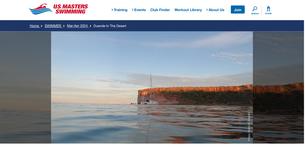

SWIMMER Magazine | Mar-Apr 2024

'Duende' in the Desert

A short escape far away opens up a new world of swimming and wildlife watching

By ELAINE K. HOWLEY

Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck knew it in 1940 when first he tasted the sparkling waters of the Sea of Cortez, a narrow strip of water that separates the Baja Peninsula from mainland Mexico. "Association with the sea creatures had conditioned," he wrote in *The Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*.[1]

That massive journalistic undertaking was the result of his accompanying marine biologist Ed Ricketts and a tiny crew aboard the 77-foot fishing vessel Western Flyer for a six-week voyage to "collect and preserve the marine invertebrates of the littoral," which he noted they sometimes digested by calling an expedition.

Their tidepool survey of the Gulf of California, the more modern moniker for the sea that had originally borne the name of a brutal 16th century conquistador, made for a great travel log. In that 1941 book, Steinbeck presented the team's findings as well as his own musings on the depths of the sea, the creatures that inhabit those azure waters, the nature of friendship, and his quest to understand the world around him. He described the team's many stops in "little harbors and near barren coasts" along the 4,000-mile journey and spun narrative gold about the Vermilion Sea.

In November 2023, I was lucky enough to join a shorter, more swimming-centric expedition to that same region, which also provided the inspiration and setting for one of Steinbeck's most acclaimed novellas, "The Pearl."

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On my journey with SwimTrek, a Great Britain-based provider of open water swimming vacations, our merry band of 14 swimmers and three skilled guides ventured into several of the same harbors and bays Steinbeck and Ricketts trolled more than 80 years prior. (SwimTrek provided my berth on the trip at no charge.)

And what we found there and within our group of strangers-turned-best-friends has left an indelible impression and a strong desire to return to Baja, La Paz, and that special week camping, swimming, and exploring Isla Espíritu Santo.

"**Duende**" is an expression that describes the indescribable feeling experienced by a person immersed in nature. "Duende" is a feeling of wonder and inspiration, an overwhelming sense of beauty and magic." So notes an unattributed quote in a book of desaturated, sun-blasted images of magical scenes around Baja California Sur that I picked up at a bohemian coffee shop in La Paz, the largest city in Baja California Sur and the jumping-off point for our SwimTrek trip to nearby Isla Espíritu Santo.

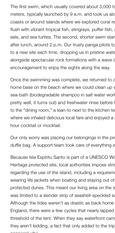
We boarded a panga—a 12-person wooden dive boat—at the dock in La Paz harbor, which had recently been hammered by a rare hurricane, and zipped to Espíritu Santo in a little over an hour.

From the moment our group disembarked, nature took charge. A serene sense of duende quickly settled in among the group members as we marveled at the red rocks and cliff faces that sheered into a profound turquoise sea. Far from the grasp of the nearest cell tower, we'd be unreachable for the full five days we'd be camping on the island that's designated as "uninhabited" yet teems with life.

Most SwimTrek trips are based in a hotel near the beach from which the tour group can swim or roam farther afield by boat. Some are conducted from a live-aboard ship where the group stays on the vessel and treats to a new swimming spot each day. The Baja Mexico trip is unique in that it's the only excursion SwimTrek offers that involves camping.

Technically more "glamping" than true camping, it's hard to claim you're really roughing it in SwimTrek's beachfront camp on Isla Espíritu Santo. Participants sleep in tidy, two-person tents arranged neatly in a row a few inches apart—a smart concession to limit the environmental impact of the group—and have access to a pair of sawdust pit toilets that are kept immaculately clean and work surprisingly well, even if Montezuma makes a claim for revenge.

A fully staffed gourmet kitchen offers three meals on a regular schedule: first breakfast of coffee, yogurt, and fruit at 7 a.m.; a second (hot) breakfast at 8 a.m.; lunch at noon; happy hour at 5 p.m.; and dinner at 6 p.m. This kept us well-fed and hydrated for our two swimming sessions per day.



We started each swim with a short ride aboard a panga to a new swim spot.

The first swim, which usually covered about 3,000 to 4,000 meters, typically launched by 8 a.m. and took us along coasts or around islands where we explored coral reefs flush with vibrant tropical fish, stingrays, puffer fish, moray eels, and sea turtles. The second, shorter swim started after lunch, around 2 p.m. Our trusty panga pilots took us to a new site each time, dropping us in pristine waters alongside spectacular rock formations with a wave of encouragement to enjoy the sights along the way.

Once the swimming was complete, we returned to our home base on the beach where we could clean up with a sea-bath (biodegradable shampoo in salt water works pretty well, it turns out) and freshwater rinse before heading to the "dining room," a lean-to next to the kitchen tent where we inhaled delicious local fare and enjoyed a happy hour cocktail or mocktail.

Our only worry was placing our belongings in the provided duffle bag. A support team took care of everything else.

Because Isla Espíritu Santo is part of a UNESCO World Heritage protected site, local authorities impose strict rules regarding the use of the island, including a requirement for wearing life jackets when boating and staying out of the protected dunes. This meant our living area on the island was limited to a slender strip of sawdust-speckled sand. Although the tides weren't as drastic as back home in New England, there were a few cycles that nearly lapped the threshold of the tent. When they was waterfront camping, they aren't kidding, a fact that only added to the trip's nonpareil vibe.

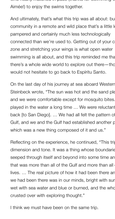
The **abundance of life** on the island and the water around it is truly breathtaking and a clear indication of why Jacques Cousteau dubbed the Gulf of California "the world's aquarium."

On our second full day on the island, the weather was clear for a rare opportunity to become aquarium exhibits ourselves and swim with fellow marine mammals. We boated to Los Islotes, a tiny rock formation at the northern end of Isla Partida, a small island just north of Isla Espíritu Santo that's home to a robust colony of sea lions.

Swimming with the sea lions, despite having to wear an uncomfortable and ill-fitting life vest, will remain a treasured memory for the rest of my life. Seeing their obvious ease and delight in the water reminded me why I swim and why the sea holds such power over me. Their unabashed curiosity about us—they're accustomed to groups of humans visiting, as has occurred nearly every day over the past 30 years—and getting a chance to interact with wild creatures on their terms in their home made me struggling to find the right descriptive words. Spectacular. Marvelous. Enchanting. Inspiring. Humbling. Life-changing. None of them can fully encompass the 30 minutes of sheer joy and wonder we experienced in the presence of those intelligent and graceful creatures.

I felt a similar sense of awe when we visited a large rookery for Xigalas birds at Bahía San Gabriel at the southern end of Espíritu Santo. The sleek, arrow-shaped birds have taken over an abandoned pearl farm and established a thriving community safe from most predators.

Enormous brown pelicans swooped low as we swam and paddled. Sparkling white seagulls hopped loudly and inched toward us at lunchtime. A foot of blue-footed boobies perched upon a dark rock that appeared frosted with the guano of a thousand decidedly ungraceful, teal-shoed birds rounded out our wildlife encounters in fine fashion.



We swam a lot, but we also played in the crystal clear water, surrounded by like-minded, adventurous swimming spirits.

Lest I make it sound like this was purely an ecological expedition, let me assure you, the swimming was superlative too. We split into three groups based on pace, and we happily swam as much or as little, as fast or slow, as we wanted. Most of us didn't know anyone else on the trip, which is something that sets SwimTrek apart from other tour companies in that it's designed to not only support solo travelers but caters specifically to single swimmers. But as it worked out, we all found a swim buddy who nearly matched in pace (thanks for swimming with me, Aimée!) to enjoy the swimming.

And ultimately, that's what this trip was all about: building community in a remote and wild place that's a little less populated and certainly much less technologically connected than we're used to. Getting out of your comfort zone and stretching your wings is what open water swimming is all about, and this trip reminded me that there's a whole wide world to explore out there—though I would not hesitate to go back to Espíritu Santo.

On the last day of his journey at sea aboard Western Flyer, Steinbeck wrote, "The sun was hot and the sand pleasant and we were comfortable except for mosquito bites. We played in the water a long time . . . We were reluctant to go back (to San Diego). . . . We had all felt the pattern of the Gulf, and we the Gulf had established another pattern which was a new thing composed of it and us."

Reflecting on the experience, he continued, "This trip had dimension and tone. It was a thing whose boundaries seeped through itself and beyond into some time and space that was more than all of the Gulf and more than all of our lives. . . . The real pictures of how it had been there and how we had been there was in our minds, bright with sun and well with sea water and blue or burned, and the whole crusted over with exploring thought."

I think we must have been on the same trip.

About The Author
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Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications including *AARP.org*, *Atlas Obscura*, *esportsN*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. A lifelong swimmer who specializes in cold water marathon swimming, she has contributed to SWIMMER magazine since 2009 and USMS.org since 2012. Contact her via her website: elainekhowley.com

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