



**Oregon State University**  
Marine Mammal  
Institute

# BAJA GRAY WHALE EXPEDITION

**FEBRUARY 28–MARCH 8, 2023**



*Updated 7/6/22*

[mmi.oregonstate.edu/baja-expedition](http://mmi.oregonstate.edu/baja-expedition)  
(541) 867-0202



# ITINERARY OVERVIEW

## Day 1 – Tuesday, February 28: Loreto, Baja California Sur

Our trip begins in Loreto, Mexico, at [Hotel La Misión](#), our base for the next three nights. Meet us on the fourth floor at 5 pm for a group happy hour for a welcome, introductions, and an overview of the expedition ahead. A short walk takes us to a local restaurant and our first of many nights to enjoy Baja California cuisine.

## Days 2 & 3 – Wednesday, March 1, & Thursday, March 2: Loreto Bay National Park

Our days start early, but you won't regret it: the sunrises are spectacular. We breakfast at the hotel, then walk along the Malecón (boardwalk) to the harbor where we board pangas (small open boats), piloted by experienced local guides. Early morning brings beautiful light and, typically, calm water. From our pangas, we explore Gulf of California waters to the north and south, looking for marine mammals. California sea lions are an almost certainty; dolphin species can include bottlenose and common; if we are lucky, we may see pilot whales, false killer whales, or any number of other species of toothed whales. The waters near Loreto are legendary for large baleen whales, and

we may get to see fin whales and even blue whales. Seabirds, shore birds, and gorgeous scenery are guaranteed.

If conditions allow, we lunch on a nearby island and explore the beaches and desert plants and animals. We return to Loreto mid-afternoon for some free time to rest or explore this charming mission town on your own.

Early evening happy hours bring us together again for a debrief of the day, shared observations, and an overview of plans for the following days. A short walk away, we dine at additional neighborhood restaurants, chosen specifically by our local hosts to reflect quality, diversity, and Baja California culinary style.





## Day 4 – Friday, March 3: Loreto overland to San Ignacio Lagoon

We watch the sunrise during breakfast, then load our gear into vans and head across the Baja California peninsula en route to the west coast and the vast Pacific Ocean. This is a day of otherworldly beauty and diversity through some of the most unique desert landscapes in the world. The landscape is punctuated by villages and towns, each with their own stories and history.

Our last hour is unpaved road, finally ending at the remote, pristine, and tranquil Laguna de San Ignacio, a protected desert park that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Our destination is Campo Ramón, rustic luxury on the shore of the lagoon. Gray whales

swim, blow, spy-hop, and cavort in the waters beside our camp, and on calm evenings, we hear whale blows across the water. José Sanchez and his staff welcome us to camp, help us settle into our tents, and provide orientation during happy hour followed by a hearty home-cooked meal. After dinner, we watch the stars.



## Days 5, 6, & 7 – Saturday, March 4, through Monday, March 6: San Ignacio Lagoon

Our primary focus at San Ignacio Lagoon is, of course, gray whales. Weather permitting, everyone has the option for two trips on the water each day, watching whales from pangas. Our panga drivers are deeply experienced in safety, weather conditions, respect for the whales, and broader biology of this ecosystem and the people who live along its shores.

Here, the gray whales are in charge, choosing when, where, and how close to approach us. We can expect plenty of close views, including an occasional “shower”

when a whale exhales close by. San Ignacio is famous for its friendly mother-and-calf pairs, that are known to approach pangas so closely that they seem to ask to be touched. Indeed, many guests on our past trips have been able to touch a whale — an extraordinary and deeply moving experience. Spy hops, breaches, jousting, and mating



Photo copyright Michael S Nolan

behavior are commonly seen. We see bottlenose dolphins almost every day, and seabirds and shore birds are constantly overhead, on the water, and along shore. Sea turtles are resident in lagoon waters.

Optional excursions to explore mangrove and desert ecology are offered. And there is always the option to relax at camp and enjoy the scenery and sounds for those wanting a slower pace.



## Day 8 – Tuesday, March 7: San Ignacio Lagoon to Loreto

Our final morning at San Ignacio Lagoon begins with an early breakfast. Then we load into our vans for the drive from our remote wilderness, through the desert of Baja, and back to Loreto, with a stop for lunch along the way.

We arrive back at Hotel La Misión de Loreto late in the afternoon, in time for a shower, a change of clothes, and a special farewell dinner.

## Day 9 – Wednesday, March 8

Breakfast is a relaxed affair at the hotel, followed by departure to our respective homes (or other adventures).



# EXPEDITION LEADERS

## Lisa T. Ballance

Lisa T. Ballance is the Director of Oregon State University's Marine Mammal Institute, Endowed Chair of Marine Mammal Research, and Professor of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Sciences. In this role, she oversees the vision and implementation of research, education, and outreach for the Institute's 60 Professors, post-doctorates, students, and staff.

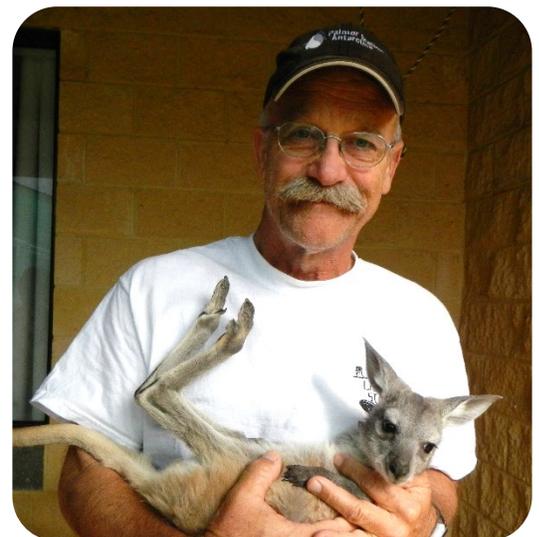
Prior to joining OSU's Marine Mammal Institute, Lisa directed NOAA's Marine Mammal and Turtle Research Division in La Jolla, CA, providing scientific leadership and oversight of applied research in the context of Endangered Species and Marine Mammal Protection Act directives. She was also Chief Scientist of NOAA's Eastern Tropical Pacific Dolphin Research Program, which provided the scientific basis for the "Dolphin Safe" label found on tuna cans in supermarkets all over this country.

Lisa holds a PhD in marine ecology, an MS in marine science, and a BS in biology. She has studied the ecology and conservation biology of whales, dolphins, porpoises, and seabirds for over 30 years around the world, including the tropical Pacific and Indian Oceans, Antarctica, the Bering Sea, and Cambodia's Mekong River. She has published more than 130 scientific papers, book chapters, and technical reports; regularly gives invited presentations at professional conferences, universities, public lectures, and policy-related briefings; and been awarded research funding from a wide variety of sources including National Science Foundation, Department of Energy, US Navy, and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. Lisa is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, recipient of the Department of Commerce Bronze and Silver Medals, NOAA Fisheries' Supervisor of the Year, and cover feature of the Association for Women in Science.



## Robert Pitman

Robert Pitman is a marine ecologist, who worked with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service from 1976 to 2019. He has participated in over 150 scientific research cruises in all the oceans of the world, including more than 30 trips to Antarctica. Bob has published 150 peer-reviewed papers and co-authored two editions of *Marine Mammals of the World*. His primary focus has been whale and dolphin distribution, ecology, and conservation. In recent years, Bob's main research interest has been the ecology of killer whales. Since 2003, he has led efforts to describe five different ecotypes of killer whales from the Southern Ocean. Bob is an affiliate faculty of the OSU Marine Mammal Institute and lives in Newport, Oregon, with his wife and colleague, Lisa Ballance.





## José Sanchez

José Sanchez (left) is the owner of Pure Baja Travels, which operates Campo Ramón, our lagoon adventure headquarters. MMI has been traveling with José and his team since 2022.

José is a native to Quintana Roo in the Yucatán Peninsula and moved to Baja to study marine biology at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur. After graduating, he joined a marine mammal program with the School for Field Studies. He has also been an invited instructor for nature guides at the RARE Center for Tropical Conservation in Baja. José has been leading ecotourism trips since 1993. He lives in Michigan with his wife and son and splits his time between leading kayaking trips on Lake Superior and whale watching trips in Baja.

## Ernesto Vázquez

Ernesto Vázquez (below left) is a marine mammal biologist with more than 30 years of experience. He began his career with the gray whales at San Ignacio Lagoon.

Ernesto focuses on cetacean population management, which is critical for regions such as Laguna San Ignacio, where the fishing tradition is an important part of the history of the people who inhabit this peninsula.



## Joel Coronado

Joel Coronado (below middle) is a naturalist specializing in environmental education and a local Baja Californian. Joel has been a tour guide at San Ignacio Lagoon since 2018.



## Said Estrada

Said Estrada (above) is a naturalist and professional Spanish–English translator. Said has been a tour guide for five years, including four years at San Ignacio Lagoon.

## Dawn Barlow

Dawn Barlow (right) is a post-doctoral scholar at the MMI, under the mentorship of Dr. Leigh Torres. Dawn studies the influence of oceanography on distribution of whales, dolphins, and porpoises to mitigate human–wildlife conflict.



# WHAT TO EXPECT

## Schedule

The Baja Gray Whale Expedition is a shared adventure. The itinerary is designed to be immersive; yet there is always an option to spend time on your own. Evening happy hours are our chance to reconnect as a group, compare notes, learn from our expedition leaders, local guides, and each other, and to dive into deep questions pertaining to the amazing wildness all around.

You may find your bedtime shifting forward to accommodate the early mornings and active schedule. At the same time, the experiences and company are intriguing, and you may find yourself compelled to talk with hosts and new friends late into the nights.

## Weather & Clothing

Our expedition is set in a beautiful desert — the air is very dry. Mornings and evenings are often cool and may be windy. Daytime temperatures are warmer, with highs in the upper 70s or low 80s. Temperatures on the water are cooler than on land. Prepare for plenty of outdoor time with lots of sun and wind, especially on the water in the lagoon. Layers and sun protective clothing are important.

Walking surfaces will include uneven sidewalks, wet sand, and rocky shores. Your feet will get wet up to your ankles as you climb in and out of the pangas (with assistance at the ready).

Dress is casual throughout the trip, especially in Campo Ramón and on the boats! Restaurants in Loreto are also casual but feel free to bring a change of clothes for these evenings.

We'll provide specific packing suggestions in additional materials.



## Accommodations & Meals

The town of Loreto and La Misión Hotel offer modern conveniences, comforts, and cafés. Breakfasts and dinners are in the hotel and surrounding restaurants. Lunches are picnic-style on beaches along the Gulf of California.

Campo Ramón, on the shores of San Ignacio Lagoon, is off the grid and sustainable — and the experience is magical. There is plenty of fresh water, hot showers, cold drinks, and lighted tents (thanks to solar panels). The composting toilets are simple and clean. The food is as extraordinary as the wildlife, with early coffee, tea, and breakfasts, and full homemade breakfasts, lunch, and dinner in the camp dining tent. You will be amazed at the diversity and composition of these delicious meals. The starry skies and sounds of the wind and gray whales are our mainstays at night.

# WHY IS THIS TRIP SPECIAL?

It is one thing to travel to extraordinary places like Baja California Sur, the Gulf of California, and San Ignacio Lagoon. It is yet another to travel there with the OSU Marine Mammal Institute.

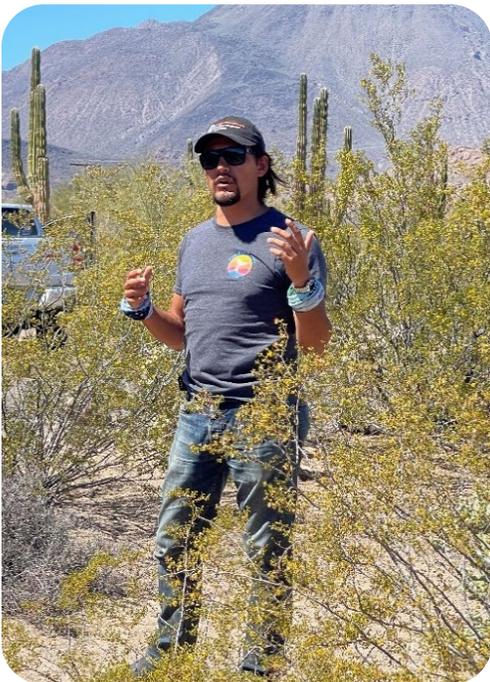
By joining us on the Baja Gray Whale Expedition, your travel companions are scientists who are world experts in marine mammals, local guides with deep knowledge about this land, and curious adventurers like yourself. Together, we explore and experience spectacular nature.

The wonders of biology and the practical and philosophical complexities associated with conservation become our discussion topics through evening lectures in camp and informal chats in pangas. The research that MMI conducts, the students we mentor, and the impacts of our efforts are woven throughout the trip. As a fellow traveler on this expedition, you become a part of that impact through your engagement and support.



## Marine Mammal Institute

Marine mammals are among the most beloved creatures in the ocean. They are deeply familiar and yet remain deeply unknown. OSU's Marine Mammal Institute is home to global experts in diverse fields of study, all committed to collaborative approaches to learn about these awe-inspiring animals.



We train the next generation of scientists, who will go on to work around the world to increase understanding of marine mammals, their habitats, and the impact we humans have on them. Our researchers engage with local communities to ensure that our collective efforts have the broadest impact possible.

It is our inherent responsibility as scientists and as humans to discover and share our knowledge with others. We do this because the only way to ensure a healthy future is if we are all stewards of it.



# TRIP COST

By joining us on the Baja Gray Whale Expedition, you will visit remarkable natural habitats first-hand while directly supporting graduate student education and research opportunities at the Marine Mammal Institute.

The Baja Gray Whale Expedition fees are as follows:

**\$1,000 per person deposit (NONREFUNDABLE)**

**\$5,000 per person final payment (DUE BY SEPTEMBER 1, 2022)**

---

**\$6,000 total trip cost per person**

*Your deposit secures your reservation.* Your \$1,000 deposit is a nonrefundable, tax-deductible donation to the Marine Mammal Institute Fellowship Fund. You will receive an emailed confirmation immediately after payment of your deposit or trip fee.

## The trip price includes:

- Nine-day, 8-night expedition in Baja Mexico, with activities as described and modifications subject to weather and daily conditions
- All meals and nonalcoholic beverages from dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 9
- Alcoholic beverages at Campo Ramón and one alcoholic beverage at happy hour and dinner at Loreto
- All accommodation from Day 1 through the night of Day 8, double occupancy.
- Gratuities for panga drivers, van drivers, and restaurant staff at happy hours and group meals in Loreto

## The trip price *does not* include:

- Travel between your home and Loreto, Mexico.
- Ground transportation between Loreto airport and La Mision hotel (taxis wait at the airport)
- **Required emergency medical evacuation insurance.** (We can provide suggestions, or talk to your travel agent.)
- Incidentals and items of a personal nature (laundry, telephone calls, etc.)
- Customary gratuities for Pure Baja Travels staff of \$160/guest.

# Cancellation Policy

Per-person cancellations are subject to the following:

- The deposit of \$1,000 per person is a tax-deductible donation to the Marine Mammal Institute via the Oregon State University Foundation and as such is *nonrefundable*, even if you cancel your registration for any reason.
- If you cancel your registration for any reason before December 1, 2022, your \$5,000 per person trip fee will be refunded in full.
- If you cancel your registration for any reason on or after December 1, 2022, your \$5,000 per person trip fee will not be refunded.