



Text and photos by Chloe Ernst

MARIETAS ISLANDS

HOME TO BREACHING HUMPBACKS AND DIVING BLUE-FOOTED BOOBIES

“Get your cameras ready,” a deckhand says, grinning. But, in Banderas Bay, the whale-watching passengers needn’t have so hastily zoom in on the ocean ripples the whales left behind. Over the next 20 minutes, the two humpbacks would breach, slap their flippers, and wave their flukes (or tails) in a playful and impressive display.

Along the Pacific coast of Mexico, humpback whales mate from mid-October through March. Humpbacks are considered especially playful whales and the mating season draws out the liveliest behavior. And, it is only during mating season that male humpbacks sing.

The north shore of Banderas Bay ends at Punta de Mita and, about 6 kilometres off the point, the Marietas Islands lie in the mouth of the bay. The volcanic islands are full of life under the water, on the land, and in the sky.

Protected as the Marietas Islands Marine Reserve, they are best known as home to the blue-footed booby—which nests only here

and in the Galapagos. The boobies fish by nose diving into the water from dozens of feet up. Trying to catch a glimpse of their blue feet as they dive, however, is the day’s challenge.

Once used for artillery testing, the Marietas Islands came to international attention through the work of oceanographer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau. Now, small tour boats and yachts visit the islands for snorkeling and wildlife watching.

As the trimaran leaves the islands, a passenger sees a dark mantra ray glide under the bow. Distracted from the whales and blue-footed boobies, the other boat passengers crowd to watch as the forms glide like shadows under the surface.

Although fishing in Banderas Bay is a mainstay in the economy and there are sport-fishing options for visitors, no one casts a line near the islands, says another deckhand.

“We don’t fish here. This is a respected place.”



HUMPBACK WHALES

Humpback whales are the noisiest and most imaginative whales when it comes to songs. They have long, complex, eerie, and beautiful songs that include recognizable sequences of squeaks, grunts, and other sounds. Only males have been recorded singing. They sing the complex songs only in warm waters, perhaps for mating purposes.



BLUE-FOOTED BOOBY

The Blue Footed Booby is a tropical seabird that lives on the west coast of Mexico and along the coast of Ecuador and northern Peru. Just like its name suggests, the Blue-footed Booby bird has bright blue feet and is about the size of a goose. Its name comes from the Spanish word bobo which means "stupid fellow," because Blue Footed Boobies are very tame birds, lacking the fear instinct of other birds. They also appear to be a very clumsy bird on land.



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