

## Diving the Baja Sur

Cabo San Lucas – San Jose Del Cabo – Cabo Pulmo – La Paz - La Ventana

### Travel and getting around

#### **Airports**

There are two main airports in the Baja Sur area. Los Cabos International airport (SJD) in Cabo San Lucas and Manuel Márquez de León International Airport (LAP) in La Paz. Typically flights to Cabo San Lucas are the cheapest and most accessible. Rental cars, shuttles and taxis are available at both locations.

#### **Buses, Taxis, Rent A Car**

Rental cars are available in local offices, on-line and by telephone. There are numerous companies that are located at or close to the airports including Hertz, Budget, Thrifty, Advantage, National, Avis and Alamo.

There are two bus companies that go back and forth between La Paz, Todos Santos and Cabo San Lucas. El Aguila bus lines and Eco Baja shuttles have numerous daily departures and tickets can be purchased on-line. Only Eco Baja shuttles picks up from the Los Cabos airport.

The roads in Baja Sur are in good shape and driving is quite easy. Rental cars are a good way to get around on your vacation, especially if you want to visit some of the out of the way spots. It's not advised to drive at night due to the large number of cattle on the roadways.

All of the scuba diving areas are within half a day travel from each other. Cabo Pulmo and La Ventana are only accessible by private shuttle or rent a car.

### Dive sites – Diving conditions – Marine Life

The southern Sea of Cortez can vary greatly in temperature, visibility and diving conditions. In general waters are warmest in the summer and fall reaching up to 86 F (30 C). Winter and spring temperatures can drop down to 66 F (19 C), especially in January and February before slowly increasing into the spring and summer. Thermoclines may be present with large drops in temperature compared to the surface. In the winter a 5mm wet-suit is recommended, a hood will also go a long way in keeping the body warm while underwater. Typical sea conditions at the protected dive sites are calm, any offshore sea-mounts or channel dives are subject to winds, tides and currents. Visibility is varied and is mainly determined by plankton blooms, temperatures and local conditions. Good visibility can be experienced all times of the year but it's best in the summer and fall, reaching 100ft/30m. On some of the more advanced sites currents can be present but in general diving here is good for beginners and advanced divers.

The southern Sea of Cortez is famous for the bigger animals, including whale sharks, hammerhead and mako sharks, California sea lions, marlin, manta rays, large schools of mobula

rays, humpback, orca and gray whales. It's fish schools can get rather large as well, easily enveloping a diver. Big animals in the Sea of Cortez are seasonal and it's unlikely that you will be able to see all of them in the same diving area. The best way to experience the Sea of Cortez is to dive in a few different spots, each area has it's highlights.

The coral reefs of the area are often overlooked, there are at least 39 species of stony coral and 21 species of soft corals found here. Living in among these corals are numerous species of invertebrates for the macro lover, nudibranchs and seahorses are seen regularly. Corals tend to thrive here in micro-environments where the conditions for coral growth are present. Upwelling plays a major part, bringing cold, nutrient and oxygen rich water from the deep in contact with these reefs. Currents bring in a constant supply of food and most of the coral growth is concentrated on small islands and points of land. While the coral reefs are not extensive they are robust and have a number of similar species to the coral reefs of the western Pacific. Definitely a refreshing change if you have dove a lot in the Caribbean. There is a common misconception that the reefs in Cabo Pulmo are the only coral reefs in the Sea of Cortez, this is not true. There are coral reefs to be found in all of the diving areas in the southern Sea of Cortez.

## **Seasonality & How to**

### **Whale Sharks**

Sightings are guaranteed in La Paz early September through to the beginning of April. Outside of these months they are still around but further away and sightings are not consistent. Occasionally they can be spotted at the Gordo Banks outside of San Jose del Cabo, but there are no dedicated whale shark tours for that area. Whale shark tours can be booked anywhere in the Baja Sur area but they all leave from the harbor of La Paz. Tour operators cover the whole spectrum here, the cheapest tours basically throw you in the water with the whale sharks, the higher priced ones include equipment, a briefing and a guide. Certified operators fly a whale shark flag and have a government permit to run whale shark tours but not all tour operators are certified.

There is no scuba diving with the whale sharks in La Paz, only free-diving and snorkeling.

### **Sharks**

Sharks can be seen at a lot of the dive sites in the area, most notable are sightings of hammerheads at the sea-mounts of El Bajo in La Paz and at the Gordo Banks in San Jose del Cabo. Both of these dive sites are deep sea-mounts and an advanced dive. Typical dive depths are 30-40m/100-130ft on these dives and they should be done on good weather days. The late summer and fall are the best for spotting hammerheads, mainly because of the clear conditions. Because of the distance to these dive sites they are not typically run everyday. If your goal is to get out to one of these sites you should give yourself a window of opportunity.

Bull sharks can be found in Cabo Pulmo during the months of December through March. It's also a good place to spot juvenile sharks close to the shore at certain times of the year.

There are also two shark chumming dive/snorkel tours available in Cabo San Lucas, normal sightings include smooth hammerheads, blue, silky and mako sharks. These tours are done year round.

### **California Sea lions**

There is a sea lion colony in the harbor of Cabo San Lucas and two accessible from La Paz. The most famous is the colony at Los Islotes, at the northern tip of Isla Espiritu Santo in La Paz. This one has the largest number of juveniles and they tend to be the most playful. Sea lions are here year round and have their babies in the spring. Summer and Fall are the two best seasons for interaction. It is possible to dive and snorkel at the colonies.

### **Rays**

There are a large number of rays in the Sea of Cortez including the giant Manta, about 7 species of mobula ray, a few cow-nose species and a number of stingray and electric rays. It's very common to see Mobula rays jump completely out of the water, especially in the late afternoon.

### **Humpback Whales**

Humpback whales winter in the southern Sea of Cortez and are concentrated around the Cabo San Lucas area, with regular sightings as far north as Loreto. They are also very common along the Pacific Coast of the peninsula. The season is approximately mid-December to mid-April.

### **Gray whales**

Gray whales winter in the lagoons of the pacific coast of the Baja. Bahia Magdalena is the most southern lagoon and closest to the area. Gray whale watching trips depart mainly from Lopez Mateos and Puerto San Carlos. Gray whale watching starts mid-January and finishes in mid-April.

## **Scuba Diving in Cabo San Lucas**

There are three main diving areas in the Cabo area

1. The bay of Cabo San Lucas, also an established marine reserve. ~7 dive sites
2. The Gordo Banks, deep sea-mounts famous for big animals, including hammerheads.
3. The corridor

Each area is unique and accessible from the marina although the boat ride to the Gordo Banks is shorter from San Jose del Cabo. There are dive centers in the marina and in the town of Cabo

San Lucas as well as in San Jose del Cabo. You can also do shore dives in Chileno Bay, while the dive is very shallow there is some macro life and good photo opportunities. All in all there are approximately 15 different boat dives, two that are possible to dive from shore.

The highlights of diving in this area include hammerhead sharks and other large pelagics at Gordo Banks, diving with the sea lions and it's a hot-spot for large schools of Mobula rays.

Cabo San Lucas is also one of the best places to go humpback whale watching, the male humpback whales put on a really good show with their mating displays.

## Scuba Diving in Cabo Pulmo

Cabo Pulmo is a unique dive destination, *almost* off the grid and home to a successful marine reserve. It's known for it's schooling jacks, bull sharks and is also home to juvenile sharks, humpback whales (seasonally) and a healthy population of reef corals and fish. There are about ten dive sites in the park including the El Vencedor wreck. All of the dive sites are close to the town, about 10-15 minute boat rides. Diving conditions are fairly easy and all the diving is done off small pangas, 22ft to 26ft boats. Most of the diving is shallow with a few deeper sites on the outer reef.

It is a managed reserve and has more conservative regulations for diving than other places in the Baja. Group sizes are limited, maximum 50 minutes of bottom time and dive sites are on a rotation. Simply translated this means great diving but no guarantee as to which dive site you will visit during your trip. No 90 minute dives.

The main attractions of Cabo Pulmo are the large school of horse eye jacks and the bull sharks. The horse eye jacks are schooling during the late summer and through to December. Bull shark season runs from approximately December to early March, when the waters cool down.

Cabo Pulmo is about a 3 hour drive from La Paz and about 2 hours from Cabo San Lucas. It's definitely off the beaten path, there isn't a lot of infrastructure so don't expect any real hotels or restaurants. These are limited to bungalows and rooms in private homes that are available for rent. If you do decide to rent a car the road conditions are good the entire trip with only the last 40 minutes being on dirt road.

There are about 4 local dive operators and scuba diving day trips available from both the Cabo San Lucas area and the city of La Paz.

## Scuba Diving in La Ventana

La Ventana is a small beach-side town most known for kite-surfing. It's located on the east coast of the peninsula, approximately an hour drive from La Paz. At this time there is only one dive operator and trips are available to Isla Cerralvo, also known as Jacques Cousteau Island. Scuba diving at Isla Cerralvo is off the beaten path, only a few operators go out there on a regular basis. It's one of the best places to spot the Giant Manta and has some very good dive sites including a sea-mount.

## Scuba Diving in La Paz

La Paz is located about a 2 1/2 hour drive north from Cabo San Lucas. It's the gateway to Isla Espiritu Santo, a UNESCO World Heritage site that encompasses over eighty square kilometers. These islands are uninhabited and offer excellent scuba diving sites and abundant marine life. There are six main areas to dive in the islands, each with two or three different dive sites. There are also a few local dive sites near the harbor of La Paz including a small sea lion colony on San Rafaelito. The dive sites are varied and include deep walls, sea-mounts, shallow coral gardens and rocky, boulder reefs. La Paz also has five shipwrecks to explore, two that served in WW2. El Bajo is probably the most famous dive site, a deep sea-mount where you have the chance to see schooling hammerheads. The scuba diving trips in La Paz are day trips. Boat rides are longer than average and a typical day trip with two dives is a minimum of 6 hours.

Most tourists swim with whale sharks while they are here, the whale sharks are found very close to the harbor and most whale shark tours are short in length (<3 hrs) or combined with a day trip to the islands or some scuba diving. One of the few places in the world where you can swim with whale-sharks in the morning and then sea lions in the afternoon. Sightings are guaranteed in La Paz early September through to the beginning of April.

Day tours to see the whale sharks are also available from San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas.

## Some extras

Some of the diving in the area is done in established marine reserves. There is a daily or annual fee for diving, snorkeling etc in the reserve and most operators will charge the fee. Be sure that you receive proof of payment, usually in the form of a paper bracelet issued by the governing body.

There are some Mexican laws concerning whale shark interaction, whale watching and other water based activities that tourists should be aware of. Guidelines for whale shark interaction are often briefed before any whale shark trip and include a no touching policy and minimum distance rules. You can view the whale shark guidelines [here](#).

It is illegal to enter the water and swim with any whale species, including humpback and gray whales. There are no operators that offer swimming with whales in the Baja. Whale watching tours also have a minimum distance rule, you can view the whale watching regulations [here](#).