates. By mid-February to mid-March, the bulk of the population has arrived in the lagoons, filling them with nursing, calving and mating gray whales.

The gray whale has a dark slate-gray color and is covered by characteristic gray-white patterns, scars left by parasites which drop off in its cold feeding grounds. Gray whales were once called devil fish because of their fighting behavior when hunted. They have two blowholes on top of their head, which can create a distinctive heart-shaped blow at the surface in calm wind conditions. The blowholes are connected directly to the lungs, so the whale can take a mouthful of water and breathe at the same time. Gray whales measure from 16 ft in length for newborns to 43–49 ft for adults (females tend to be slightly larger than adult males). Newborns are a darker gray to black in color. A mature gray whale can reach 44 short tons, with a typical range of 17–36 short tons.

As we walked the long pier to get into our boat an osprey also called a sea hawk or fish hawk was on the railing of the pier and had a fish in its talons tearing it apart. There were osprey nests lots of places in the area, some on artificial platforms, other nests made wherever the osprey could find a suitable nesting perch. First thing I saw, and quickly up went my camera, were gray whales spy-hopping, breaching and spouting. I got only a few photos of the whales spy-hopping and one tale and fin shot. I was so excited along with the others in our boat when we first saw the many whales. As soon as one approached our boat we all got our hopes up that it would come very close to our boat and it did. My first touch of a young whale was right on the top of its rostrum (tip of the front). It went on its side and we saw its eye looking right at us as it went under the boat to the other side. I moved to the front of the boat and another whale came over and I got to touch it nearer the blow hole. As soon as I did the whale forcefully expelled air through the blowhole and sprayed us all. After lots of laughing our boat captain continued taking us for a ride and we looked for other whales. We kept seeing blue jellyfish with the common name of blueberries. Specimens of this species were observed in the Sea of Cortez in 2012 and a live jelly was sent to the Monterey Bay Aquarium for identification. It was determined that this was a newly identified species of *Stomolophus* (Cannonball Jellyfish). Our guide Andy snagged one out of the water and we got to touch it and it was very blue and felt like very very firm gelatin. The jellyfish was so glossy that it reflected everything near it.

Andy stopped at the local store in town and got us any soda we wanted and a new supply of beers and tequila (for margaritas) as the last group drank up everything. We settle in our assigned room. We had a nice big room, king sized bed, and sitting room. A modern bathroom with running hot and cold water...just perfect. A door wall that opened to a roof top patio scanning the length of the building. You could over look part of the town

of Guerrero Negro. Guerrero Negro is the largest town located in the municipality of Mulege in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur. Guerrero Negro was founded in 1957 when Daniel Ludwig built a salt works there to supply the demand of salt in the western United States. The salt works was established around the Ojo de Liebre coastal lagoon to take advantage of its strong salinity.

Sophia was the cook at the BB and she made us fresh guacamole with chips, and fresh fruit as snacks. Every meal she made was hot and fresh for each person....different every meal, Mexican style. Such a nice woman and cook....made us feel right at home.

Next day was a full day of whale watching. Our group was allowed to take the short cut road through the salt works to get to Laguna Ojo De Liebre's outer lagoon for more whale watching. Leaving by boat we passed a large mooring with sea lions perched on top sunning themselves. We also passed a tug boat pulling a large barge of sea salt to its location. In this area were large white sand dune barriers and sand bars that birds were resting on. There are as many as 200 species registered in the area...hundreds of Sandpipers, many Cormorants and Gulls. I like the Caspian Terns we saw. I got a good photo of a gray whales tale and pectoral flipper today....and a few sky-hopping photos. One more short encounter with a friendly pat on a whale and back to the BB. After lunch it was back to Laguna Ojo De Liebre's inner lagoon for more whale encounters.

After a good nights sleep and breakfast we left early for our last whale watching in Laguna Ojo De Liebre's outer lagoon. This was the best day for the whale bonding. We had a young whale come over to our boat and play with us for at least 25 mins. Everyone on the boat had a good time patting the whale who did not want to leave and neither did we. I managed to get good photos of Mike touching the whale from my vantage point and he got photos me from his. Lots of hands were in the water to pet the whale....screaming and laughter front one side of the boat to the other. The whale would poke his whole head out of the water to get a good look at us. One person in our group was a little boy from China traveling with his parents. The little boy had the best time ever with the whale encounters....and fun the whole trip.

Time to pack up for our plane ride in our Piper Lance aircrafts. We were assigned with two others to fly with Andy as our pilot. Before we took off Andy said something was not right and we went back and he turned off the engine. The other pilot was Gray with the rest of our group...he came back also. After the engine problem was solved we took off. The ride was bumpy but we made it back to land at customs, and then took off again to land at San Diego Brown Field. We gave our goodbyes to our group and Gray handed out T-shirts with Baja Airventures logo on the back. Mike and I rate the trip number one, wished for warmer weather but that is pure luck.

LAST DAYS IN SAN DIEGO. We arrived late and tired so we just got our room and walked around the corner from the hotel to a Thai restaurant and had a great dinner. As we were leaving Mike and I saw the Chinese couple and their little boy who were on the Baja Airventures trip with us. Mike sneaked around the corner and yelled out Ling Chung Fong the name of the little boy (who did not speak English, just a few

words)...his American name was Michael. The little boy screamed out in delight of seeing us again. Bye we said, maybe see you in China someday.

Our last full day before flying home we planned to go to the Maritime Museum established in 1948, that preserves one of the largest collections of historic sea vessels in the United States. Located on the San Diego Bay, the centerpiece of the museum's collection is the Star of India, an 1863 iron bark, the vessel that once carried cargo to India, transported immigrants to New Zealand, and braved the Arctic ice in Alaska to work in the salmon industry. Aboard the 1898 ferryboat Berkeley the museum maintains the MacMullen Library and Research Archives. Mike liked the Soviet-era B-39 attack submarine visit. We walked along the waterfront and stopped at the 'Unconditional Surrender Statue' a 25-foot, full color statue of an iconic American image: Alfred Eisenstaedt's 1945 photo of a sailor and nurse in passionate embrace following the news of Japan's surrender to end WWII. We were surprised to see this statue in a park right next to a huge aircraft carrier. We had seen this same statue in Sarasota, FL. I read on Wikipedia that this statue is made in bronze, aluminum and even styrofoam and can be found in many places in the US and around the world. The statue arrived in Royal Oak, MI on June 18, 2016, and was installed in the city's Memorial Park on June 20. The city manager expected that the sculpture would increase tourism, and help raise money for The Michigan WWII Legacy Memorial, a permanent World War II memorial in the park. It was removed six months later, on December 20. I missed that viewing. Anyway we continued to walk the promenade to the Gaslamp District for one last shopping time for me and one last beer tasting and tapas for Mike.

Yet another successful trip that we had wanted to do for a while...the touch with nature made it all that more special.

Audrey & Mike Lambert
2018