



Oregon State University
Marine Mammal
Institute

BAJA GRAY WHALE EXPEDITION

FEBRUARY 24–MARCH 4, 2025



beav.es/baja
(541) 867-0202

ITINERARY

Day 1 – Monday, February 24: Loreto, Baja California Sur

Our trip begins in Loreto, Mexico, at [Hotel Posada de las Flores](#), our base for the next three nights. We'll begin with a group happy hour for a welcome, introductions, and an overview of the expedition ahead. Happy hour will be followed by dinner together at the hotel.

Days 2 & 3 – Tuesday, February 25, & Wednesday, February 26: 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. Large baleen whales, such as fin whales and blue whales, can be found in the waters near Loreto, and we may be able to sight them from our boats. Seabirds, shore birds, and gorgeous scenery are guaranteed.



Photo by Dan Edge, Baja Expedition 2023

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 – Thursday, February 27: 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 as we travel overland through some of the most unique desert landscapes in the world. The journey 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.



Photo copyright Michael S Nolan

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 behavior are

Days 5, 6, & 7 – Friday, February 28, through Sunday, March 2: 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,

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.

Group excursions to explore mangrove and desert ecology are offered as part of the itinerary, if conditions allow. And there is always the option to relax at camp and enjoy the scenery and sounds for those wanting a slower pace.



Day 8 – Monday, March 3: 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 Posada de las Flores, late in the afternoon, in time for a shower, a change of clothes, and a special farewell dinner.

Day 9 – Tuesday, March 4: Home

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



EXPEDITION LEADERS

Lisa T. Ballance, PhD

Lisa T. Ballance is the Director of the Marine Mammal Institute of Oregon State University, Endowed Chair of Marine Mammal Research, and Professor of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Sciences. In these roles, she oversees the vision and implementation of research, education, and outreach for the institute's 60 professors, postdoctorates, students, and staff.

Prior to joining the Marine Mammal Institute, Lisa directed NOAA's Marine Mammal and Turtle Research Division in La Jolla, California, 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 the United States.

Lisa holds a doctorate in marine ecology, a master's degree in marine science, and a bachelor's 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.



Renee Albertson, PhD

Renee Albertson is a Research Associate and Affiliate Faculty with the Marine Mammal Institute. She earned her doctorate at the MMI in 2015 with Dr. Scott Baker, evaluating population structure of rough-toothed dolphins. Renee's research off the Oregon coast focuses on gray whale physiology, and she maintains the Oregon coast harbor seal photo-identification catalog. In the South Pacific, she collaborates with scientists and policymakers in Island Nations and participates each year in the International Whaling Commission's Scientific Committee Workshop on Small Cetaceans of the South Pacific Islands. Renee teaches several field-based marine mammal courses each year and has won several awards for her teaching at Oregon State University.



Lisa Hildebrand

Lisa Hildebrand is a doctoral candidate at the Marine Mammal Institute, under the mentorship of Leigh Torres. Her research seeks to better understand the space use of Pacific Coast Feeding Group gray whales along the central Oregon coast and how individual whales overlap with different human activities, such as recreational fishing and commercial crabbing. Lisa has been studying gray whales for six years now as she also completed her master's degree with Leigh at the Marine Mammal Institute leading a project along the southern Oregon coast about fine-scale gray whale feeding and their prey. Lisa came to Oregon after receiving her Bachelor of Science degree from Newcastle University in the United Kingdom.



José Sanchez

José Sanchez 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 been an invited instructor for nature guides at the RARE Center for Tropical Conservation in Baja. José has been leading ecotourism trips since 1993. José 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 Morquecho

Ernesto Vázquez is a marine mammal biologist with more than 30 years of experience. Ernesto began his career with the gray whales at San Ignacio Lagoon. He specializes in cetacean identification and cetacean population management and is deeply involved in surveys for the critically endangered vaquita porpoise.



Joel Coronado

Joel Coronado is a Baja Californian and naturalist specializing in environmental education and marine biology. Joel has been a guide at San Ignacio Lagoon since 2018 and enjoys wildlife photography.



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 windy. Daytime temperatures may be warmer. 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.

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 will share specific packing suggestions in the Preparation Packet.



Accommodations & Meals

Our hotel and the town of Loreto offer modern conveniences, comforts, and cafés. Breakfasts and dinners are in the hotel and surrounding restaurants. Lunches are simple and delicious picnic-style meals on beaches along the Gulf of California or in local restaurants en route to the lagoon.

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 full homemade breakfasts, lunch, and dinner in the camp dining tent. Our local camp staff can accommodate most dietary restrictions. 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 Marine Mammal Institute.

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 talks in camp and informal chats in pangas. The research that MMI conducts, the scholars and 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. The Marine Mammal Institute of Oregon State University 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 cost is as follows:

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

\$5,500 per person trip fees (DUE BY OCTOBER 1, 2024)

\$6,500 total trip cost per person

**Your deposit holds your reservation only until the full payment due date of October 1, 2024, unless full payment is made.* Your \$1,000 per person deposit is a tax-deductible donation to the Marine Mammal Institute Fellowship Fund and as such cannot be refunded.

The trip price includes:

- Nine-day, 8-night expedition in Baja California Sur, 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 accommodations from Day 1 through the night of Day 8, double occupancy
- Gratuities for boat drivers, van drivers, and restaurant staff at happy hours and group meals in Loreto

The trip price *does not* include:

- Transportation between your home and Hotel Posada de las Flores, Loreto, Mexico
- Overnight lodging prior to February 24 or after March 3
- Required emergency medical evacuation insurance
- Incidentals and items of a personal nature
- Customary gratuities for Pure Baja Travels naturalists and camp staff of \$160/guest
- Optional gratuities for hotel staff outside of group meals

Other important information:

- Flights to Loreto, Mexico, are limited and subject to change. Any arrangements or additional lodging needed to accommodate flight schedules are the responsibility of the traveler.
- We recommend that travelers adhere to public health guidelines set by the [Oregon Health Authority](#) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cancellation & Refund Policy

The deposit of \$1,000 per person is a tax-deductible donation to the Marine Mammal Institute via Oregon State University Foundation and as such is nonrefundable, even if you cancel your registration at any time and for any reason. If you cancel your registration for any reason on or before November 30, 2024, we will refund 100% of your \$5,500 per person nongift trip fee. If you cancel your registration for any reason December 1–31, 2024, we will refund 50% of your \$5,500 per person nongift trip fee. If you cancel your registration for any reason on or after January 1, 2025, we will not be able to refund your \$5,500 per person nongift trip fee.