



The Magic Kingdom

Sometimes, there are just no words. How is it possible, for instance, to describe what it's like to come face-to-face with a 40-tonne, 13-metre-long ocean giant, followed by a romp around the sea with a playful, inquisitive four-metre-long baby giant?

Adjectives like "incredible", "fantastic" and "amazing" unfortunately just don't cut the mustard. Listening to Eric Clapton live on stage is "amazing". Swimming among humpback whales is...

Q: Why do humpback whales make swishes in the water?
A: Because they can.



"Honestly, the whale was holding its hands out just like this!" (See photo to right)

FLYING SOUTH FOR THE WINTER

Every July, I hop on a plane and fly south. Over the equator, down to New Zealand, and then a quick jump over to the Kingdom of Tonga, which is a bit to the right and north of New Zealand, but not quite as far north as Fiji or Samoa — if you look at a map of the South Pacific. By another metric, Tonga is approximately one-third of the 7,400km distance from New Zealand to Hawaii.

Still can't quite figure out where I'm talking about? "No worries", as they say Down Under. Actually, before I travelled to Tonga for the first time ten years ago, I had no idea where this small South Pacific nation was either, and little did I suspect that I would end up spending so much time in this remote and beautiful country.

July marks the beginning of winter in the southern hemisphere, which is no coincidence. My annual migration to this far-flung territory is timed to coincide with the arrival of humpback whales, which visit the Kingdom from their Southern Ocean feeding grounds to give birth, raise young, test themselves (in other words, male whales picking fights with other male whales), find mates, and mate.



a.

b.



- a. One of the most unusual poses I've seen a humpback execute...rising up out of the water as if in prayer
- b. Newborn calf from the 2007 season I nicknamed "Hina Hina", which is my mispronunciation of "Hine Hina", which means "white" in Tongan

MORE ABOUT THE HUMPBACKS

The humpbacks that visit Tonga live in the southern hemisphere, moving to the Southern Ocean and areas around Antarctica in the summer to feed. Not all humpback whales in the southern hemisphere go to Tonga, and whales that visit Tonga in any given year don't necessarily visit again the following year...or at least that's the commonly held wisdom.

From personal experience, I know that some whales do return, though not necessarily in consecutive years. It's certainly a nice feeling whenever I see humpbacks I've encountered before.

Females generally give birth to calves during July to September, nurse them for several months, and then take them

on the long journey to summer feeding grounds. Along the way, they face all sorts of challenges, from the sheer distance involved to potential threats from hungry predators.

It's possible to see whales in all of the waters around Tonga, but most of the organised whale-swimming activity is in the northernmost Vava'u group.



Four whales hanging out in between periods of activity. Note the teeny-tiny person in the upper left-hand corner of the photograph, who provides a sense of scale.

GREETINGS ALIEN

Meeting a humpback whale is probably as close as you could ever come to meeting an alien. Think about it. Although they're mammals and arguably highly intelligent, they don't look anything like us, they don't move like us, they don't speak the same languages as we do, they don't eat the same foods we do, they're not comfortable in the same environments that we prefer, and they probably have very different ideas than we do about what's fun and what's not. Other than that, we have a lot in common.

Actually, humpback whales can be highly inquisitive, and they do often approach people as if to "check us out", spyhopping to take a look, swimming underneath boats and swimmers, sometimes even just floating on the surface within arm's reach of boats.

Over the years, I've spent hundreds of hours in the water with these majestic animals, watching them, trying to learn more about them, and having some amazing experiences along the way.

- a. A beautiful little girl practically demanding to have her photo taken
- b. One of many churches in Vava'u
- c. Flowers flourish in Tonga even during the winter.

a. b.



c.

A BIT ABOUT TONGA

The Kingdom of Tonga is an island nation, comprising three primary island groups — Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u, from south to north — with 176 islands (most of which are not inhabited), covering an area of about 750 square kilometres. The country lays claim to being the first nation to greet each day, and hence each new year.

The islands are sparsely populated, with current estimates putting the nation's population at slightly over 110,000 people, two-thirds of whom live in Tongatapu.

The people of Tonga are of Polynesian origin, and are about as friendly as you can get.

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A highly inquisitive, solitary whale that proactively approached boats and swimmers for many hours, appearing to enjoy having company around



a.



b.

a. The power-packed pandemonium of a typical heat run
 b. Male and female humpback executing beautiful manoeuvres, possibly engaged in a courtship ritual

I've seen baby whales go on breaching frenzies with their mothers, watched groups of enormous, highly-testosterone-charged males head-butt and tail-slap each other, swum among pods of horny males and females in heat runs, watched an escort whale fling an aggressive shark into the air, had a newborn calf left in my care for hours by its nonchalant mother, witnessed beautiful courtship dances and spiralling pirouettes...the list is endless.

Through it all, if there's anything I've learned, it's that being alien isn't necessarily a barrier to communication.

INTER-SPECIES DIALOGUE

Surprisingly, we don't actually know all that much about humpback whales. When I first visited the islands, one of the theories, for example, concerning the role of escort humpbacks was that they were females, acting like nursemaids or midwives for mommy whales. As it turns out, they're actually randy males hoping to be next-in-line to mate. Oh well...close, but no cigar.

TO SWIM OR NOT TO SWIM



Swimming among whales is a life-altering, unforgettable experience.

Where there are whales, there always seems to be controversy. Tonga is one of the few places left in the world where swimming with whales is legal, though you can only engage in this activity with licensed whale-watch operators, following the guidelines set out to protect both whales and people. In other

words, you can't just show up in a boat and chase whales around.

Some people hold the view that swimming with whales (and other cetaceans) under any circumstance is not acceptable, arguing that interactions between people and whales is unnatural and disturbs them.

While I certainly understand their concerns and motivations, I disagree.

Sometimes whales are certainly busy and/ or have more important things to do than stare at curious people bobbing in the water. In those circumstances, they simply swim away. There's no way any human can swim fast enough to keep up.

Executed correctly, interactions with whales and other cetaceans are rewarding, and I'd be hard-pressed to think of a more effective way to motivate people to protect them.

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Curious calf swimming up for a closer look



Being as different as our two species are, it's actually not all that surprising that there are still many things we haven't worked out about humpbacks. Most people who study these whales probably don't actually have the opportunity to spend much time around them, much less in the water with them.

...which is one of the reasons visiting Tonga is so special.

Having spent so much time with the humpbacks, I've been fortunate enough to see patterns of behaviour, witness

things that probably few if any people have seen, and in some instances, communicate with them.

Ok, I know that sounds flaky in a crystal-gazing kind of way, but on occasion, when the mood strikes them, some whales do seem to take time to observe and assess us and much as we do them.

To highlight one common scenario... baby whales can't hold their breaths for as long as adults, so even at rest, they surface every few minutes to breathe. If you're in the water and stay calm (i.e.,

don't hyperventilate and swim at them like a flailing madman), quite often, they'll decide to come in for a closer look. When they do, if you stay perfectly still, they might approach near enough to make eye contact — which is the litmus test.

Some people they like; others they don't. Simple as that.



OTHER STUFF TO DO

Life in Tonga does not revolve around humpback whales. In fact, there's a lot more to do in this lovely South Pacific nation.

Divers visit Tonga all year round. Sailing is extremely popular, with bareboat and captained charter vessels available in Vava'u. Kayaking, hiking, go-cart tours, island-hopping, cultural tours, surfing, kite-boarding, fishing, shopping, and just hanging out are just some of the other options available for recreation.

a.



a. Classic breach, this one executed by a female who was playing with her calf
b. Despite their enormous bulk and size, humpbacks are extraordinarily graceful swimmers.

Establishing that positive initial dialogue is important, as it often sets the tone for how your encounter will go (or not).

If you're ever fortunate enough to visit the Kingdom of Tonga or swim among whales elsewhere, I'm sure you'll understand what I meant in the introduction to this article.

There's just no way to describe what it feels like when a large, intelligent alien looks you in the eye and decides: "Hey, you're ok. I think I'll hang out for a while and play with you."

It's sheer magic. ☺



b.

SPECIAL THANKS to the ever-nimble, always entertaining Kelvin Aitken of Marine Themes for showing me the ropes; JB, Ongo, Aunofo, Hollie and all the gang at The Mermaid for babysitting me; Ruby of Pacific Travel Marketing for making sure I get to and from where I need to be; and the lovely people of Tonga for being so hospitable.



Tony Wu

FROM THE AUTHOR

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"Tonga is the perfect getaway — remote, laid-back, peaceful, fascinating culture and full of wonderful people...not to mention encounters with humpback whales!"

TONGA



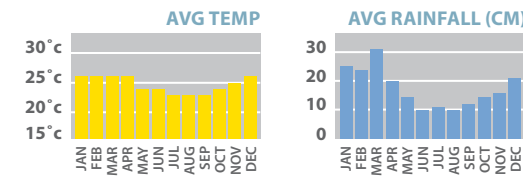
FACT FILE



The primary gateway to Tonga is Fua'amotu International Airport in Nukua'lofa in the southern Tongatapu island group, accessible via Air New Zealand, Air Pacific, Pacific Blue and Polynesian Airlines. Airlines Tonga recently commenced direct flights between Nadi in Fiji and Vava'u, though it's best to double check availability of this route with your travel planner. Domestic flights are operated by Airlines Tonga.



Subtropical climate, with warmer weather from December through April and cooler weather the rest of the year. Besides whale watching, diving is also a popular activity in Tonga. A 3mm to 5mm wetsuit is generally sufficient for both diving and whale swims.



Tourist visas valid for 30 days are issued free of charge. Citizens of certain countries are permitted to obtain a visa on arrival. Others are required to obtain a visa in advance. Please check online or with your travel agent for the current list of visa-on-arrival-approved nationalities.



There is a domestic GSM network, but no international roaming. There are internet cafes in Nukua'lofa and Vava'u.



240V, 50Hz.



Tongan Pa'anga. Tipping is not generally practiced.



Recommended vaccinations include hepatitis A, tetanus, typhoid and rabies, as well as ensuring up-to-date routine vaccinations for measles/mumps/rubella and diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus.



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