

Puff Up! It's A Whale!

Posted on



'Whale-watching' is too passive a term - at a moment's notice the engine roars and everyone grabs onto the nearest railing as the boat rocks in all directions negotiating the waves of the Indian Ocean at high-speed in search of giant creatures of the deep.

Words Benjamin Fowler Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

It's eight in the morning and I'm not sure what to expect out of the water as we embark from Mirissa Harbour, packed with colourful boats and already bustling with coastal commerce even this early. Our vessel, Sashimi, is chartered by the Paradise Beach Club, and as it makes its way past the cliff-sides that bracket the bay, we watch the waves crash dramatically against the rocks. Headed due south towards an uninterrupted expanse of the Indian Ocean, I take a look back towards the island, which by now is silhouetted black by the morning sun, and the spiky palm trees remain the only distinguishable feature.

As the land further recedes, we're left with the open sea, the engine's dull roar and our imaginations. In a flash, a speedboat zooms by us, leaving the Sashimi bouncing in its wake. Our anticipation builds as we make our way out to deeper waters.

Things quickly quiet down, with just the engine's drone and an occasional bird flying by. Out here, Sri Lanka is just a small strip of blue, barely distinguishable from the vast, empty sky, like sediment built up at the bottom of a tank. The Sashimi's crew members, ever vigilant in scanning the horizon, spot a school of dolphins in the distance, and off we go. What looks like eight or so bottlenose dolphins tumbling around in a loop is actually over a hundred surfacing for a moment to grab a quick breath or two before diving back down again. Underwater it must look like a giant parabola of dolphins.

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Bottlenoses can hold their breath for a total of 20 minutes, though it's about a 15 minute gap between each time the school surfaces for breath. They all get their breaths in about a two minute span when they briefly surface - much to the joy of the spectators. Some dolphins only expose their blowholes while others launch themselves completely into the air. For some moments there are as many as eight dolphins visible in different stages of flight, and just as quickly as they appear, the sea suddenly goes quiet again.

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Once they are gone, the crew carefully navigates near where they expect them to surface next. There's a delicate balance here, because if the animals feel like they can't surface to breathe they will learn to avoid the area altogether, and I'm constantly impressed by the crew's ability to predict where they will surface.

At one point they guess where the dolphins will surface and cut the engine, and sure enough there the dolphins are, swimming right alongside the boat. We'll see this spinning wheel of dolphins about four times in the next hour, and then its the briefest of pauses before someone shouts 'Whale!' and off we go. The boat accelerates strikingly quick, and it doesn't take long to learn that when the engine begins to roar you need to immediately grab onto the nearest railing.

By the time I make my way to the other side of the boat and look to where the fingers are pointing, there's just a cloud of water vapor lingering in the air - evidence of a blue whale's geyser-like spout.

We head towards where we expect to see the whale surface next. It's a course due east, directly into the glare of the morning sun as it's refracted across a huge expanse of waves. Even with sunglasses on I have to squint and shield my eyes from the sun, but there it is -

like a long shadow, moving smoothly across the shimmering, golden water. It lifts its tail elegantly into the air before diving deep, and it's not an image I'll soon forget.

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Next, a course is plotted that will take us on the other side of the whale, for less strenuous viewing. Sure enough, the silver-blue whale emerges on our vessel's port side, almost like a submarine, moving parallel with our boat. It occasionally spouts its water with a blast, and disappears for seconds at a time before surfacing. Unlike dolphins, the blue whale's blowhole is located on the back end of the creature, so it has to curve the back of its enormous body for the blowhole to breach the surface, and at best we're only ever seeing about one third of the massive mammal – the Sashimi feels like a rowboat in comparison.

Though it disappears for brief moments, you can tell when it's going to dive down for good when it raises its enormous tail in the air and the largest animal in existence slides down into the sea without so much as a splash. In fact, on board we get in the habit of shouting 'Tail!' when this happens so everyone can get one last look at the whale, but more importantly, its flourish as it exits. One time, the whale spins as it descends and the giant tail slowly rotates in accordance – a spectacular sight.

Similar to the school of dolphins, we're left to speculate on where it might surface again between long pauses. Eventually a rhythm develops between the long, quiet pauses and the sudden action brought on by a sighting. Once we come across two whales swimming along with less than a meter between them, so close to the boat we can see individual features and fins.

What pops up out of the water next is a sperm whale, which is brown with reflected sunlight and a great deal smaller than the blue whales. Also, their blowholes are situated above their heads, which shoots out water at a forward angle, almost resembling a giant sneeze. Because of this placement they can keep most of their bodies above water and steadily cruise along without the undulating motion required for the mighty blue whales to take a breath.

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Eventually there are four sperm whales in view from the boat, with two moving right next to

each other like a couple of torpedoes in no hurry to get anywhere. They blow their spouts and dive in sync with the same flourish of their tails. It's not long until we see waterspouts in the distance. A passenger points and a second later the engine roars, everyone grabs onto the railing, and off we go again.

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