

Sea of Cortez/Baja California, Mexico

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A Whale Lady's Tale

An American woman who went to Baja to help save the whales instead helped reform the mid-coast kayaking business

By Claire Walter

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Mary Harter came to Mexico because of the big guys. Big, like 40 tons. Big, like the gray whales that spend their winters in the Sea of Cortez, calve there, and feed in this rich sea for the long spring migration to Alaska. More accurately, she first came to Mexico in 1983 for a job that revolved around the big guys. During her winters off from her position as a field biologist at Yellowstone National Park, she introduced camera-toting tourists to whales and their environment.

She was hired by a tour company called Baja Expeditions for her expertise in interpreting the wonders of the natural world and her ability to interact well with clients on their liveaboard whale-watching boats. In time, spouting whales replaced spouting geysers in Harter's life, and she closed the Yellowstone chapter of her life and moved to Mexico.

When Baja Expeditions decided to get into the sea-kayaking business, Harter became a paddling guide, teaming up with a local guide named Ricardo Amador. They were a good mix. "The manager took the system developed for river trips and put it on the sea," she says of the skiff-supported trips along the stunning coves and headlands of Espiritu Santo and 54 other smaller islands off Baja's eastern shoreline. Their pattern of camping and kayaking has become the standard in what is now one of North America's premier sea-kayaking destinations. They also wove into their itineraries explanations of the region's natural and cultural history—introducing clients to the stark beauty of the desert, the richness of the Sea of Cortez and the simple ways of the Pericu, the indigenous people of Baja California.

Harter and Amador came from very different places in gaining knowledge of and affection for the sea the islands off Baja California. She grew up in typical American town along New Jersey's Garden State Parkway and has a degree in wildlife biology. As the son of a fisherman, he has the Sea of Cortez in his blood. He grew up learning the vagaries of the sea, the complexities of the coastline, the secrets of offshore islands and the life cycles of fauna. There's a lot to know. The Sea of Cortez, a deep cleft that is the

geological continuation of California's San Andreas Fault, is the world's richest sea, habitat for some 800 marine species.

Ten years after Harter first landed in Baja California, the twosome launched their own sea kayaking company. They called it Mar y Aventuras, a play on words that splits Harter's first name—and also means “sea and adventures” in Spanish. Harter and Amador set up shop La Paz, the largest city in southern Baja California. For the first five years, she guided all trips, but a bout with skin cancer now keeps the fair-skinned blonde in the office—a breezy but spartan aerie with tropical-blue walls, a couple of old couches covered with serapes and a computer and phones to link them with clients who reserve kayaking tours or rent boats for independent kayaking, travel agents and companies like California-based O.A.R.S. which books its clients on Mar y Aventuras trips.

Along the way, Harter and Amador got married, and in addition to running their 47-boat fleet, which includes rentals as well as kayaks used on guided trips, the couple has been instrumental in organizing sea kayaking the Baja Sea Kayak Association. In fact, Harter's office is command central for the association's activities. The group has a couple of key missions. First, obviously, is to keep the sea vibrant, healthy and attractive to kayakers—though as a biologist, Harter isn't too worried about the Sea of Cortez right now—as long as it's left alone. She says the whale population is up since she first started leading whale-watching tours. “As much as we talk about [the negative impacts of] tourism, the whale population has grown,” she says. “When people learn to love the whales, they want to protect them.”

She points out that the Sea of Cortez is one of only two places on earth where humans can swim safely sea lions (the other is the Galapagos Islands), and snorkeling with these huge pinipeds is a highlight of Mar y Aventuras' sea-kayaking trips. San Ignacio Bay, north of La Paz, is known for its “friendly whales.” Motorized skiffs ply the bay, where whales come close to the boats—often close enough for people to touch them. Kayaking among the whales is no longer permitted, but there's no law that keeps a whale from approaching a kayak.

“On one trip, we had a couple of fin whales come within 20 feet of the boats, and then a blue came up,” Harter says. “We were coming back from snorkeling. That big whale jumped in the water and passed us. First we saw the eye passed us, and then, the rest of it kept passing and passing. It was enormous.”

Second, the organization is trying to make sure that all outfitters are legal and “play by the same rules,” such as paying taxes--\$120 annually per boat—and complying with employment regulations. By law, all workers are supposed to be permitted, and at least 50 percent of the workforce must be Mexican nationals. We hear a lot about undocumented Mexicans crossing the border to work in the U.S., but we know less about the reverse: so-called “frostbacks” who travel south of the border to work in Mexico. These “freelance” operations transport clients from Southern California to the Sea of Cortez, essentially poaching local, legal guide services' business.

As far as whales go, things have come full circle for Mary. She arrived for the whales, was instrumental in introducing many clients to the magic and mystery of this marvelous species and now has been running a kayak company at a time when kayaking in areas where whales are active is prohibited. She's learned a lot about her adopted home, and her next goal is returning to her wildlife biology roots and writing a natural history guide to Baja California. It'll be a good one.

You can contact Mar y Aventuras (www.kayakbaja.com) via E-mail at sea@kayakbaja.com, or through O.A.R.S. (www.oars.com) at 800-346-6277.

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