

## Taking the White Road to Seals

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to swim with a wild seal in the deep ocean? I have always felt that would be a truly amazing experience; and it was, once I got over the initial adrenaline rush and instinctive trepidation, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico with my boyfriend, Daryl. It was a week-long vacation spent at wonderful resort with a tremendous staff that met all our needs, and then some.

We slept in, ate well, spent days lingering on the beach and nights in town, and tried out the various activities offered to tourists. It was relaxing and comfortable, but something was missing. It just all felt so....planned. Don't take me wrong. I enjoy being pampered as much as the next girl, but there came a point where my audacious streak was itching for an adventure, to experience something off the beaten path.

Gary Erickson, the founder of Clif Bar, once wrote that there are two types of roads marked on any given map: the red lines represent freeways, while the white indicate smaller country roads. The red road is all about the destination. It is the sure and familiar path. You know when the next off-ramp is and where to fill up the tank.

In contrast, the white road is about the experience. White roads are simple and adventurous, and if you have the time to spare, you just might end up experiencing something new.

That sums up how I was feeling. I was stuck on a vacation red road when I yearned for the thrill and unexpected that comes from venturing down a white road.

One day, we were down at the beach looking over the same snorkeling gear that hundreds of other tourists had used to explore the bay in front of the hotel strip. I eyed the gear, looked at the water teeming with other tourists, and sighed.

I turned to Daryl, and without a word, we both mutually agreed. No, this just didn't quite cut it.

We were about to head back up the beach, when a man effortlessly hopped out of the boat he had just pulled up onto the shore. He had a deep tan, and strong shoulders and arms that came not from air conditioned gyms, but from living an active life on the ocean.

He headed over to the snorkeling shack where we had been lingering, clearly friends with the personnel there. His tall frame, long Scandinavian blond hair, and the English he spoke made him stand out in the group of Mexicans like a cashew nut in a bowl of peanuts. It was clear he was one of them, and yet, he wasn't.

We gave pause as we listened in on the conversation that he easily picked up with the guys in the shack. We learned that he had just finished a water tour with some friends on the other side of the peninsula and that they had seen turtles and all sorts of beautiful fish.

Daryl looked at me with a big grin on his face and I knew then that we had found our adventure. Sure enough, with some coddling and pleading (and promise of cold hard cash), Georg the Scandinavian agreed to take us to this special area of the peninsula.

The next morning, Georg picked us up at the hotel in a van that had seen better days. As we drove to our destination, he filled us in on his story and how he came to Cabo on vacation as a teenager, fell in love with the place, and just never went back home to Stockholm.

He parlayed his love of the ocean into various gigs in water tourism to pay the bills, and in his spare time, spent many hours scuba diving off the peninsula and charting the area's vast quantities of fish. He was leading a life he never could have imagined as a boy in Scandinavia, and loved every minute of it. It was quite an inspiring story about following your passion and letting the cards fall where they may.

The last few miles of our journey took us through a remote stretch of cacti and bush that ran along the coastline as far as the eye could see. There was an occasional passer-by on foot, but other than that, it felt as if we were the only souls out there. It was a nice respite from the touristy area where we had been spending our time.

We finally pulled up to a small two-story building that looked like something straight out of a Corona beer ad, complete with requisite palm tree.

The building's one-room ground floor was home to an assortment of scuba and snorkeling gear, wet suits, all sorts of maps, and a tiny refrigerator. We met a small group of Georg's friends who would be coming with us on the water that day. After exchanging pleasantries and gearing up, we headed down to the shoreline where a truck acted as a boat launch and pushed our two small boats out into the ocean.

It was a bluebird day. No wind, about 80 degrees, and the water was clear and inviting. I couldn't wait to get in and see all there was to see under its surface.

Georg pulled out a map and showed us the areas where he had seen the most ocean life over the past several days. Chugging a beer, he motored us for about 30 minutes to the site, talking to us the entire way without ever really looking to see where he was going. With his wild white-blond hair blowing in the wind and his lean physique, he was the perfect character to lead us on this adventure.

When we reached our destination, we dropped into the water and were instantly rewarded with a lush, underwater scene. I have snorkeled many times and in many of the world's best places, but this was right up near the top. Imagine New York City; replace the buildings with coral and the people with fish, and you get the idea of what we were experiencing.

Schools of brightly colored, exotic fish swam by, sand sharks and eels swept along the bottom, and there was something new to see at every turn. It was an amazing, truly novel undersea world.

After a few hours checking out this treasure trove of aquatic life, we boarded back on the boat. I think Georg was pleased to see us so giddy about the experience we had just gone through because he smiled and said, "Ok, I'm going to take you to an area where, with some luck, you might see some turtles and perhaps a few seals. "You can swim with them if they are there."

Daryl and I crossed our fingers as we sat back in the boat and away we went with Georg's hair flying behind him.

We were getting to know Georg's friends in the boat with a comfortable, creative banter of Spanish, English, and sign language, when we rounded a rock outcropping and all conversation immediately stopped.

There, in front of us, were not just a couple of wild seals, but an entire colony. There were about 25 or 30 in total ranging in age from mature adults to youths just past the pup stage. It was incredible.

Georg cut the motor, and we all dropped silently into the water. We cautiously swam to the rock where many of the seals were sunning themselves. Slowly, one by one, they slid into the water to join us as their curiosity about the strange looking two-legged aliens who had just crashed their party got the better of them.

At first, we danced around each other like pigeons in the park. It was a bit unnerving to be in the space of so many wild seals, just as I am sure they felt a bit apprehensive being around us. Eventually though, we all realized we weren't going to harm each other. They began to swim around us in circles, getting closer as they got bolder.

I finally took off my snorkel and started to coast along with one seal in particular, following his playful dips and somersaults. The seal was agreeable to me hanging out with him and we swam around, over, and under each other, and gave playful chase. I could have reached out and touched his smooth, silky skin but instinct told me not to. It was enough to simply be in this beautiful animal's presence.

Suddenly, the seal came to an abrupt stop, and I just about ran into him. He turned onto his back, threw a playful look at me with his tender brown eyes as I tread water, watching him inquisitively.

He swam past slowly, inches away, and twitched his whiskers as he hesitated a moment. Then, without warning, turned, and swam away as quickly as he had come.

He had bid goodbye. I didn't follow.