

Swimming with Giants

by Scott Portelli



There are few words to describe the exhilaration of swimming with a Humpback whale. And, as with many travel adventures it can be hard to share the emotion of the experience. But, for anyone who is looking for the adventure of a lifetime, not to mention the unique photographic opportunities, you cannot surpass the experience of interacting with these awe inspiring creatures. Oh, and no! The whales aren't going to eat you.

In August last year I had the opportunity to swim with Humpback whales in the tropical islands of Vava'u, Tonga. Each year between August and October Humpback whales migrate north from Antarctica to warmer waters to give birth. The islands of Vava'u provide

sheltered waters for the females to nurture their young through the first stages of their life.

Each morning we would embark on our search around the islands for cooperative whales. Once we spotted whales, we would take the boat to within 100 metres from the whales to remain unobtrusive. Practicing a minimal impact encounter policy, four people would slowly enter the water at any one time and swim in the direction of the whales. As we swam closer we would slow down our approach and just gently swim as a group trying to stay together so the whale would not feel surrounded or threatened. The mother would usually be hovering just below the surface while the calf would enthusiastically swim up to the surface entertaining us with its

Nikonos V 35mm lens. Natural Light.
Provia 100f . f8 1/125

curious activity and playful antics. We could be in the water for 5 minutes or 25 minutes, depending on how comfortable the whales felt with us and how willing they were to interact.

There is no doubt these creatures are intelligent, which usually sounds like a cliché that some conservationist or researcher might spout, but you can observe these remarkable creatures analysing us little humans each time we entered the water, they really had their own unique personality. Without sounding too Zen, when they look at you it is like they see or feel what you are thinking. I looked into the calf's eyes each



Minolta 7xi. 100 - 300mm lens. Natural Light. Kodak Elite 100 f11. 1/150th

Nikonos V 35mm lens. Natural Light. Provia 100f . f8 1/125

time he swam up to me and I knew he was looking back at me in the same absorbing way. These newborn calves are so inquisitive around swimmers that I was in awe of their presence, and treated every experience like it was my first.

The willingness of these mammals to interact with us made photo opportunities plentiful, and conditions were quite ideal on most occasions. 30 metre-plus visibility, an overcast sky providing just the right amount of diffused light to eliminate harsh shadows, and enough swim time with the whales to adjust camera equipment and assess the right type of wide angle lens to use. You don't realise how incredibly massive these creatures are and how close you actually get, so choosing the optimal lens is important. The water is a



comfortable 25 degrees Celsius and also reflects the air temperature, so you can be comfortable in the water all day with a 3mm wetsuit, plus it allows for better manoeuvrability. The hardest decision you will have to make is

whether you spend more time photographing a frolicking calf or the awesome presence of the adult.

The first encounter I had with a humpback mother and calf was so exhilarating that it literally took my breath away. As



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we made our approach towards the whales a sense of awe came over me as we saw a large patch of white materialise from this vibrant blue abyss, into the massive outline of a whale. The sheer magnitude of the situation I was in was indescribable, I had a 25 tonne humpback whale directly below me, and I was inadvertently drifting above this colossal creature. Our first encounter was brief and for me unforgettable, as the mother decided she was going to move she started to ascend and all I could think was, that I was about to be on top of a whale and there was nothing I could do. But what was amazing was how aware they are of your presence and how gracefully she manoeuvred beneath me. As she moved forward and broke the surface of the water, I gently felt the wake of her powerful tail. I managed



to shoot a roll of 36 exposures in less than 5 minutes. I was hoping this would be an indication of encounters to come.

During our trip we were lucky enough to stumble across the same mother and calf on several occasions, and we noticed the excessive amount of

remoras attached to the mother. So we nicknamed our whales, (Yes we all thought of them as our whales because we had developed an attachment to them) Solomon and Remora a play on the biblical characters Sodom and Gomorrah, however with more positive connotations



experience with the whales was always unique, but starting to feel familiar. But just when you think you had done it all, physically touching a whale's tail was something that kept me wanting more. The adrenals started pumping and once I was back on the boat I couldn't help but openly express my experience, it was amazing, I was loud and boisterous, and unfortunately caught on video.

Tonga is a photographer's paradise, and in addition to the encounters with whales, you are in a tropical paradise surrounded by coral reefs, a plethora of marine life, the people are so friendly and hospitable, and the food is amazing. There is much more to explore and it is definitely a place I will go back to as often as I can.

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of course. After encountering this mother and calf over the period of a week we started to see distinct recognition from the whales whenever we were in the water with them.

We developed a theory, that the whales might respond to a red wetsuit we had on board and we convinced one of the girls, Deb, to give it ago. It wasn't long before Solomon took a liking to the suit, or possibly to Deb. My new philosophy after this was that if I wanted a close

encounter with the calf I should stick by Deb's side. As the calf really liked to come close and investigate, close enough that he allowed us to reach out our hands ever so cautiously, and the whale did the most amazing unexpected thing, he turned and slid his stomach and tail along our hands, it was one of the most remarkable things I have ever experienced. By this stage, it was about a week into the trip and because we had been lucky to encounter whales regularly, the

All international flights to Tonga fly via Auckland, New Zealand; Nadi Fiji; Apia, Samoa, or Sydney Australia. The airlines are Polynesian Airlines and Air Pacific who are members of the One World group and Air New Zealand who is a member of the Star Alliance group. You can also fly Royal Tongan Airlines daily out of Auckland and every Thursday & Monday out of Sydney, Australia. After arriving in Tonga (Tongatapu) you will need to get a 1.5 hour domestic flight to the island of Vava'u to join the WhaleSwim Adventure expeditions.

The operation follows strict guidelines and the whales are never in distress. The tour operator Rae Gill is a conservationist and plays a pivotal role in educating the community about the importance of protecting these valuable resources. WhaleSwim Adventures is committed to whale conservation and fully supports the non-harassment policies of the Whale watching Guidelines in place in Tonga. They also support the implementation of the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary and of course, a World Whale Sanctuary.

Email: tours@whaleswim.com
website: www.whaleswim.com

Modesty Blaze

The Macro Sized Flashgun with Wide Angle Ambitions



This is the Inon T Flash.

Don't be deceived by its compact dimensions. Its guide number of 22m at 100 ISO equals many popular mid size strobes and its 100 degree coverage exceeds most unless you add a light sapping diffuser.

The T Flash is four way compatible to work flawlessly with a range of film and digital systems. It offers TTL dedication with the Nikonos V and RS, and most 35mm Nikon and Canon Autofocus SLR housings.

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can depend on the built in "TTL" sensor for fuss free perfectly balanced images.

For aiming your strobe at night, checking the colour of your subject or macro photography take advantage of the Ts built in modelling light. It's linked to the shutter release on most cameras to come on just as you need it. For distance shots in clear bright conditions use the laser to confirm proper strobe placement.

With all these benefits you'd expect a thumping big price tag. You'd be surprised. This outrageously specced flashgun is priced as modestly as it is sized.

The Inon T Flash. From Ocean Optics.

See UWP 11 for Mark Webster's in depth review www.uwpmag.com



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