

Tonga's Gentle Giants

by Nigel Marsh

Humpback whales can be viewed at many places around the globe, but one of the best places to swim with these gentle giants is the warm blue waters of Tonga in the South Pacific. I have wanted to visit Tonga for many years to photograph these graceful and majestic animals and this year I finally fulfilled that dream.

Humpback whale swims are conducted at several locations throughout Tonga, with the island group of Vava'u considered to be the best. Covering an area of 115 square kilometres, the 34 limestone islands of Vava'u have the most sheltered and clearest waters of Tonga, and the most whales. The area also has the most licensed whale swim operators, around twenty. For my recent trip I went with one of the most experienced operators, Swimming with Gentle Giants which is owned by award-winning Aussie photographer Scott Portelli.

Scott has been running these hugely popular trips for over 20 years. One of the benefits of going with Scott is the small group sizes, so more whale swims, and all groups are led by an experienced underwater photographer that can help you to get the best photos and videos of your experience. Most trips also have a marine biologist on board, so they can answer every question you have about the whales.

Arriving in the capital of Vava'u, Neiafu, our group of eight were split into two for our accommodation and whale swims. Our accommodation was in rented houses that overlook the lovely blue waters of the Neiafu harbour, where



A close encounter with a curious calf - 1/200, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and natural light

I enjoyed several nice snorkels and shot some interesting subjects with my macro lens, including mantis shrimps, gobies and a sea snake.

Leading our groups were award-winning Scottish photographer Grant Thomas, who has been leading trips in Tonga since 2017, and Aussie couple Nush Freedman and Andre Rerekura, who recently produced and starred in the series Shipwreck Hunters Australia for Disney Plus. Over dinner Grant explained the rules and regulations and how things

work in Tonga.

For our week of whale swims, we were going to be using two boats with local skippers and whale guides. For each swim the guide is only allowed in the water with four guests at a time. At all times you follow the instructions of the guide and skipper, they tell you when to get in, when to get out and when to move back, if you get a little too close to a whale. Grant also explained that the operators share whales and with each operator allowed two



The calm waters of Neiafu Harbour - 1/800, f14, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with 18-300mm lens

boats, there are a lot of eyes looking for whales.

Grant also shared some photo tips, saying a fisheye lens is best avoided, as only occasionally will a whale swim close enough to use it. He recommended a 16-35mm for a full frame camera or a 10-20mm for a crop camera. I was planning to use my Tokina 10-17mm with my Nikon D500, and keep it at 17mm for most shots. For natural light photography with subjects like whales, I set the camera to aperture priority, the f-stop to f8 and the ISO to 200 and let the camera select a shutter speed. But as

most cameras tend to over-expose on natural light, I set the exposure to -2.

The next morning, we boarded our boat, via the wharf in front our accommodation, and met our local crew, skipper Villy and guide Lucky. Departing at 7am, we had seven hours to swim with whales before we had to be back in the harbour. Twenty minutes after departing we spotted our first whales, a mother, calf and escort. However, they were on the move and another couple of boats were with them. We finally got our first swim about an hour later, when we were invited to share a different



Our whale swim boat 'No Bananas' - 1/4000, f8, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens

mother, calf and escort.

Lucky slipped into the water and swam about 50m away, he then raised his arm and Villy told us to enter the water, quietly. We swam over to Lucky and he pointed down. Below us, about 20m deep, I could see two large dark shapes, resting adult humpback whales. Grant explained that the mums often rest, sometimes at depth like this and other times on the surface. But where was the calf? Then I saw it, the calf had been under mum, maybe getting milk, and was now heading to the surface for a breath.

This was quite a large calf, maybe

5m long, and it was a magical sight to see it rising to the surface. It took three breaths, then circled around to get a close look at us before it dived to return to mum. We then gazed back into the blue. Only a few minutes later the calf came back to the surface for another breath. While adult humpbacks can hold their breath for up to one hour, calves can only go for five to seven minutes before they need air.

After its first breath the calf turned towards me and swam within one metre of me. I could see it looking at me, wondering what I was, before it

returned to mum. The calf repeated this behaviour another three times, getting air, checking us out and then returning to mum. However, on its last descent something interesting happened, this time it went to the escort. Grant explained that the escorts in Vava'u are normally males, that are hoping to mate or show they are a worthy father, and calves never go close to these males. He concluded this escort was another female.

As we watched, the calf played around the escort, then they all started to move, heading towards the surface. We finned like mad trying to keep up, but the whales were just too quick. I watched them take a breath at the surface and then the escort slapped its tail and they were gone. After spending twenty amazing minutes with these whales it was time to move on so another boat could have a turn. Villy then informed us there was another mother and calf nearby that was all ours.

We followed this mother and calf slowly for over an hour as they cruised around an island. The calf breached several times, while mum rolled on her back, slapped her tail and waved her pectoral fins around. We were hoping they would wear themselves out and eventually stop for a rest. And finally, they did.

Over the next ninety minutes we had five swims with this pair, with the encounters varying from five to twenty minutes. For the first few swims the mother rested in deeper water, but we could still clearly see her in the brilliant 30m visibility. The calf was a little shy at first, not wanting anything to do with us, but as her confidence grew she got closer and closer. The mother was anything but shy, as she rose from the depths she would take her time, allow us to get close to see her eye inspecting us.

For the last few swims with this pair the mother



A cute calf at close quarters - 1/200, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and natural light

led us into shallow water, allowing us to see the bottom as she rested 10m below. It was a magical encounter with this pair, and it was sad to see them leave, but it was time for a late lunch and a visit to Mariner Cave.

With the islands of Vava'u made of limestone it is no surprise that there are many caves in the area, and we explored a number of them during our stay. Mariner Cave has an underwater entry, only a short swim, then opens into a large cave with stalactites.

Outside the cave a coral wall drops to 30m and is home to numerous reef fish.

After a spectacular day of whale swims we headed home, exhausted and exhilarated.

Before heading to Tonga I had worked up a list of things I hoped to see and photograph, calves being top of that list. The other two things were a singer and a heat run. Day two crossed off one of those things straight away, when we found a singer just outside the harbour.



A mother humpback playing at the surface - 1/640, f13, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with 18-300mm lens

Only the male humpback whales sing, and they all sing the same song. However, finding a singer is no easy task. We saw the whale descend, and his singing was so loud you could hear it in the boat, but it took our guide several attempts to find him. With the singer finally located we entered the water.

His loud chorus of moans, grunts and squeals vibrated through my body as we swam towards him. Looking down all I could see was a tail. He was head down, tail up, with his head close to the bottom. We stayed with this singer for over an hour and

relocated with him twice when he moved. During the week we saw two other singers, including one that had a silent friend hovering with him.

Each day we also had more mother and calf interactions. These always varied. We had one mother that was logging, resting on the surface with her calf tucked under her chin. Mostly we had a mother and calf with a male escort, which were generally brief encounters as the males always wanted to move, not allowing the mother to rest for long. One randy male was constantly nudging the female and at one point



Mother and calf in the blue waters of Vava'u - 1/400, f8, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and natural light

even his penis popped out!

Each day we had swims with at least two groups of whales. Some days we were with a group straight away, other days it took several hours before our first swim.

On day four we finally found a heat run, well a mini heat run. When a group of males chase a female, whether she has a calf or not, it is known as a heat run. A dozen or more males can be involved in the chase and are known to fight each other to show who is the strongest. Our mini heat run only involved two males chasing a mother and calf.

This was an action-packed experience, as it involves being dropped ahead of the travelling whales. On our first drop the whales swam below us, the mother and calf in the lead with the two males following. The second time we dropped in well ahead of them, and this time I free-dived to 8m to await their arrival. After a minute of waiting I was suddenly joined by one of the males, who waved at me with his pectoral fin. As I headed for the surface the other whales came gliding pass.

The finally drop was very exciting, as the whales were all on the surface



A mother humpback rises to the surface - 1/500, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and natural light

heading straight for us. Our group scrambled to get out of the way, but before we could move the whales all dived and went straight under us.

For almost all of my images I was shooting from the hip, simply pushing the housing in front of me and snapping away. I didn't want to be seeing this amazing experience through the viewfinder. At times my framing was a little off, and I ruined a few spectacular images with this technique. However, this is an experience that you want to enjoy first hand, and you also need to know how close you are at all times, as I almost

got smacked by a tail twice!

I had an incredible week in Vava'u, snorkelling with the wonderful humpback whales of Tonga. The experience left me with memories that will last a lifetime, but I don't think it will be a once in a lifetime experience, as even now I am thinking of a return to swim with these gentle giants.

Nigel Marsh

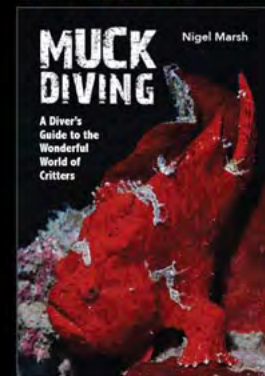
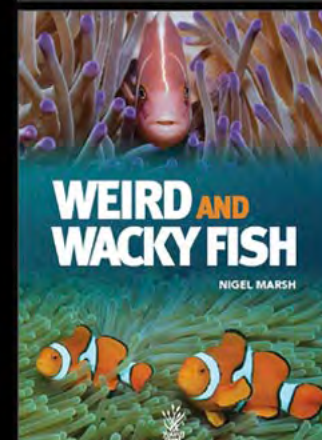
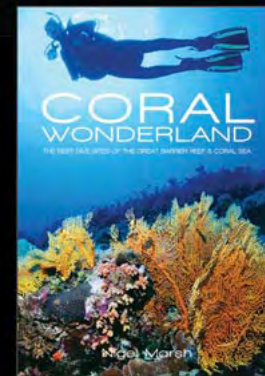
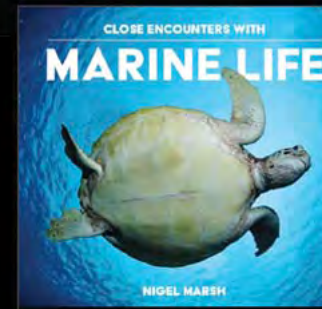
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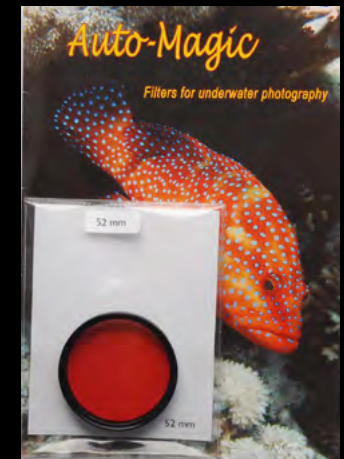
Nigel Marsh is an Australian photojournalist, underwater photographer and author. Working with New Holland publishers, Nigel has produced a number of guide books for divers and snorkelers, and also a series of children's books with marine related themes.



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