

Play Time



Coming face to face with the sea lions of Los Islotes

Sea lions are shy but curious critters that sometimes seem to enjoy interacting with humans—but only on their own terms.

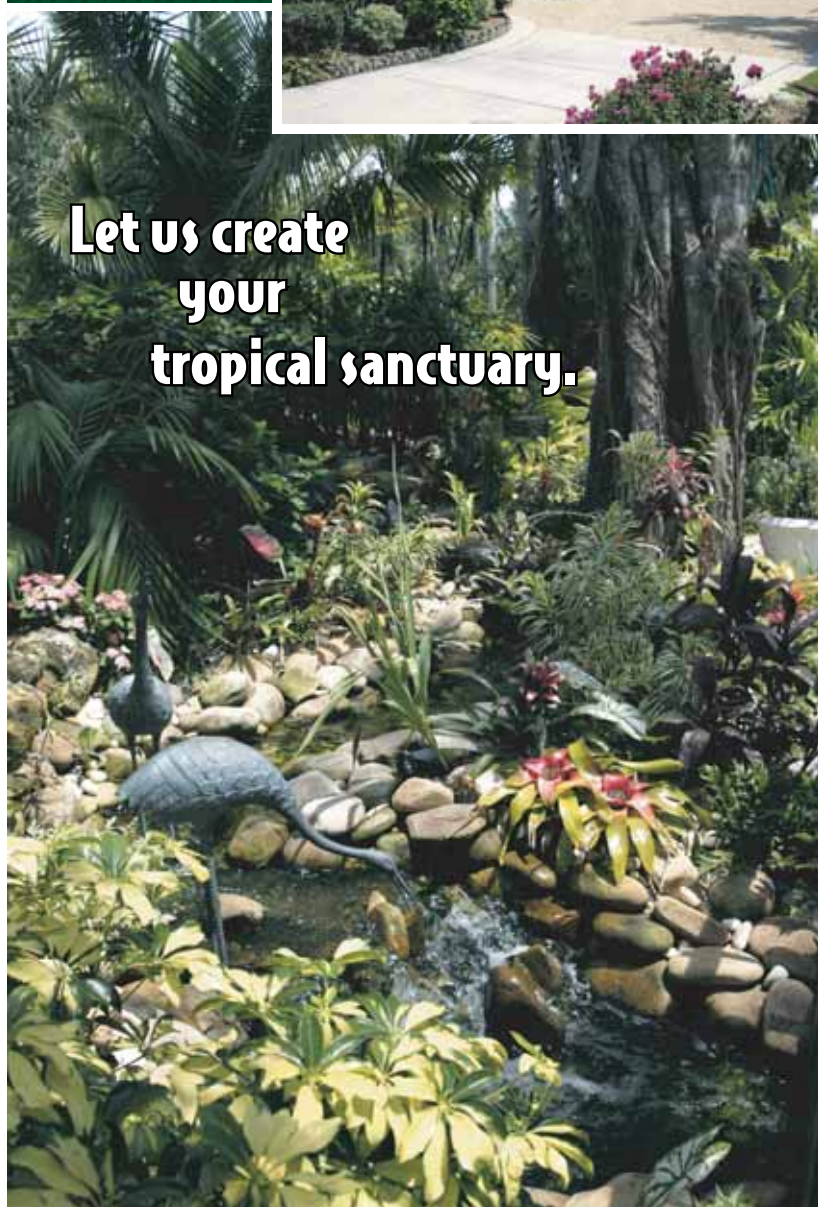


by Glenn Ostle

There are few experiences in life as exciting and stimulating as a personal encounter with a wild animal. And there are few such encounters as enjoyable as cavorting with sea lions, those rebellious, fun-loving, juvenile delinquents of the ocean that engender awe with their underwater antics and make even the most accomplished swimmer feel inadequate.

But finding a group of sea lions with which to interact is another issue entirely. In most cases, these shy creatures avoid human contact, or at least manage it on their own terms. But on a remote

PHOTOS BY GLENN OSTLE



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island in Mexico, intrepid divers and snorkelers have a better than average chance to interact with these underwater acrobats.

Los Islotes is located on the eastern edge of Baja, Mexico, about three to four hours from La Paz, depending on the speed of your boat. The small, uninhabited island sits amid the surreal blue water of the Sea of Cortez, where large marine life prospers and humpback whales come to give birth. A stop at this remote island was part of a weeklong dive program for which I had signed up and an opportunity to try for a close encounter of the sea lion type. No guarantees, but as the island is a perma-

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When snorkelers and divers arrive at Los Islotes, youngsters from the nearby sea lion colony come out to say hello.

nent home to a colony of playful sea lions, chances of getting close to the fast-moving critters were pretty good.

That day we were lucky. Ours was the only boat in the area, and we could see many sea lions sunning themselves on the rocks, including a large male that eyed us warily as we swam slowly toward the island. As we drew closer, the sea lions became curious and swam out to buzz us, occasionally swimming straight toward us and blowing bubbles in our faces to let us know who was boss. When they realized we were no threat, they began to include us in their games, and it soon became open season on divers. They sneaked up on us from behind, dive-bombed us from above, and chewed on our fins. One even delighted in grabbing my underwater strobe light with its mouth to see if I wanted to wrestle for it. Sorry bub, I paid too much for this thing!

We were fortunate that the elder of the group did not swim out to chastise the youngsters for fraternizing with humans

and chase them all away. As a result, we were able to spend a few delightful hours taking pictures of these incredible animals.

Sea lions would glide in from all directions, often swimming directly at us and putting on their brakes at the last minute for an eyeball-to-eyeball interaction. It was like frolicking in the park with a group of large puppies, and at the end of the day, it was hard to say whether it was the humans or sea lions having the most fun.

If you have a truly adventurous spirit and would like a better look at sea lions than is possible at the zoo, an incredible experience awaits you at Los Islotes. Come on in, the sea lions are fine. 🦭

Glenn Ostle is a Charlotte, North Carolina-based freelance photojournalist. His articles and photos have appeared in a number of dive and travel magazines and can be viewed at www.featherandfins.com.

If You Go

Los Islotes is about twenty miles north of La Paz, Mexico, which is served by both Aero California and Aero Mexico airlines. A number of live-aboard dive boats and land-based dive operators take guests out to Los Islotes. One is Club Cantamar (52-612-125-1424, www.clubcantamar.com). For more information about the La Paz area, visit www.vivalapaz.com or www.visitmexico.com/wb/Visitmexico/Visi_La_Paz.