

Galapagos Orca Encounter

by Ron Watkins

As I sat poised on the edge of the small inflatable panga anxiously waiting to slip into the ocean, one of my buddies Albert nervously asked, “Is it safe to go in the water with them?” This was the first time I consciously thought about the safety of entering the waters of Darwin Island in the Galapagos with these apex predators, or killer whales (Orcinus orca). I wasn’t sure exactly how to respond to Albert and the others looking at me for affirmation.

Up to this point, we had been cruising around in the pangas watching the orcas from a distance swim near the island and out around the fifty-one foot tall lava structure known as Darwin’s Arch. Then the transient pod of one male, three females and one calf took an interest in us and came in for a closer look. The orcas swam directly under the panga, surfacing within arms’ reach and then slowly circled the small boat. Next to our amazement, there were two spectacular gravity defying tail slaps where the rear half of the orca came completely out of the water before crashing to the surface with a big splash. The pod disappeared for several minutes and we thought the show was over before the large male

surfaced in the distance and thrashed about with a large sea turtle in its mouth. We discussed whether it was just a play toy or a meal, but after we observed an oily slick near where the orca had surfaced, we guessed it was the latter.

Despite having up to four inch teeth and often being referred to as “killer whales,” these marine mammals are actually the largest of the oceanic dolphin family. They may have gotten their deceptively dangerous name from a mistranslation of their Spanish name “asesina de ballenas”, which literally means “killer of whales” because they often feast on whales. A more fitting misinterpretation is the one of Albert’s grandma. In Chinese, killer whales are actually referred to as tiger whales. Albert’s grandma said to him, “Why you call them tiger whales? They look like panda. Why not just call them panda whales?” If I had heard that translation before the trip, it would have made my response to Albert about the safety of entering the water with the orcas much easier. After all, who wouldn’t want to swim with cute playful “panda” whales?

As the trip leader of the fifteen guests cruising the Galapagos, I



carefully thought about my response to Albert because I had no experience in the water with these large mammals. I turned to the group and said, “I am not 100% certain that this is safe, but the pod has been very social around the boat and showing no signs of aggression towards us. There has never been a recorded fatal attack on a human by an orca in the wild and this is an extremely rare opportunity. Each of you have to make your own decision of whether or not to go in, but I cannot live with the regret of not trying.” Soon afterwards, I quietly slipped in the water alone as the others looked on in disbelief from the security of the panga.

The pod of five graceful orcas was a short distance in front of me and slowly approached my position. I took a test shot with my camera, looked at the histograms and made a few minor adjustments. I then looked up to see the large male quickly closing in on me as if to protect the other three females and calf from this strange creature and make sure that I was not a threat. He came within eight to ten feet of me and slowly changed course to pass just below me as I turned around and started swimming until I could no longer keep up. With a rush of adrenaline, I popped up and swam toward the boat and quickly handed up my camera. Immediately the group started asking if the whales were aggressive and what it was like, but with my eyes wide-open and evident state of euphoria, I think they already knew the answer. As I explained the thrill of the interaction, I hit the display on my camera and quickly showed them a few images I had captured and they let out screams of excitement as they each slipped on their fins and masks. Evidently, the fear of a photographer missing a rare photo opportunity is much greater than the fear of getting in the water with one of the world's most



powerful predators.

On the second drop in with the orcas, a few others nervously joined me. This time, one of the females with the calf in tow headed straight towards me and the male was nowhere to be seen. From my shark diving experiences I know you have to keep your head on a swivel because it is not the one that you see that you have to worry about, but rather the one you don't. Orcas are also known as the ‘Wolves of the Sea’ because of their highly sophisticated and cooperative hunting techniques so I was a little

concerned, but quickly shifted my focus to the two approaching orcas. To my surprise, the mature female veered to the left of me and allowed the calf to swim below her and surface a short distance directly in front of me, which appeared to be a sign of trust. I turned and swam with the pair for a bit until they dove deeper.

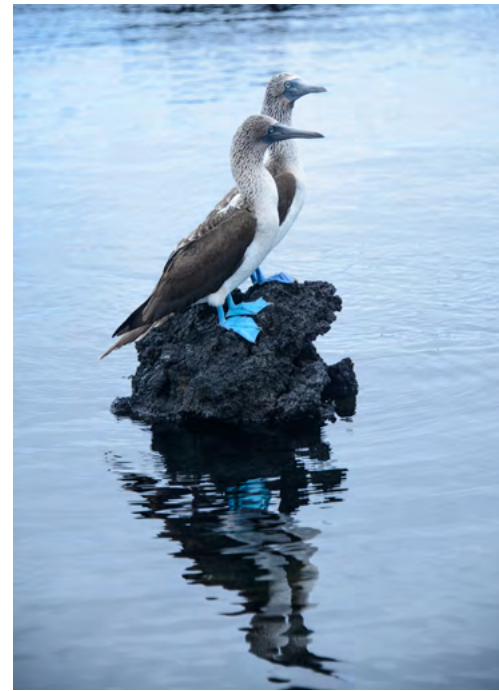
After the second pass, more people started to enter the water and eventually everyone on the trip joined in the fun. Over a period of forty minutes, the playful pod of killer whales interacted with us



in the clear warm water while we took pictures and video, but they eventually grew tired of us and moved on. As we all surfaced and got back in the pangas with smiles on our faces, I realized that we were sharing something special that few people will ever experience in nature.

After our rare interaction with the orcas, we were all as giddy as school kids and couldn't stop talking about what each of us had experienced and just how fortunate we were to see orcas in the wild – the way they are supposed to be seen. We all came to the Galapagos to experience the raw beauty of nature, but none of us expected an interaction of a

lifetime. For the next several nights, the workshop photo reviews were full of orca pictures and videos and some people became very emotional when reflecting on what it meant to them. For me, it truly was a new high point in my aquatic life and I feel extremely lucky that the orcas allowed us to interact with them. But most of all, it was being able to share this chance encounter with fifteen people from various walks of life who now share an everlasting bond. I will never forget how terrific I felt when Albert approached me and confided: "It has been twenty-two years of diving for me and it is the first time I have spotted wild orcas. If you didn't jump



into the water, I would not have done so myself alone. We may be the first Taiwanese divers to ever swim with orcas. Thank you, so much. Great to share this experience with you."

A trip to the Galapagos Marine Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site is a "bucket list" trip. It is one of the most unique ecosystems in the world and provides rich bio-diversity both above and below the surface. The scuba diving is unparalleled with schooling hammerheads, Galapagos sharks, mola molas, sea lions, turtles and large schools of fish.

Our group spent much



of our non-diving time on exciting land excursions and rides along the coastline observing blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, marine iguanas, penguins and the giant Galapagos tortoise. It seemed like every day of our ten day trip introduced us to a new and exciting animal behavior. Although we all seemed to enjoy every new interaction with the same fervor, I believe everyone's most memorable and exhilarating wildlife encounter was during those forty magical moments we spent swimming with wild orcas.

Ron Watkins
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