

Whale Tales

by Gregory Sweeney

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, Niuaus.

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.

Between June and November each year, Vava'u is the home to

hundreds of southern humpback whales (*Megaptera Novaengliae*). They migrate from their feeding grounds in Antarctica to the warm, sheltered crystal clear waters of Vava'u to either mate or to give birth. They Bear their young in warm waters because the new-born calves can not tolerate the freezing polar waters. Calves are born about 4 meters (12 feet) long and can weight a staggering 2 tons, 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 feeding on 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.

The word patience is an understatement when it pertains to whales. One can spend hours even days scanning the horizon, motoring around the Pacific Ocean in a very small boat, looking for the slightest hint of the illusive 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. 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.

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 there third partner Hollie. After a long day on the whale boat this place serves some great food.

Capt. Ongo has an uncanny ability to 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.

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. I put my ear to the boat hull, the songs



were amplified (describe songs). 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 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.

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 comfortable 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.

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, the mother launched into her own amazing aerial display. It is an impressive sight to see a 40 ton creature performing a full breach.

The whole episode lasted almost three hours, truly an unforgettable afternoon.

The Heat Run: On several occasions we encountered groups of 5 to 9 bull whales charging through the water, challenging one another by ramming and climbing on top of each other to establish dominance for breeding rights. During a



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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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.

I marvelled at this unique opportunity to observe and swim with



Manatees: The Gentle Giants
Photographs by Gregory Sweeney Text by Karen Keberle

This book of over 70 full-color photographs presents an intimate portrait of manatees as they perform underwater acrobatics, pose for the camera, or lounge in the warm freshwater springs. Using his rapport with his subjects, the photographer captures not only the serene beauty of the springs, but also the manatees' natural curiosity and unusual physical traits. These beautiful photographs are an excellent introduction to the personalities of these leisurely vegetarians.

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