



A gray whale is seen at Ojo de Liebre Lagoon.

'Pay off some debt'

Mexico is one of the few major tourist destinations not to have closed its borders during the pandemic or demanded a negative COVID-19 test result from visitors on arrival. As a result, it was the third-most visited country in the world in 2020. But it has still been a disastrous time for the tourism industry and whale-watching tour operators were among those hit by a suspension of non-essential activities for part of last year.

Thanks to a decrease in coronavirus infections, the government allowed the boats to go out 30 percent full at the start of this January-April season, which was later

increased to 50 percent. "We kept the jobs and we hope to come out of it, if not with a profit, then at least being able to pay off some debt," Luis Enrique Achoy, of whale watching company Malarrimo Eco-Tours, told AFP. He said that it had been a good season with around 1,500 to 1,700 whales spotted in the El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve.

'Little by little'

Fisherman and tour guide Naman Dominguez was one of those affected by the pandemic restrictions. "Right now, there's a maximum of six or seven people per boat



Whale watchers try to touch a gray whale.

due to social distancing," he said. "But everything's getting better little by little. As the level of infections has been low, tourism has been increasing." The gray whale's survival was once at risk after commercial whalers found them wintering along the Baja California peninsula in the mid-19th century.

But the population in the eastern North Pacific has since rebounded strongly and the gray whale is today ranked "least concern" on the list of threatened species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The eastern North Pacific is home to the only definitely surviving breeding population, with an estimated size of up

to around 27,000 gray whales, according to the IUCN.

And one of the best places to see them is in the lagoons off Baja California where they congregate in winter away from predators like killer whales, offering an unforgettable experience for visitors. "We could touch them and see the mother with her calf. The two of them were playing for a good while with us," said Mexican tourist Claudia Gaitan. — AFP

