



WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Witnessing Humpback Whales Fight for Love

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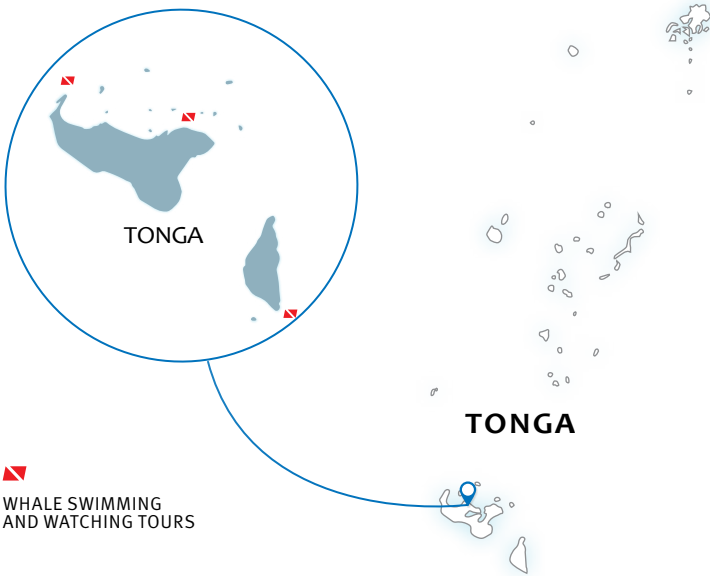
Humpback whales slapping their tails

It was the last day of an incredible Tonga whale trip aboard the well-known dive vessel *Nai'a*. The sea had turned rough, the winds blustery. After cruising all morning, hoping for one last encounter, we had finally given up and began packing away our gear. Then, there came the familiar cry: “Whales!” What appeared to be several whales, with perhaps a mother and calf, had been spotted in the distance. With 45 minutes to spare, several of us jumped at the chance of an encounter and sped off. As we approached, the water became alive with splashing, jostling whales – two males were fighting over a female with her calf in tow.

We entered the water and approached the melee cautiously. The calf, disturbed by the aggressive behaviour of its mother’s suitors, swam past us and away from the violent situation. As we neared about 15 metres, one of the males went head-down and raised his huge tail high into the air and repeatedly slammed it onto the water’s surface. Each impact was a loud, jarring “whump!” that I could feel through my entire body. I cautiously edged in – these were adult whales, some 12 metres long – until I was close enough for the underwater view of this amazing situation.

Over the next 30 minutes, the whales would disappear into the dark water, then suddenly appear again, giving me tantalising glimpses of the competition. At one point, noting a movement well below me – it was the flash of a white-edged pectoral fin that caught my attention. I realised that there were only two whales. One suitor had apparently won out, and the reigning male and female were swimming closely together, quickly passing out of sight into the murk.

Individuals were as much as 12 metres long



WHALE SWIMMING AND WATCHING TOURS





The exciting encounter lasted for around half an hour



“My last unforgettable memories of this breathtaking encounter were of foam and bubbles streaming from his rapidly-descending body, and his tail turning slightly to avoid me as it came down hard, the wake of the powerful thrust lifting me gently, up and away”

After a while, alone and having not seen the whales again, I began to accept that the encounter had ended. Then I noticed vague shapes and movements down deep, along the edge of a sheer reef wall. Freediving, I found the two whales, suspended closely side-by-side in the water at about 16–18 metres, gently caressing each other. They didn’t seem to mind my presence, allowing me to shoot from only metres away in the dark water.

As I headed upwards from my fifth or sixth trip, I realised the whales were slowly following. The male ascended

from directly below me, and I began to think I was going to end up on his back. To my delight (or perhaps, relief), with the female just beyond him, he gave me an eye-to-eye look from just over a metre away. As he broke the surface, he quickly raised his massive tail to dive. My last unforgettable memories of this breathtaking encounter were of foam and bubbles streaming from his rapidly-descending body, and his tail turning slightly to avoid me as it came down hard, the wake of the powerful thrust lifting me gently, up and away. [SDA](#)

After my last freedive to the whales, they followed me up for a very close look