

Nature Va'vau

# A whale of a time in Tonga

Angela Saurine dives in with the ocean's gentle giants in a tropical paradise

IT'S hard to believe a boat full of people can be so quiet.

Ignoring our goosebumps as we sit at the back with our flippers in the water, the only sounds are the water lapping against the side, the soft whirr of the engine and the faint, scratchy shhhhhhh of the two-way radio.

Each of us has our eyes anxiously peeled at a point on the horizon, looking for the slightest sign of movement.

After what seems an eternity there comes an excited cry: "There it is! At nine o'clock!"

It is quickly followed by the voice of our captain, Kam. "Go!" he says. "Go, go, go!"

We carefully slide into the water and, with our bottoms pointed up and feet moving in a cycling motion so as not to make any splash, move in the direction indicated.

Before we know it a playful whale calf is swimming towards us. He turns and looks at us curiously out of one eye before gracefully diving out of sight.

On our next swim the same whale sticks around longer. It playfully slaps its tail in the water just a few metres away, does a barrel roll, ducks, weaves, surfaces then dives beneath us.

I already feel it is an amazing encounter, but that feeling is reinforced when I look up and see the awestruck smiles of my less fortunate fellow tourists on the boat nearby.

As we return I feel guilty at having two brilliant encounters in a row and don't want another swim until the other groups have had an equivalent experience. To my relief, when the next group gets in, the calf's mother returns from her deep dive and swims straight towards them.

We had spent much of the morning

with this humpback and her calf surrounded by the idyllic tropical islands that make up the Va'vau group in the Kingdom of Tonga. Most of that time, she had been teaching the newborn lessons it would need before the long journey south to Antarctica.

She would blow a bubble to the surface and the calf would follow. She would slap her pectoral fin on the water, the calf would do the same. She would hurl herself out of the water and breach right beside the boat, showing us the white underside of her belly. Before long her offspring tried to copy, with a clumsy but extremely cute half attempt out of the water.

To our surprise over the space of a few hours we saw a dramatic improvement in its technique.

By lunchtime, it was confidently embarking on a pirouette of five breaches in a row across the horizon.

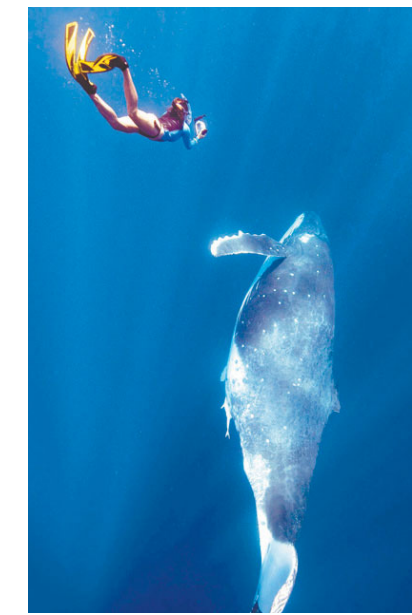
One of our guides, Adriana, who had moved to Tonga after several years working in the Galapagos, said it was the first time she had seen a female humpback teaching her baby such lessons.

Patience has never been my strong point, and it had been a disappointing two days of brief or lacklustre swims before hitting what our passionate volunteer guide Helen called a "diamond" day on day three.

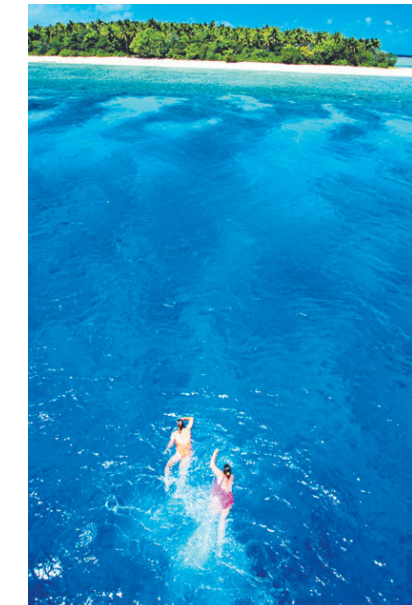
Only five people including the guide are permitted in the water at a time, so we are divided into three groups, and the boat must stay at least 100m away.

The first person to spot a whale is the first group offered the chance to swim with the whales, but my friend Sonya and I were usually too busy chatting on the top deck to be offered this advantage.

On the first day we had spotted



PLAY: A humpback whale swims with a young girl. Picture: Getty Images



TROPICAL TREAT: Enjoying Tonga's top conditions. Picture: Getty Images

INVITING: The warm waters around Tonga are great for swimming. Picture: Getty Images

whales after a couple of hours on the water, but as Kam refuses to chase them there is a lot of time spent idling to get them used to the sound of the engine. In this instance the mother, calf and her protective male escort, with an unusual all-black tail fluke, don't want to play.

In the afternoon we wait for a boat with a wildlife photographer on board to finish his work before it is our turn to swim with sleeping mum and her calf.

As the first group approaches, the calf raises its flipper and slaps it on the water as if to say a friendly "hello".

Under the water the gentle giant is

peacefully still, as her calf swims up to her and nuzzles her around the neck.

We are close enough to note her breathing and see remora fish picking parasites off her.

At one point, the calf begins to swim towards us and opens its mouth wide. Apparently, I didn't see it because another snorkeller swam sideways in front of me at that moment.

My second whale swim had also proven disappointing.

After what had seemed like an eternity waiting my turn, we get in and swim above a sleeping whale.

But visibility is poor and all I can see is a blurry patch of white beneath me.

But when the next group replaces us it wakes up and shoots to the surface – giving them a sensational encounter – before taking a deep dive.

This is not a holiday that comes with any guarantees. I am glad I booked a longer tour and I come to relish the mere adventure of the trip and appreciate how special the experiences we have had were, rather than greedily craving more.

If it is a bad day for whale swimming there are plenty of alternative activities.

On one such day we visit Swallows Cave, swimming into a large, deep cavern where the water is a deep electric-blue colour in parts.

The snorkelling is superb, with an array of sea cucumbers, large blue starfish, stingrays, clown fish, trigger fish, moray eels and colourful coral.

About 1000 whales come to Tonga each year and while the exact number is not known, a large proportion of those head to Va'vau. There are six Antarctic populations that migrate north to various tropical waters each year, travelling at an average speed of 7km/h.

These whales pass about 200km off the east coast of New Zealand and stay in the shallow waters to give birth and mate for about three months.

If they didn't make the journey the calves, born without blubber, would not survive the freezing waters.

The females grow up to 19m and can weigh 45 tonnes while the males grow to about 17.5m and calves are 4-6m long and weigh two tonnes at birth.

Some mothers bring their one-year-old calves with them but after that the offspring don't return until they are five and ready to mate themselves.

Where they go between the ages of one and four instead is a mystery.

While whaling in Australia was outlawed in 1963, it continued in Tonga until 1978.

By the late 1960s there were as few as 15 breeding pairs arriving annually to this "whale nursery".

While there has been a marked increase in the number of whales making the Australian migration, the Tongan population never fully recovered.

Tonga is one of only three places in the world you are allowed to swim with

whales, and during our trip I constantly wrestled with whether or not we should be here.

Some environmentalists vehemently oppose the practice.

But it is common for humans to snorkel with fish, to which we would appear giants.

New Zealand-born Rae Gill, who runs the tours, sees herself as a whale-loving conservationist, who wants to create awareness of these magnificent creatures.

She refuses to do day trips because she believes it puts too much pressure

Wish you were here

Need to know

**Cost:** A seven-day Paradise Island Adventure tour starts at \$3600 a person twin share and includes a welcome lunch and farewell dinner, five nights at Treasure Island E'u'eiki Eco Resort in the outer islands with meals and three nights at Mystic Sands Beach Bungalows with breakfast, six days on the boat with lunch, one day at leisure and boat and airport transfers in Tonga. Four-day tours are available from \$1600 a person.

When to go

Whaleswim tours run from late July to mid-October. August usually has the best weather, but the calves can be more playful later in the season.

Getting there

**Pacific Blue** ([www.flypacificblue.com](http://www.flypacificblue.com)) offers direct flights twice weekly from Sydney to the capital Nuku'alofa on the main island Tongatapu with fares starting from \$339 a person one way with connecting flights from other destinations across the Virgin Blue network. From there it is a 55-minute domestic flight to Neiafu in Vava'u with **Chathams Pacific** ([www.chathamspacific.com](http://www.chathamspacific.com)) then a boat to the outer islands. There are no international or domestic flights in Tonga on Sundays. Visas are not required for Australian passport holders.

**More:** [www.whaleswim.com](http://www.whaleswim.com) or ph 1800 629 306.

**Quirky fact:** Buderim ginger bears, which can be bought from Australian supermarkets, can help keep the tummy calm in choppy seas. It's a good idea to take a packet or two.

on operators to see whales, and from this year will only offer four and seven-day tours.

She says she would rather see the whale tourism industry here shut down than become over-commercialised.

It's something every individual must decide for themselves.

All-in-all, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience which I would recommend to anyone who likes their holidays filled with adventure, excitement, anticipation and unpredictability.

But you also need to have plenty of patience.

QUEEN MARY 2 & QUEEN ELIZABETH WORLD VOYAGES 2011

World Cruise 103 nights available from \$27,179 pp

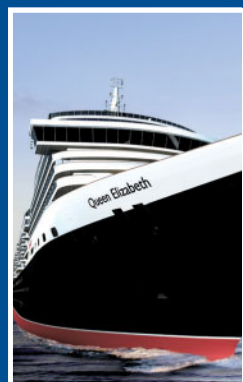
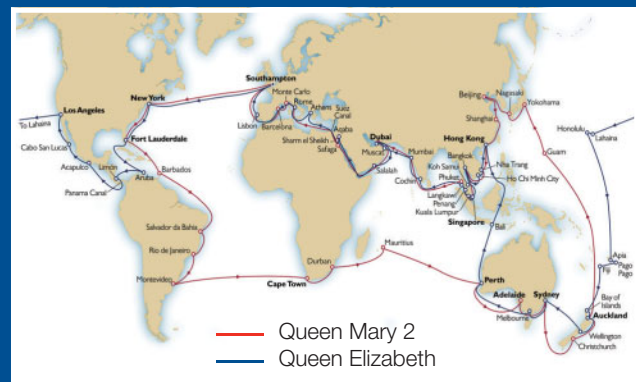


cruise europe in luxury at amazing value

Holland America Line Cruises



**QUEEN MARY 2 CUNARD**  
Sets sail from New York 13 January 2011  
15 Sector Voyages available from 12 to 96 nights  
Capetown to Adelaide • 15 nights departs Capetown 5 Feb 2011 Inside from \$3,899 pp



**QUEEN ELIZABETH CUNARD**  
Sets sail from Southampton 5 January 2011  
15 Sector Voyages available from 12 to 95 nights  
Sydney to Singapore • 16 nights departs Sydney 22 Feb 2011 Inside from \$5,312 pp



**Mediterranean Adventurer 20 nights back to back**  
Includes: Return economy airfare from Adelaide to Rome flying Cathay Pacific, 20 night cruise aboard Holland America Line's *ms Eurodam* or *ms Noordam* Rome Return.  
Departs 19 & 29\* April; 19 & 29\* August; 8, 18\* & 28 September 2010  
**Limited availability, book today!**  
from only \$5,499 pp twin share including taxes



**Ultimate Northern Europe 20 nights fly, cruise**  
Includes: Return economy airfare from Adelaide to London flying KLM Dutch Airlines, 20 night cruise aboard Holland America Line's *ms Eurodam* London Return.  
Departs 9 June 2010  
Also available Fjords & Highlands Adventure 18 nights from \$6,347 pp  
from only \$6,525 pp twin share including taxes

CUNARD: Fares are cruise only per person in AUD, based on complete twin accommodation in basic cabin categories, available at time of printing. Includes all taxes and charges subject to change. Supplements apply for other cabin categories. CUNARD has set aside cabins which are available at those fares. Once these cabins are sold, fares may revert to a higher fare. Subject to limited availability. \* Price based on QMS World Cruise departing New York. MED ADVENTURER: Airfare component based on Cathay Pacific's Qantas. For sale until 18.08.10. DEPARTURE: 01 APRIL - 22 MAR 10, 04 APRIL - 10 SEP 10. Additional accommodation may be necessary by flight schedule at additional cost to consumer. ULTIMATE EUROPE: Valid for new bookings only. Valid for sale until sold out. Prices are per person twin share and quoted in AUD. Prices are correct as at date of issue and are subject to availability, currency fluctuations and surcharges until final payment is received. Travel the World reserves the right to modify or withdraw this promotion at any time. Airfare is with N.M. Dutch Airlines based on economy class only. For sale until 20 Feb 2010. For departure times until 31 Oct 2010. Subject to availability. Booking Conditions and Phil Hoffmann Travel Schedule of Professionalism applies. EOE: TTA 61818-5 PHT14983 SM 10.10.10

