

With the sperm whales of the mid-Atlantic Ridge

by Wade Hughes FRGS

This pod of sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) swims slowly in mirror smooth seas in mid Atlantic, off the coast of Pico in the Azores. In their midst, two newborn calves. When they see me in the water, waiting in the hope of a glimpse of the calves, they do not deviate from their chosen course. We have observed the pod from the boat for some time.

The adults are taking turns to shepherd the calves and to dive for food in the abyssal deeps, around 1000 metres below. On occasions, all the adults dive and the calves are left to face the uncertainties of their strange new world alone.

I swim with this pod a number of times, each time entering the water well away from the animals and waiting for them to approach. The underwater visibility is well over 30 metres, but sprays of audible clicks from the adult whales' echolocation confirms that they have detected me long before they come into view.

If they wished to avoid the encounter they could easily do so: there are miles of open sea room all round us. Yet, each time, they swim slowly past, allowing me intimate and

privileged insights into their lives.

As they pass, we make eye contact. A flicker of their eyes signals conscious watchfulness, and perhaps curiosity at the strange life form

that has materialized out of the blue underwater fog.

On one occasion a 50 tonne bull, escorting the pod, singles me out for close inspection. It swims so close

that I am concerned we will touch. These are wild whales: petting them, or attempting to do so, would violate that wildness. But I'm also concerned that touching could perhaps jolt the





whale and cause sudden violent motion. Even an unintended slap from a pectoral fin-or worse, from flukes that weigh around two tonnes-would deliver a crushing blow.

But, the bull avoids contact with what can only be described –in human terms- as extraordinary care. It slows its deliberate head on advance and coasts to a halt, no more than half a metre from me. I am earnestly wondering “Now what?”

The bull’s tail begins to sink and this enormous animal rotates into a head up position.

We have observed this behaviour several times before, when small pods of sperm whales have encountered each other. Writing in 1839, Thomas Beale, the first serious observer and commentator on sperm whale behaviour pondered that “...this posture they seem to assume for the purpose of surveying more perfectly, or easily, the surrounding expanse” .

Beale could well have been right. The whale seems to be closely scrutinizing me. As I stare into its left eye, with its flukes 14 metres or so beneath

my fins, the bull slowly spins on its tail. The base of its jaw and its throat pass before my face. And then I am staring into its right eye.

These are long, intense moments. We come to the Azores, hoping to get close to the sperm whales. In now hundreds of encounters, this is closer than we ever imagined would be possible. And it is one of the biggest whales we have seen. It is clearly an encounter on the whale’s terms. I feel very small.

We know not to anthropomorphize animal behaviour. But it is difficult not to consider this



animal to be anything but gentle and gracious. It is, after all, a super-predator. – the world’s largest toothed animal. It hunts, holding its breath, as deep as three kilometers beneath the surface.

Triangular scars beneath this whale’s eye testify to the desperate piercing bites inflicted by the beak of a giant squid – an animal as long, or possibly even longer than the whale itself. These are fresh marks, inflicted in a struggle to the death, in the blackness of the abyss. Yet here, on the surface, the whale is docile. Perhaps weighing its options. Perhaps carefully considering whether or not I represent a risk to the calves.

It is unlikely, but not impossible, that it sired the calves. Big bulls roam the oceans in solitude, seeking receptive females, and dispersing the gene pool.

Calves and adolescents gather in the company and care of adult females, in much the same way as do elephants. Their society is dominated by the influence of the matriarch. But, from our observations of this pod, this bull has easily fallen in with the other whales. These include large adolescent bulls, which must soon leave the pod and join the bachelor herds. These are the congregations of testy males that the whalers of old, with eyes only for whale oil,



happily valued as “forty-barrel bulls”

Perhaps this bull’s sheer size and latent power imposes order and acceptance on the pod. Whatever it is, the younger bulls swim peacefully in company with it. The calves wriggle around it as they do every other whale in the pod. Perhaps it is the prodigal father returned after a year and a half philandering through the oceans of the world. We will never know.

It’s sheer size and impossibly close proximity impose on me . It is difficult to be elated, and yet remain calm. Elated, because this is, in many ways, the jackpot. Intimately close to a superb specimen of this

most enigmatic of species. Sobered by the realization that we must be careful in choosing what we wish for. It was the whale that chose how this encounter should unfold. Only the whale can decide how it will end. I am paying close attention!

Apparently satisfied with its close inspection, it begins to sink. Slowly and, I believe, carefully. Only when it is well clear of me does it twist and beats its flukes to catch up with the pod.

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NOTES:

The photographs shown here form part of a collection of work completed over the years since 2005, under permits and special permission issued by the Azorean Regional Secretaria do Ambiente do Mar.

All approaches towards the whales, either by boat or in person underwater are made not only in strict adherence to the Secretaria's guidelines, but also with the well being of the whales firmly in mind.

No breathing apparatus other than snorkel is used. Typically we only allow one photographer to enter the water at a time: when permit and circumstances allow, we will enable a second photographer to enter the water a discreet distance behind the first.

Our expeditions are self-funded and not for profit. Photographs are donated without charge for research or educational purposes.

Our expedition members are:
Robyn Hughes
Wayne Osborn: International Fellow, Explorers Club
Pam Osborn
Wade Hughes: Member, Explorers Club; Fellow Royal Geographical Society

All photography of whales, from either the boat, or underwater, is done in strict accordance with the

conditions of our permit which is issued by the Regional Secretaria do Ambiente do Mar. We are very grateful to the Secretaria for granting this permit, and we trust that our work is repaying the trust placed in us, and that both the whales, and the whale watching industry in the Azores is benefiting in some small way from the contributions we have made to the record over the past years. In our view, the world has a lot it can learn from the balance of regulation and self-regulation that characterises the Azorean whale watching industry.

Approaches to the whales are made using mask, snorkel, and fins only. This is both a requirement of our permit, and good, sensible practice. Bubbles from scuba would disturb the animals, and the weight and drag of a scuba, or rebreather, unit would be an encumbrance on some of the longer swims from the boat we often have to undertake to be in the best position to record an encounter. Nevertheless, the temptation to follow these mystical creatures down into the abyss is immense. Can you just imagine...!

As the world's pre-eminent sperm whale researcher, Dr Hal Whitehead, points out, sperm whales are "timid and inoffensive" (unless

Land photos by Robyn Hughes



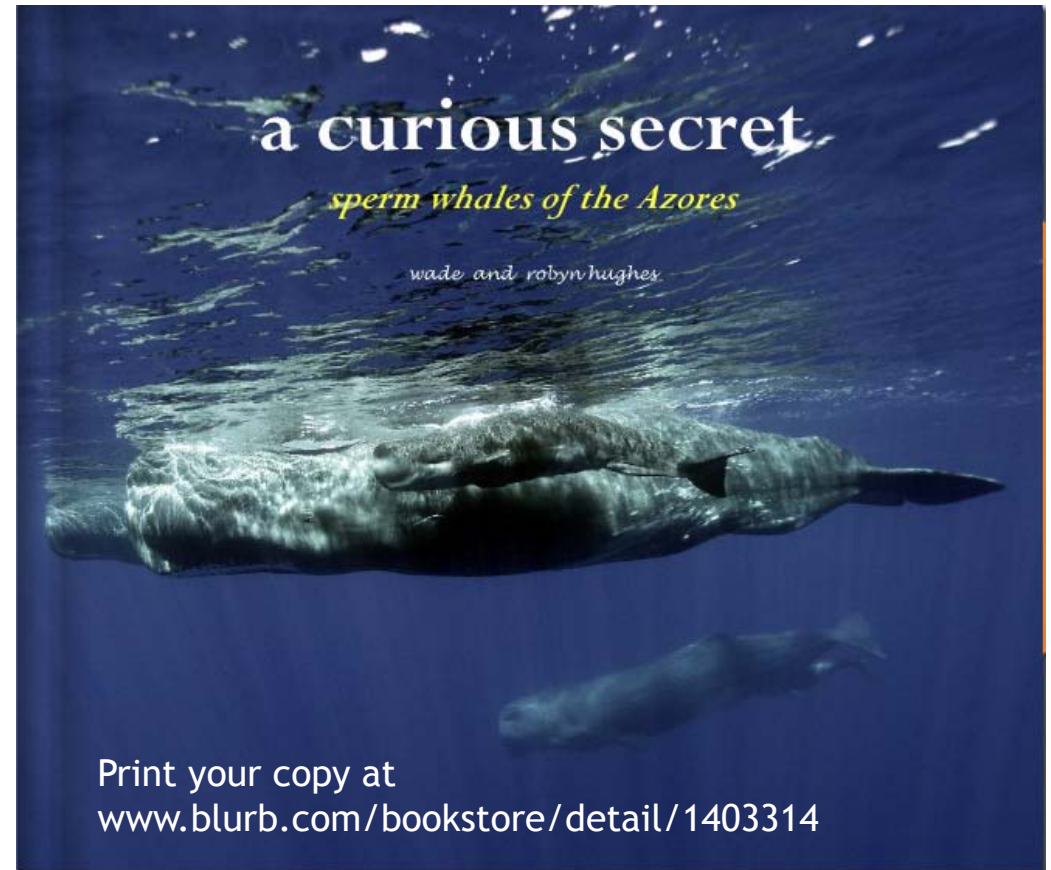


you happen to be a giant squid!) and so we are careful not to cause fright by surprising them. Usually, we only allow one photographer into the water at a time, although if circumstances are judged to be appropriate by our professional skippers and guides, we will allow a second to follow at a discreet distance behind the first.

The responses of the whales to our approaches are quite unpredictable. At different times, even the same individual whales can display anything from disdain for our presence, indifference, or active curiosity. On one occasion, a passing adolescent female whale submerged a little to avoid passing close to me,

surfaced 20 meters or so from me and sharply smacked its flukes on the surface, just once. We got the point and went looking for another whale to spend some time with. On other occasions, we've enjoyed lingering inspections from giants that loom up out of the blue, satisfy their interest, then move on to more important business. Almost every encounter is preceded by rigorous probing from the whales' sonar, often well before the whale comes within range of visibility.

Lenses for underwater use have ranged from the Nikon 12-24 zoom, through Nikkor 20mm prime, and now to Canon 16-35 zoom and 35mm



prime. I've used a number of housings, all commercially available aluminium, with domes ranging from 6 to 9 inches. Robyn uses Nikkor 70-300mm and Canon 100-400 mm zooms in the boat.

If you have a passion for whales and the sea, you can write to us at aussiesabroad@aol.com.

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The Whales of São Marco

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