

DIVE LOG

ENCOUNTERS

Dancing With the Stars

Watching a seal or sea lion spiral toward you is one of diving's most playful encounters. Follow our lead around the world for five pinniped experiences ►► BY TERRY WARD

With probing eyes and a top-side awkwardness that gives way to mermaidlike movements underwater (hey, that sounds like a few divers we know!), pinnipeds offer one of the underwater world's most playful and mutually curious encounters. For divers looking to come mask-to-whiskers

with this family of marine mammals — which includes seals, sea lions and walruses — the planet's cooler, kelp-laden waters beckon.

📍 Sea of Cortez, Baja California

The largest reproductive sea lion colony in the Sea of Cortez — home to

some 400 sea lions — is in the group of small islands called Los Islotes. For divers and snorkelers alike, it's the most dependable place to get in the water with the animals year-round. But you'll encounter sea lions at plenty more locales along Baja's coastline too, including La Reina

(on the north end of Cerralvo Island and San Francisquito Island, home to a small sea lion colony. The animals are far from shy, often coming up to divers for a playful nip on their fins and snorkels. During spring's "pupping" season, big bulls guard their harem — if you see them barking or blowing bubbles at you underwater, it just means they're nonplussed. Snorkelers can get in the water with the animals during live-aboard trips too. "It's just as much fun — sometimes even more of a blast than scuba diving — because you're on the surface with them, free-diving down," says Jose Sanchez of the *Solmar V*. "They're doing spirals around you. It's really a blast."

► **When to Go** The sea lions hang out year-round at Los Islotes. Late May through October is the best time of year to dive with them. By July and August, the pups have grown a little and are more playful underwater.

► **Operators** The luxurious *Solmar V* (solmarv.com) operates from Cabo San Lucas and offers a Sea of Cortez and Baja Nature itinerary — the latter especially appeals to divers traveling with snorkelers, with three dives daily and more

topside activities like kayaking and whale-shark spotting using an ultralight plane.

► **Price Tag** *Solmar V*'s eight-day, seven-night Baja Nature itineraries, with six full days of diving (three dives per day), start at \$1,795 per person.

📍 Nanaimo, British Columbia

Whether you choose shore diving or day-boat diving, you'll enjoy encounters with seals and sea lions in the temperate waters off Nanaimo, Vancouver Island. For shore-based action, the shallow anemone-covered wall at Madrona Point is a good place to see seals, and there's a colony near Wall Beach too. "When they come around, just stay calm and move slowly," says instructor Shirley White of Nanaimo Dive Outfitters. "They often come right up to you and look closely or nibble at bits and pieces that stick out. They are like dogs in that they feel with their mouths, so they taste everything to see what it is like." Boat trips to Norris Rocks will put you in the water with sea lions, and snorkelers can even get in on the action with trips to Snake Island to swim with seals.

► **When to Go** Year-round. You'll come across sea lions in the most impressive numbers from November through March, when they return to their local breeding grounds.

► **Operators** Nanaimo Dive Outfitters (nanaimodiveoutfitters.ca) can arrange everything from guided shore dives and boat trips to snorkeling-only excursions and topside tours. Stay at the Buccaneer Inn (buccaneerinn.com), a family-run inn fronting the Newcastle Channel with suites with full kitchens and pull-out sofas, as well as a rinse room and dry rooms for stashing your gear.

► **Price Tag** Shore dives with a guide from Nanaimo Dive Outfitters cost \$49 per person (or \$74 if there are two of you), and full equipment packages including two tanks are \$61 per day. Boat dives are \$110 to Snake Island and \$125 to Norris Rocks. One-bedroom suites at the Buccaneer Inn cost between \$98 and \$147, depending on the season.

📍 Poor Knights Islands, New Zealand

Tolkien-esque landscapes might draw the masses to New Zealand's volcanoes and glacial valleys, but for divers, the Poor Knights Islands off the North Island's Tutukaka Coast are the pot of gold at the end of a country full of rainbows.



A harbor seal stops playing long enough to pose for a photo; (opposite) California sea lion pups frolic in a cave in Los Islotes, Mexico.

JON CORNFORTH; OPPOSITE: ALEX MUSTARD

During the southern hemisphere winter, scores of male New Zealand fur seals can be seen around Fruit Cake Rock at the northern end of Maroro Bay. “It’s a bachelor party!” quips Kate Malcolm of Dive! Tutukaka. Plan your dive for a warmer day, when they’re likely to ditch their heated-rock hangouts for the water. Add schooling blue maomao, snapper and lobsters — called crayfish in these parts — to the mix, and it’s Kiwi winter diving at its sweetest.

> **When to Go** The southern hemisphere’s winter months, June through October offer the best chance for seal encounters; avoid May, as plankton blooms can impact visibility. Water

temps dip into the lower 60s, but visibility can reach up to 100 feet.

> **Operators** Dive! Tutukaka (diving.co.nz), open year-round, and fronting the marina is a recognized National Geographic Dive Center and the best facility in the area, with top-notch gear and five boats moored steps from the shop. Stay at the harbor-front Oceans Resort Hotel (oceansresorthotel.co.nz) next door, with king-bed rooms or spacious apartment suites.

> **Price Tag** Dive! Tutukaka runs two-tank dives with full gear for around \$192. If you have your own gear, it’s \$115, with discounts for multi-day dives. Oceans Resort Hotel’s rates average around \$111 including breakfast for two, with winter rates dipping to \$76 per night.



California sea lions play in Monterey; (opposite) a New Zealand fur seal swims among the kelp off New Zealand’s Poor Knights Islands.

📍 Monterey, California

Divers in search of seals and sea lions hit the jackpot in the kelp-lined coves and islands carved into the Carmel coastline and the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. And sites off Point Lobos — the main birthing grounds for seals — are prime destinations to view the underwater antics. Juveniles born the previous year like to show off their swimming skills and get up close and personal with bemused divers around Whalers Cove (site of a former whaling station) inside the protected area of the Point Lobos State Reserve, where you’ll also likely spot sea otters. Your best bet for diving with California sea lions is around the Coast Guard pier at San Carlos Beach, known locally as the Breakwater. “There are so many sea lions there sometimes that you can’t hear yourself talk for all their barking,” says Bruce Sawyer of Aquarius Dive Shop, adding that the

animals sometimes snack on mola mola fins and can be seen “playing with them like Frisbees.” Sea lions and seals don’t tend to mix, and you’re most likely to see seals during shore dives at sites around Lovers Point and MacAbee Beach, while boat trips four miles or so offshore are more likely to deliver the sea lions.

> **When to Go** Year-round.

> **Operators** Aquarius Dive Shop (aquariusdivers.com). Stay at the Lone Oak Lodge (loneoaklodge.com), a dive-friendly hotel with rinse tanks, drying lines and rooms with fireplaces for warming numb limbs.

> **Price Tag** Full gear rental from Aquarius costs \$75 for the first day (with two tanks). Guided shore dives cost \$85 for single divers and \$75 per person for two or more. Several independent boat operators are in the area, and you’ll pay around \$90 for two-tank dives. The Lone Oak Lodge offers doubles from \$60 to \$120 per night, depending on the season.



Did You Know Having difficulty telling seals and sea lions apart? Sea lions have external ear flaps, bark more and are sleeker (though typically larger) than seals. Sea lions are also more nimble than seals on land, due to a larger front flipper and highly flexible hind flippers.

📍 Kangaroo Island, Australia

South Australia is a wild place, so it’s no surprise that Kangaroo Island is the Down Under destination for going tête-à-tête with pinnipeds while diving among some of Australia’s most prolific temperate-water gorgonian and sponge life. The go-to dive site for finning alongside Australian fur seals and New Zealand sea lions is Pissy Boy Rocks, a 20-minute boat ride from the island’s north coast. Dive guides encourage you to interact with the animals by copying their actions — show your belly to them and mimic their rolling motions, with your hands

open at your side. Shore dives don’t disappoint either, with leafy sea dragons.

> **When to Go** Year-round.

> **Operators** Kangaroo Island Dive & Adventures (kangarooislanddiveandadventures.com.au) claims a 100 percent success rate of spotting sea lions during north coast dives. Aurora Ozone Hotel (auroraresorts.com.au), on the foreshore in Kingscote, has standard rooms or apartments and a swimming pool, sauna and typical Aussie barbecue zone.

> **Price Tag** Two-tank boat dives to Pissy Boy Rocks run about \$313 per person. Rooms at the Aurora Ozone Hotel start at \$146 per night.

PHIL COLLA; OPPOSITE: JURGEN FREUND