



A kayaker sets off in the Gulf of California.

ADVENTURE 101

Sea Kayaking Baja's Jewels

PADDLE INTO THE WILD By JOHN BRILEY

THEY ARE SCENES from our daydreams: paddling across an indigo lagoon surrounded by porpoises; coming eye to eye with a breaching whale; drifting to sleep on a beach under a dazzle of stars, well fed and soothed by top-shelf tequila. All are common occurrences for sea kayakers in the Gulf of California, off Mexico's Baja California peninsula. "This is one of the best preserved marine ecosystems you will find, and the chance that you'll see a variety of sea life on any given trip is high," says Peter Grubb,

founder of ROW Sea Kayak Adventures, which has guided trips in the area since 1995.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS The first time a whale surfaces next to your kayak, says Grubb, "is like a gift. People get a superclose and often life-changing experience." A variety of whale species, including humpback, fin, and blue, amass in the gulf from January through March, chiefly to calve and mate. The rest of the kayak season features other wildlife, including sea lions and juvenile whale sharks.

BEYOND THE BOAT Entry-level excursions, within the protected waters and islands of the Bahia de Loreto National Park and Isla Espiritu Santo biosphere, provide about two hours of kayaking in the morning and an additional hour in the afternoon. That leaves time for snorkeling, hiking desert arroyos, lolling on the beach, or swimming with sea lions.

PADDLE PREP Kayakers must have at least moderate fitness, but, Grubb says, "we coach people on how to use their core to paddle so their arms don't get tired." You'll need to be able to help carry kayaks—light, 21-foot Seaward fiberglass doubles—up on the beach. The biggest challenges? "Getting people to drink enough water," says Grubb. "And when people on the same trip want to go at different speeds, we often split the group and rendezvous on the beach later."

AN ALFRESCO EXPERIENCE Most outfitters offer multiday kayak trips suitable for novices (from six to 11 days, starting at \$1,095). To prepare for the trip, Grubb recommends "at least a few hours of kayaking" before arriving in Mexico. Also required: a willingness to camp consecutive nights—sleeping in tents, showering with salt water, and dining outdoors. To be sure, this is soft camping: Most tour-operated kayak adventures are supported by motorized *pangas*, which trail the group at an out-of-earshot distance loaded with comforts including tents, folding chairs, wet suits, and coolers packed with local produce and seafood.

LOW-ANXIETY THRILLS Fear of capsizing and other jitters dissolve quickly thanks to stable kayaks and waters largely shielded from strong winds and surf. What won't fade is the thrill of a self-propelled journey into a magical environment teeming with creatures that show little fear of human interlopers.

ATLAS
Baja California, Mexico



At 760 miles, Baja California is the second longest peninsula on Earth.