Excerpt from
Travel Journal: Gray Whales of Baja
Eye to Eye in San Ignacio Lagoon

February 1- 6, 2008

by
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Dedicated to Dr. Tom Sourisseau,
whose probing scientific questions I kept hearing in my head as I experienced the whales.
February 1, 2008
Assembly Point: San Diego

Tomorrow Debra, my partner in life’s adventures, and I depart with our ecotourism group from the hotel lobby at 6 am. I’m as academically prepared as I can be, full of booklore about the grays. I’ve combed *Sightings* by Brenda Peterson and Linda Hogan, *Gray Whales* by Jim Darling, the San Ignacio lagoon portions of *Eye of the Whale* by Dick Russell, and *Whales: Touching the Mystery* by Doug Thompson. The volumes are full of tales about the place where I am going and the people I am about to meet through Baja Expeditions, the whaling camp where I will stay. Yet I found a much older book, *Men and Whales at Scammon’s Lagoon*, by David Henderson especially helpful because it described the bloody history of whaling in great detail and the constant battle between humans and the intelligent “Devil Fish” they hunted.

Henderson’s book was as close as I could come to Captain Charles Melville Scammon, whose close observations of gray whale behavior enabled him to write *The Marine Mammals of the North-western Coast of North America*, published in 1874. A whaling captain for only eight years, Scammon is an important figure in the history of the gray whale. He is credited with “discovering” the birthing lagoons of Baja, and his writings alerted other whalers to the easy hunting there, leading to the slaughter of the species. Though long considered an accurate scientific resource, I found the portions of his book quoted by both Henderson and Thompson hard reading, particularly a vivid description of how orphaned babies haunted the ships after their mothers had been killed and cut up, circling the boats and crying. “When the mother was taken to the ship to be cut in, the young one followed and remained for about two weeks; but whether it lived to come to maturity is a matter of conjecture” (Thompson 99). Though Scammon refused to speculate about its future, Thompson is clear about what happened: without its mother’s milk, the calf was doomed to death, because it would have no food. This death of the young, combined with the enthusiastic slaughter of adults, led to the severe population decline of the gray.

Despite their drop in numbers, scientists have been able to conduct research about this cetacean species, but there are still many mysteries about them.. The greatest, to my mind, is why, after many years of decimation at the hands of men like Scammon, of plummeting population numbers,
disruption of family groups, the death of their young, do they now allow humans to venture close to
them again? Why do they permit us to view their babies, sometimes granting a precious touch?

These interactions primarily occur within the birthing lagoons of Magadelen Bay, Oja de Liebre
(formerly known as Scammon’s Lagoon), Guerrero Negro (connected to Oja Liebre by a shallow
channel) and Laguna San Ignacio, where so much of the original slaughter took place. Friendly
encounters stop the moment the mother and baby leave the safety of the lagoon and proceed north,
though some have been known to occur in Washington state and off Vancouver Island in British
Columbia. I can’t help but marvel that I’m venturing to the one spot where such contact is
common. But why? How did this change from enemy to friend come about?

This shift is a relatively new phenomenon, first occurring in 1972. Francisco “Pachico” Mayoral, a
local from Laguna San Ignacio, was out in his boat one day fishing for grouper and cabrilla when he
was suddenly surrounded by hundreds of whales. He was frightened and for good reason. The
Azorean whalers who hunted on the Monterey Bay were the first to name the grays “Devil Fish”
because they fought back when harpooned, often body-slamming whaling boats or smashing them
with their tails and killing the whalers. Serves the whalers right, I always thought, when I taught this
little bit of local history in my English 1A class on the Monterey Bay region.

Though those acts of self-defense occurred a good hundred years ago, according to Dick Russell in
Eye of the Whale, Pachico had a more recent reason to feel afraid. Just a few years earlier, several
fisherman in San Ignacio had accidentally run over a whale in a narrowest part of the lagoon. The
whale attacked and killed the entire crew. After that, the local fishermen not only tried to keep their
distance, but made sure that they announced their arrival to the whales in this area by beating on the
hull of their boats.

That day, Pachico and his partner Luis watched in fear as dozens of whales spy-hopped near their
little skiff, lifting straight up out of the water; the creatures seemed to be taking a good look at the
two men. One whale scratched her head against the front of the panga (as the skiffs are called) for a
good hour. “And most of her body was underneath,” Pachico reported to Russell,” so we could not
move” (147). I can imagine the forty foot whale beneath the twenty-five foot boat, resting it on her
back, preventing the men from sailing away. The men worked quietly to lift the fishing lines they
had dropped into the water, afraid that if they hurt the whale, she would retaliate, and they too
would die. Finally, Dick Russell quotes Pachico as saying, “I don’t know what finally compelled me
to reach out my hand. The moment I touched the whale for the first time, I felt something
incredible. I lost my fear. I was amazed. It was like breaking through some kind of invisible wall.
And I kept touching. That moment I compare with when my first child was born. It leaves a deep
impression on my heart” (147).

He goes on to say, “I feel the whales came looking for us…We analyze that the whale…now
forgives us for hunting it. They are demonstrating the friendship that we never showed them… I
think they are smart and that they are showing us how to live. And I believe that this is a great
lesson for us” (148).

Since then, many whales have approached Pachico and the other fisherman of the lagoon. They
bring their babies. “They teach their young to be friendly too. It is like the first friendly whale told
the others what it was like. How they do this, we don’t know. They speak and communicate under
the ocean,” Pachico claims (Russell 148).
An entire whale watching business has sprung up in the lagoon, with locals taking first scientists and then tourists like me out into the water to witness the miracle. The scientists named the experience Friendly Whale Syndrome and “syndrome,” according to Webster, is a word used to characterize an abnormality. But I’m curious. Am I about to see abnormal behavior or is this what could have been if we had chosen not to hunt this species?

Dick Russell finds the timing of Pachico’s encounter significant. It occurred during the same year that the Mexican government established the San Ignacio Bio Reserve as a refuge and the United Nations called for the end of worldwide whaling. Roger Payne, one of the world’s best known whale scientists, comments in his book Among Whales, “The brain of whales suggest by their size and complexity a potential for function and/or thought equal to or surpassing our own”(327). Is it possible, as Russell implies, that the whales sensed this change in the status of their birthing grounds and approached Pachico as a result? Payne speculates further, “It is as though our two mammalian brains have more in common than we are aware and that we really may have significant things to say to each other – despite our isolation for the last sixty-five million years – if only we could find a communication channel”(346). Is that communication channel in the process of being opened in San Ignacio Lagoon?

As I think ahead to the trip, I am filled with questions. Is Friendly Whale Syndrome totally voluntary or are the creatures somehow coerced? What kind of relationship has developed between the people of San Ignacio and the whales? And how do the locals like Pachico feel about the hundreds who journey there as eco-tourists? What will I learn from first-hand experience that either confirms or contradicts the scientific writing I’ve read?

This whale species lives in a world so different from our own that many of the scientific texts I read cautioned about what the author reported, always couching it with the caveat that it’s hard to gain good information. Research is limited by the human ability to witness only about ten percent of the whales’ lives, the moments when they are at the surface of the sea. Even my writer’s imagination, trained to visualize the impossible, finds it difficult to wrap my mind around the sensory experience of their daily life, the sounds and smells and currents, much less the complexity of their family behaviors and drives. I find myself wondering about basics: What might it feel like to touch a whale, if I am so lucky? Will their skin feel leathery or pebbled from barnacles and lice? What does their breath sound like? Do they sleep?

I can’t wait to find out.
February 2, 2008
Arrival at San Ignacio

Baja at last – a wholly different world. I walk through a landscape of sand and cactus, along beaches of crushed shell lapped by small waves that move to a slower sense of time. The place feels both foreign and mysterious, as if it’s whispering secrets in a language I don’t understand, hiding treasures that are yet to be revealed. It took a long journey to get here…

We were met by Alex Romero and Jose Sanchez who cheerfully hustled us onto the waiting Baja Adventures yellow school bus and immediately began answering our many questions.

Alex (left) and Jose (right)

Alex, a La Paz native, has worked for Baja Adventures for fifteen years. Now the manager of the camp and one of the guides on the whale watching expeditions, he is married to an American woman, and they divide their time between here and her native Wisconsin where they lead kayaking adventures during the summer. The amiable Jose hails from the Yucatan but graduated with a degree in biology from the university in La Paz, focusing on marine mammals. He’s worked for the company for eight years and is also married to an American woman; the couple divide their time between Baja and Lansing, Michigan. I envy Estaven, their little four-year-old, who claims the lagoon as his backyard each winter while he attends a local pre-school here. For several years, Jose taught in a program called RARE, a guide training program for locals in rural areas. In San Ignacio, its aim was to provide locals from a small village of only 300 people with scientific knowledge about the whales and enough English to serve the eco-tourists who come to the lagoon. I believe that
nationally it works to educate locals in any area about the benefits of eco-tourism as source of income, providing them with an entry into another way of life. It turns out that one of Jose’s star pupils, Lupita Murillo, is now one of our guides as well.

After a lunch of scallops fresh from the lagoon (delicious!), the afternoon was spent getting oriented to the camp and its environs…Debra and I immediately took off down the shell-covered beach with our binoculars in hand, ready to look for whales. As we sat and watched for spouts, we heard an odd hollow noise, like a long sigh. A deep and slow whistle, it sounded as if air were snaking through a huge wooden pipe. “What is that?” Deb asked. But each time we looked for the source, we could see nothing. A few minutes later, though, we heard the whoosh of a whale spout. Finally, using the binoculars, we traced the whales’ backs, and realized that we were listening to the whales inhale!

Because the lagoon is only forty feet deep at this spot, we learned later, the whales do not often show their flukes when going below, taking a big breath and sinking slowly instead. We marveled to hear the familiar in and out that marks the passage of air moving through the human body, but at so much slower a pace. We listened to our sisters in the sea, fellow mammals bound to the same accordion-like movement of the lungs that preserves our own life. Without realizing it, I found that my own inhalation had grown deeper.

Later, as I described the experience to Alex after dinner, his face lit up. “Isn’t that the coolest sound?” Then he grinned. “We have guests who complain about the noise sometimes. They don’t realize what they’re hearing and say it keeps them up at night.” I can’t imagine anything more comforting than this lullaby of air, floating across the starry dark of the Baja skies, a gift from the sea.

Since I had Alex to myself, I began to ask him about the whales, “Are the number of whales in the lagoon the same as last year?”

He frowned for a moment. “Every year is different,” he stated. “This year we’ve seen whales as far south as Cabo San Lucas which is really unusual.” No one can explain the population shifts but salinity and water temperature have been proven not to be a factor. “And they’ve been feeding,” Alex declared. “Scientists used to think that the whales didn’t eat the whole time they were down here. But if we see poop, we know they’re eating. And we’ve seen poop.” He shook his head, “They are such a mystery. We know so little.” Then he grinned. “But maybe after tomorrow you’ll know a little more.”

We have two whale watch trips scheduled, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Alex smiled. “I love the trips. Everybody puts on all these clothes so they don’t get wet or cold. You’ll see. Fashion disappears. The only thing that matters is the whales.”
February 3, 2008
Whale Encounters

Each time I woke during the night, I listened for whale breaths. But a furious wind was ripping across the tent and all I could hear was the far-off yipping of a coyote and the flapping of the canvas sides. I burrowed deeper into my sleeping bag, pulling my wool hat over my ears. An icy chisel had shaped the stars, lights of clear gold that spattered like a Pollack painting across the night sky.

After breakfast, the group hurried to get ready for the first whale watch trip. Dressing for it required care: choosing the right layers of warmth and rain gear, wrapping the cameras in waterproof bags, correctly donning a personal floatation device and finding a matching pair of wellies from the tangle of boots provided by Baja Expeditions. And don’t forget the sun block! Alex was certainly right about the lack of fashion, but we just laughed at how we looked.

Divided into groups of six, we were assigned to a naturalist and a skipper. I was pleased that Debra and I ended up in Jose’s group, since he so often expressed what he knew about the whales in scientific terms. We walked to the twenty-four foot fiberglass pangas down sandy banks and across the tidal flats.
Jose explained that we would journey to the one part of the four-mile long lagoon designated for whale watching. This way, if a mother and baby didn’t want to have any encounters with humans, they were free to swim in the rest of the area. Even if we saw something spectacular on our way out, we were prohibited from lingering to watch.

The Biosphere Reserve has other strict rules that governed our time in the water. We were allowed to stay in the whale watching area for 90 minutes only. Our arrival and departure were recorded by an official, who watched from the shore or from a boat and had a walkie-talkie to let boats know if they’d over stayed their limit. Only 16 pangas were permitted in the whale watching area at a time. According to Jose, the Mexican government had originally wanted the limit to be 20 but the people of San Ignacio felt that 16 was better for the whales. The skiffs operated out of several whale watching camps around the lagoon, taking out groups like ourselves who stayed for several days at a time or the more casual day trippers. Only two boats could be near a friendly whale at one time. If others were in the area, they had to hang back and wait their turn. Above all, whales were not to be harassed or endangered in any way. Their contact with us was to be utterly voluntary, without coercion. It was their choice.

Chino, the official who recorded our ins and outs was also charged with watching to make sure that no infractions occurred. Though he was not dressed in a black and white stripped shirt, he acted as a referee for the area, calling fouls and timeouts. We waved as we motored past him, standing up his skiff and recording our arrival on his clipboard.

Jose pointed us toward the most open part of the lagoon, near its mouth. We gazed for spouts. Suddenly a whale breached less than 200 yards away, rising out of the water and falling back down on its side with a huge splash. Awe filled my chest at the size of the creature, mountains of spray rising from the cast of its body into the sea. I could see the white markings along its jaw and head, the smile of its long mouth, the heavy lidded eye. “It didn't blow!” Jose shouted. “It’s going to breach again. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1.” As if listening, the whale rose just as Jose called out the last number, flung itself skyward and splashed down again. We shouted. Cameras clicked. Jose counted down a second time, his arm rising and falling with each number like a boxing ref; the whale appeared exactly when he predicted.
Then the whale spouted and dove. Jose laughed. “I guess that one read the textbook. Three is the number of breaches they write about, but really, it varies all the time.” Then he leaned back against the side of the panga. “It took me four years to get a picture of that. It’s very unusual for you to see it so close.” San Igancio had given us our first gift...

That afternoon we whale-watched in the impish Martin’s skiff, with Jose’s star pupil Lupita as our naturalist. The group decided to rotate guides and skippers, so we could experience each one’s particular expertise. Lupita brought the perspective of a local, someone who had grown up with these whales, first touching one when she was only eleven. At twenty-five now, she has the distinction of being the first female guide in San Ignacio lagoon and its only fisherwoman, working full time with her uncle when whale watching season is over.

She also possesses a wicked sense of humor and kept us laughing the whole time we were in her company. Lissa, Alex’s wife, told me later that Lupita is a “whale whisperer.” “They come to her,” she insisted. “You’ll see.”

At first, it did not seem that Lissa was right. But after a couple of encounters with mothers and babies who shied away from us, Lupita directed Martin to a corner of the whale watching area.

Lupita and Martin

“Look, there’s a young one,” she called. “You can still see the lines near its blowhole from where it was curled in the womb.”

The baby who surfaced a few hundred yards from the panga was nearly all gray, with very few barnacles or lice. “It’s maybe two weeks old,” Lupita guessed.

Would Mama permit it to play with us? Because whales seem to like the sound of an idling motor, we stopped moving and waited. Lupita handed me an empty bleach bottle with a section cut out of it. “Throw some water,” she instructed. Everyone else in the boat leaned to the side and splashed. “Come here baby,” Lupita called in a coaxing tone. We watched anxiously as the light colored
mother whale, with a distinct coral patch of lice near her blow hole, spouted near us. Unlike the other mothers we had encountered, she did not position herself between her calf and the skiff. They were coming closer.

“Here she is,” Lupita called. The baby appeared at the rear of the boat right where Debra and I were seated.

I leaned to make contact.

Spongy skin rippled under my palm, soft and tender. I could feel the sparse hairs, like thick wire, that rose from dimples that pockmarked the baby’s snout.
The calf’s twin blowholes, which I’d been warned not to touch, looked as moist and sensitive as the openings of an elephant’s trunk.

“You’re such a beautiful baby,” I crooned over and over. Debra and I ran our hands down its nose and along its jaw for as long as it would permit. Then it slid below the water, surfacing again beside us with a big blow. As we screamed in surprise, the calf bobbed its head. I swear it was laughing.

The calf came close for several more encounters, often following touches with a huge spray. It seemed to be playing – rushing toward us, then careening away after gently nudging the panga, making surprise dives below the boat, only to emerge again on the other side. Mama hovered nearby, sometimes swimming beside her baby, at other times watching from afar.

Finally, she declared that play time with the humans was over. Their two sets of blow holes, so vulnerable looking as they rose in tandem from the sea, appeared beside us one last time, and then they swam away.

“I love whales!” Lupita yelled as we watched the pair disappear. Her exuberance captured the feeling in the boat. I couldn’t stop smiling, feeling a happiness that was too big for words. Pachico Mayoral’s comment about “breaking through an invisible wall” when he first touched a whale suddenly made deeper sense. An utterly wild creature and I had just made joyful contact. The
touch of the calf’s skin against my hand shifted something in my conception of the world, created broader possibilities for kinship and family.

Was this sense of connection simply a mammalian link, the coming together of two vaguely similar species? No. Because though I have been awed by encounters with many wild mammals, something felt different about this one. I couldn’t stop the goofy grin that creased my face nor the wonder that electrified the hairs on the back of my neck and my arms. Did these sensations arise from a moment of union between a sea and land creature, the coming together of beings from wholly different spheres? Or was it simply the charm and delight of interacting with any kind of very young creature? Perhaps the sensations occurred because I’d just touched an animal whose protective mother was so much bigger than me, who could smash our boat with a flick of her flukes. Yet never once during our encounter had I felt afraid. Instead, it was as if the ribs which caged my heart creaked opened, giving me more room.

I remembered Roger Payne’s speculations about the link between our two mammalian brains. He wondered if we would have things to say to each other if only we could talk. If Dr. Payne had been in the panga with me at that moment, I would’ve nudged him with my elbow and whispered, “Look at all the silly smiles. The communication has begun. It’s just not in a spoken language.”

As we sped back to camp, our precious ninety minutes of whale watching used up, I couldn’t wait to see Alex. I wanted to tell him that last night’s comment about our adventures on the lagoon was right. The superficialities that we use to define our lives -- clothes, jobs, cars -- had fallen away. All that mattered were the whales. And that, I realized, made camp, the foreignness of life in tents with this group of strangers, the constant desert wind and icy stars of San Ignacio, feel like home...
February 5, 2008
Whale Kisses

...Later that day, we prepared for the final outing of the trip. After the morning’s disappointing lack of contact with the grays, I was hoping we would have some sort of major meeting during the afternoon. But as I got into the panga, guided by Molo and again with Lupita as naturalist, I chided myself. I’d already had plenty of touches and blows from two baby whales over the last two days, not to mention witnessing both a breach and some mating behavior. Why in the world was I so greedy? “Relax,” I kept telling myself, looking over the chop of the lagoon and the dolphins and pelicans that accompanied our skiff. I took a long breath, trying to blow away my hope that Lupita, the “whale whisperer,” would once again work her magic and bring a baby to us.

Molo stood at the helm, straight-backed and silent. He maintained the mien of a sentry, watching the water, while keeping a careful hand on the rudder of the skiff.

We left the other boats in our group and headed out toward the entrance to the lagoon. There we saw two mother and calf pairs, but both mothers hurried their babies away from the panga when we got near.

Suddenly, excited talk in very fast Spanish spouted over the walkie-talkie. Without saying a word, Molo turned the panga back toward where other boats seemed to be hovering. I looked at Lupita, wondering if she would clue us in on what was going on. But she simply smiled, a Cheshire cat grin. I squinted. Was it a friendly mother and baby? If so, how nice that we would all get to share in the experience and watch each other’s joy.
As we motored into position and sat waiting in the water, I peered at the two boats that were poised for interaction. Just then, one of them lifted up out of the water, riding on the back of a whale. The creature hoisted the panga into the air, then gently set it down again.

I shook my head. Was I seeing things? Forty feet of whale had just elevated a twenty-five foot boat, weighted by eight people. Was she (Alex later told us that she had shown her belly to his panga, exposing her sex) scratching an itch on her back or simply teasing the folks in the skiff? Her entire body, a wide expanse of gray, was stretched out perpendicularly to the panga. Then she sank down into the sea.

Our camp mates moved from one side of the skiff to the other, squealing with what can only be called childish glee. They all leaned to the west, splashing and calling the whale. Suddenly, she spyhopped on the eastern side of the boat, near the stern. Only Alex, his whale watching instinct honed by years of experience, turned in the right direction. He stretched his hand out to touch her. “Here I am!” she declared in what looked like a game of hide and seek.

This was the most playful mother I had seen in the lagoon. Where was the baby? I watched carefully as the whale interacted with two boats, but our angle prevented me from seeing a young one. Besides, the antics of the mother were enough to keep me occupied. Spouting and coming close to the skiffs, it seemed she just couldn’t get enough attention. As I watched more closely, I realized that the whale was alone, an adult, seeking contact.

When it was our turn to motor close, I hung over the edge of the panga with the rest of my fellow whale watchers, splashing and calling to the whale. “Baby, come here. Baby!” shouted one of my boat mates. Then the whale turned on her side and revealed her entire length to us, prodding the boat with her nose.
“That’s no baby,” Lupita yelled as we leaned over, reaching to touch. I caught my breath. Though I’d seen how big this whale was from afar, it didn’t prepare for the enormity of her body next to mine, at least twice the length of our boat. The babies we’d touched were so small, tiny creatures who could not threaten us, compared to this adult. This female was fully capable of sinking our skiff with a flick of her flukes or a hard nudge with her head, and yet I never felt afraid, not even for a moment. Why should I? She was so clearly emanating love.

Unlike the baby whales, this gray was thickly covered with circular barnacles grouped together in what looked like continents on a globe or constellations in the night sky. Running my fingers over their pebbled surface, I felt as if I were touching the stars. Her body was scarred in spots, runneled with white lines that Alex later explained may have come from being scratched by ice in the Arctic.

Our panga lifted up and down, carried by the strength of the whale’s body. Like she’d done with the other boats, she gave us a short ride on her back. After putting us down again, she turned on her side, opening her wide mouth, and came close to the skiff.

The “whale whisperer” leaned over to touch her. “I felt her baleen!” Lupita shouted. “I had my entire hand in her mouth!” The whale dove and then came up again. “Wow!” Lupita couldn’t stop grinning. I was struck by the exchange of trust between human and whale – baleen and fingers coming into contact, an intimacy shared by two species who had so recently been enemies. What a marvel.
Several times the whale showered us with a blow as she went under and around the skiff, revealing her mouth, her back and the tender skin near her blow holes for us to caress. The dual blow holes, one of the distinguishing features of this species of whale, were huge, dark slits against her gray skin. I patted the area near it gently, grateful that she was willing to expose such a precious spot for a touch. Her skin felt more worn than the babies I had stroked the day before. Yet it still possessed the same spongy texture, tender and easily bruised.

Several times, as I patted and stroked, I had a sense of unreality. The moment felt too big to hold. “I am embracing an adult whale,” I thought. “My hand is pressing against her skin. Am I really doing this?” Time seemed to elongate. Though interacting with the babies had made me happy, something deeper seemed to be occurring in this moment, an ancient joy that welled up in me like a current in the sea. The words I used to try to name it -- contact, kinship, love — just couldn't capture the enormity of those sweet waters. I let them wash over me, hoping I communicated the electrical current of delight eddying in my palm when I pressed it against the whale’s head or body.

I have no idea how long we spent with the whale, but at some point Molo pulled back and let another boat come close. We hovered nearby as our fellow whale watchers screamed, laughed, cried and ducked their heads after being doused by a blow. Finally, Lupita said, “We’re going to go in again. This is your last chance because we have to go back to camp. Give me your cameras, and I’ll take pictures for you.”

Molo put us into position and the whale returned, lifting us up and down and making herself available for more touches. I was grateful that neither Debra nor I chose to fuss with a camera. Instead, we could simply enjoy our fingers pressing into the whale’s wet skin, feeling the stubble of lice or the thick hairs that protruded from the edge of her mouth. Lupita clicked away, recording our interactions.

Debra and the whale  Photo by Lupita Murillo
Once, I had a good view of the whale’s eye. We could see her eyeball, a soft gray that seemed to peer eagerly up at us. Though there is no scientific proof (as yet) of the intelligence of these huge mammals, that eye seemed to know who and what it was regarding. I felt an odd sensation in my chest. Something shuddered through me or perhaps it was simply my heart opening.

Photo by Jessica Kirk

My rib cage felt too small to contain the happiness that I felt at that moment.

Everyone around me seemed to feel the power of the contact. When I looked up, I noticed that the same grin that I wore also creased the face of each person in the panga. “My!” one of my boat mates said, the word stretched and elongated to embrace her happiness.

The whale edged closer to us and rose higher out of the water. “Kiss her!” Lupita instructed Debra and me. We bent and pressed our lips against the top of her huge head, the taste of salt stinging our tongues.

Debra and Marcy kiss a whale

Photo by Lupita Murillo
The whale and I were skin to skin – she lifting up out of the sea, me leaning crazily out of the boat, two different worlds uniting in love. Anything seemed possible in that moment. Magic had occurred, a connection snaking out beyond the confines of logic, bolting like lightning away from the scientific approach I’ve been trained to take to life. This was something other, bigger and broader. I had no words for it. I simply wanted to laugh and cry, to beat my feet against the boat in a crazy “happy dance,” to somehow allow my body to move with this new and huge wave of feeling. I’d kissed an adult whale! What could be better than that?

As always, Lupita gave shape to the moment with her humor. “I love you!” she called to the whale when we left. As Molo began to speed back to camp, Lupita turned back to face us. “She kisses better than my boyfriend,” she commented. “Much better.” We laughed, dizzy with glee and delight.

As we journeyed, we discussed this rare occurrence. Why would an adult whale seek out the type of contact we had experienced with the babies? Perhaps this creature had been touched by humans when she was young and simply wanted more. I remembered that scientists now believe that grays can live to be 100 years or more. It was possible that this whale had been alive during the whaling times. Yet she and the other whales over the last few days were still willing to be touched by members of the species that had hunted them. How and why had this happened? In Doug Thompson’s book, *Whales: Touching the Mystery*, Lupita is quoted as saying, “We have to learn how to forgive like the whales do. The people who come and touch the whales can imagine what it was like when we used to kill the whales. Yet the whales have forgiven us. They could kill us easy, but they don’t. Instead they come and bring their babies and they are gentle with us…I really think about God putting those whales here to teach us humans to forgive – to open our eyes and see (48).” At that moment, the wisdom and truth in her words circled around my heart like squawking gulls. Though I may never know why the whales of San Ignacio lagoon allowed us to glory over them, showering them with love and expressing our wonder, my bones hummed with a song of joy from that contact.
February 6, 2008
Farewell to San Ignacio

…When we finally lifted off, many of the group wiped tears from their eyes. “It’s hard to leave a place where you’ve been happy,” one of them said to me, wadding a damp Kleenex in her hand. I leaned back in my seat and pondered the nature of that happiness, a bell of joy still ringing through my bones. It arose from the touch of a totally wild creature, I decided, made richer and more precious by its potential to harm me. That adult whale could have sunk our panga in an instant with a flap of her fluke or tail, yet she chose to seek kisses instead.

Had I ever experienced anything equivalent to this magic? What about the bears I’d encountered during backpack trips in the Sierra? The Yosemite ones rummaged for food in garbage cans at night, but didn’t ask for interaction. The one we spied last summer as we drove to the trailhead bolted through the trees in a fearful rush when it heard our car. Our friend Connie had come upon an adolescent beside a creek as she rounded a twist in the trail. It stared at her for a moment, then hurried away. What we’d just experienced with the whales would be like a gigantic bear, three times
my size, arising from the between the trees and lumbering alongside me, occasionally stopping to ask me to stroke its brown fur.

I looked out the window at the Mexican landscape. This trip had widened my sense of possibility, deepened my awe at the wonders of this world. And, as Debra whispered to me as the plane flew northward, our hearts had been sprung wide open. Whatever I kept caged there no longer needed to live in hiding. Of course I felt different. I’d kissed a whale, exchanged love. At that moment, it seemed I would never again need to hold back kindness or joy. I cupped my hand around the pulse of my memories. “Thank you,” I whispered to the receding Baja skies.

Works Cited


A note on the photos: Most of the photos included in this journal are my own or my partner Debra Houston’s. I am grateful to Angela Heine, Jessica Kirk, Kathleen Sloan and Martha Taylor for supplying me with some additional pictures to illustrate this account. I am especially thankful to Lupita Murillo for grabbing our camera and taking shots of our wondrous encounter with the adult whale, so that we could just enjoy the moment.