

Kingdom of the Whales

by Tim Rock

The last Kingdom in the Pacific. And one of the last places on Earth a person can meet, face-to-face, one of the ocean's largest mammals. Tonga. Sailors come to sail and party. Others drop out and drink kava. Locals live to praise the Lord with hauntingly beautiful choirs. Some come to stay in tidy lodges and wander deserted beaches. And whale lovers make the annual pilgrimage to see humpbacks.

Tonga's claim to fame for those wanting to be in the water with a whale is that it's one of the few places on the planet where it is still legal to snorkel with these gentle giants. Various laws in other whale grounds around the world like Hawaii and South Africa allow for whale watching, a fascinating experience in itself. But that way you only get to see a fraction of what's going on. In Tonga, you can watch above and below. It's an exciting and often humbling experience.

I was amazed at my first

encounter there. It was windy, spitting a bit of rain and the boat was bouncing around like a cork. We were told there was a baby frolicking at the surface and mama was probably down below sleeping. Now when a baby whale "frolics" it makes quite a splash. When we were told to get ready, I donned fins and mask and quietly slipped over the side of the boat.

We found the young whale as the waves rolled over our heads and washed saltwater into our snorkels. But that first close encounter blotted out any discomforts. Cold, waves and salty lungs were all but ignored. Here was something three times my size, covered already in barnacles, wanting to play with me!

Humpback babies gain about 70-80 kilos a day. So even though this was a "baby" it was like swimming around with a small van with fins. Even though the sky was cloudy and the water a bit stirred up, we looked

All photos were made using Aquatica D200 Housings and Nikon D200 cameras. The D200 with a Tokina 10-17 lens (mostly at 10mm) at 6.3 was the basic setting with manual adjustments for shutter. No strobes were used. Land images were taken with a Sigma 10-20mm with circular Kenko polarizer, Sigma 18-200 OS with circular polarizer and a Sigma 80-400mm OS Lens. Aerial were made with the Tokina 10-17 at 17mm.



down and could see the mother resting below. When the mothers rest they stay down about 30-40 feet below the surface for roughly 20 minutes at a time before they have to come up and grab a breath. Baby whales have to surface every eight minutes or so. Since whale babes are usually only children, I guess they get lonely and want a playmate so snorkelers may fill this void for the curious calves.

Occasionally the baby would dip down and make sure mom was still there. Then it would come back up, much to our glee, and rocket by. Lifting a fluke, it came so close I could count the barnacles and see tiny crabs on its mouth. After a while, the considerably larger mother decided baby was having too much fun. She slowly rose from the depths, gathered baby into her breast, cruised by and eyeballed us and, with a few measured kicks of the tails, they disappeared into the blue.

That was great. Little did I know it would get better.

Whale buffs are lucky. It is the general consensus that the most comfortable time to visit the tiny town at Vava'u is during the dry season between May and October. It is also considered to be the region's high season and coincides pretty much with whale season. But it's really not that rainy here. Mostly it rains at night and cools things off, making for great



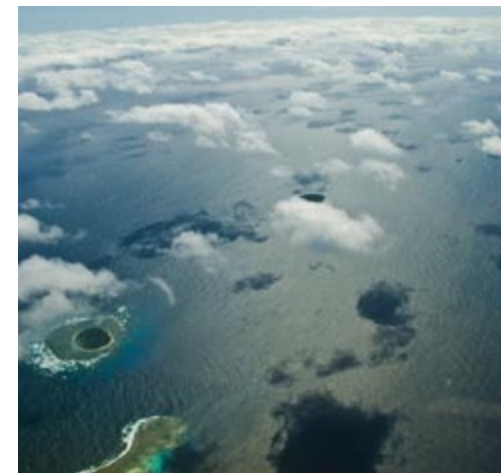
sleeping. Tonga lies solidly in the South Pacific's unpredictable cyclone alley. But they don't occur too often in Tonga. The weather and winds do change frequently, but it seems on average the spring brings 3-4 days of windy weather followed by 2-3 days of sun and flat seas.

The whales start to show up in late June to early July. August and September are considered to be the best months for whale observation.

Most visitors arrive at Fua'amotu International Airport, about 15km southeast of the main town of Nuku'alofa in the southern part of the country. You must then

catch a local flight to Lupepapau'u International on Vava'u in the north where most people stay in or around Neiafu town. It's up here that all whales seem to come, attracted to the many bays, protective limestone cliffs and warmer water. These whales feed in Antarctic waters about half the year and then migrate north to Tonga to have their young and breed.

Winging over Tonga on a sunny day is an eye-popping experience. The clear waters and sandy fingers leading to rich coral reefs make vivid emeralds and aquamarines. Large tracts of land give way to smattering of islands and hidden reefs. The other



way to see Tonga is to bring your own yacht, which is a popular pastime for sailors.

Tonga has a rich history. The Tongan archipelago is thought to have been first inhabited somewhere between 3000 BC, and 1100 BC. Tongan warriors have been called "Vikings of the Pacific" attacking neighboring isles and extending



the Tongan Empire to parts of Fiji, the Samoas, Tokelau and Niue. The monarchy has remained strong despite inconsistent efforts of first the Dutch and then the British to tame the Tongan culture. Captain James Cook called Tonga the “Friendly Islands”, a moniker that the islands retain to this day.

Westernized Tongans nowadays question the role of the monarchy, but Princess Pilolevu Tuita, daughter of Tupou IV, has been good for the whales. As a Patron of Whales ceremony, she just recently visited Vava’u and proclaimed Tonga a whale sanctuary and affirmed her father’s decision to stop whale hunting over

35 years ago.

A few days passed and the weather improved and so did the encounters. We watched for over an hour as a mother nursed a calf. The setting was a broad bay with the high cliffs of the islands on one side and a sandy, palm-lined beach off the other. Fruitbats winged overhead but we were fixed on what we saw below. Gentle and protective, the large female came up to breath, calf in tow, four times during our encounter. The calf came up many times in between. The sun started to set and the scene was about as tranquil as Nature can provide.

As we made our way back to

the boat, a gentle rain started. In the maze of islands that leads back to Vava’u, we came upon another mother and calf. The baby had its face out of the water and its mouth open. This was probably the first time it had experienced rain and was reveling in the massage the raindrops gave it while getting a taste of sweet, fresh water.

As the sea flattened out, we were able to head southeast past the many reefs and islets and out to the open sea. We had encounters with lone males singing, their plaintiff vocals vibrating through our comparatively tiny bodies. Breaching by males to attract a female or ward

off a suitor produced some spectacular jumps.

Females teaching babies to breach was even more entertaining. Mom would leave the sea with a huge splash. Baby would then emulate Mom, trying many times in succession to get the form and air that mama so adeptly had just shown.

We watched heat runs where males would try to run off a female’s escort in order to mate with her. This was like following a series of runaway train cars. Huge heads would plow through the sea. The challenged male would blow massive bubble streams as he voiced his disapproval of the challenge. We would follow these



breath.

We swam with these whales until we were exhausted. As if she knew we were done, the mother open her pectorals displaying her immense white breast and made a huge turn like a giant sea eagle swooping in for a landing. One turn, then another and off into the blue they went. For us, a truly perfect whale day. I hope they enjoyed watching our antics as well.

Tonga is still new to tourism and is a bit of a diamond in the rough, which is part of its charm. We were focused on whales but it has great hikes, healthy reefs and virtually untouched beaches as well as a special culture. People are friendly and quick to greet you with a “Malo e Lelei” (Good Day). Handicrafts are very nice and fresh fruits come to market daily. It’s a laid back and fascinating little country to visit.

For me, the opportunity to get in the water and get within yards of a beautiful family of humpbacks was about as close to Nirvana as I think one can get. They are called gentle giants, and when not threatened they certainly seem to fit the moniker. Humpbacks in Tonga. Long live the Kingdom.

amazing displays of testosterone at 10 knots or more as they rampaged through the sea. One time we even saw the male still erect as he finished his victory mating.

Perhaps the most perfect day was the long encounter we had in deep, blue crystal clear water far out to sea. A mother, older baby and male escort seemed perfectly at ease with our presence. The baby was going bonkers, pectorals open and playing deep, then playing at the surface, then tail slapping ad infinitum, then back down for more play. Mom would watch patiently. At one point she breached and then baby tried it. All the while, the male cruised below, coming up at long intervals for a

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