

Of Wonder & Whales

And God created great whales.

Genesis 1:21

It begins in the frigid waters of the Bering and Chukchi seas. Gray whales five to 11 years old are feeding, their dark mottled skin pocked by white ocean barnacles, orange whale lice, and, too, often, the scars from attacks by the Orca “killer” whales that lie always in wait. It is summer. The days are long, and the delicacies – those small, sediment-dwelling crustaceans they love – are abundant. Still, it calls: the warm, shallow water, sheltered, safe, that lies sunny and sure 14,000 miles south. It is a three-month swim away, this water, a journey fraught with the dangers of Orca. And though a creature of 40 tons might have little to fear in the world of the open ocean, history has proven the swim not always risk free. After all, early whalers called them “devilfish,” the grays, and

their kind was brought close to extinction. Still, it calls, the warm, shallow water that is sheltered, safe. It is sunny, sure and south: this is the water of Baja.

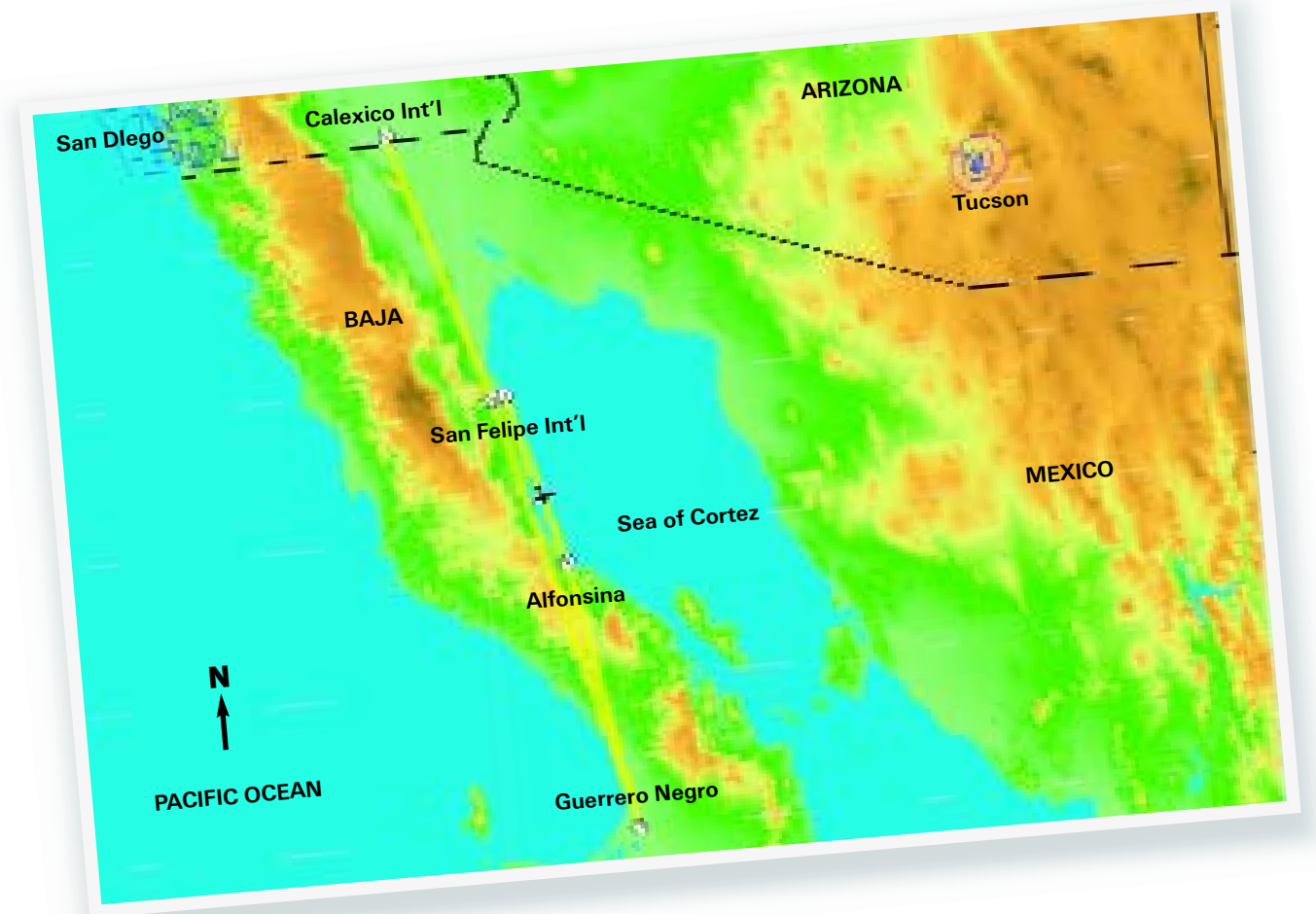
In Mexico, the coastal lagoons along the peninsula that cleaves the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean are to the gray the most important travel destination of its life. And when every summer these bays call the whales to leave their Arctic home and swim at 3-6 miles per hour for two to three months, it is because it is the one place in the world where the wonder happens – the wonder of their creation.

To a gray whale, migrating south to Baja to breed probably isn't such a big deal. It just does it. But to me, Pilot Michael, this annual phenomenon is such a remarkable moment in a flying adventurer's life – should he or she decide to share in the experience – that I am making the trip. Baja, Mexico-bound, I am; I am crossing

Islands in the shimmering Sea of Cortez on Baja's east coast (left); the skinny sandbar landing strip of alluring Alfonsina (above)



Shallow lagoons and the swirl of sun-baked sand:
The aquamarine beauty of a Baja day



Map provided by Voyager Flight Planning Software

the border and flying south. South to San Felipe, where I'll spend laid-back days between the gorgeous Desierto del Colorado and the Sea of Cortez; I'll sport-fish the teeming waters and stuff myself silly with huge local shrimp ("big blues"). I am soaring south; south to Baja California del Sur and Guerrero Negro, the remote, white-sand land where the Laguna Ojo de Liebre awaits. Here, in the most famous lagoon of them all, I'll find the gray whale – breeding, giving birth, nursing its young until the newborn calves (cute little things at 1,500 lbs each) gain enough blubber for the 14,000-mile swim with their mothers back north. Maybe I will even meet a few "friendlies," those young whales so curious about their new life that they approach whale-watching boats and allow themselves a petting by enchanted passengers.

I will land on a sandbar in the tiny

town of Alfonsina and lunch on fish tacos so fresh and authentic that "Mexican" will take on for me new meaning. I will rent an all-terrain vehicle and bounce along miles of deserted beach, where the only sign of life for hours in this blissful solitude is the birds, the sun, the sea. Yes, getting aloft in Baja to see where gray whales breed is a flying adventure sure to be immense.

First, however, two things: One, I'll need to hook-up with Channel Islands Aviation out of Camarillo Airport (CMA) in Ventura, CA. Their 8th annual trip to whale-watch Baja is what I want on, a Mexican adventure so well-conceived and -planned that not only will the camaraderie of other pilots be excellent fun, but all the necessary arrangements (flight planning, accommodations and the like) will be handled just great as well. And two, I'll have to consider the myth of Baja itself. Legend has it that this 874-mile-long

peninsula once was a magical island inhabited by a tribe of black Amazons ruled by one Queen Califia. According to historian Fernando Jordán in his book, *El Otro Mexico* (1951), this tribe of brave, strong women adorned with gold and armed by bows and arrows kept no men about. They tamed a herd of fiery flying griffins they rode like horses. And to discover this land was the dream of many Spanish explorers who promised their kings and queens a treasure of women and gold if only their expeditions were funded. Alas, the land Cortéz happened upon in 1535, christened California, yielded a few pockets of gold, but no Amazons. In 1768 the peninsula became *Antiqua California* when California, the state, or *Nueva California*, was claimed; in 1800 its name was changed to Baja ("lower") to distinguish it from Alta (or "upper") California, the part the U.S. next acquired, in 1845, in the



Crusted with barnacles and orange whale lice, this breeding gray soon will embark from safe Baja waters - if she is a new mother, alongside her calf - and swim two to three months to the Arctic waters of home

Mexican American War. Today, Baja is a traveler's bliss of rugged mountains and endless beaches, the captivating desert landscape home to warm-hearted people and a deluge of diversions, from fishing to kayaking to golf to lazing about with a great margarita.

I could quite go for meeting an Amazon myself. But no matter. I have the whales more on my mind, and it is to Guerro Negro I'm flying. There, the Laguna Ojo de Liebre has maybe 1,500 grays offering their miracle of life to my wonder-filled eyes, and I long to witness first-hand their antics.

Flying first to San Felipe, the small fishing community on the splendid Sea of Cortez (or *Golfo de California*), I fuel-up for all I'm worth for here, at the towered airport (SF), the fuel pumps are sure. On the way, Baja's craggy desertscape is amazing: the volcanic land is dotted with distinctive cardón cactus, spiky Joshua trees and skinny ocotillo bushes. Raw. Untamed. From the air it is just as sense-stirring as the small offshore islands - Isla Miramar, Isla St. Louis - I see later after flying to the secluded village of Alfonsina, for lunch. It is a sandbar, actually, so landing at Alfonsina for its one hotel and restaurant is a total thrill even before the lavish spread of tortillas and salsa and luscious deep-fried big blues. Is it possible to re-fit in the cockpit? Plump with lunch, I wonder this around siesta hour. The sun is brilliant, blazing, although not yet summer hot. The hotel's cool shade seduces. Then again, I'm glad I don't waste a minute snoozing away the afternoon, not when Guerro Negro calls.

I buzz across Baja to the Pacific, and beneath my wings, by the inch, Mexico becomes even more dazzling. The country's cultural heritage increases in richness, with well-preserved or restored mission



Fly the Baja Whale Odyssey Yourself!

Should magical Mexico and its gray whale breeding lagoons call you to travel with all the persuasion of the warm Laguna de Ojo Liebre when it lures pods of grays 14,000 miles south from the Bering Sea, here is information helpful for your flying migration:

Channel Islands Aviation: Organizers extraordinaire of Baja-bound whale adventures. flycia.com (805) 987-1301

Hotel San Felipe Resort & Spa: Lovely, ocean-view accommodations, plus pool (800) 464-4270

La Pinta Hotel: Fine accommodations in Guerro Negro (011-52) 615.157.1304

Bajalaguna.net: Baja travel and whale-watching excursions is their business

Malarrimo Eco-Tours: Operates boats into gray whale breeding lagoons. malarrimo.com (011-52) 615.157.0100

Laguna Tours: Runs whale-watching excursions from Guerro Negro (011-52) 615.157.0050



The isolated shoreline south of San Felipe on the Sea of Cortez: from the air a visual splendor of craggy volcanic islands (left). This page: It's wheels-up above lovely Alfonsina

churches, modest plazas, and the spectacular Sierra de San Francisco mountains around Guerro Negro, I know, a treasure chest of pre-Hispanic rock art. Landing here (at non-towered GRN) within a 25,000 sq. kilometer biosphere that is Latin America's largest, I feel instantly the respect accorded the whales. The calving bays of Laguna San Ignacio, Baja Magdalena and Laguna Ojo de Liebre (formerly named Scammon's Lagoon after a whaler of old who slaughtered an entire pod here with explosive harpoons) are nationally protected, with only 10 whale-watching boats at any one time allowed in each lagoon, and sightseeing aircraft required to stay above 3,000 feet.

There is no need to swoop any lower. Before landing, the flight I make above Laguna Ojo de Liebre easily reveals the astonishment: many of the 1,900 whales (800 of them calves) that this year wintered here. It is quite a far cry from history's woeful state of whale affairs, when Charles Melville Scammon's deed opened the door for the killers that brought the species to the brink of extinction. Since 1942 when the International Whaling Commission decreed *enough is enough* and accorded them full protection, the Eastern North Pacific gray whale population, at 19,000 to 23,000, has made a remarkable return to nearly its original size. I, for one, am delighted.

Speaking of size, the whales of course are huge – up to 50 feet long from rostrum (upper jaw) to fluke, which goes 12 feet across. And then there's that one stiff hair in each rostrum dimple, and the way they "spyhop" by lifting their head out of the water just above eye level, do a little pivot, and slide back in. There is the way they stay submerged only three to five minutes



Despite rules and regulations on both sides of the border, flying into Mexico doesn't have to be daunting. You'll need to file a flight plan with US Flight Service and obtain Mexico Charts if you are traveling farther south than the US Charts take you. Aviation Publication Service (800-869-7453) has plenty.

Remember, your first landing in Mexico must be at an official "Port of Entry/International Airport"; your return to the US, also at an "International" field. There is no VFR night flights in Mexico; finding fuel at small airports is iffy. What's more, your flight plan must specify all border crossing times, and your return must be within 15 minutes of same, or you'll be fined \$5,000. In Mexico, calling Flight Service can be challenging as "800" numbers don't apply and public phones usually accept only a Mexican phone card. Make sure your US calling card gives you access to US "800" numbers. We suggest: file your departure and return flight plans at the same time. Also, choose a border crossing time significantly later than planned; you can then radio any chance within at least 30 minutes of crossing. If you cut it too close to radio a US Flight Service Station, you could have trouble crossing. Likely you will work with one of four Flight Service Stations – San Diego, Prescott, Albuquerque, or San Angelo. Get their in-air radio frequency and their local (non-800) number. Tip: San Diego FSS has three very good prerecorded briefings on flying into Mexico (800.439.4322, touch 2, 25-26-27)

Papers required to cross the border in both directions are the same. However, in Mexico, you must have **proof** of insurance written by an authorized Mexican Insurance Company – an additional policy even if you already are covered for flight there. If your agent can't obtain this policy for you (most can), call MacAfee & Edwards, (800.334.7950). Renting a plane? You must have the owner's written permission to enter Mexico. Fees? Be prepared for landing fees of \$2 to \$26 (US) – pesos also accepted – and a \$50 (US) Mexican Airspace Authorization Fee. Pay ahead and you are qualified to fly Mexico for an entire year, unlimited flights. There is also a per-person Tourist Visa fee of \$20. When entering back into the US, your aircraft is required to have a data plate and 12-inch N#.

If your Mexico Port of Entry is not your final destination, you must file a Mexican Flight Plan that is signed and officially authorized by the airport authority. For fuel, major US credit cards are not welcome, so carry enough cash to fuel up. If security is not evident, it is recommended to fuel up upon departure.

For detailed information, telephone numbers of Border Flight Service Stations, and lots of essential tips on paperwork, forms and other items either required or highly recommended for travel into Mexico, including aircraft documents, pilot certificates, and other paperwork, please visit <http://flyingadventures.com/mexico>.

Happy flying!



Sauntering woman (top) and sunning sea lion (bottom) - both soak-up nature's seductions offered by beautiful Baja



at a time (their max is 15) before breaking the water's surface with the drama of their three to five blows. How do I know all this? Because I am blessed to be in one of those 10 boats on the lagoon, getting so up close I can touch the calf that practically snuggles up for a cuddle. After a night at the La Pinta Hotel, very fine, where dinner was as incredible as the killer margarita (I think the thing forgot all but the alcohol), I was up with the chickens for a morning whale-watching expedition. It is easy to board a boat in Guerrero Negro, either one run by an organized eco-tour outfit or a small *panga* owned by a local boatman. Either way, floating out among the whales, especially the fiercely protective new mothers who nonetheless at times will nudge their young above the surface as if to show them off, is one awe no nature-loving flyer should miss – not ever – in life.

Later, in a moment of quiet, I reflect on how it felt at the lagoon. The sand, the sea, the breeze. There, the magic of Mexico infused my spirit with a sense of warm contentment, a sense that lingers still. No hurry. No worries.

It is not a long return flight to San Felipe for fuel, then home. I will have a wonderful room at the Playa Club San Felipe, and a wonderful dinner (there's that strange margarita again) at Baja Mar, a wonderful restaurant. But for now, the Baja sun is seeping into my bones, and the magical sight of the whales, the way their lagoon seemed so still and warm and safe, so perfect for the business of making and birthing whale babies...well, it is an experience that leaves me feeling...awfully...sleepy. I feel why the gray whales year after year come here, to this bliss of a beach paradise: It is Baja heaven here and...ahhh, yes. Time for that siesta. ✕