



Whale Tales



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The bull escort keeps watch over mother, calf and me

There is a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean that are the jewels in a royal crown. The Kingdom of Tonga is where times begins as it straddles the international dateline. Tonga is an archipelago of 170 tropical islands scattered across 425 km of the South Pacific between Hawaii and New Zealand. Fewer than 37 of the islands are inhabited. There are four major island groups in Tonga. From South to North: Tongatapu, Ha'apai, Vava'u,



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A Tongan in a traditional fishing boat

Getting to Tonga can be a logistical challenge with connecting flights and baggage weight limits of 22 kg (not enough for laptop computer, topside photo gear, underwater photographic equipment, diving equipment, and if you have any room; clothing). After a long journey of 36 hours I still was not in

Tonga. By this time I was in a semi-zombie state with my body on auto pilot. After boarding a small prop plane for an hour flight to Vava'u airport I was met by a representative from the Paradise Hotel. A short taxi to the village then I procured some hot food and a much anticipated bed.



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1 A whale fluke





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A mother lets a young calf rest on her nose

and can grow to a length of 17 meters (51 feet) and weight up to 41 tons. Gestation period is 11 months and the calves gain approximately 1 kg per hour nursing from their mother.

My quest is the endangered humpback whale. Once an estimated 250,000 of the leviathans roamed earth's oceans. Today, after a century of whaling, fewer than 39,000 remain although their number is slowly growing.



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A whale breathes in through its blow hole

The word patience is an understatement when it pertains to whales. One can spend hours even days scanning the horizon, motor-ing around the Pacific Ocean in a very small boat, looking for the slightest hint of the illu-sive whale. A break in the crest of a wave or a spout in the distance, could it be a whale or is the hot sun playing tricks on your mind.



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A pectoral fin slaps the surface of the water



The weather gods are a factor in the equation: rain, wind and swell can make looking for these mighty leviathan more of a challenge. Sometimes we could not take the boat out for 3 to 4 days because of unfavorable weather. Whale watching is like a giant crap shoot; you don't know what the dice are going to roll. Sometimes the odds are in your favor and old King Neptune gives you his blessings.



Captain Ongo scanning for whales

We procured the boat services of Sailing Safaris in Vava'u run by Captain's Jon and Ongo, licensed whaler watching operator. They also operate The Mermaid Bar & Grill that is managed by their third partner Hollie. After a long day on the whale boat this place serves some great food.



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Mother follows her baby up for a breath

find the preverbal needle (a.k.a. whale) in the hay stack. Sometimes he can see the blow spouting like a tea kettle a half kilometer away or the dorsal fin just breaking the sea surface.

Capt. Ongo has an uncanny ability to

The water was dead flat, with no whale in sight. We cut the boat engine and you could hear the whale songs coming from the fathoms below. When I put my ear to the boat hull, the songs were amplified. I heard a low haunting sound like no other. He was calling for other whales to come and join him. The song's cadence slowed and we knew the whale was coming up for air. The nose broke the surface about 50 meters to



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A whale pokes its head out to look around





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A mother and calf cruising toward me

Whale-watching etiquette states once the whales are found you can not just jump into the water with them because the whales could be scared away. The whole searching process will have to start again. Humpback whales are wild creatures and there are several aspects which are taken into consideration. It might take up to 30 minutes till the whales are use to the boat, and if they are moving it might take all day. Once they are stopped or submerged we enter the water with as much stealth as is possible with cameras. Only after the Humpbacks are com-

our starboard side. Humpback are dubbed "singing whales" because the male sings during courtship routines. The low notes of their "song" can reach 185 decibels and can carry 100km through to open ocean.



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Whales perform "spy hopping" when they pop up to the surface and look around.

fortable with our presence do we swim close to them. They have a super sense of hearing and will spook very easily with unnecessary body movement. If the whales are spooked they will dive or swim off very fast.



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I have had a truly amazing experience. One afternoon we encountered

Barnacles and remoras are often found on the humpbacks





The baby whale puts on a show of its new acrobatic skills with breaches and rolls

a super sense of hearing and will spook very easily with unnecessary body movement. If the whales are spooked they will dive or swim off very fast.

I have had a truly amazing experience. One afternoon we encountered a new born calf (possibly only two weeks old) with its mother keeping a watchful eye. The calf was extremely inquisitive and playful around us; to our amusement it seemed a little awkward and uncoordinated. The calf started doing barrel rolls and then proceeded to splash the water with its long pectoral fins. Once we climbed back into the boat, the calf launched into doing an aerial display for us with about 15 breaches as a way of showing its new freedom. Not to be out done by her calf,



Takaji Ochi on whale lookout



The mother takes her turn to impress us





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The Tongan "School bus" brings the children home . No wasted space on this boat.

through the water, challenging one another by ramming and climbing on top of each other to establish dominance for breeding rights. During a heat run can be dangerous time to be in the water with whales. Sometimes two or three bull whales will pursue a female whale for several days engaging in elaborate mating rituals to win breeding right with that female.



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Four whales engaged in a heat run.

Two pigs talking over the plans for the BBQ.



I marveled at this unique opportunity to observe and swim with these magnificent humpback whales: an unforgettable experience. Tonga has its own special magic where one loses their sense of time. Malo' Aupito



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