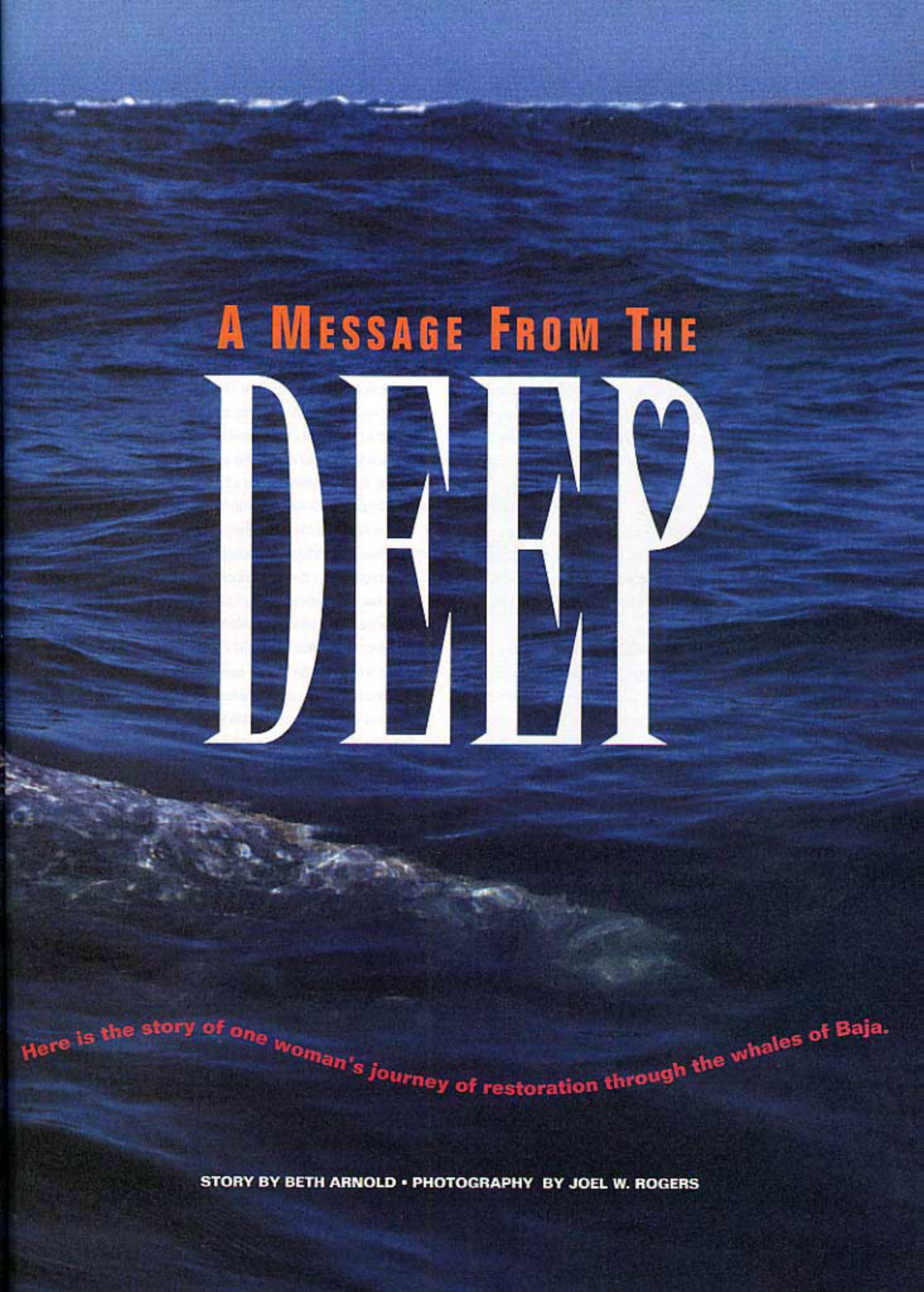


Healing can come through the most unexpected channels.



A MESSAGE FROM THE

DEEP

Here is the story of one woman's journey of restoration through the whales of Baja.

STORY BY BETH ARNOLD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL W. ROGERS

I am hiking across Isla Santo Domingo, a barrier island off the Baja coast of Mexico, which appears to be nothing but a gigantic sand pile — thousands of dunes, sand verberna, and some kind of brambles that somehow survive the salt air. In the distance, I spot a multitude of eruptions from the sea's surface, water spewing upward in spouts, like geysers. This is what I have come for. Whales.

I slog across the desert sand dunes at a good clip, but my feet can't keep pace with my anticipation. When I finally reach the ever-shifting boundary where the sea meets the land, the power of the Pacific is palpable. The surf bangs the beach with a force stronger than a jackhammer. I imagine the whales enjoy the turbulence; perhaps it's like a carnival ride for them. But by now, the only spouts I see look much farther out in the water, and I fear I have missed my opportunity.

Then suddenly, across my line of vision, a gray whale bounds out of the water and hangs in the air a few seconds before crashing back into the sea. I had no idea — I imagined that seeing whales up close would be a thrill, but their magnificence literally stuns me. I have seen my first breach.

IN TRUTH, WHALES aren't the only reason I have traveled from Arkansas to Baja. I am in search of something, a feeling of peace about my brother, Brent. Since his death from AIDS a few years ago, I have struggled with my grief, tried to accept his loss even if I couldn't under-

My adrenalin is flowing — to see a whale

stand it. Oddly enough, a thought recurs about whales.

In one of a few dreams that weren't nightmares in the last several years of his life, Brent dreamed he was swimming with whales. It was a moment of respite in his nightly trauma, a peaceful suspension of reality when he could swim in something other than an ocean of sickness.

I'd seen Disney's film classic *Willie, the Operatic Whale*, and made a copy of it. Willie was a jolly whale who sang robust opera out in the open sea, but he was finally harpooned and died. He ascended into heaven and echoed his arias there. Brent wanted me to send the movie to him, but I foolishly wouldn't. I was worried that Willie's death was too sad and wouldn't be a positive focus for my brother, who at this point had cancer because of AIDS. But I was wrong: Willie would have been cathartic for Brent. My brother's dream of whales supplied a liquid freedom that his body and mind hadn't experienced in years, and the movie would have been a waking refuge. Willie could

To touch a gray whale is to touch sea magic. Here, two worlds meet in the middle of the stretch of water along Baja known as "the Boca."





at all would be electrifying — but I want more than that.

have shown Brent that his own exuberant spirit would live on. Why hadn't I seen that the little whale had faced and transcended what my own brother was staring down on a daily basis?

Although I hadn't consciously realized it until I saw that first breach, this must be part of what intuitively called me to Baja. But I don't want to just observe these majestic mammals. I want to touch one of these creatures that for Brent must have held some kind of personal mythology. I want to feel its physical presence — something I will never be fortunate enough to experience with my brother again. I want that mystical connection with a whale, as if my human hand to its otherworldly skin might put me in touch with something even larger, bring me something of my brother, if only for a moment.

I'D NEVER BEEN what you'd call a seasoned outdoors person. Then, four years ago — six long months after my brother's death — I spent a week in Mexico at a fitness spa, where vigorous mountain hikes were the opening salvos in a long battle to flush out my stress and loss and grief. That week proved to be the beginning of my recovery. Exercising my body in nature had cleared my head, and I discovered a tangible way to regain some of the peace I'd lost.

Now a novice jock, I wanted a challenge — a trip with physical adventure that would provide space to let me feel my feelings and think new thoughts, an ample opportunity to mull over how I fit into the world, how to deal with the things life had visited on my doorstep.

And that's how I'd latched onto the idea of watching whales while kayaking along the Baja California peninsula. It was a sport I could handle, and the payoff of seeing the



Ghosting The Gray Whale

The population of gray whales was about 25,000 before nineteenth-century whalers almost slaughtered them to extinction. Finally, in 1946, the gray whale received protection from the International Whaling Commission. In 1986, they were listed as an endangered species in United States territories. Since protection began, the population estimates have increased to between 20,000 and 25,000, and in June 1994, the Mexican government removed gray whales from the endangered-species list.

Gray whales migrate from their summer feeding grounds in Alaskan waters to the Baja lagoons every year — a trip of more than 5,000 miles — to breed. The warmer, shallower waters of the Baja lagoons are perfect for birthing calves: The higher sea-water salinity found near Baja adds buoyancy to the newborns, and the lagoons provide protection from the rough winter seas.

Mature females measure about forty-five feet; males about forty. They weigh approximately forty-five tons. The calves come into the world at about fifteen feet and a whopping 1,500 pounds; as is the case for all mammals, they are born live. They grow an average of sixty to seventy pounds a day from their mothers' fatty milk and nurse for up to seven months. The mothers and calves can be found off Baja from November through May, but are more commonly sighted from January through March before they begin their northern migration.

Baja whale-watching is regulated by the Mexican government and permits are issued to a number of outfitters each year. Baja Expeditions has been organizing whale-watching trips for more than twenty years and does a fine job with them. Once the gray-whale-watching season begins in January, the outfitter sets up camp with a complete kitchen and dining tents. Camp stays up until March, when the season ends. For more information, call (800) 843-6967.

— B.A.

whales was a larger-than-human-life adventure. The soothing emptiness of the Baja desert, the possibility of communing with a gentle giant — this trip seemed like the perfect ticket.

Although it had been cold in Arkansas when I left, La Paz, the largest city and capital of Baja California Sur, was toasty warm. No wonder: It's only an hour's drive from the Tropic of Cancer. I sat in the hotel bar drinking my first margarita and watching the sun set over the sailboats in the harbor. Already my head was clearing out. My thoughts had moved beyond the rigorous schedule of taking care of children, a husband, a career. I had some emotional room to think about who I am and about Brent. He lived his life as an adventurer. And I was trying to follow in his footsteps, looking for them in the sands of Baja.

Baja Expeditions, the outfitter I'd signed on with, arrived first thing the next morning to load our group onto a bus. We headed up Highway 1, where for miles and miles the Sea of Cortés glistened to the east, an azure outline blending into a pale-blue Baja sky. At lunch time, we pulled over for a repast of fish tacos, frijoles, and beer. Now this was living. The dry, desolate landscape was a stark contrast to the green hills where I live. My eyes could see beyond their usual images, my thoughts could expand out of their overworn grooves.

After a four-hour trip, we reached Puerto López Mateos, a dusty village on the beach. We took off our shoes and threw on jackets, then loaded our gear into open skiffs — called "pangas" — that can seat six to eight people comfortably. The wind whipped through my hair as the boat sped up the channel. Within twenty minutes of leaving shore, our Mexican driver pointed to another panga out in the channel where a film crew was catching one of the massive creatures lolling in the water. Although I only caught a glimpse of its majesty, my appetite was whetted.

Of the two pangas, mine was the first to arrive at Isla Santo Domingo, where the camp was set up. A young Mexican named Alejandro dashed over to pick up my bags and help me find the right tent. One of my most precious commodities is time alone. I usually hate the thought of the forced intimacy of groups. I picked the tent farthest from the camp, just to be safe. It was also the closest to the water, perched atop a ten-foot sand dune. It looked nothing like my accustomed surroundings; the change of scenery would be good therapy.

At orientation, our guide, Dave, said we didn't have to do anything but whale-watch, kayak, hike, relax, and wash our own plates after meals. Alejandro and his brother, Beto, the chief cook, would indulge our appetites with delicious food. Oh, and for the bathroom, we would have a screened patch of sand with a toilet seat, plus accouterments, such as toilet paper. No problem for the men, no pride for the women. This indignity alone would definitely distract me from my usual tailspin.

THE NEXT MORNING we are in the panga by 8:45 and heading out on our saltwater safari. The day is spectacular; a few clouds hang low in the blue sky. Within five minutes, the thrill is on. We see a few whales scattered about a stretch of sea known as "the Boca," and the idea now is to figure out how to home in on one. My adrenalin is flowing — to see a whale at all would be electrifying — but I want more than that.

Besides our panga, four others are whizzing after their visual prey. Two huddle around a couple of mothers and their calves who are rolling up to the surface, spouting their spray. The whales glide effortlessly in and out of the water while the people in pangas watch in awe. I yearn to be as close as they, but I don't want to overwhelm the mammals like a tacky tourist. Then I see people in



I haven't showered in days, but I feel great



Opposite: Kayakers maneuver their vessels with sheer muscle and agility along Baja's wildest coast. Dune islands and mangrove thickets are the major obstacles. *Above:* Adult gray whales measure between forty and forty-five feet, and weigh forty-five tons. This gray whale's days near Baja are at an end as it noses back north.

some of the other pangas stretching out their arms to touch the whales. And I can now name my mission: to touch a whale.

We boat around, scouting for sprays and tails. Sometimes when we're near a whale, its movements are so slow that it seems more like it is lurching than swimming. Then, in another second, it swiftly submerges, disappears, and we are left wondering where it will pop up next. It's almost like hide-and-seek, and I am growing giddy with delight. I'm gazing in the distance, watching and waiting for the "big one," when a whale sublimely flings itself out of the water in another breathtaking breach. Then another bounds out of the water in the calm lagoon. In front of us and on both sides, spouts are spewing all over like so many Old Faithfuls.

To spot whales, one must follow their underwater

plumes of six to ten feet long, or catch the sound of their vaporious breath being exhaled like a giant, mucousy sigh. They look like streamlined dinosaurs or mammalian battle-ships steaming through the water. I watch a mother and baby cut through the waves in the same rhythm. Sometimes Baby swims beside Mama, and other times Mama gives Baby a piggyback ride — like my father used to give Brent and me. With the rhythm of the waves and the whales' motion, my thoughts drift momentarily. The sight of these awesome creatures reminds me of the wonderful here and now; the symmetry of the natural order I'm witnessing tells me there is more to life than the temporal. I feel refreshed.

AFTER LUNCH, KAYAKING is on the agenda. I've never been in a kayak before in my life, and presently I am tucked in with a woman whose youngest child will be twenty-nine tomorrow. The wind is whipping fiercely and constantly, and sand is becoming embedded in my skin and hair and nostrils. Getting across this channel is going to be a lot harder than I thought.

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This has been a primal experience that's thrown me into a different reality.

A Message From The Deep

(FROM PAGE 69)

"Dave," I call to our guide, "I think I'm going to have to drink a beer for this to be fun." He holds up his paddle, and Arturo, the panga driver, brings each of us a cold one. As my paddling partner and I struggle and talk, my initial wariness about this crowd begins to fade a little.

Back at camp, it at first seems important to take a shower, but finally I accept the fact that I am going to stay dirty. Five minutes later I would be covered in the powder-fine sand again, anyway. This, I realize, is the first indication that I am surrendering my will to nature: If I can let go of my binding structure and adopt a more relaxed view of the world, it might ready me for the one-on-one whale encounter I crave. I wash my face, brush my teeth, and change clothes for cocktails and dinner, baseball cap firmly pulled down over my messy hair.

A Southern woman who normally likes to wear lipstick and talk trash, I'm about as foreign to some of the others as fried okra. But after a conversation about eating disgusting foods, we laugh a lot and pull our chairs over by the mesquite grill to warm up. I find myself choosing to stay in their company rather than go off by myself to read. The men bond some more by simultaneously flossing their teeth. "What is the world coming to when people sit around the campfire flossing?" I ask, feeling like I've finally joined the circle. They make grunting male noises and go to bed, and I head off for my tent feeling like it's been a good, good day.

Within ten minutes of leaving our camp the next morning, we scout some whales. Our two pangas are the only ones on the water. The waves are rough and high, tossing us about. It feels pristine and pure to be out here in the salty air, scanning the horizon, at the mercy of the sea.

Suddenly a whale and her calf pop up within a yard of the other panga; its crew goes crazy with excitement. It's the luck of the draw with whale-watching, and that panga just drew a pair of aces. We are oohing and aahing watching them when Dave reaches out his arm to slide his hand

A Message From The Deep

along a whale's back. Jackpot. "Come over here, whales," I call to them. Brent would have loved this.

The whales submerge and disappear for a while. Then somehow, some way, they surface close to our boat and exhale a spray. I feel like I'm about to hop out of my skin. Somebody exclaims that the whales are only about ten feet away.

The whales come again. This time they are within a yard and I almost jump up and down in the boat. I stand up, looking down into the murky water, waiting to steal a glimpse. They come back again and on the next swipe, I stick my arm into the brine. I can see two gray hulks underneath us, and my excitement is spinning out of control, when, suddenly, my hand just barely makes contact.

The whales' black, mottled skin — the skin I just touched — glistens with ocean water as they part the waves. The baby's skin is barnacle-free, but the mother is covered with the crusty protrusions, from her head all the way down her back. They bring their eyes above the water for a peep at us, and I wonder what we look like to them.

The waves are now five feet tall and rocking, but Carlos, our driver, hangs steady. The other driver, Artolo, is visibly agitated. He's never had whales going back and forth underneath his boat so many times before. He is spooked by it, but I am exhilarated.

In the flash of an instant, the baby comes up beside me. I take the chance I've longed for and shove my palm onto his magnificent tail fluke. He flicks his fluke, and I flex my arm back as I feel the surge of power. Good thing: It was an iota of the force he uses to propel himself, and I can tell that with one hard whack my arm could have easily been broken.

I watch as the baby hangs face down in the water with his tail in our faces. Where will he surface next? I feel absolutely no fear that the whale might turn the panga over. I only feel the charging juice of adrenalin.

We stand up in our panga, watching and waiting for the next move. The whales swim between our two pangas. It



Baja Besides Whales

The Baja California peninsula, which is one of the world's longest peninsulas, extends 800 miles south from the US border and has a width that varies from thirty to seventy-five miles. The physical geography starkly contrasts from one region to the next. Two-thirds of Baja is desert, but it also has mountain ranges and forests, and the irregular coastline is indented by numerous bays. The flora changes steadily along with the terrain and the climate; Americans driving recreational vehicles have also inevitably become part of the scenery.

We started out in the Cape Region before moving ever so subtly into the Magdalena Plains of the desert. Though the landscape looks desolate and barren, more than 4,000 kinds of plants grow here; eighty of the 110 species of cactuses found in Baja are endemic to the area. Some strange breeds of plants somehow find enough sustenance from the dry earth to exist. The elephant tree is common, as are large forests of cactuses. The *Cardón* cactus, whose trunk is crusty with a swirly caramel and green, is abundant.

Fauna on Baja is exotically varied, having populations of pumas, foxes, coyotes, and wild geese. Offshore, seals and sea lions live in waters abundant with swordfish and tuna.

—B.A.

A Message From The Deep

is eerie, as if the mother is indulging her baby by letting him play with the boat. The baby pops up right beside me again and I can't believe my good luck. Two of us nimbly stick out our arms and press our fingers against his flesh. His skin is smooth and slick, his flesh firm. I like the way he feels, this living being who belongs to the sea. He swims under the panga and surfaces on the other side, where I reach down again.

By now it seems plain that the baby whale keeps coming back to get close to me. It is odd, but true. My eyes focus on his outline down in the cold Pacific. To witness the fluke swish through the

brine was a pleasure I hadn't anticipated, but touching this whale has been a heart-expanding experience. I never expected it to happen. Dave hasn't seen it all year.

Baby comes right beside us, knocks the boat with his tail, and rolls in the water. We run our hands lovingly along his side in a wide sweep. The only way this could be better is if he kissed me on the lips. Then, as a parting gesture, he lifts up a tailful of water and splashes me so completely that it leaves me soaking wet.

Playtime is over. Mamma and baby glide away. My playtime is over for now, too, but it has left me with something lasting. Not only have I touched a whale, but a whale has touched me with the gift of believing that something is right in the world.

Although we go out on the water the next two mornings and it's a thrill to see the whales, nothing can compare with the experience we've already had. I know it's probably a once-in-a-lifetime deal. Too many pangas are out on subsequent mornings, and I wonder at the gentleness of the mammals that they don't turn the pangas over, which are buzzing around them like pesky gnats. It is repulsive that some of the drivers leave the whales no space.


Dave says he thinks people will eventually have to be satisfied watching whales from the shore because watchers will interfere with whale migrations and calving too much. (In fact, however, researchers at the Oceanic Society found in a recent study that human observations, so far, have no impact on the migrations and calving of gray whales.)

We have one after another beautiful Baja blue-sky days. The last time I kayak,

Dave is with me, paddling with his strong, tan rower's arms. We drink Pacificos as we meander through a salt marsh that seems like it could be anywhere from South Carolina to Vietnam. Even though I haven't

had a shower in days and have woken up about twenty-five times a night sleeping on the ground, I feel great. This has been a primal experience that's thrown me into a different reality.

On our last morning, we catch a lot of spy-hopping whales in the act of raising their heads above water to take a look. Then it's time to pack up our gear to go. Although I'm looking forward to the amenities of a hotel, I won't have to wait for a shower to feel cleansed. The extraneous muddle in my head — all the roles I play that periodically burn me out and consume me — has been blown away by the spray of the whales.

A friend once said that being on an African safari and being awed by the mighty animals on the vast plains was a spiritual experience. Now I know exactly what she meant. How else can I explain this feeling that the baby whale carried a message from Brent, now in his own unencumbered freedom? 

Little Rock writer Beth Arnold has contributed to Rolling Stone, GQ, and Mirabella. She recently finished her second screenplay.

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