

The Ambassador Abroad... Around the World in 152 Days (Part 2)

In this issue, Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch continues the ongoing account of his latest adventures as onboard naturalist and guest lecturer on the brand new Viking Neptune as she sails around the world!

Panama Canal and Coastal Holiday

This itinerary is often booked as the first part of the Viking World Cruise as it takes people from Fort Lauderdale (or sometimes Miami) to Los Angeles. It saves flying across the US for guests living on or near the Eastern Seaboard and is an interesting itinerary with good wildlife opportunities and wonderful history, scenery and engineering too! Of course a few guests, like Kris and I, had joined in Barcelona or even earlier and sailed across the Atlantic. You can read about that voyage in the December 2022 issue. Read on to hear about sightings in the Caribbean, transiting the Panama Canal and sailing up the Pacific Coast with visits to Costa Rica and Mexico before our arrival in Los Angeles.

Fort Lauderdale to Colon

It's always worth watching for cetaceans when you cruise the Caribbean and there are plenty of seabirds to watch while you're waiting! There's an outside chance of a North Atlantic Right Whale in the waters off Florida when heading toward the Bahamas and Dominican Republic but they are mostly further north. Humpbacks though can be found pretty much anywhere there are quiet sheltered bays and shallow areas although the largest number are found around the more northerly islands. Sadly however, on this occasion we were to be largely disappointed as choppy, and sometimes rough, seas limited our time on deck and the chances of spotting anything.



There were laughing gulls (above), turkey vultures, brown pelicans and an osprey around the port before we departed on 22nd December and some brown

boobies the following morning as we transited the north-west coast of Cuba.

On Christmas Eve we managed to dock in Cozumel in strong winds, where only a couple of frigatebirds and briefly an unidentified tern hunted near the ship.



Our Christmas Day at sea brought up to 5 brown boobies at a time (above), riding the air currents and chasing flying fish. From time to time, masked boobies were also spotted, one soaring over the bow for a short while.

Flying fish are wonderful to watch. Many guests are not aware of them until we point them out and there are over 60 species to be found around the world, some reaching lengths of around 45cm! Technically they should be called gliding fish as they build up speed to around 40 miles per hour under water and as they break through the surface they unfurl their pectoral fins which have evolved into wings which underwater are held back along their bodies.



They have been recorded flying as far as 200 metres but flights are usually much shorter, although sometimes a series of short flights in different

directions can be observed. This is facilitated by a tail which has evolved to have a longer lower lobe which can be used to provide a quick burst of additional propulsion when dipped in the water. All this is a great escape strategy when a larger fish is chasing you, but not so effective when the boobies are on patrol above!

Patches of Sargassum floated by, one larger patch being a hunting ground for 3 laughing gulls. Late in the day, guests reported seeing dolphins, off the port side at 1615 and leaping to the starboard bow at 1712. Later still, close to sunset, 2 to 3 more were seen to starboard but no species ID was possible.

Boxing Day saw very rough seas, and no wildlife at all was sighted!

Cartagena was the port on 27th and as is often the case in this part of the world, flying fish were again being hunted by brown boobies as we approached. Around the port were numerous brown pelicans (below) and a tropical kingbird which briefly visited



the World Café at the aft of the ship. Near the cruise terminal is a free eco-park, full of native wildlife including many wild though habituated macaws and monkeys and other birds in large aviaries.

Our final Caribbean port, on 28th, was Colon from where many guests took tours onto the Gatun Lake, into the Chagres Rainforest National Park, or further along the canal to visit the Miraflores Locks or Panama City itself. For us it was a rest and writing day but we still managed to observe magnificent frigatebirds, turkey vultures and laughing gulls around the harbour.

Panama Canal Transit

With locks at both ends, and being a fresh water environment, there are no cetaceans in the Canal although manatee were introduced after the creation of the Gatun Lake which supplies the water for much

of the system. These latter are probably no longer around as they were often eaten by the native people of the area and struggled to survive following their removal to this strange new world. Bird life however abounds and our sightings from the ship this time included: magnificent frigatebirds, brown pelicans, black and turkey vultures, a couple of ospreys, laughing gulls, keel-billed (and other) toucans, yellow-headed caracaras, macaws, parakeets, swallows and even tiny humming birds! Capybara and white-tailed deer were seen on the banks and Kris saw, and photographed, a crocodile!

And of course there were the mules that guide the ship through the locks, electric trains that feed entirely on electricity!

Our day (29th) ended with a brief glimpse of what seemed to be a small whale, surfacing aft, off the port quarter after we had left Panama City behind.

Canal to Costa Rica

Cetacean sightings really picked up once we left the Panama Canal. Kris and I do an official, timetabled, Wildlife Watch on sea days, usually between 10am and 12noon, but we're often around at other times too. Passengers soon get into the swing too and on 30th splashes had already been seen which suggested whales or dolphins and a turtle swam by close to starboard with another being seen by our friend Roger Strom as we arrived to set up at 0950. Six brown boobies were already flying with us, often peeling off to chase the flying fish. By 1005, there were 12, and Roger also spotted an Audubon's shearwater.

At 1108, things became really exciting when a group of half a dozen dolphins leaped towards us from off the starboard bow. Initially the jumps were quite low, and the animals were dark grey, fairly large and with a good sized quite curved fin. Initially I was not at all sure of the species but as more approached some became quite active and soon we had counted at least



25 animals in four different sub-groups. This also permitted the all-important ID photograph... rough-toothed dolphins! No wonder I had been uncertain initially! I had seen the species only once before, a single leucistic individual amongst a group of pantropical-spotted dolphins off Ascension Island over 7 years ago! This remains one of my favourite encounters of the trip so far. It is always good to observe an unusual species and get photographs and even better to share it with fellow passengers.

By noon, a young Nazca booby (a glorious white bird



not unlike a gannet at first glance) had joined the browns and we had passed several flocks of 20+ wedge-tailed shearwaters feeding in groups at the surface or circling around. By 1500, at least 50 brown boobies were flying with the ship, riding the air currents alongside and over the bow and hunting the flying fish, and unseen schools of fish or squid with occasional squawks of “mine” and “back off” as they converged on the same target!

Later, at 1715, a guest reported seeing 3 dolphins to port.

Puntarenas, Costa Rica was our port on 31st and this is a great country for wildlife and rainforest tours which many guests enjoyed and some spotted small rays and a turtle during the sail-in. We had a day on the ship but had time to photograph brown pelicans and both royal and sandwich terns on the pier along with small waders, perhaps sanderlings. Magnificent frigatebirds and black vultures circled above us all day, grackles and grey-breasted martins flew around us and shortly before sail-away we rescued a large fig sphinx moth from the deck!

Sailing to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

The New Year brought lots more brown and Nazca boobies as well as one or two immature red-footed boobies and large numbers of flying fish.

The first dolphins were spotted at 0950, and we photographed 8+ striped dolphins (below) leaping



away to starboard at 1005. More dolphins were seen as the morning continued but never close enough for positive ID, including 6+ away to port with some jumping at 1210, at least 4 more away to starboard at 1220, and 20+ surfacing strongly 2 or 3 miles to port at 1450.

In the afternoon, between 1545 and 1555, 10 smaller and very active dolphins were spotted close to starboard and in the wake which may have been spinners and we photographed one of two turtles around the same time. Throughout this time, 6 Nazca boobies were flying with us and fishing from time to time, 4 of which were immature.

Our New Year's Day finished shortly after 1650 when we could see multiple groups of dolphins far away to port leaping and surging. There must have been 75+, probably many more and this time our photographs were able to confirm them as common.

The second sea day quickly became a turtle day with the first being seen by a guest from their balcony at 0555! A large ray was seen jumping at 0640 and then 2 manta rays were reported to starboard at 1235.

But during the morning, particularly between 1000 and 1030, around 10 turtles were seen, as well as mahi-mahi and even a couple of sharks.

At 1245, Roger Strom photographed a beaked whale surfacing a couple of miles off the starboard bow. We have sailed with Roger before and he's a great photographer and generously shares his photographs with me to use in slide shows and talks. On this occasion although not of show quality, it was great to confirm a sighting and family if not species.

As I was speaking in the morning, our watch was 2pm – 4pm and again, multiple turtles were seen, one with a booby riding its shell! Numerous fish “boils” could

also be seen with larger fish and sometimes boobies and shearwaters joining in the frenzy.

The best was yet to come however and just as I began to round-up my watch we spotted large fins in the distance which approached our starboard bow closely



and revealed themselves as 3 orca, including a mother and juvenile! Not a bad end to the day!

What we didn't know at this stage was that another great sighting had taken place this day, off Dana Point in California. Whale watchers out with Captain Dave's Dolphin and Whale Watching Safari had spotted blood in the water and feared the worst but instead were treated to a grey whale mother bringing her new born calf alongside! Not only photographs, but also drone video of this amazing event hit all the news media the following day and I learned about it the day after. Despite contacts in the area, neither they nor I heard anything else and we can only hope that mum and her baby made it safely to the lagoons a week's swim south where she had originally hoped to experience this happy event.

On 3rd January, the early birds again caught the worm with dolphins seen to starboard at around 0600 and again at 0630 and 4-6 small whales seen ½ mile off the starboard beam.

During our watch between 0930 and 1230 numerous turtles and flying fish were again seen as well as mahi-mahi and both brown and Nazca boobies. The most interesting sighting was at 1025 when 2-3 grey-brown beaked whales surfaced two or three times and then dived with an arch of the back. They were unfortunately over a mile and a half distant but I'm fairly sure they were Cuvier's beaked whales

A guest reported a whale to port just after 1300 but we once again finished the day with dolphins at 1635. This time it was pantropical spotted, 12 to 15 of them racing in to the starboard bow with a series of low

leaps and then presumably bow riding before drifting down the side to the stern almost invisibly.

Our last sea day before Cabo brought yet more sightings. At 0600, a large whale was seen by guests blowing perhaps ¾ mile to starboard and surfaced twice before arching its back and diving. Two sea turtles were also reported around 0700 and either a white-tailed or red-billed tropicbird.

We saw 2 more turtles at around 1015 then at 1100 7-8 dolphins approached the starboard aft quarter and began leaping and surfing in the waves there. I believe them to have been pantropical spotted once again but could not confirm it.

A red-billed tropicbird approached the port bow at 1055 and a guest reported two fur seals or sea lions off the port side at 1351.

It was 1701 that brought the most spectacular sighting of the day, with 50+ pantropical spotted dolphins leaping and back-flipping in to the port bow



and alongside, surfing in the bow wave to the excited screams of many happy passengers and two happy Sea Watchers!

Cabo San Lucas

Knowing how good this area can be, I was up early and saw at least 3 common dolphins at 7am, and



photographed two more leaping to the port bow at 0710 with 2 more being seen to starboard. Then, at 0715, the first blow was seen, a little over a mile ahead.

Two more blows a mile and a half to port were confirmed as a mother and calf by 0718 and at 0724 the original humpback whale dived 250 yards to starboard.



As we anchored in the bay at 0815, we could still see the blows of at least 4 or 5 humpbacks far out to sea and this continued all day, with pectoral slapping and full and partial breaches witnessed from the ship often at two or more miles distant.

What was really noticeable was that no whales were seen closer, in the bay, until late in the afternoon. This does not surprise me as on previous visits I have seen many small boats, commercial and private, chase whales backwards and forwards around the anchorage. On my last visit in 2019 I predicted then that although this has long been an important shallow water breeding ground for humpbacks, they would not stay if this behaviour continued. Not good for the whales and not good for those whale watching companies trying to operate more ethically. Certainly on this occasion, these boats travelled much further out o sea, and into the Sea of Cortez on their trips.

Sadly, in the late afternoon, a mother and calf, probably the same ones we had seen that morning, were herded and chased into the shallow waters of the bay by a flotilla of more than 20 small boats from over by the famous rock arch. Eventually the Coastguard, who had been present throughout, did briefly intervene and try to screen them but neither this nor the repeated tail- and pec-slapping brought much respite. Despite this, mum and baby remained in the shallows until darkness fell when she clearly spent time nursing her offspring. Cabo San Lucas is a clear example of somewhere where better protection is needed for the whales in the area, where existing

regulations need to be enforced without fear or favour. Sadly both the whales and the good operators are suffering from the failure and many of the whales seem to be heading elsewhere as a result.

Cabo to Los Angeles

More whales were spotted early on 6th, two at around 0600 and at 0631 a big tall blow “like a fire hose” was seen away to port which suggests one of the blue whales that do migrate along this coast. Dolphins were also reported at around 1030 and an adult and immature Nazca booby, as well as a brown booby flew with us for part of the morning. Later in the day, a few gulls and occasionally a larger bird, could be seen astern, fishing in the wake.

Our last sea day before arriving in LA saw 3 or 4 common dolphins to port at 0645, to starboard at 0715 and then 5+ leaping in to the port side and the wake at 0950. Shortly after, 30+ were spotted on both sides as well as a possible Laysan albatross.

Between 1240 and 1250, 8+ common dolphins were surfing, diving and breaching close to the starboard side and at 1245 20 more were doing the same thing to port. A small shark was also seen shortly after.

For the second time on the cruise, orca were seen, two approaching close to the port bow and diving. This is a known migration route for both humpbacks and greys and possibly also for blues and fins, and I have witnessed orca tracking greys quite closely on this coast previously. On this occasion though, the animals may have been part of a pod which is known to specialise in sharks and rays in this area.

Dolphins were reported in the wake at 1423 and then we saw 12-15 common dolphins leaping in to the starboard bow where some clearly were bow riding. Others could be seen in the vicinity on both sides of the ship, apparently foraging, for a total of at least 25 to 30 but quite possibly many more.

Early the next morning we arrived in Long Beach, Los Angeles where many guests (those not taking part in the World Cruise) left us and the remaining guests joined for a voyage which would ultimately end on or after May 9th, in Greenwich, London. For us, the next stop would be Hawaii but that story is for another day!

Flying fish, Nazca booby, striped dolphins images credit: Kris Simpson

All other images: Robin Petch