

A Whale of a time

with Tony Wu

The ocean is big. Amazingly, I hadn't really felt it before. On reef dives, land is nearby, and with reasonable visibility, you can see the bottom, or at least the vertical face of the reef. Here, there was only blue - left, right, front, back, down, even the sky above. My entire field of vision, my entire existence at the moment was blue - interrupted only by an 11 metre juvenile sperm whale chewing on my fins.

It had taken fourteen months of planning to get to this place and situation. On my previous visits, I had met and become friends with Takahashi-san, the owner and captain of "Dancing Whale", the 16-metre boat he uses to take visitors on dolphin and whale watching trips.

Takahashi-san had come to the Bonin islands nearly two decades earlier, long before there were many visitors from mainland Japan. Even today, relatively few people journey to the islands due to distance. The Bonins, known as the 'Ogasawara' islands in Japanese, lie approximately 1,000 kilometres southeast of Tokyo. It takes twenty-five hours on a large (but not necessarily comfortable) ship to get out to the islands, and the ship makes the journey only a couple of times a week. In short, the Bonins lie precisely in the middle of nowhere.

Calling the Bonins 'islands' is perhaps an overly generous



Sperm whale smiling for the camera. Sadly, there was a hook embedded in its right jaw. The trailing filament is visible.

term. They're more a collection of volcanic outcroppings in the middle of the sea. They're small, only a few are inhabited, and they lie adjacent to deep ocean trenches, thousands of metres deep. Like similar locations around the world, the Ogasawara islands have dozens, if not hundreds of endemic species that have evolved over thousands of years.

The primary attraction for me, however, was underwater. The islands are a haven for marine life. Upwelling from deep ocean trenches attracts schools of fish that congregate to capitalise on the oasis of food. Pelagics like mantas, sailfish, mola molas, green turtles and leatherbacks are frequent visitors to Bonin waters. Large predators abound - hammerheads and tiger

sharks are common - and local fishing lore is replete with tales of monstrous beasts that defy description and belief.

My previous visits to the islands were to photograph the many species of dolphin that make the Bonins a regular stop-off, if not their home. Bottlenose (*T. truncatus*), spinners (*S. longirostris*) and pan-tropical spotted (*S. attenuata*) dolphins are quite common, with orca (*O. Orcinus*) and other larger species being sighted less frequently. The local bottlenose are particularly fond of checking out humans in the water, and the crystal clear, unspoiled blue water makes for wonderful photographs.

During those trips, I learned from Takahashi-san about the annual visit of the sperm whales, *Physeter macrocephalus*. Whales of all types pass by the islands throughout the year. Elegant humpbacks (*M. novaeangliae*) grace the islands primarily during winter, and other species, including Bryde's (*B. edeni*) and rare beaked whales also show up.

It had only been a few years since Takahashi-san first noticed a pattern in sperm whale activity though. He had found a particular spot where females and their calves appeared to congregate for several weeks each year, usually commencing in late July. Over several years, he had consistently found the whales, and on occasion, had been fortunate enough to have some approach the "Dancing Whale" for a quick look.

Captain Takahashi's stories captured my imagination. Few people had ventured out to the area he described, as it was quite far from the island where most people lived. In fact, a mystique



All underwater images were taken with a Nikon F90x in a Nexus housings, 20 mm lens. RDPIII. 1/320 shutter priority.

surrounded the sperm whales. Local fishermen spoke of attacks by aggressive sperm whales, the largest of the toothed whales. Large, intimidating sperm whale teeth were on display around the islands, leftover from the days of large-scale whaling. No one on the islands really wanted to get near the whales, much less in the water with them.

Except me.

So here I was.

'Suspended', as it were, some 3,000 metres above the nearest land, floating in an ocean of

blue.

To get here, I had communicated often with Takahashi-san and the whale watching people for over a year. We reached an understanding that would give me the opportunity to search for the sperm whales, and get in the water for photos if the conditions were right. So I had returned to these enchanted oceanic islands when sperm whales were most likely to be around.

The juvenile sperm whale in front of me had interrupted our



lunch. We had been searching for hours without any luck. Just as we took our first bite, the curious juvenile surfaced next to the boat. We dropped our lunches, Captain Takahashi took the wheel, and the three of us grabbed our topside cameras.

The whale played around the boat, peeking above water, looking at us, spraying us with its (bad) breath. After all the months of planning and waiting, everything looked just right. Captain Takahashi gave me the nod, and I donned mask, snorkel and long fins to get in. The Captain's wife and my wife joined me as safety spotters.

When we slipped into the water, the whale was about ten metres away, resting just below the surface. I signaled that I would snorkel down for a better



look, took a deep breath, and slowly descended headfirst, my back to the whale. At about seven metres, I turned to find the whale heading straight for me. It was two metres away, and looked like a large grey submarine on a collision course.

To avoid direct contact, I kicked for the surface. The

whale followed. As I looked down, the whale opened its jaws, and started to probe me with sonar. A few clicks and clacks, grunts and squeals, then a sudden flurry of loud, rapid, painful booms and clicks that penetrated and reverberated in my body like noise at a heavy metal concert.

As I reached the surface, the



A quick glance behind me and I realised that my safety spotters had long since deserted me and were watching from the boat, which was about 15 metres away.

I tried to think clearly through my growing anxiety. “Remember, this is a baby whale”, I told myself. “Maybe it’s just curious”, I thought. I placed my hands on the whale’s forehead, and gently pushed away.

My fin left the whale’s mouth, and I floated away. I finned slowly to open the distance between us, but again, the current worked against me. The whale approached. Once again, I found myself in the same, awkward position. I pushed away again a few more times with the same result - me straddling the whale, the whale chewing my fin.

As my heart rate settled down to a calm 250 beats per minute, I realised that it had been some time since First Contact, and I was still in one piece. “The baby’s just curious - the baby’s just curious” became my mantra, and I pushed off once more. This time, I took a breath and snorkeled down. Wide angle lens ready, I framed and snapped off a few images before surfacing and ending up on the whale’s head again like a hood ornament.

The whale and I repeated this game until I finished 36 exposures. It continued to pursue my fin and nuzzle me like an overgrown aquatic puppy, but the whale’s sonar was no longer on, and in hindsight, it never made a threatening gesture.

With my film finished and my nerves steadied, I turned my back to the whale and swam for the boat. The whale submerged

first thought that came to mind was Takahashi-san’s parting advice to me. “Remember”, he said, “if the sonar goes on, it might think you’re food!”

I watched as the leviathan surfaced in front of me, less than a metre away. The sonar probing intensified, and the whale approached again. Panic set in, and I backpeddled frantically to get out of the way, but as luck would have it, the current was behind me. Trapped between the current and the whale’s advance,

I ended up spread eagle atop the approaching whale’s head.

First Contact was a bit of shock. The whale’s head felt like hard, wet rubber, similar to a very thick skinsuit. I didn’t notice the scars and ring marks left by large squid on the whale’s head until much later. My mind, understandably, was occupied processing other information, particularly as the sonar picked up again, and I looked down to see the whale take my left fin into the side of its mouth.



We found the remnants of a mesopelagic octopus nearby, perhaps leftovers from a sperm whale meal.

and followed directly underneath me. Our eyes met, and for the first time during the encounter, I was certain of my safety. I saw curiosity. I saw playfulness. I saw an animal that wanted to learn about me as much as I wanted to learn about it.

I stepped onto the boat, grabbed another camera and looked into the water. The whale was waiting, about five metres under the boat, head turned to

the side so its eye was looking directly up at me. I waved from the swimstep, and the whale turned to trail the boat at the surface. The moment I re-entered the water, the juvenile approached rapidly again. This time, I wasn't (as) afraid.

I spent over two hours playing with my friend, snorkeling down to swim beside it, staying still as it approached me, and letting it chew on my

fins from time to time. I discovered ring marks left by its prey, and sadly, I saw that the whale had a large fishing hook through its jaw, 30 centimetres long or more, perhaps from a longline. Filament trailed from the hook for several metres. I contemplated trying to remove the hook, but realised that my effort would be in vain, and would probably cause the whale more harm than good.

The swells were large and the water cold, so eventually I left the water from sheer exhaustion. As I dried off and relayed my experience, the whale continued to play. It surfaced next to the boat and ispy hopped to take a look, perhaps for me. It raised its tail flukes and splashed water all over us, perhaps to invite me back in. It waited behind the boat, under the swimstep, looking up, perhaps to see if I would play a little longer.

Finally, it raised its tail flukes and splashed the boat six last times, before diving down somewhere deep, perhaps to tell other whales a story like this.

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Tony Wu and William Tan's book "Silent Symphony" was awarded 1st Place at the 28th World Festival of Underwater Pictures

