

Photographing humpbacks: A Personal Perspective

By Tanya G. Burnett and Kevin Palmer

Few experiences can rival the ineffable impact of being in the water with an air breathing creature that is about 500 times your size and weight. A cetacean that can look you in the eye and choose to either hang out or glide away has a lasting effect on many people. But where is the best place to go and what is the gear you really need to capture that moment?

In the last several years, many traveling photographers have flocked to the famous locations where humpbacks congregate to mate and calf. People naturally want the latest and greatest places that allow an in-water experience with these mammals, often exotic locales like northern Tonga and the island of Moorea in French Polynesia.

The siren's call of 130' visibility and a verdant South Pacific backdrop is certainly understandable! But after experiencing many locations around the world and how they operate, we have concluded that the location in our North Atlantic backyard on the Silver Bank, Dominican Republic, probably offers the best humpback

whale encounters for most people, most of the time.

The problem with many in-water whale encounter locations is a lack of regulation that leads to an excessive number of boats and people pursuing a limited number of whales. This often generates disappointing encounters as you and forty of your not-so-close friends swim like mad before the whale decides they have had enough.

The other factor in these South Pacific locations is just how often the weather is quite snotty during the South Pacific winter which is when the humpbacks show up. These locations can get quite rough and in an effort for boats to find calmer conditions, it usually means giving up that nice visibility.

The Silver Bank on the other hand, tends to be pretty consistent in condition and in the number of people that visit. It is an open ocean environment that can make for a

Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, 8-15mm lens at 15. 1/200th@F8. 320 ISO. Available light



Nikon D7000, 28-300mm lens at 85mm. 1/250th @ F6.3. ISO 500





Nikon D300, 70-200mm lens at 120mm. 1/500th@F7.1. ISO 200

potentially rough crossing to get there, but with a fairly protected anchorage once on the bank and some additional reef barrier to mitigate swells when the wind picks up.

Most importantly, the thing that sets the Silver Bank apart is that the Dominican government has restricted access to only 3 permits. That means there are a maximum of three liveboards on the Bank at any given time with hundreds, and at times thousands, of humpbacks coming and going in this quite expansive sanctuary. It is considered the largest aggregation of whales in the world.

Regardless of which location you may choose, what are the most

important things we can do for greater success with our video and photography when swimming with whales?

The thing that most people underestimate in importance is the quality and experience of the guide on your tender. One of the greatest improvements in experiencing humpback whales in the water over the last 30 plus years, is the fact that high-quality guides have learned a huge amount about “reading” whale behaviors and personality.

When we first went on a humpback whale trip in the mid-1990s, the guide’s experience was iffy at best. Most of our encounters



Nikon D7200, 28-300mm lens at 108mm. 1/400th @ F6.3. 640 ISO

involved leaping in front of oncoming whales in the hopes of getting a passing glimpse of humpbacks lasting mere seconds. This amounted to just a handful of lucky shots after a week of trying.

Today, experienced guides know just the kind of whale behavior that might provide a good encounter and when the opportunity arises, encounters can run from a minute or two up to an hour or longer with a very calm whale. Now a trip can produce dozens, or even hundreds of interesting whale photographs for your efforts.

Obviously, equipment plays an

important role in an image maker’s success rate, but that does not mean whale photography or video is particularly difficult. Actually, it is just the opposite.

Since it is mostly ambient light imaging near the surface, whale photography is some of the easiest nature photography there is – even for beginners. We have seen guests shooting their smart phone in a \$200 waterproof housing produce some awesome whale footage. Olympus TG-6 shooters with a wide angle wet lens shooting in program mode can do pretty great (a little negative exposure compensation helps). And of



Nikon D800, Nauticam housing, Tokina 10-17mm at 16mm. 1/200th @ F6.3. 250 ISO. Available light.

course, modern DSLR and mirrorless cameras, when set up correctly, can produce the kind of spectacular results we expect of them.

For those looking for the best lens for their interchangeable lens camera, we usually find this will be somewhat dependent on the type of person and swimmer you are. If you tend to hang back a little and are a bit uncomfortable getting too close, you might want a lens that has about 95-to-105-degree angle of coverage. This would be about a 16-18mm lens on a full frame camera, or about 10-

12mm lens on an APS-C camera. That should give you some reach to frame a very large subject.

If you tend to be a little closer to the action, the newer range of water contact optics that have come out in recent years that can offer up to 130 or 140 degrees of coverage are a great solution and one of our favorite options for whales. Less water between you and the subject makes for sharper results if the whale is very cooperative.

Some of these optics also have some distortion correction built in. Some shooters have great



Nikon D500, 28-300mm lens at 200mm. 1/250th @ F6.3. 200 ISO

success with fisheye lenses (up to 180-degree diagonal FOV), but the biggest concern with shooting these is the amount of distortion right at the surface of the water which tends to make the ocean's surface appear quite curved. One trick to help with this is to learn to shoot the fisheye while holding the camera down near your waist which can reduce the surface distortion a bit.

Another option is to wear a weight belt balanced so that while floating at the surface, one can exhale and just sink a foot or two below sea-level to reduce the distortion while still looking through the viewfinder or monitor. Both techniques are good habits when seas get a bit choppy as well to avoid micro-bubbles near the surface that can reduce visibility.

The biggest challenges are often the ones that can't generally be controlled. Of course, first on that list are the whales themselves. That is where the guides come in and can hopefully find the cooperative and relaxed ones over the course of the day. Secondly is the understanding that swimmers

are generally dropped down-wind of the whale. This is so snorkelers on the surface will not be inadvertently blown into the whale – which would possibly be a bad situation. But that also means that you can't always control which direction the sun is shining in relationship to the whale. So, you may well have to shoot towards the sun sometimes, which is less than ideal. Your best hope in that situation is trying to make the most of a somewhat silhouetted whale, perhaps shooting high shutter speeds to capture some crispy sun rays while waiting for a better position.

Just because you are on a quest to find personable whales on the daily tender expeditions, it doesn't mean there is not plenty of activity going on at the surface. On the Silver Banks, lots of impressive breaching, tail lobbs, and "spy-hops" are commonly seen – often at a distance, but occasional breaches very close to the vessel are breathtaking in their power and mass.

Having a surface camera or the ability to shoot your housed camera topside is a must for these daily adventures.

Another often spectacular behavior to witness is a whale "heat run". This is when anywhere from a few males to over a dozen are in pursuit of a single female who may or may not have an escort. These can be quite aggressive (towards each other,



Nikon D850. Nauticam housing. 28-70mm lens with Nauticam WACP. 1/20th @ F7.1. 260 ISO. Available light.

not towards the boats) and involve the wild activity of males trying to outdo each other; frequently launching out of the water. You definitely do not want to be in the water with this fast-moving crowd of rowdies, but depending on your tender, you can sometimes hold your camera over

the side and beneath the water as the tender runs beside the group to capture what can be many whales in a single shot.

Serious photographers would do well to consider bringing a pole cam for such a purpose as holding a rig beneath the surface with a rapidly

moving tender will make you feel like you just spent a few hours at the gym! A lighter weight option for video in this situation is a GoPro or similar action camera on an adjustable pole mount. In the often-bright conditions, even these small sensor cameras can perform quite well.



Nikon D7200, Nauticam housing, 8-16mm lens at 8mm. 1/60th @ F8. 400 ISO. Available light.

Snorkeling with these magnificent whales is understandably on many folks' bucket list – whether acted upon or not. And doing it more than once always brings new surprises and experiences.

After 30 years of photographing humpbacks, it has stayed just as exciting as the first time, but the overall quality of the experience has improved immensely. Not to mention, if you share your photos with the right research groups, you can contribute to the greater body of knowledge about some amazing

creatures we share our planet with. Not a bad win-win scenario.

Getting to the Silver Bank

All access to the Silver Bank is from the Dominican Republic and the easiest entry is the Puerto Plata Airport, (POP airport code). There are many international flights available. There is one other DR gateway in Santiago (STI) but this requires a 2.5 - 3 hour drive to where the boats depart from.



Nikon D7200. 150-600mm lens at 525mm. 1/3200th @ F14. 200 ISO

From the Puerto Plata airport it is roughly a 30-40 minute road transfer, depending on the time of day, to Cofresi which is a small coastal village in the northern DR. Within Cofresi, you will find the Ocean World Marina where all three liveaboards depart from. There are local hotels, restaurants and all inclusive resorts.

Embarkation on the liveaboards usually begins around 5pm. Generally, all vessels depart and cruise during the evening hours for calmer winds and to arrive by daylight on the Bank. Each of the three liveaboards has a mooring ball set up behind a prominent coral reef and remains on mooring until the last day departure back to the Ocean World Marina.

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