

unwelcome refrain, an unpleasant side effect of poverty and tourism's hard-edged mix. It took all our patience to decline their constant offers of free or discounted voyages—free or discounted, of course, only if we'd first listen to a half-day presentation on investing in time shares.

But once we are at sea, the colorful surf at the tip of Baja California still inspires awe. Deep ultramarine blues bleed into sparkling turquoise, and long lines of sugar-white foam caps roll toward the arid shore.

Reading about Steinbeck's journey on the *Western Flyer*, I found that the novelist, for the most part, avoided the language of emotion or poetry in favor of an objective, dispassionate tone, as if he were humbled by the rigors of species identification and placement within Linnaean taxonomy. Even so, something about that surf-blasted, rocky archipelago made even Steinbeck turn to fairy tales and myth to help himself imagine how humankind, or perhaps his alter ego, might occupy such a wild and vivid spot.

Seeing the cape's dramatic arches and wind-carved caves, Steinbeck described the site as "a small boy's dream of pirates," complete with "gold bars and jewels and beautiful ladies."

And it's still remarkable to behold, despite the cruise ships towering over the horizon and the water taxis buzzing near the shore. We'd be back there soon enough. Maybe the day could be saved with a little beach swimming. That's when we saw them: three black humps on the horizon, each one spouting a plume of water.

"Whales!" the passengers cried.

"*Las ballenas!*" roared our captain.

The boat turned and gave chase. A school of dolphins appeared starboard, their dorsal fins and glinting, curved backs slicing through the water like paddle wheels. The whales seemed to tease us, letting us gain on them briefly before gliding away to a midpoint on the horizon.

"Maybe if you turned off the music," I lamely suggested, "they'd let us get closer."

Leah was looking in the opposite direction. Suddenly she gasped. A cetacean that seemed close but was probably many boat-lengths away was breaching the water. We saw its enormous gray barnacle-encrusted back as it rose up and fell, slapping its side hard against the dark surface of the surging water. Its tail fluke waved and slapped again.

And then it was gone. God, it was huge. And fast, too. A long moment passed as I tried to grasp what I'd seen. Long enough to see it spout another watery plume of farewell on the distant horizon.

It was only a moment, but I was grateful for the sighting. With it came a potent reminder of shared space and connection between that whale and myself. The largest citizen from the natural world reached out to a boat filled with loud, drunken tourists, and momentarily transported us beyond the limits of both habit and imagination.

We turned back to the cape and the boat picked up speed. We glided over the water, imperfect and unavoidable. The darkening sky made the sea look impenetrable. It was an illusion, I knew: a sensation not merely to be analyzed and understood, but also to be felt as deeply as the catch in my throat. It was more than enough to redeem the day; in fact, it was a worthy encounter that would bridge the gap that had split so many other days.

Barbara Tannenbaum is a journalist and author based in San Rafael. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Salon.com*, and *San Francisco* magazine. She recently finished a novel set in Los Angeles about daughters and mothers transforming their lives during the culturally turbulent 1970s.

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