

# Fred and Elizabeth's Whale watching visit to Baja California, Mexico. (Oh! OK, so we saw some birds as well)

**11<sup>th</sup> March 2007 – 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2007**

**Where?** We had read and heard of the friendly Grey whales that visit **Baja California** and the **Sea of Cortez** each winter but it never seemed feasible to make this long trip. However a Magazine article mentioned a good chance of Blue Whales and Humpbacks in that area too so the research assistant was kicked into 'drive' and plans hatched. We had both long wanted to meet up with the largest, loudest creature that has ever lived on this planet. Matters came to a head when a planned Earthwatch trip to the area did not fructify due to their silly restrictions on "Team bonding requirements" That evidently required us sleeping in a pup tent in the sand dunes having dragged our own camping gear across the world.. Not really Whiteknuckles clients' idea of fun especially when perfectly serviceable Cabanas were readily available less than 200 metres away. So that was scrubbed and having spoken to Naturetrek, I knew they did a similar trip but it was fully booked for over a year ahead. The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society run a similar venture for March 2007 and I could be 'waitlisted' for a proposed 2<sup>nd</sup> trip where vacancies would be possible on a shared charter. We don't do "waitlists" so made contact direct with the Charterers in USA and booked with them. Got the plane tickets and we were on our way. Almost. Well you cannot go half way round the world just for 12 days and risk missing the boat, so a few days either side were added in. We were to fly into San Diego and end up at the tip of the peninsular (Cabo) on 26<sup>th</sup> March to make our own way home.

**US and Mexican Entry requirements:** - There is a Visa Waiver arrangement for USA and the Mexicans seemed relatively relaxed about a boatload of Gringos invading their shores. (Having seen the mass development down in Cabo it is time they got wise and tightened up.) Anyway we were assured that Uncle Sam at the Department of Homeland Security would cooperate with our plans subject to us not carrying liquids, explosives or wearing bedsheets as outer wear. Or so we were told. They also promised not to destroy our luggage provided we did not lock it so they could take a peek inside to check that our laundry was properly ironed etc.

**Local currency** is of course is the and the Mexican Peso (also written \$ just to confuse the Gringos further) at \$20/£. I hope you are paying attention. Rough prices will be given in local as required.

**Getting there, back and around.** The flights were not difficult to arrange and as we fly to Gatwick from Isle of Man we would use American Airlines flights from there via Dallas/Fort Worth to San Diego for convenience. We would of course have to get back out of Mexico at the end of the boat trip to reconnect with return legs of transatlantic trip. We initially thought it would be fun to drive up the Peninsular in a rented car as this would give us some sense of adventure. However this did not come about but a nice lady at AA agreed that it would be sensible to reduce our carbon footprints by skipping San Diego altogether on the return and flying direct from Cabo to Dallas to meet up with our Dallas/LGW flight as planned. This was jolly nice of her indeed. Transport from San Diego to Mexico was of course on the chartered boat "Spirit of Adventure." We had booked an AVIS Rental Car in Cabo for the week we were to spend down there at the termination of the boat charter. This was done direct from home without problems at US\$300 for seven days unlimited mileage etc.

**Food & Drink.** We were complete novices at Mexican and Californian 'cuisine' and still are. We were appalled at the wastage of good food and the junk eating and drinking habits of most US citizens. Or maybe they were just stocking up for a possible shortage. We rarely if ever saw anyone without a Burger/Dog or Waffle in one hand and a "drink to go" in the ubiquitous polystyrene tumbler in the other. All 'cutlery and crockery' was throw away plastic as it seemed was most of the food. This going on alongside some of the poorest local people you could imagine.

**Bugs, Beasts n Bowels.** Hygiene standards appeared high. No-one seemed to be afflicted with Montezuma's revenge although we stuck to bottled water. Fruit was plentiful and we saw scant evidence of mossies or their little cousins the "No see 'ums."

**Accommodations.** Covered under each section below.

**Kit carried.** I do not carry a telescope and rely on my Minox 10x42 Binoculars which serve me well enough. I also had my Fuji S5000 Camera with a good 10x Optical zoom and 1.5 converter and an adequate supply of re-chargeable batteries. I had packed a 'multi plug' but no one told me USA ran on half power. There is a vacancy for a skilled researcher on the team. Whales are big enough for most lenses but Humming birds required a bit more skill once you had actually got them in the view finder. We spent an hour with one on a nest in a bush plain to see **except** when you used the viewfinder. A tripod is just an encumbrance.

**Books?** So I got the latest Frommer's version for San Diego but it was barely adequate and more concerned with history and architecture. What History? What Architecture? It is a skyscraper city less than 400 years old. Anything built before the Korean war is historic. I had no bird book so bought "Birds of Mexico" as it seemed to cover the area. After the second day in the field it stayed unused. It was rubbish! I bought Sibley's "Field guide to Birds of Western North America" and this did a better job. US\$20 at a nature reserve so spent in a good cause.

**Now to the trip itself:-**

**March 11<sup>th</sup>.** We took the afternoon flight to London Gatwick where we had an overnight at Gable End in Horley.

**March 12<sup>th</sup>** Joe ran us to the airport at 07.45 for a 10 am take off to Dallas/Fort Worth. Security was dreadful and painful but we survived it all. Take off was on time and the plane a comfortable 777. Leg room very good but they charged for a beer! A ten hour drag over Greenland, Lake Superior and St Louis seemed to be making good time and we hoped for some breathing space in the two hours for immigration and to change planes. Then it dawned on the chap driving that the USA had gone onto Daylight Saving the night before without telling the plane's computer. So our comfort margin disappeared like the snow fields below. We had 90 minutes. The daft bit was that we had to 'enter the USA' for visa, give fingerprints and iris picture, collect luggage, pass customs, give them the luggage back and then actually go back through security to change terminals and find our new gate. We made it and even had time for a beer. When getting to the gate for the San Diego flight we actually saw an elderly lady stuff her Poodle into her handbag and zip it up and carry it aboard. You could not make this up and it beggars belief how she got it through the X-ray scanner. Maybe the frizzy hair came later and it could have started out as a small spaniel? Flight to San Diego went ok and it was less than 15 minutes for the Taxi ride into town but we did have to carry our luggage to the car and then to the hotel from the car. The driver was not allowed to lift items by Federal order. We had picked "**Little Italy Hotel**" in San Diego based on Frommer's guide for three nights. This was pleasant and central even if they did omit to mention the traffic noise to us out of towners. **US\$ 95 per room per night.** Being in Little Italy eating out was not a problem. Gorgeous Seafood and the ubiquitous steak and pasta dishes. This gave us our first introduction to the enormous portions that were served as routine.

**March 13<sup>th</sup>.** After a relatively restless night we had a good 'continental' breakfast. This term is overused in North America and they do not specify which 'continent' they are referring to. Brits of course assume French Croissants, jam and/or toast. Over there it can mean anything they choose it to mean from Cereal/Waffles/Doughnuts, Fresh fruit and "French toast" whatever the heck that is meant to be. I have never seen anything less "French" in my life. After this we set off for a look around the

City in pleasant sunshine. It was but a short walk to the nice harbour area and we found ourselves looking at “**Star of India**” billed as the oldest active ship afloat, which is a bit loose, and part of a small maritime museum. I did have an ulterior motive so paid my entrance fee and went aboard. A very nice display above and below deck. LOA 212’. They had looked after her very well since being built in 1863. Sad that they could not spell “Barque”. My interest was that she was launched as “**Euterpe**” and served with Shaw Savill out of Liverpool having been built in a small town called **Ramsey on the Isle of Man**. Built to last by Manx Craftsmen not 400 metres from where I live. We finished the Museum tour on a Russian Attack Sub (**B-39**) which was being used as a rest by Heerman’s Gulls with a Greater Scaup for company. Well, that’s a couple of ticks to start the list. Further round the harbour the **USS Midway** was moored and open for inspection. Who could resist a look round a large Aircraft Carrier? Not me! So up/on we went through all the living accommodations/Rest rooms/ Officers quarters/control centres etc., even a Post Office for incoming and outgoing mail. Then into the Hangers/Armaments below the flight deck and then if that was not enough for young and old flyers it was up onto the flight deck with its rows of “Big boy’s toys.” Phantoms, Crusaders, Voodoo, Skyhawks, Cougar, Panther, Choppers of every shape and size. AND they let you play with them. Elizabeth was perhaps less enthusiastic but it was nice and sunny up on deck. Who needs Shopping Malls? Then ever upwards to the Bridge on the Island and even the Captain’s chair to sit in with its buttons to push to get the big birds up and back again in all weathers. Then a beer on the Fantail and back to our digs before the evening meal.

**March 14<sup>th</sup>**. Enough of this sightseeing, time for some birds. So we board the trolley (trams to us Europeans) toward the Mexican border. Cheap, fast and clean way to travel in this city. We de tram at Chula Vista and catch a free shuttle to “the Chula Vista Visitor Centre” on the Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. Home to the Light-footed Clapper Rail and others. We were not told if this description referred to the colour of the birds walking gear or whether the soubriquet came from a habit of running without leaving prints in the sand. We remain in ignorance as the one we saw was asleep and declined to enlighten us novices. There were some interpretive displays and a few birds of prey in aviaries but of course the Marsh area was out there to be scanned. Quickly adding Brent goose, Widgeon and Bufflehead to the ducks, Various Waders with strange American names, Willet, Yellowlegs, and Killdeer etc. There was no sign of Running Bear or Sitting Bull so we guessed that the names did refer to birds and we had not strayed onto a Reservation. The tick list grew quite fast, well we had never been here before, and we added Mocking bird, Anna’s Humming bird and Western Meadow lark. I thought he played for Harlem Globetrotters. At this stage Elizabeth was getting quite uptight as being ‘African trained’ she was sure the Brewer’s Blackbird was really a Glossy Starling and Meadow Lark a Yellow-throated Longclaw. She has a point so as the sun was getting a bit hot it was time for a nice cup of Tea. Wrong! What do they put in the Hot water round here? It has never been near China or India. My Bird book was proving not up to the task so this was where “Sibley’s was purchased. We did better after this but do they have to call it a Long-billed Curlew? I ain’t ever seen a short billed one! Back on the shuttle and a convenient tram took us back to our lodge although the shuttle driver did her best to send us to another ‘Hotspot’ on the Tijuana estuary. It was quite hot enough thanks! Another good meal and bottle of biddy, Italian of course, and to bed for the last time on American soil.

**March 15<sup>th</sup>**. Embarkation day. We were not to arrive at the boat before 18.00. We are not city people so what was more natural than another trip on the tram out to Saltee Lakes just in case there was the odd bird about. This was about 45 mins. out of town to the NE and the ride was very pleasant with our first Swallows and an American Kestrel to look at on the way. Saltee was to prove a long way from Saltee Lakes and it was already too hot. So we stayed along the river, swamp, and contented ourselves with Turkey Vultures, Buzzards, Hawks etc., We then saw a ‘Keep out’ sign to protect the nesting site of Bell’s Vireo which my book said was some form of rare LBJ. It was grey green when we saw it but everything was so confusing that we took this in our stride. Back on the tram by a different route to collect luggage and get Taxi round to “H&M Landing” where our boat awaited us.

Or so it said in the brochure! Arrive 17.30 and partake of Calamari Sandwich (honest) and a beer in famous restaurant. We wait and wait some more. We meet our guide Isadore, (Izzy) and he puts our entire luggage on a barrow but says the boat is not yet ready for us. We wait, tick Double Crested Cormorant, Brown Pelican, Blue Heron, Night Heron (appropriate enough) and it gets cold as the sun goes down and then colder still. Shipmates arrive but it is dark before we get aboard and Izzy looks shocked when I ask what time we go ashore for dinner. Not time he says as we sail promptly at 22.00. We are shown to our cabin. The bit you have been waiting for! **“Spirit of Adventure”** is about 80 foot long with 12 guest cabins. We had not brought a cat which is just as well as the cabins were too small to swing one. Two bunks, just room to stand to dress/undress, no outside view (we were below water line). This was going to be cosy! There was a large saloon for eating and socialising, four shower/toilets and some good viewing decks. Cabins are just places you go to sleep in. (if you can sleep!) We meet our fellow sufferers/travellers and the boat sets off into the Pacific Ocean with its two powerful diesels throbbing. A sound we were going to hear quite a lot of over the next twelve days. We are told we will enter Mexico next morning at 06.00 at a place called Ensenada to clear Immigration etc. Do Mexicans get up that early? (The correct answer is “No”! If you said “yes” or even “possibly” please pay attention!) Factor in that Mexico did not follow USA into Daylight saving on Sunday (see flight out) and this could be fun.

**March 16<sup>th</sup>.** Dawn saw us in Ensenada hovering for a berth. A few birds, Harbour Seals and Sea Lions were about but no sign of life as we know it on the shore. We were on USA time and the Mexicans were no doubt pleased for us but totally unaffected by it. How did you score? If you thought it would be straightforward you need to study more. After the sun had risen at the friendlier hour of 07.30 we went alongside and the Mexican Immigration boarded. It took two minutes to grant visas and about fifteen, to have a cheroot and a warming glass of Tequila. The Swell had built up and there was a cold edge to the wind. Nevertheless we spotted a ‘spout’ ahead and got to see our first Grey whale heading north to Alaska. We arrive at Todos Santos Islands to anchor and lower the skiffs for a closer look. No landings permitted which was quite a relief as there was quite a swell running which made negotiating the off-lying rocks ‘interesting’ without trying to actually hit the very steep beach. There were Harbour Seals, Californian Sea Lions and a few indolent Elephant seals. We were told that some baby sea lions were asleep in the sea and, as they are “quite relaxed,” we could sneak up on them. Some were “quite dead” and you don’t get more relaxed than that! I think I was the only passenger bothered with the birds, apart from Izzy, but we managed to boost the tick list with Black Oyster Catcher and Brandt’s Cormorant. Back aboard and we pass more and more North bound Grey Whales in the misty conditions and some Pacific White-sided Dolphins decide to come and play. We are also ticking various auks and gulls but I will not clutter this narrative with tick by tick details. After an excellent dinner we sloped off to our cabins.

Perhaps now is a good place to discuss the other feature of this trip. **Our Fellow Guests!** There were 27 of us plus Naturalists Izzy Szczepaniak and Mark Carwadine. These two were excellent. The rest of us were the usual mixed bunch, Ten Brits, Six Americans, Five Germans, a couple of Finns and two Swiss. Everyone seemed to get along with each other, the bulk of the Brits appearing to be Mark Carwadine “Groupies” who follow him on his trips. Some had even done this same trip before. (There’s sad!) We were sharply reminded of the perils of “Group” excursions during Wildlife sightings (be it Whale/Dolphin/Turtle/Mola Mola or whatever) when the cameras came out. Then good manners flew out of the window and you were often shouldered aside and your lens filled with heads, legs and even bums. No matter that you had been keeping watch and had seen the creature first while the others skulked below. Once it was called they were all over the place like a rash. Eventually I wised up to this, took up a ‘quiet’ position and got what I could before the melee. Agreed that some of them carried expensive kit and needed just the right shot for posterity but they should still be sensitive to others. This was sadly lacking on occasions. It suddenly became obvious why most meals were served with forks but not knives. (Rumours that the cook on a previous trip had been stabbed to death over the last piece of Garlic Bread may not have had some substance after all!) Happily there

was no fighting on this trip that we are aware of, and everyone survived in one form or another. It did re-inforce our yearning for the personalised service of the Whiteknuckles Group.

**March 17<sup>th</sup>.** After another noisy night we rise around 06.30 for breakfast and thereafter arrive at San Benitos Islands which my co-scribe has described as a bleak lump of rock in the Sea. Skiffs lowered and this time we make a landing complete with 'packed lunch' as we are told we are going to do some walking. We find an Elephant Seal rookery and get some nice close ups of these large beasts. Lots of Cows and Calves but no Bulls who we are told left a month ago having played their part. We walk on and find some nesting Ospreys with a fledged chick which was nice. Lots of LBJ's and a Pair of Peregrines. It was still blowing a tad cold so we found shelter while others went off to see some Lighthouse or other. I went off and sat with some friendly Elephant Seals and there was a late Bull amongst them. Evidently some lesser ranked Bulls sneak back after the Beach-masters have gone to check over any females who may still be 'willing.' After re-boarding "Spirit" we went to East Benitos to see the endangered Guadalupe Fur Seal Colony. Then it was back aboard for a further lunge south but with the weather showing signs of tropical seas to come. We get close views of Bryde's Whales (pronounced "Brudders" after their Norwegian discoverer. Well, he did not actually discover them, they knew they were there, but he claimed the right to give them his name. The Whales may have preferred something more poetic but were not consulted as usual.) We continue south seeing Mola Mola, Turtles and of lots of Dolphins and Whales. Just before Sunset we negotiate the narrow, shallow, sandy entrance to San Ignacio Lagoon where we are to spend two days with the Grey whales. We drop anchor and, 'Oh Bliss, Oh Joy,' stop that b\*\*\*\*y Engine. A nice steak dinner followed and then off to the Cabin for a quiet night rocking gently at anchor! Took a while to nod off as the poor old body was not used to this at all!

**March 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>.** San Ignacio is why we had put up with all the privations so far. One of the main breeding grounds of the Pacific Grey Whale that makes an extraordinary migration each year from their feeding grounds in Alaska/Bering Straits down to Baja California to calve and mate in the comparatively safe and warm waters of the Lagoons. Hunted to near extinction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it has made a surprising come back since being protected and numbers are said to be back to previous levels. Seeing all the breaches and spouts around I can well believe this. Even more extraordinary, despite having gained the name "Devil fish" by the early whalers due to the Female's furious defence of her calf, they now seem to have forgiven mankind and are some of the friendliest habituated creatures you will ever meet. They seem to positively encourage contact and will place their massive heads on the gunwhales of the skiff/panga to be patted, stroked and even open their massive jaws to have their tongues scratched. One girl actually threw her arms round a calf and kissed it on the 'lips!' If that had been a Frog imagine the size of the Prince. Forget the normal wildlife rule of keeping still and quiet. Knock on the side of the skiff and Mum will come to you and nudge junior forward for his turn to look at the funny creatures that turn up in these strange craft to pat and caress them. Their eyes, set just behind the jaw line, regard you with what seems to be amused interest. This is a trip that every wildlife enthusiast has to experience to believe. Our mission was accomplished! The effect that such contacts can have is best illustrated by the following true story. Some years back there were plans to build a de-salination plant in the lagoon which of course would have had a detrimental effect on the Whales. The Mexican President and his family were invited down to meet the Whales. Such was their experience that on his return to the Capital he sent for the Legislation for the proposed Plant and wrote 'not in my Lifetime' across it and handed it back. Space forbids a stroke by stroke account but we made four trips in the Pangas over the two days as well as a cruise into the nearby Mangrove swamps to see the endemic Mangrove Warbler. (ticked!) Having had two nights at anchor we left San Ignacio just before sunset and headed out into the Pacific once more.

**March 20<sup>th</sup>.** Next morning dawned fine and **blue**. The sky and ocean were this colour and so was the first whale of the day. The biggest and loudest creature ever to live on our Planet. The Blue Whale! 100 feet and 100 tons. "Awesome" is often overused but it was surely written for this fantastic

creature. It was bigger than the boat! You ain't seen nothing like this! It eats the equivalent weight of four African Bull Elephants per day. Its call at 160Db can be heard by other whales 30km-50km away. David Attenborough waited for nearly two years for his pictures for the series "Blue Planet" and we get ours on day six. We are now moving from temperate to tropical waters and whales and dolphins become easier to see and follow. We make good time and at sunset are treated to the 'Pacific flash' which, sadly, is an atmospheric phenomena and not some extrovert Mexican.

**March 21<sup>st</sup>- 25<sup>th</sup>.** At dawn we are round the Cape and into the Sea of Cortez. The guide book says it is the youngest and richest sea in the world. Not sure of its age but the richness is there. Schools of Dolphin, Bottlenose, Common and White-sided, often 300 strong chase us around, and there are spouts everywhere. We head for the rich Gorda Banks but keep getting sidetracked by close encounters with both Blue and now Humpback Whales. The Blues, as befits their status, are more refined but the Humpbacks are breaching and leaping like overgrown Salmon. Can you imagine a 50 foot Salmon. Apart from the Grey whales we had come with the hope of, perhaps if we were lucky, maybe seeing a Blue Whale. This was fulfilled many times over. Best 'moments' were a Mother and Calf cruising along quite unconcerned at our proximity although Jr. was protected by Mum always making sure she was between us and him. We followed them on the Sonar and they were diving to 500 feet or more and obviously feeding as they travelled so having run off the digital equivalent of miles of film we left them to get on with their lives. Memories were of the huge 'blowhole' nostril which looked like you could hide a car in it and the enormous flukes as big as a small plane. They are long of course but it is only when you see the whole animal in the clear water that you get an idea of the sheer bulk. Nuclear subs are shrimps compared to this. In total we saw over twenty Blue Whales and my dreams had come true. We visited several Islands, San Diego, San Jose, Santa Catalina and Los Islotes. These Islands are geologically young and there are fossils coming to the surface on Santa Catalina which have yet to be studied. We found the jaw of a whale protruding from a cliff and the rest will be in there somewhere. Santa Catalina also has some huge Barrel Cactus and many interesting birds. There is also a very sneaky Rattlesnake that has evolved to lose its 'Rattle'. It climbs trees after birds and lost the rattle rings to enable silent pursuit. We saw a nice Merlin and both Brown and Blue footed Booby. At Los Islotes there were Manta Rays jumping clean out of the water and many curious and friendly Sea Lions played with the snorkellers.

**March 26<sup>th</sup>.** We finished at the Time Share Capital City of San Lucas to say our farewells and be ferried ashore to waiting taxis. We get our Mexican visas back from Captain Mike, throw our luggage onto waiting skiffs, and leave "Spirit of Adventure" after 12 full days. Some of our party are flying straight home wherever that may be and grab taxis, some are booked on later flights but the Whiteknuckles Tour is not over yet. An Avis car had been booked for seven days and a Hotel bed for seven nights. A smooth stationary bed with no engine noise. Imagine that! Then some gentle touring, some sightseeing and perhaps a few more birds.

Our fellow guests drifted off and we went off in search of Mr Avis. The depot we found was closed but a friendly Tourist Guide phoned them. We were given directions and told to get a taxi as it was some way off. Is this Mexican "Meet and Greet"? We arrive and announce ourselves. "Yes the car is ready but you are too early." Response "No you are late!" We were held to the minute and then they proceeded to do all the paperwork that was pre-filled from the UK. We were shown our car, a beat up Fiesta/Focus that seemed to be in working order. Pedro started to itemise the dings and scratches but to save time I invited him to show me a panel that was not dinged. Matters speeded up after that and we loaded our luggage and fired it up. It was manual geared and the 'gate' was like a tractor. It did have four tyres and a spare. We launched ourselves into the San Lucas traffic and escaped onto the main road east through the landscape of building site after building site. It resembled a mix of Lanzarote, Torremolinos and a dash of Soweto. The *Norte Americanos* love this place and they deserve each other. After dodging trucks, potholes and dodgy verges (this is the main M1 highway) we approach San Jose. This is the older more refined Fishing village/town 20 kms east of the cape.

There is some building but nothing on the scale of San Lucas. More refined is also possibly overstating its attractions due to lack of adequate comparators. By some miracle of navigation we find ourselves in the main square and spot our Hotel, "El Tropicana". We see it, but it is lunchtime and there is not a car parking space to be found. We orbit several times, leave the square and fight our way back and at last spot a small gap and shoot into it. We walk to the Hotel, the entrance to which seems to be through a busy bar and restaurant where everyone thinks we have come to eat, drink and be merry. We locate the 'Reception' down a dark alley and unearth **Raul**. He has our booking which was a relief. We register and are directed to a private Car Park to unload. It is looking up. The Hotel is built in Colonial Spanish style, or maybe it was built in the Colonial Spanish era? The rooms are grouped around a central courtyard. We find our room on the first floor, there are only two, overlooking the garden, buzzing with birds and small pool, and with all *mod cons* some of which actually work. We immediately go into Mexico mode and take some afternoon rest. The beds still appear to roll about a bit but only when you are awake which was not long. In the cool of early evening we go out and check the various eating establishments. We opt for the Hotel Restaurant. The meal was good but nothing to write home about and perhaps a little expensive. The service could have been better and we could have lived happily without the Mexican quartet banging on, and on! Beds were very welcoming for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time that day. It was Quiet! Bliss.

**March 27<sup>th</sup>**. After a 'continental' breakfast (Self serve Fruit Joos, Cereals and Toast) in the Palapa, soon to be known as the Palaver in the Palapa, we took to the car and headed north up the so called main road. Elizabeth confesses that this is the only time she has been 'seriously concerned' over being driven by me on any holiday to date. The road is narrow, where there is tar there are Potholes and the verges, or lack of them, can trap the unwary so the temptation is to stick to the middle. Sadly the oncoming traffic seems to share this idea so your actual course over the ground is a convoluted route, dodging Potholes, oncoming or even parked traffic and avoiding where the verge has crumbled away taking some of the road with it. We entered a small village of Miraflores, decided against finding a road through the mountains, and continued north several more km. We noted several birds, including a huge Eagle, but stopping on this road would carry a health warning. We found a 'road' heading east to the coast, which the map indicated would eventually return us to San Jose. The map was right but 'eventually' should be more specific. The road followed dried up river beds, hugged cliffs, bounced over undetermined obstacles... In some villages there were 'speed bumps' but it was hard to tell the difference. We wondered why they bothered until we were actually overtaken by Speedy Gonzalez himself in a white pickup with all four wheels off the ground at once. Now we understood some of the 'dings' in the car. He must have no teeth. This explained why when we found Greater Road-Runners they avoided the roads and kept to the cactus and scrub. Clever birds! They knew when they were outclassed. Apart from the three Road runners we saw, the avian highlights were Hummingbirds, Cardinals, Orioles and California Quail complete with Bill Haley quiff. We travelled on past Cabo Pulmo with more half finished 'dream homes' and some unfulfilled nightmares that consisted of a rusty caravan with the door ajar, a Hammock slung between two cactus and an artistically arranged pile of bricks. "Plot for Sale" signs vied with "Private Property, Keep out" although quite why the lucky owners thought we would want to trespass on their particular piece of Desert to the exclusion of the rest of Mexico was not apparent. Even the Ground squirrels looked the other way. Security firms seemed to be the main growth industry although the only people in evidence were in hammocks. We took a detour through some woods/shrubs and regained the sporadic 'tarmac' and returned to El Tropicana. We dine at "Damiano" which was more traditional and friendly. Another quiet night in a bed that stayed firmly in one place! We were also pleased at the lack of traffic noise.

**March 28<sup>th</sup>** Today it seemed to be "a good idea" to head west back through Cabo San Lucas. We braced ourselves to forego its obvious attractions such as the 'Giggling Marlin', 'El Squid Roe' 'What's up, Karaoke Bar' and my favourite 'O Mole mio!' You just could not make these up and leave you to judge the ambience of the place and its clientele. Thus fortified we drove north up the Mex 19 coast road towards Los Todos Santos. The traffic on this route was as bad as, if not worse

than, yesterday with Huge Trucks vying for street cred with everything from Porches to Bubble Cars. We stopped off at one or two places that looked promising but were not. Some Crested Caracara and Turkey vultures patrolling the road indicated their main source of food. One or two side turnings indicated an escape route but disappeared into the bush after a while. It was probably kinder that way! A signed "Tourist Highlight" was Rancho Pilar which turned out to be a lady making 'Beach Jewellery' and woven Palm frond hats whilst her husband made sandals from old tyres and ropes! Good for 2,000 miles? This place is not developed enough to rate as a fourth world country let alone 3<sup>rd</sup>. We re-traced our route as we felt we could not stand the excitement of the Honey Pot of Los Todos Santos, again passing up on the "Giggling Marlin", and returned for a siesta before dinner at Damiano's. We were joined by a male Xantu's Hummingbird that sipped from the fountain so the day was not entirely wasted.

**March 29<sup>th</sup>.** After that experience we had had enough of driving. The 'map' and our nose indicated a small river/swamp to the east of our Hotel with what appeared to be a small path running alongside. "*Paseo del Estero*" just had to be Estuary path to me! And so it was! Well almost! Happily most of the smell seemed to come from a broken "Lavender plant" just by the start of the path. The river itself was fed by a spring some way inland and whilst it did pick up a few flavours of its own on its way through town a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. The path was quiet and we immediately spotted Moorhen, Heron and various Egrets. As we approached the Ocean the stream widened into flats etc., and there were Ibis, Stilts, Ducks and lots of 'peeps!' The ducks turned out to be Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal spiced with a few Cinnamon. Egrets were Three coloured, Little and Greater. Peeps ranged from Yellow Legs, Killdeer, Semi-Palmated Plovers to Spotted and Least Sandpipers and the ubiquitous Sanderling. Brown Pelicans and various Cormorants nearer to the Ocean itself. There was a small pond where patient observation produced Night Heron, Green Heron, Ruddy-Duck and Pied Grebe. I would not advocate that anyone makes a special effort to visit Cabo San Jose but if you are there you could do worse than spend a few hours here. The adjacent wooded areas produced Osprey, Cooper's hawk, various doves, Phoebes, Woodpeckers and Orioles. Maybe not all on this particular walk but you should get the picture. We also saw a fine Cottonmouth swimming the river. The afternoon was spent touring the town with a further solo visit to the estuary by Fred in the cool of the early evening before Damiano's again.

**March 30<sup>th</sup>.** Time to brave the roads again so we headed east to pick up the bits of the coastal track that we had missed the first time. Progress was slow but we notched up our first Gila woodpecker. We pulled over to take a close look at a perched Hummingbird which turned out to be another male X'antu. He seemed pre-occupied and then we spotted his lady snugly on the nest just feet from where we were. We wound down the windows for a clear camera shot. This was hard. You could see her in binoculars and with the naked eye but boy, finding her in the view finder was not easy. I took sightings and then just fired blind at where she should be. (When I got home I had not done that bad!) We also had good views of three Magnificent Frigate birds. (That's the official name not mine!) It was getting hot so we turned and headed back to town. For a change we sought out a place for lunch and a cold beer purely in the interests of research of course. The place we chose was down a back street (they are all 'back streets' really, it is that sort of town.) We shared the Mexican equivalent of a ciabatta and the beer went down a treat. After the by now accustomed Siesta it was time for another trip down *El Paseo del Estero*" which brought forth much the same but more. A nice Belted Kingfisher obliged for a while and we also were able to confirm such things as Cactus Wren and Ground Doves as well as the only Red-winged Blackbirds of the trip. Damiano's beckoned and the staff there were getting quite used to us and had reserved a table.

**March 31<sup>st</sup> and April 1<sup>st</sup>.** Try as I might I cannot recall what we did on these two days. I know we repeated the 'coastal track' one day and must have lounged about or been unconscious the other. Elizabeth's diary is also silent on which was which so I am not totally to blame. Anyway we saw more birds! I think we headed for the other side of the river but it was all guarded as this was/is where



the mega development is to be. (They have been saying that for years of course. “Manana” is alive and well.) When we went to Damiano’s on one of these nights the patio area had a private party so we were seated in a private lounge!

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>.** The embarrassing bit. Our flight was not until 13.00, with the car due back at 11.00 so having packed etc., we just sat and read, planning to leave at 10.am. We checked out and headed for the Avis airport depot. This was very slick and in no time we were ferried to the airport and negotiated the screaming hordes at check in, got our boarding cards and went for a relaxing hour in the lounge. I wondered why all the planes seemed to be leaving an hour early. I checked Avis’s check in and the penny dropped. Mexico had put their clocks forward and not told us. Well it meant we did not have to wait so long for our plane which left 35 mins late anyway. This neatly removed our transfer cushion at DFW and we now had only 50 minutes. We repeated all the same Immigration/Carousel/Customs/Emigration/Security stuff, found our gate and received a personal welcome aboard as we were last. Boring flight, slept to wake over Scotland, land at LGW transfer to the zoo of the South Terminal and fly home.

**Conclusion:-** We would not have missed the Whales etc., for anything but it was a long way to fly and we will be in no hurry to cross the Atlantic for another 30 years. In fact large areas of the globe have been wiped from the ‘to visit’ list, including Latin America, much of Asia and Australia (whose only attractions seem to be a Bridge, an Opera House and a Rock in the desert.) Elizabeth now feels that Africa has a lot going for it. Every cloud has a silver lining.

You deserve a couple of photos after that.



Elizabeth with friendly Grey Whale.



Blue Whales. Calf and protective mother.

Rest of photos in the Gallery.