

Dive with manatees in Xcalak, climb an ancient pyramid at Muyil, shoot the curl at Puerto Escondido, and eat your way from coast to coast.

MEXICO

Where Nomads Go



SEEK EXPERIENCES

Whale Bays & Turtle Beaches

From Magdalena Bay to Puerto Escondido, **Johanna Read** tells you how to get up close and personal with the ocean's gentle giants.

Where the whales come to be petted

The gray whale swims slowly toward our boat, her baby following closely. She sinks under the baby, then gently lifts him onto her back so he's almost fully out of the water. Is this so we can admire him, or so the baby can get a good view of us?

Introductions done, what happens next is even more surreal. The 50ft-long (15m) mother floats over to our boat and stops, her nose partially underneath us. Leaning over the gunwale, I reach out and pet her head. It's slippery smooth, except where it's covered in barnacles. Soon the baby noses his way over, wanting some love too.

I'm told Magdalena Bay is one of only three bays in the world — all off Baja — where this phenomenon is known to happen. Usually, petting or otherwise touching wild animals is to be strictly avoided, but here the whales themselves seek it out.



ThinkStock/Getty Images



A gray whale approaches a boat in Magdalena Bay

Claes Sanchez Pizarro/Getty Images

TRIP NOTES

International flights land in most of these cities, with domestic flights connecting to smaller La Paz and Puerto Escondido.

La Paz. Baja California Sur Laidback La Paz is on the Sea of Cortez, 125mi (200km) north of Cabo. Several species, even giant blue whales, feed here. You can also snorkel with turtles, rays, sea lions, and whale sharks. Bus tours go to Magdalena Bay for the day for gray whale watching.

Cabo. Baja California Sur The southern tip of Baja peninsula, where the Pacific meets the Sea of Cortez, is a favorite spot of whales. Humpbacks are often seen from shore in winter. Five turtle species nest from August to December.

Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca Find six turtle species, five dolphin species, and, from November to April, humpback whales. They're even seen from the beach.

Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco The largest gathering of Pacific humpbacks in Mexico is in Vallarta's Bahía de Banderas from December to March.

Cancún and the Riviera Maya, Quintana Roo Turtles lay eggs on Riviera Maya beaches from May to October. Isla Mujeres, off Cancún, is turtle-mating central from May to July. (Note: Isla Mujeres now charges a small tourist tax upon arrival.) Dolphins are occasionally seen nearby, and whale sharks visit in summer.

the adorable babies. They protect and release 40,000 to 60,000 turtle hatchlings annually.

After the sun has set, I carry my hatchling in a coconut shell, careful not to touch her. When her flippers feel the sand, she pauses before starting her 100ft (30m) scramble into the waves, imprinting the location in her brain as she goes. With luck, she'll be one of the 5% which survives and returns in 15 years to lay her own eggs.

Without the assistance of the turtle project, turtles only have a 1-2% chance of survival. Mexico has six of the world's seven sea turtle species — green, olive ridley, hawksbill, loggerhead, kemp's ridley, and leatherback.

my eye. There's a huge turtle floating two-thirds of the way up the wall of the wave. She's scooping out the beach — where she herself was hatched 15 years ago — to choose the perfect spot to lay her eggs tonight.

This Puerto Escondido beach is ideal for turtles. It's 15mi (24km) long and empty save for a fenced-in area where turtle eggs are buried to protect them from predators, and the local resort which sponsors the Palmarito Sea Turtle Camp. A few times nightly, patrols search the beach for freshly-laid eggs. They dig them up, count them, and then rebury them, marking the date they're expected to hatch. About two months later, hotel guests can help release

Three mothers with babies repeat this whale-led interaction before our onboard naturalist says, "Time's up," and we head back to Bahía Magdalena's Puerto San Carlos and our bus to La Paz. Cetacean lovers, rejoice: along with grays, Mexico is home to humpbacks, minkes, fins, blue whales, and several dolphin species.

Saving endangered baby sea turtles

The sunset view is simply too gorgeous to keep my eyes closed during our beach yoga lesson. I watch Playa Palmarito's immense summertime waves rise higher and higher, then slowly curl before they fall with a crash. Then, something catches

After the sun has set, I carry my hatchling in a coconut shell, careful not to touch her