

Explore

Blue Ocean Writings

Diary

Carl Safina's voyages around the world have brought him face-to-face with giant, car-sized Leatherback turtles, hundreds of thousands of nesting albatrosses, and pods of dolphins facing death from tuna fishing. Scroll below to read some of his diary entries:

Across A Desert Sea

Sandy and I are at the Tucson airport, where jets are roaring into the morning and the desert's brown ridges ring the sky in weightless silence. A few years ago Sandy formed the non-profit Environmental Flying Services. By non-profit she means, "I charge only for trip expenses. I never charge anything for my time. These researchers' projects would be impossible otherwise; they have no money to pay a pilot." And so today we will fly to La Paz, Mexico, near the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula. There we will meet Laura Sarti, the Mexican scientist conducting this aerial census of Leatherback sea turtle nests.

We lift into the desert sky, climbing to 7,500 feet, acquiring a vulture's-eye view. Soon we cross the Mexican border at the twin cities of Nogales Arizona and Nogales Mexico, different as night and day. After customs formalities in Hermosillo, we prepare to strike east toward that finger of ocean in the desert known as the Sea of Cortez or, more p.c. nowadays, the Gulf of California. Since we'll be making a prolonged water crossing, Sandy shows me the safety equipment. She has a newly re-inspected, re-packed life raft on the seat. "I've added a little paddle and there's goodies to eat and water packets and new flares, and I told them to put a flask of brandy in place of the Bible the raft comes with." We'll wear belt packs containing auto-inflating life vests. Sandy says she flies so many over-water hours, it's not a matter of if she has to ditch, but when. Her engine once stopped while she was crossing the Gulf, but she was able to restart it. "If we have to ditch over water, keep the door closed until we hit. Then, you grab the raft and throw that sucker out the door. It's got a 40-foot cord attaching it to the plane, and if it isn't already inflated you just jerk that cord. Once we're floating, you're the captain, not me." Why does the passenger become captain, Captain? "Because I don't know shit about being on water. You do."

After fueling we head west from Hermosillo. And soon the miracle of Earth reappears: saltwater. This licking tongue of the Pacific Ocean is a jade sea, rather opaque, streaked with plankton blooms like pollen on a pond. We cross 70 miles of Gulf. The wrinkled sea surface is beautiful, like the grain in fine wood is beautiful. A few miles from shore we turn south, paralleling Baja California's massive, timeless coast, floating there in blue haze.

I notice a boat that dives. Sandy says, “Yes!—feeding Fin Whales!” She descends too rapidly for my groundling stomach. “Look at that guy coming up vertical.” But I’m already watching one angling downward, its jaws massively agape, vast pleated throat distended, dragging a comet of bubbles into those jade depths.

Sandy circles as I open the window at 115 miles an hour for a literally breathtaking photo op. She says suddenly, “Oh god—a Blue. I’ll put her on your side, but she’s going down.” The Blue Whale is the largest creature ever to have lived on Earth—and I don’t see it. “She looked great,” says Sandy, as though talking about an old friend. Sandy has seen, it is safe to venture, more than most people. She flies researchers studying everything from plankton to whales, people who really know nature and understand where to find it and how to see it. So I’m surprised when she suddenly says, “I miss a lot from up here. I mean, it’s a surreal existence. Like, I’ve flown thousands of miles of turtle surveys and,” she turns to face me, “I’ve never watched a turtle lay eggs.”

I understand, but I’m not about to start feeling sorry for Sandy. She found her true calling. She’s been a social worker, ran a farm-like center for runaway kids, earned extra money as a belly dancer, been a librarian. “I did a lot of things that interested me, and when they stopped interesting me, I moved on. Flying is the only thing that has never stopped interesting me.” We pass Loreto, with gorgeously striated red-rock desert cliffs plunging on our immediate right. Sandy nods shoreward saying, “This should be a national park.” I wonder if she means just the land. I think it would be cool to have a Great Whales National Park. On land we’ve designated national parks for observing nature’s spectacles, and wilderness areas, closed to motorized use, for wild things and diligent people willing to lose sight of their car. No less at sea, we need just a few ocean parks for ocean-loving people, and a few untrammelled ocean reserves for sensitive ocean wildlife. But only a tiny fraction—well under one percent—of ocean area is protected. That’s as true in the U. S. as it is worldwide. We need to move the concept of zoning into the sea, so that various places might be zoned for various uses, from oil drilling to different kinds of fishing to ocean refuges, to help people understand what uses can be expected and what places can be protected.

By four p.m. we’re 1,200 feet over the Bay of La Paz between Baja and the island of Espiritu Santo, talking to the tower and preparing to land. A Caracara watches from the runway as we smear some rubber.