17 January

I landed on the 17th of January 2008 at around 2 p.m at Loreto airport in Baja California Sur (BCS) – a windy arrival. While waiting for my immigration check, I heard a voice behind me ask, “Where are you from?” She was Maryjoy from Alberta; Canada accompanied by her parents Alberta and Joy and was keenly looking at the poster roll in my hand.

They had also come for the Grupo Tortuguero (Group of Turtlers started by Pro Peninsula consisting of fishermen, communities along the coast, students, researchers and scientists) meeting and the 28th annual symposium on sea turtle conservation and biology scheduled from the 19th to 26th of January. And Mary was a regular volunteer for the Grupo Tortuguero. This was the fourth time she was attending the meet. Immigration over, we took a cab. The people from Pro Peninsula (Kama and Rachel (scientists)-The group who started the Grupo Tortuguero from CA) went to El Dorado, Maryjoy and her family stayed in a rented house. Eli (Conservation Director -Golden Gate Audubon Society) and I went to the volunteer house at Salvetierra Y Romanita near plaza Juarez, where we were received by Chuy (the Fishing leader and main member of the Grupo Tortuguero (GT)). He helped me with my luggage. I was carrying T-shirts and TREE cloth bags of TREE Foundation for distributing to people at the symposium.

Elena Finkbiener the leader for all the volunteers introduced me to the other volunteers. They were Anne (Germany), Narissa (New Zealand), Natalia (Costa Rica) Andrew, Eli, Kate, Jaime, Sharon and Lindsey all from USA, Manuela (Brazil), Javi, Mariantu, and Christu (Galapagos), Flor (Peru), Marissel (Mexico City), Nima Moin (Iran).

That evening, I went for a walk on my own to the beach, barely 100 meters from the house. Pelicans, cormorants, terns and seagulls were making a din on the shore line.

And the Sea of Cortes surrounded by hills and mountains looked so beautiful with its many little islands. I noticed that the waves here did not rise high nor was the sea as fierce as the sea back home that is the Bay of Bengal in Chennai, where I lived.

It was an incredible sight and a moment I will always treasure.
At dinner we met some more volunteers of ISTS (Hoyt and Daniel - Scientist – Pro Peninsula, Roderick – V.P. Conservation International, J Nichols – Senior Scientist Ocean Conservancy, Pro Peninsula and Grupo Tortuguero, Brad and his wife Celine and daughter Karenna from British Columbia) and GT.

18th January

The next day after joining the other volunteers in making name tags, I walked into the auditorium, the venue of the ISTS and GT meeting.

Here I met J Nichols’s (president of this years Symposium) mother Sheila who said that she was going to watch whales at Lopas Mateos at Magdalena Bay the following day. I decided to accompany her on that trip.

That afternoon Maryjoy came by to see how I was doing. She took me for a drive with her parents in Pete Marquez’s (Mary’s friend-regular volunteer for the Grupo Tortuguero) car. We drove along the coast for some time and then parked at a spot, about three miles from the Loreto marina (a small jetty where boats and yachts are docked).

Round cobbled stones filled the beach and there was no sandy beach anywhere. But there were numerous Catalina clam shells as well as large shells of different hues, shapes, colors and sizes around.
Looking all around, I could not find any man made structure. **Clearly Nature ruled in this part of the world.** With the desert (the land all around Baja is only desert – dry with only few days of rain in a year) behind me and the Sea of Cortes ahead and only the sound of waves greeting us, it was a euphoric moment. If there was a heaven on earth, I thought this must be it. A sense of tranquility descended upon me. It seemed as if I had been transported into a different realm. My mind seemed free of any kind of thoughts. I felt in one with the surroundings.

Returning back we helped paint the steps of the auditorium. Actually it was Mary’s idea. Since the steps and floor were grey in color, often people missed a step. Painting the raisers with a bold line in yellow color, it would help people watch their step. Maryjoy, Pete and I were busy at it from 2.30 – 6 pm. That night we had dinner at ‘La Palapa’ restaurant – it means thatched roof with palm leaves in Spanish.

19th January

We left by 7.30 am from Eco Allianza office (the office space given for use during the symposium) – at Salvetierra, Loreto, then to Lo Paz Mateos at Magdalena Bay on the pacific side of Baja. It took us two hours by road to reach the point where we got into a boat. We went on a boat (Panga) little larger a fishermen’s boat. They have a union and everyone has to use only the local fishermen’s boats on rotation. A fisherman can do two trips if possible a day for the whale watch.

Grey whales live in the seas of Alaska and Siberia. In the Fall, when the water begins to freeze, they begin their migration of more than 6,000 km to the coastline of Baja California Sur. Here they mate and give birth, a year later, in the warm waters, which is why they are considered to be 100% Mexican.
The whales give birth in the lagoons of Ojo de Liebre and San Ignacio as well as in Magdalena Bay. More than 900 whale calves are born every year. Unlike other species, when they detect observation boats, they come closer in order to interact with visitors.

Female adults can grow up to 17 meters long and can weigh up to 45 tons. Some live up to the age of 60. Generally, they give birth every two years to one calf which reach sexual maturity at the age of 8 or 9.

Like the grey whales, the friendly humpback whales, the other visitors to the Baja California Sur coastline, such as Cabo San Lucas, migrate to mate and give birth. The male whales emit shrieking cries, which were recorded on the Voyager space probe. The ‘humpback,’ the most acrobatic of all whales, was given this nickname because of the way it arches its back when plunging into the water. Despite being a protected species, it is still considered to be in danger of extinction.

The fin whale has found itself an ideal refuge in the Sea of Cortes where it is frequently spotted. The blue whale, the largest animal on our planet, measures around 26 meters long and weighs more than 129 tons. They are most frequently spotted in the area between Loreto and La Paz Bay.

Towards the end of winter the whales begin their return trip to the Polar Regions. The calves have learnt to swim but do not leave their mothers side. They are the last to leave. Despite the fact that the seas are home to one of the greatest and most diverse ecological systems in the world, the whales leave behind a void which makes the people of Baja realize that their own survival depends on them! Tourism is a thriving and lucrative industry here thanks to the migratory season of the whales.

In 1972, Mexico created its first grey whale sanctuary in the Ojo de Liebre lagoon in the State of Baja California Sur, which is now home to the largest number of grey whale natural reserves in the world.

We set off on our boat sailing through many mangroves and saw many birds enroute, after about 45 minutes on a choppy sea. Suddenly we stopped in line with a grounded fishing boat. I noticed the Captain of the boat was gazing at something in the water on his left. I was sitting on the bow of the boat, when I saw a spout and the blow-hole portion of the whale. It came as a shock to see one so near and looking around slowly we were pointing out to one here and another there. Two Whales were swimming around us at about 10 feet away.

Just then I saw a whale swim towards us. In the clear water its light grey body so much like a large fish did frighten me. They were there for some time and then we could not see them. After waiting for 5 minutes and turned back. I did not know Spanish to tell the boatman that I would like to spend some more time there. Anyway the silly guy after 15 minutes took us around the mangroves and sand dunes and asked us if we would like to walk on the dunes since we had 20
more minutes. It was a little sad not being able to spend more time with the whales. I felt like a little girl then, but then who cares.

Back to base we were in time for the Serri Indian Leatherback dance. The Serri Indians are the last indigenous people of BCS.

They live in Sonora Refugee on the North Eastern side of the Sea of Cortes. They welcome every leatherback turtle that comes to their beach by building a small thatch with herbs and even paint the turtle using herbal paints. Then they dance around it before releasing it into the ocean. They have formed the Grupo Tortuguero – Comcaac (people in their language) to protect the sea turtles and have stopped eating the turtles. That was great to hear from them.

J Nichols introduced me to Maiyra one of the Serri Indian girls saying that I was from India and was working with the Olive Ridleys. To my surprise, after a while the other Serri Indian girls came to me, looked at me and wanted to be photographed with them. I guess they thought I was from another Indian tribe.

In looks, these people resemble the people from North East India, with chinky eyes, straight black hair and are slim, but have a darker skin similar to mine.

They presented me all small cloth bags (2”X2”) filled with sand from all the nesting beaches and
herbs. I think I got the most number with four bags as gifts. I gave away what I had then, sticker bindhi’s to the girls, my dupattas to the older women and a shawl to their chief.

Dinner followed with Mexican Music for Grupo Tortuguero.

20th January

All the Grupo Tortuguero meetings were in Spanish but I tried to follow with the help of the pictures on the posters and presentations. That evening I helped at the registration desk. A Serri Indian Dance was held in the evening between 5 pm to 6 pm. At 7p.m. all volunteers met for along meeting at the volunteer house.

21st January

Just volunteered. Natalia told me that if I needed to extend my visa, I could approach the municipal office opposite our registration desk. She came along. At the information desk I was told to go to the immigration office. So I went to the Allianza office to ask for directions where I met this lovely lady ‘Marlis’ who immediately said, “It’s a long way. You could not go on your own. I will take you.” She asked what I wanted to do on my extension. I said I wanted to go to San Ignacio Lagoon for 2 days. We went to the immigration office and she told them in Spanish that since I was volunteering and attending the symposium, ten days was not enough. I needed four more days for whale watching at San Ignacio. The officer there looked me up and down and then took my passport. He went in and typed out something. Ten minutes later he came out, gave me my passport and said “Enjoy-10 days.”

Really that moment I could not believe my ears. It seemed like a miracle. Tears welled up in my eyes. I thanked Marlis who was also happy for me.
When I returned to the registration desk, Anne was happy too. She remarked, “So now you can go and look at the whales.”

‘Brad ’another participant from British Columbia, came at around 1p.m. and said that a fisher man would take them to Coronada Islands – Sea of Cortes. “Would I be interested in accompanying them?”
That afternoon I attended the workshop on Turtle rescue and impacts of long line hooks on turtles by Dr. Maria Luz from CRAM – Marine rescue center Barcelona, Spain. By the time I came back Lisa (Duke University) came to the volunteer’s house and carried all my luggage and shifted them to room 223 at Whales Inn on the shore of Sea of Cortes at Loreto Bay. Such beautiful, helpful and wonderful people everywhere.
Next we had group meeting with all indigenous communities working for conservation of sea turtles and their oceans. It was a wonderful learning experience as each one explained their work involving the conservation in their communities and how it was being received. There were all positive movements with some groups still trying hard to convince their communities steeped in culture and religious rituals involving turtle meat eating.

Dinner followed and I took the shuttle to ‘Whales Inn.’ That was another experience. I was dropped off on the road and had to walk to a building about 100 feet away over debris and pits. I walked through the back of a building because I remembered April Stevens telling Eli earlier that the office was in a white building. I walked into the white building. There was no one around. I noticed an opened grill door leading to a dining room. I walked in and asked aloud. “Any body here?” I got the rudest shock of my life. Two white and black dogs came barking at me. I froze wondering if I had walked into someone else’s house. I tried to pacify them with some talk, but they continued with their barking. Minutes passed. A man came out and said – “You have come very late. I am just leaving anyway come in.” Leading the dogs into another room, he gave me the keys and showed me the way to my room.
Well it was worth the shock, the view from the balcony, was picture perfect, overlooking the Sea of Cortez –Loreto Bay.

22nd January

Woke up by 6 – got ready and left in the 1st shuttle by 7.10 to meet Anne at the volunteer house. I reached by 7.25 and then we walked to the Marina, a 12 minutes walk by the small fishing wharf. There were gulls and pelicans. We waited for Brad and his family and friends to come. They came by 8.15. Then we left for Coronado Islands with the Slavador, the fisherman, who was nice. I kept asking him if we would see dolphins and Baleenas (meaning whales in Spanish). Wonderful experience! The sea was a deep blue and all around there were rocky cliffs and mountains.
We were on the way to Coronado Islands – we were surrounded on the other side by Carmen, Danzante, Monzerret and Santa Catalina Loreto Bay and other islands. Bahia de Loreto, National Park.
The cliffs were of different shapes due to the erosion of the waves over the years, taking me to the days of pirates and marooned voyagers. But these were only inhabited by vultures and ospreys (fish eating raptor). I spotted on top of a cliff a nest of an eagle with one chick in it.

We sailed under a protruding edge of a cliff, that reminded me of a Gorilla’s face and there was another looking like a turtle with a knap sac. After about 30 minutes, we came to a rocky island with Californian Sea lions. The males are recognized by a fur cap on their heads.

There were many females and young ones too. Some of them were swimming. Salvador turned the motor of the boat to neutral and standing still in the water, we watched them for some time. Then we turned around this small rocky island and went for about 100 meters.
And lo! Behold we saw **white sandy beaches and aquamarine water** all around. On reaching the shore I noticed that the sand was made up of several years of coral debris and shells. Causing the water to look aqua. We just sat there for some time all by ourselves, with only the sound of waves for company and some gulls and a stray pelican around. Here too there was no manmade structure. Really so wonderful! Shells of different shapes and sizes here will leave any visitor stunned.

On the return journey, I kept pestering Salvador “no Baleenas – no dolphins.” He said he would take us along a different route into an open sea. And we all searched the sea for any whale or dolphin. Celine noticed something and said ‘Look fluke and then I also noticed a fin, looking like a dorsal fin in black. Salvodar turned in that direction and in about 6 minutes we found ourselves surrounded by **20 Common Dolphins** – leaping swimming and playing.

That moment was so fascinating; I forgot to take a pic of them. Celine called me to the bow of the boat and Neil (Conservation Photographer from USA) and I leaned over the bow for the most spectacular scenes. I just could not believe it. There below our boat about 2 feet or so in the clear waters 4-5 dolphins were swimming fast ahead of us as if saying, “We are faster and ahead of you.” I could see their eyes. I forgot myself as I got lost in their midst. Then after about 15 minutes they just disappeared and came up a few feet away, and in about 10 minutes swam away as if to say bye go your way. We just sat in silence, the experience was so overwhelming. Curious, playful and trusting were these dolphins. That moment, there was nothing else for me to want or desire. I felt a kind of freedom, freedom from all wants. I am sure anyone who sees and experiences something like that will always love the dolphins and their environment.

How could they want to kill these in Japan – I could not understand. Just like they came to us and these animals also approach the Whaling ships unaware of their fate.

We came back and attended IOSEA meeting chaired by Dr Karen Arthur with presentations from Torres Straits, Fiji, Dr Jack Frasier’s and Dr Collin Limpus’s and then met everyone at the Social at Plaza Salvitierra. We missed the 9.45 shuttle so Chuy dropped Marissel and 2 other girls and me at Whales Inn.
23\textsuperscript{rd} January

Attended the Symposium, presented my poster at the Plaza Salvetierra and attended the Auction Night.

24\textsuperscript{th} January

At the symposium all the papers presented were very informative. I am learning, but the subject is very vast there is so much to learn and still there is so much unknown. The use of satellite telemetry in research has enabled people to learn and understand so much more about behavior, foraging and migration of turtles.

The presentation of Flipper fest 07 for the video presentation secession was at 8.10 pm. It was well received and many people wanted to know how Dr. Jane Goodall was involved with turtles and how she came for our program.

It was a good feeling. I distributed our DVD to 13 people who came up and wanted it as they were involved in outreach and school programs. More than 42 people met me and said they enjoyed it. I felt glad.
25th January

I missed the 8.10 shuttle and was wondering what to do standing on the road when Marlis (the Miracle lady) came by in her car and gave me a lift to the auditorium. Last day of the symposium was packed with detailed, scientific papers and gave us interesting insights into the foraging behavior, toxic levels in the eggs and body of the turtles, the knowledge obtained from satellite telemetry. All this makes me want to do a course in biology. By 4.30 p.m. the sessions were over and we dispersed for farewell banquet. Marlis came at 6.30 p.m. and picked me up and took me to her house. Her home is a work of art, it has her life and soul in it and everything was so well coordinated that it looked beautiful. Marlis and I went to the banquet by about 7p.m. The banquet was at The Inn at Loreto. All of us Turtlers were together and bidding farewell until the next year. Maybe we would meet in 2009 in Brisbane, Australia or in 2010 in India. Dr Kartik Shanker is the president elect for 2010.
26th January
Symposium on Freshwater Turtles and tortoises. 9 am-12.30 noon.
Peter Pitchards DVD was mind blowing, just great. I got a good insight on the different land tortoises and fresh water Turtles that were there in different parts of the world and how different groups do their study and conservation. Then I shifted to Maryjoy’s place – a nice neat rented house.

Maryjoy and Pete Marquez asked me to drive along with them to Los Angeles-wonderful friends I made—another miracle in Baja.
27th January
We left Loreto by 11.30 am reached Mulege – Bahia Conception by 1.30 and after lunch on the beach drove to Santa Rosalita – Tres Viregns (3 volcanoes) – San Ignacio town.

At San Ignacio we stayed at a place called ‘Casa Leree” runs by Juanita a heritage place. I bought a book ‘Whales ‘Touching the Mystery- by Dough Thompson with a foreword by Dr Jane Goodall.
In 1972 Mexico created its first Gray Whale Sanctuary in Ojo de Liebre and San Ignacio Lagoons and Guererro Negro. In 1988 **El Vizcaina Biosphere Reserve** was established and included the above lagoons. In 1993 UNESCO declared the lagoons as World Heritage along with the cave paintings in Sierra de San Francisco Mountain which date back to 7500 years and are located in this area. It comprises about 2.5 million hectares and is the largest biosphere Reserve in Mexico. It has 450 km of coastline, beaches, islands, and islets, lagoons, estuaries, deserts and mountains. Its bio diversity is widespread and is the home to many migratory bird species and of course the Gray Whales.

 MAP OF BAJA PENINSULA

28th January

We drove from ‘Casa Leree’ to Laguna San Ignacio on a dirt road through desert – for 1.5 hours and– after reaching the Lagoon area reached **Kuyima Camp** after15 minutes – the whale watching camp which is based 2.5 km from the main road when entering the Lagoon. It is a dirt road which passes 2 camps on the way – 1st Pachico’s, 2nd Antonio’s.

 We reached by 11 am. Carlos Sextos met us and gave us an orientation at the dinning hall, about the whales and the place.

 AT THE DINNING HALL WITH CARLOS
11 Cabanas (Palafito) are log cabins in which 2 people can sleep made of wood each cabin has a solar light which is switched on only by 7 pm. One toilet and bath rooms works on a solar heater. There is no electricity here. A windmill draws water from the ground to a small tank to heat water. An example of simple living exists here. And the whole place has only 5 people Carlos, chef – Paolo, 2 guides (Alda), Margarita and Corrine and one manager.

I just felt as if I was all alone amidst the sea, mountains (Santa Clara, San Francisco, San Martin) and birds, it was so calm. Total meditation – nothing else came to my mind. I walked along the beach.

We went whale watching by 11.45 and by 12.30 we reached the observation area in the whale reserve. A mother and her calf probably 1.5 months old was spouting near us.

We were going along slowly for 20 minutes then she slowly turned and with her calf came towards us. Then they went under our boat. The calf came near the boat and then its mother came very close to the boat. We touched them. It felt so soft, like a dolphin. She took us by surprise – so close – yet so gentle. Just curious to know who and what we were. She stayed close to us for about 20 minutes and then swam away. We noticed another whale far away and some dolphins (Bottle nose) and returned back to the shore. Another amazing experience. We saw 7 whales during that trip.
An experience which totally changes one. When I entered the Lagoon area I felt a kind of inner peace descending on me, calmness and I let go. After the experience with the whales and being in the ‘panga’ with the whales, dolphins and birds it was like being in heaven. These whales which were hunted to near extinction from 1857 till 1870 were called Devil Fish as they used to ‘spy hop’ look at the whaling boats and overturn the boats and whip people with their tails and flippers. It is believed that whalers used to first harpoon the calves as the calves are always swimming above the mother as it learns to breathe and swim – an intensive 3 month course on survival.

So it was easy to harpoon them and while the calf was struggling the mother would naturally come up making it convenient for the whalers to harpoon her as she tried her best to save her little one. It is believed that whales have a good memory. Some of them juveniles, have remembered this experience or at least have seen all this, when they were young until 1931 when whaling was totally banned in the world.

Post 1931, whales observed that people were no longer harming them more so after Pachico Mayoral’s encounter in 1972. The whole Gray whale scenario changed and Gray whales have shown us that they can forgive and forget. A lesson that all mankind should learn. The experience at Laguna San Ignacio has changed my life – I have spent hours with the sea and the whales – their gentleness and curiosity and the total trust they can have on us – the selfish, greedy and materialistic man. We have and are still exploiting the oceans the home to all these wonderful animals and they are gentle with us. I can never ever be nasty to another being – man or animals – never be nasty – live to the last moment of my breath for the betterment of the ocean and all its life forms. Try to speak and share my experience with them, to as many people as I can so that many could become more sensitive to nature as possible.

The population of grey whales has recovered and although it was removed from the list of endangered species in 1992, many specialists believe that it has lost the battle against its worst enemy whereas others
believe that their best friend will be saved. More and more people are engaging in whale ecotourism. In turn, humans seem to like whales which have helped to save the species. Watching its large head appear out the water and the fact that it allows itself to be stroked, like a friendly pet, is ….. An unforgettable experience!

“It is best that, when we sit and make decisions for the welfare of the people and for the benefit of the generations to come, that they may too enjoy the same things, animals and life that we are enjoying now. We are here now because our forefathers seven generations ago, were thinking and looking for us,” said chief Dren Hyons of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga.

I also met Sarah, Maile’s friend at the Lagoon who went whale watching with Jane Goodall to fund raise for the Cougars in the Bay area 4 years ago.

29th Jan 2008
We woke up by 5:30 am and saw the sunrise at the lagoon and then went for a walk.

SUNRISE

After a while I came across whale bones, sea grass and a short rock like formation near the high tide and noticed that it was formed by dried sea grass, shells and sand.

SEA GRASS

I had breakfast and left for whale watching by 9:10 am. We saw 2 mothers and calves and 2 whales far away all in the observation area. A nice feeling!
The sea was a bit rough and the calves were very small so the mothers did not come near.

We also saw many dolphins, and then we went into the mangroves and saw the birds and the red and yellow mangroves. It was a good learning experience.
We came back to the camp by 1:10, had a bath, lunch and again left for whale watching by 2.20 p.m. this time only Sarah, Maile and me. As soon as we reached the observation area we saw 2 mothers and calves. A little far away 2 more spouts appeared may be a mother and her calf. We waited they did not come near. The mother and calf were concentrating on learning to breathe and swim. After a while we saw another mother and calf. That day we counted 6 mothers and calf and 2 whales far away. The last mother and calf spent about 20 minutes around us but did not come near us to touch them; they were only staying 5 feet away. Any way I was very happy what ever they did it was fine I was happy to just be near them and see them. Sarah shared her knowledge of 7 years with me.

Came back by 5.30 p.m. and then I went to meet Pachico Mayoral, the first man to touch a friendly whale and change the attitude of people around.

I met him in his house around 6.20 p.m. and his son Jesus came over to translate for me. He spoke Spanish and Jesus translated the questions for me. Pachico Mayoral came to the Laguna San Ignacio in 1961 on a vacation to his family friend’s home. The beauty and the wealth of the ocean made him stay back and also the girl Carmen (the family friend’s daughter) who later became his wife. He started his life there as a fisherman. From 1968 he remembers seeing whales but only 4-6 times during a season. Then one day in 1972 his best friend Lewis and he were fishing in their small fishing panga not knowing that a whale was under their boat. After a while a mother spy hoped just next to him. At first he was
extremely frightened and nervous and remembered all the stories of this ‘Devil Fish.’ He sat there motionless and the whale kept swimming under and around his boat. Again they came up close to him watching him. His fear was less now as the whale had not tried to attack his boat. And he reached out and touched it. When it stayed still, he moved closer and stared stroking the whale. The whale seemed to enjoy it and his fears were dispelled too. His friend all this while was shaking in his knees with fear and did not try to touch the whale.

After about 20 minutes when the whale swam away, they put away their fishing gear and came back to the village. He was very happy, but no one believed his story that the whale could be so friendly. People only remembered the whales killing the whalers and thought these 2 men where hallucinating. Then in 1976 a similar incident happened to a group of people who had come from San Diego in a fleet ship named ‘Elsalado’ and the whale approached their inflatable boat and rubbed itself against the boat gently. They reported this incident to the community and only then did the villagers believe Pachico’s encounter with the whale. After this he started taking visitors to the lagoon in his boat to see the whales. His first client was Earl Brokelsbee and his family.

When I asked him what he had learnt from the whales he said that they had taught him “to respect animals and everything in general and realize that the world -earth is for everyone to share with all. It is hard to understand this, but he believes that we can interact with all animals and wildlife if you are patient”.

When I asked his son Jesus Mayoral what he had learnt form the whales, he said that he feels lucky to be alive at this moment of time (era) and he lives for nature and wants to be as good as his father. His brother Ranulfo Mayoral is a member of the Grupo Tortuguero and monitors with pride and precision the turtles coming to the lagoon in a log book.

Before I left their simple house with many dogs and cats (Playing with each other) Pachico told me”Being in the lagoon is like being a guest in the whale’s house- the experience changes ones heart”. This was his 40th season with the whales. I took his signature on his photo in the ‘Whales’ book. Truly a wonderful moment for me! I found it quite difficult to take leave.

30th January
I woke up early by 4.30 and spent time walking and sitting by the shore and feeling so blessed and thankful for this life. Then Sarah, Maile and I (ISTS) drove from the lagoon by 9.15 a.m. in their jeep to San Ignacio. We reached by 10.50 – Casa Leree and left there by 11.45 – with Pete and Maryjoy towards the USA boarder. We drove past many different landscapes
DESEART FLORA
I was in awe and wonder – desert – but so beautiful with those Majestic giant Cactus Cideos, Yakas, Succulents and elephant Trees.
Then by 3.40 we reached Bhaia Los Angeles on the “Sea of Cortes” side all lined up with trailers and caravans a different kind of a lifestyle – an unexplainable serenity – sheer beauty – then went to the Tortugas Marinas Rescue center and saw, green , loggerhead, hawksbill turtles.

Then we had dinner, stayed 30 meters from the shore in a neat little room.

31st January

Woke by 5.30 had shower and sat and watched sunrise – the last day on the Sea of Cortes.
I had a mixed feeling when I left, never to be able to see the Sea of Cortes again but just carry the miracles and continue. Tears rolled down my cheeks as we drove away from there.

We drove by tall giant cactus and desert landscapes (pic) in bloom since it had rained four days ago. It seems it never rains in January. Maybe it was for us (Turtlers) to see the desert in bloom – green springing out – small purple flowers blooming from the ground – and yellow poppies – covering the of barren land – Pristine beauty – we rarely saw anyone. Then we reached Catavina – then stopped by to see some cave paintings on the cliff’s above – scampered up – spent about 1 hour and saw the paintings by ancient people – may be the forefathers of the ‘Cocheimi Indian Tribe’ who were wiped out by the 18th century by the Spanish invaders and later by the Jesuit Fathers who brought diseases with them, like typhoid, malaria and influenza.

Then we drove to Oho de Libere just stopped by the sea and had lunch at Guerrero Negro Lagoon (Black warrior). The name of the whaling ship which ran a ground in late 18th century. ‘Guerrero Negro’ has vast expanses of salt flats like our salt pans in Chennai along the East Coast road.

Then we drove down past Scammons Lagoon (Named after Charles Scammons the Yankee Whaler who eliminated almost all the whales in the North Pacific – as he maintained a log book with details of all the whales his boats had butchered) from there we drove to San Quentin which was full of orchards, vegetable farms, cultivation everywhere, we had left the ocean behind. This is land mass area. And with more land (with drinking water), humans were more visible now with colonies everywhere. A heavy feeling filled me.

All these days the vast expanse of the mountain, sea and the whales had made the ‘I’ in me disappear – the sheer magnitude made me humble – may be... ‘I’ never existed all those days – now ‘I’ had returned, evaluating, disliking and making judgments once again.

Then we reached Tijuana and now I was fully aware we had reached the hub of all mankind --- life – sheer survival to life and carry on.
The stretch between Mexican and US border took 1.5 hours, it was already 5.15 pm and then the final check was fast just checking Pete’s drivers license and we drove by to San Diego to meet Daniel at Pro peninsula Office. Reached Pro Peninsula office by 6.30 pm and delivered all the Posters and stuff they had used for ISTS and left. Drove around the downtown harbour and then had lovely veg Thai dinner and reached the hotel – sponsored by Pete. A gracious person, hard to find! Slept well by 12 pm as the 3 of us spent some time talking – as it was time to part our ways.

1st February

We left San Diego – saw the amazing White Temple (Cathedral) Pete dropped me and Mary at the Airport – Maryjoy left for Calgary, Canada. I to Chennai India, Pete to Fresno C.A. Three different individuals brought together on a trip to heaven on earth by the forces of nature. Back home in Chennai on the 3rd 4 p.m. One can believe that Miracles do happen.