

DIVE

TONGA'S MAJESTIC OCEAN WORLD

Local whale guide checks out two adult humpback whales in Vava'u, Tonga.



Photos and Words by ROB DUNTON

Shuffling to the back of the boat wearing fins, swim mask and snorkel I take the final step of a 6,000 mile (9,600 km) journey into the vast Pacific Ocean. I enter the water quietly and as my head dips below the surface I hear the soft, melodic sound of a whale singing.

With lifelong friend Mark Rauch and two Australians who have returned to Tonga for the fourth year in a row, we snorkel along the surface following Paula 'Paul' Halahingano, our local guide. He sports a mama and baby whale tattoo on his chest and has a knack for spotting humpbacks in miles of open sea. I see nothing in the endless blue below while the rapturous whale song teases me from nowhere and everywhere.

Paul stops and points down toward the faint white fringe of a whale's long pectoral fin. He takes a large breath and kicks down for a closer look, growing smaller and dimmer as he descends. He slows to a stop, surveys the scene, then looks up toward our group and taps the tips of his fingers together, gesturing that there are two humpbacks nuzzling nose-to-nose almost 50 feet (17 meters) below us.

Humpback whales frequent the waters within ten miles of my home in California; on the day I write this our local whale watching outfitter spotted nine. Viewing whales is as easy as heading to the harbor for an afternoon tour, but what I see – what I experience close to home – is remote: a puff of mist, a tail or fin, and perhaps a rare breach, all witnessed above the waterline from the deck of a large boat. The opportunity to swim with these gentle giants made the decision to fly to the remote Vava'u islands in the Kingdom of Tonga an easy one: to be in crystal clear warm water, swimming eye-to-eye, witnessing how these whales glide beneath the sea, comfort their young and engage in mating rituals.

Below, the two still humpbacks begin to move without perceptible effort. The female rises vertically, her tail pointing directly toward the surface. The male follows, gracefully encircling her body in a sort of slow motion dance. As the whales rise toward us, the male's mating song grows louder and the details of their bodies, eyes and markings become more distinct. They circle and roll together, using their pectoral fins as wings to fly through their aquatic environment. Here in the open ocean, these two can go in any direction but choose to come our way. What looked big at 50 feet below grows massive as they approach. At 39 to 52 feet long (12–16 meters) and weighing 30 to 50 tons, each humpback is about five times the size of a full grown elephant. Yet Paul remains relaxed and calm. I trust his years in the water and stay still as the two bus-sized animals come directly toward us. Now just 20 feet (6m) away, our group of surface swimmers is at their mercy and their grace. The female dips her head to adjust the trajectory of her ascent and sails beneath me while the magnificent male glides past my left. I stare in awe and make a clear connection with the whale's eye as it passes. It gives me a jolt as if a rock star or President has singled me out in a crowd with a wink and a smile. The whales continue to the surface and are lost in churning bubbles, taking breaths before continuing their mating dance beneath the sea.

After six hours on the water scouting and swimming with whales, we motor back through the lush limestone islands of this Polynesian archipelago. In the calm waters of Port of Refuge we dock at the marina at Neiafu, Vava'u's largest town (pop. 6,000). Along the road back to Flying Annie Moa, our friendly bed-and-breakfast, cars move at a leisurely pace, slowing for dogs and piglets that roam free. Children walk home from school in blue and white uniforms, some with ta'ovala, a wrap woven of pandanus leaves around the waist, the traditional and most respectful form of local dress. Harmonious choir singing floats down from one of the town's many churches as trade winds rustle plumeria and hibiscus blossoms that cheer up weathered houses along the way. A dozen guests at our B&B decide to meet up for dinner at one of the handful of restaurants in town, and we share stories of travels and other whale encounters.

Mark and I spend the next four days exploring Tonga's warm, cerulean waters that offer an average visibility of 60 to 120 feet (20–40 meters). Each morning we board one of Beluga Diving's custom boats with a small

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Lynda Sutherland (AUS), Mark Rauch (USA), Paula "Paul" Halahingano (guide) and Sally Gordon (AUS) enjoy a break at Treasure Island resort on Eueiki Island, Vava'u, Tonga.



Two snorkelers explore a morphing ball of bait fish in Swallow's Cave.



Clownfish enjoy a safe haven in a sea anemone's tentacles.

Fotula dive site, located near the mouth of Port of Refuge, is a towering limestone pinnacle that drops 100' (30 meters) to the sand below.



group of water and nature enthusiasts from around the globe: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China and Austria to name a few. As we navigate through Vava'u's scenic islands, we see whale puffs, breaches and fin slaps. Occasionally a whale will come for a closer look at us, rolling on its side to check out our boat as one long pectoral fin waves above the surface. Many whales show no interest and continue on. Others share our curiosity and allow us to see their lives up close as they watch us. We swim with various pods of whales in twos, threes and fours and spend more than half an hour swimming alongside a solitary whale shark, a gentle filter-feeder with stunning markings.

Mid-week, Mark and I take a day to scuba dive some of Tonga's reefs and underwater caves. The geologic process that formed Vava'u's lava and limestone islands created caves, tunnels and pinnacles that are home to a variety of dramatic dive sites and healthy reefs. Our first dive is at a rugged rock pinnacle named Fotula near the mouth of Port of Refuge. We enter the clear warm waters and descend along vertical walls and rock overhangs covered by soft and hard corals. As we approach the bottom almost 100 feet down (27 to 30 meters), we explore caves and a natural tunnel carved into the rock. On our dives we find sea anemones and clown fish, a wide collection of sea fans and large, swirling school of baitfish.

For the final day, we return to the whales. Our captain gets a radio call about a friendly mother and baby whale 20 minutes out. As we arrive, the reporting boat finishes its swim and moves on. Wetsuited up, we slip into the water and find a mother and its two-to-four week old baby. While the mother stays below an average of 15 minutes, the one ton pup returns to the surface to breathe every few minutes and to practice fin slaps, spy-

hopping and spins before returning to the cover of mama's pectoral fin to eat. Each time the babe returns to the surface, it circles closer and closer, curious about the masked mammals above. In this moment I know I'll return to Tonga and its azure waters, equally curious and now connected to the friendly mammals that live below.

Author's Note: Tonga's whale swimming season runs from July to October with peak months (for both sightings and business) in August and September. While whale interactions are frequent, they are not guaranteed. Humpbacks in Tonga are wild. Longer stays increase your odds of more and better interactions. The quantity and quality of interactions is heavily dependent on the quantity of whales in the area at a given time, their willingness to interact, and luck. Swimmers should be prepared for snorkeling in open, deep and often choppy seas, with extensive kicking to get to and keep up with the whales as they move.

Tonga's government has formally sanctioned rules and regulations to ensure respectful and sustainable whale watching and swimming occurs: only four swimmers and a licensed guide are allowed in the water at a time with any group of whales, and snorkelers can swim no closer than 30 feet (10 meters) to a whale (unless, of course, the whale chooses to swim to them). All outfitters and guides must be licensed.

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