



# The Humpback Whales of TONGA

Having dreamed of doing so for years, **Al Hornsby** finally shares some in-water time with humpbacks and is expectedly blown away

Photographs by AL HORNSBY, KEVIN BAILEY AND HEIDI FINN

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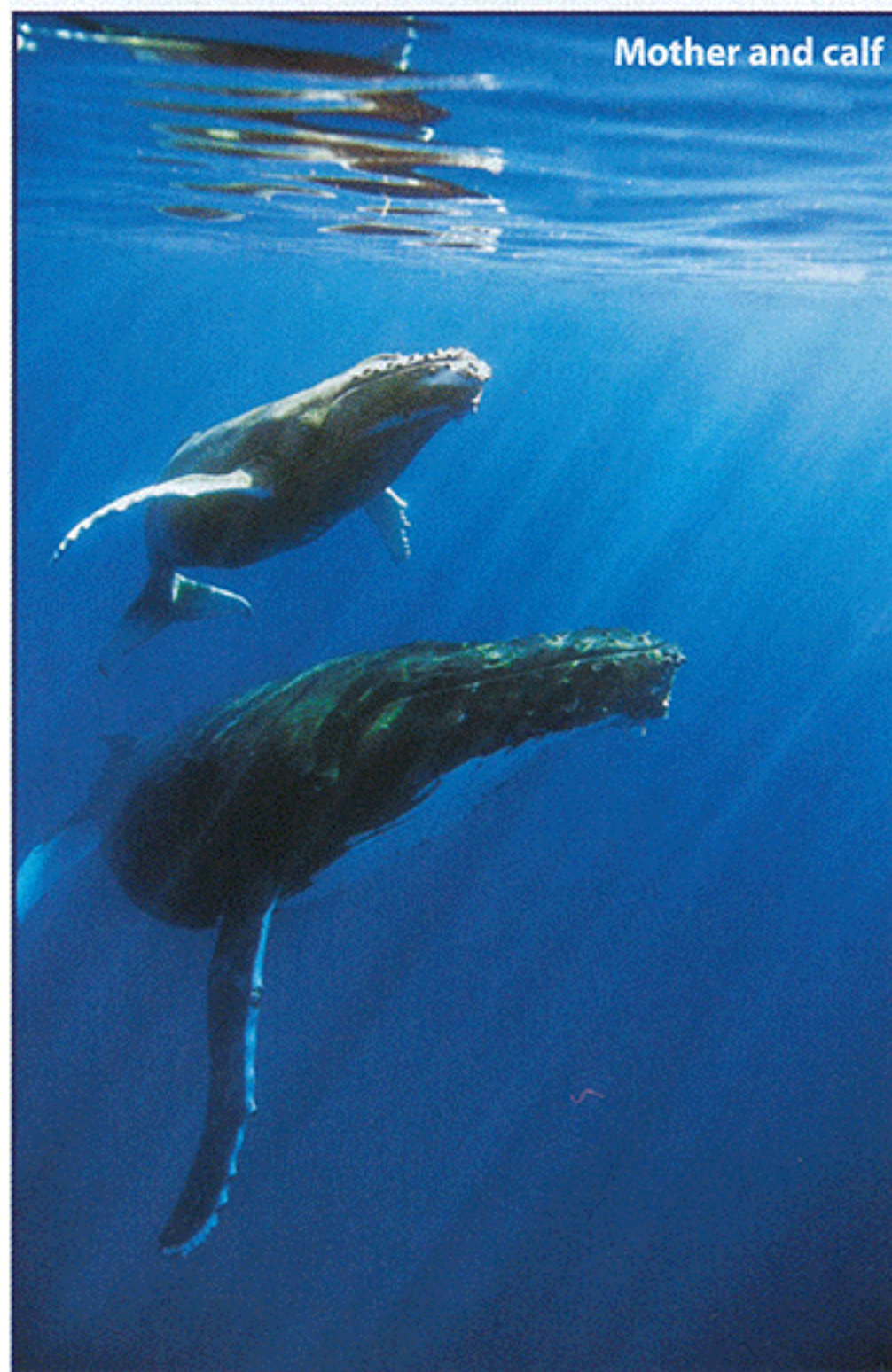


**H**aving arrived in Tonga the evening before, in mid-afternoon we - a mixed group of 18, including both divers and whale-lovers from around the globe - begin the 72 nautical mile, nine-hour run from the capital, Nuku'alofa, to the Ha'apai Islands Group, where we'll spend the next nine days searching for and interacting with humpback whales. Our ship, the Nai'a, is a 37-metre-long, deep-hulled steel vessel, which quickly shows itself to be an extremely stable craft, handling even wind-blown, open-ocean seas with scarcely any detectable roll or heave. Nai'a, based in Fiji for most of each year, has carried out voyages to Tonga for whale season since 1996 and has considerable experience and expertise with in-water whale encounters. En route, we learn about humpbacks and what we could expect throughout our voyage (and, as I was pleased to discover, even my most grand imaginings were to quickly prove paltry, indeed).



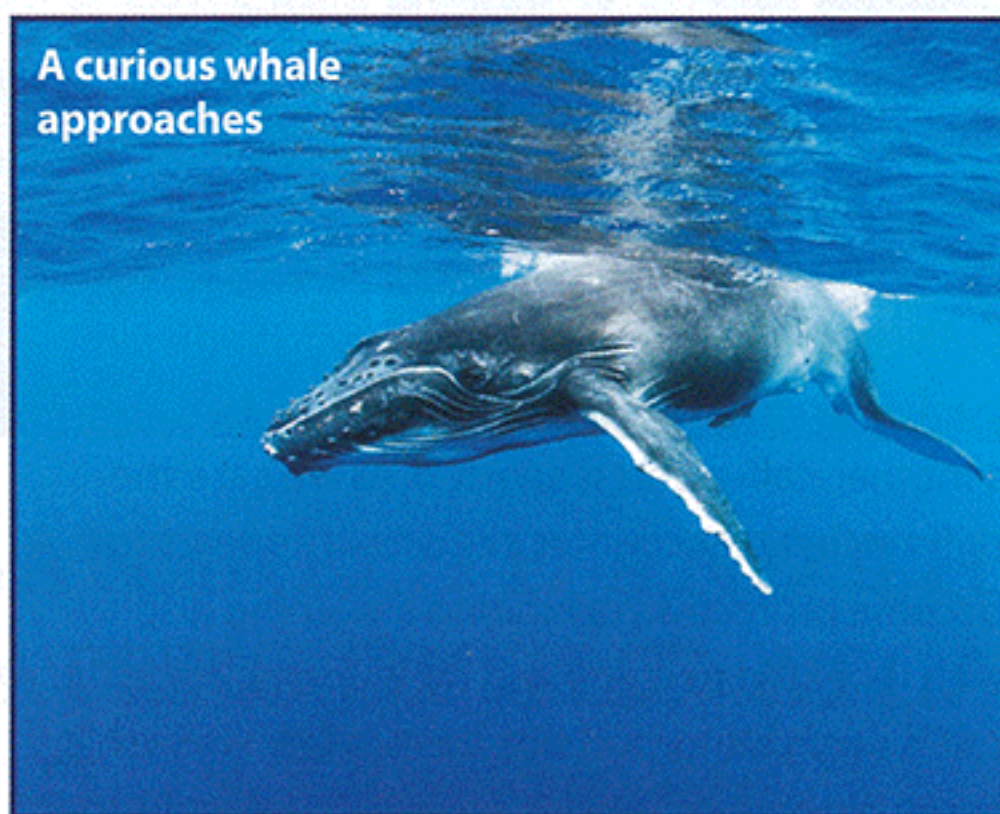
Snorkellers prepare to enter the water

**"For ten breath-taking minutes, we watch as the calf moves back and forth between us and the adult whales"**



Mother and calf

Once in the Ha'apai Group, our routine would be simple - beginning each morning just after day-break, the ship would slowly cruise, looking for whales. When whales showed interest in the ship or a willingness to be approached, we would quickly board our two inflatable skiffs and move in carefully for in-water (on snorkel) encounters. Nai'a's experienced Fijian and Tongan crew proved incredibly adept at spotting and approaching whales; our two divemasters were equally expert in leading close, in-water encounters. Each late afternoon, if no encounters were occurring, a reef scuba dive and a night dive would be provided (though, several



A curious whale approaches

Tonga's humpback tribe consists of more than 2,300 whales. They live and feed - chiefly on swarms of krill - in Antarctica, swimming some 5,000km to Tonga each year to spend July to October giving mating and giving birth. Once the newborn calves, some five metres long and weighing one to two tons at birth, are strong enough for the arduous return trip, they head back. After they leave Antarctica each year, the whales do not feed for approximately five months until their return (calves are the great exception, enjoying some 100 gallons a day of their mothers' thick, fatty milk until they mature enough to feed themselves).

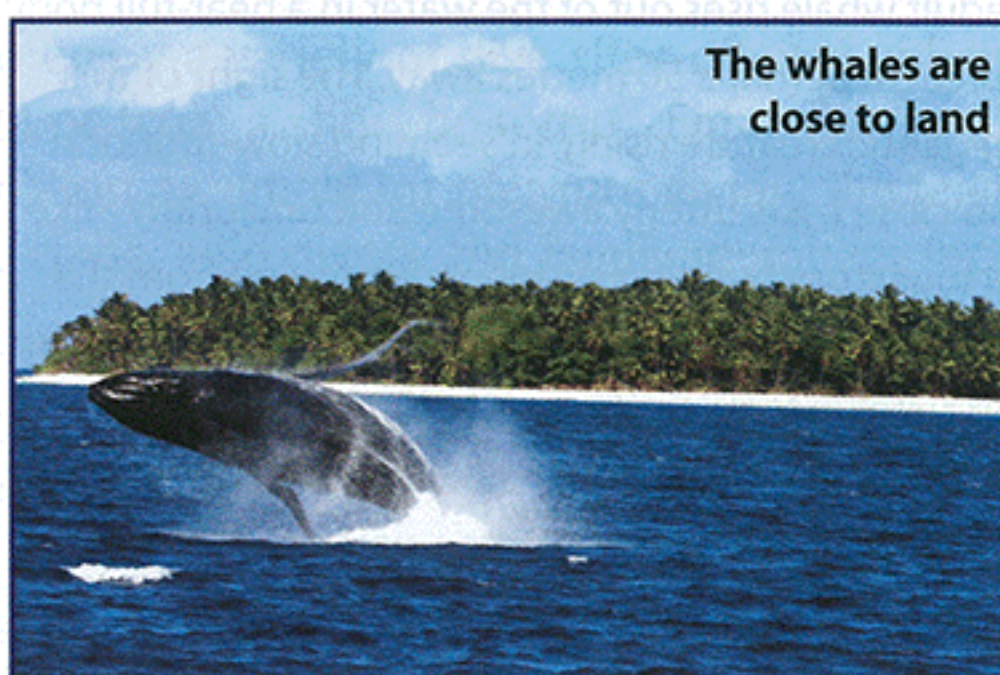


Breaching

afternoons, whale encounters ran on into sunset - only a few people ever decided to stop for a dive, although it was always offered).

On our first morning, after many far-off sightings (a massive humpback breaching - leaping out of the water - and its huge splash can be spotted from surprising distances), we find our first whale group that allows us to approach. The whales seem unconcerned with the ship, and we follow closely. They are rowdy and aggressive, apparently three males competing for a female, in what's known as a 'heat-run'. The males display, slapping their tails on the water, breaching, slapping their five meter-long pectoral fins and jostling each other, trying to be the nearest to the female. Visually, it's incredible, watching these 15-metre-long, 40 ton behemoths exhibit such wild behaviour. When it's clear they show no intention of avoiding us, we quickly board the skiffs for our first in-water encounter.

Since they are constantly moving, the



The whales are close to land



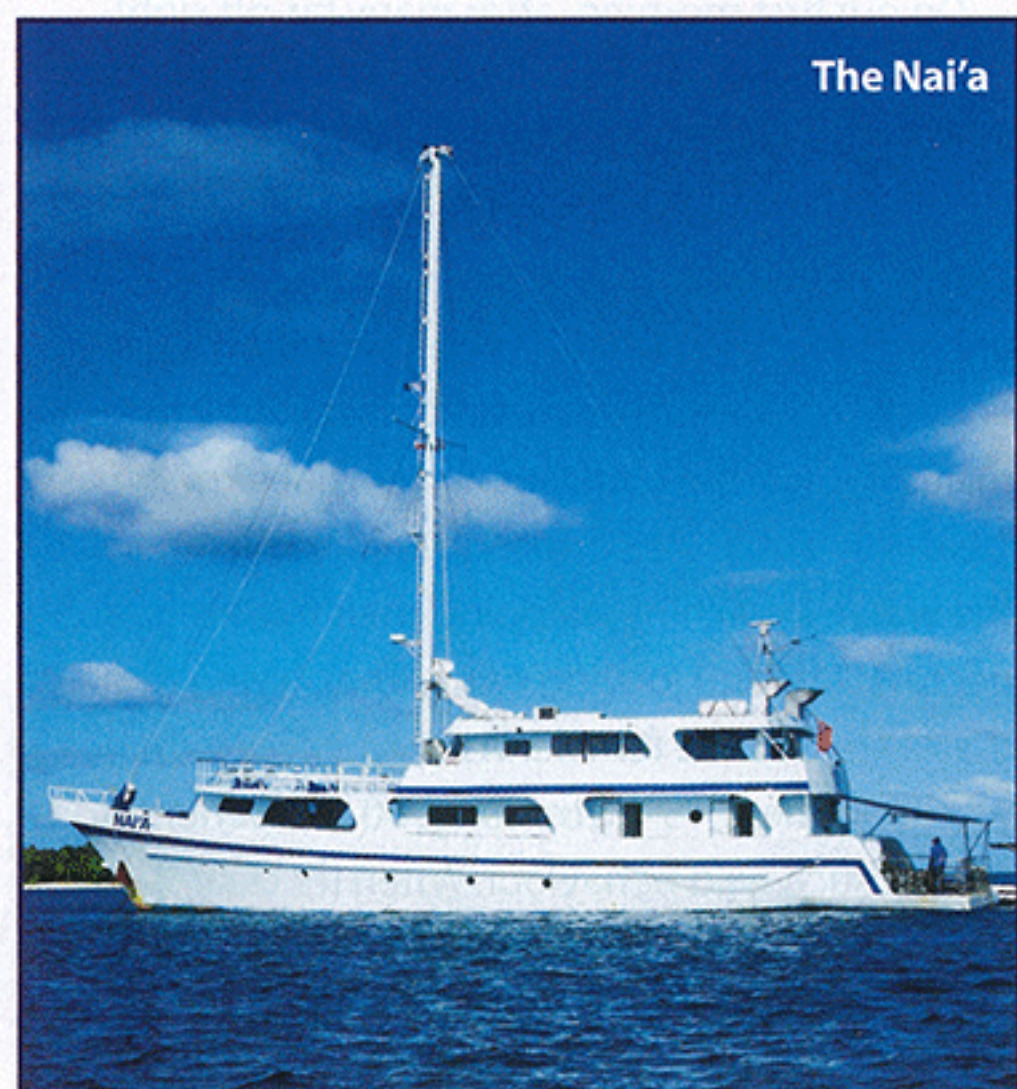


encounters will be 'fly-bys', moving in close and our dropping in, in their path. Up close, it's high-adrenaline, with their wild behaviours occurring at times just metres away from us, huge tails raised above us in our low skiffs, with spray and their exhalations splashing down upon us. When the time seems right, we slip in, at first seeing nothing but deep, blue water. Then, there is a hint of motion and a sudden flash of white, pectoral fins as three huge whales, shoulder to shoulder, swoop by just below us. In a moment they are gone, leaving us wide-eyed and whooping with excitement at our first in-water experience with humpbacks.

After several such fly-bys, as their rowdiness increases, our divemasters make the call - the whales have become too rough and unpredictable; although they show no malice towards us, in their wildness an accidental brush by one of these huge animals would be disastrous. We return to Nai'a to search for calmer whales.

In late-afternoon, we spot what we quickly learn can provide the ideal situation for in-water encounters - a mother and calf. When a mother becomes comfortable with the ship and the skiffs, magic can happen. The calves tend to be curious and often unafraid of approaching people in the water, and the mothers let them explore their growing independence. On this occasion, it's even more interesting - there is also an escort, another adult whale, which can be a male or female that serves as a protector.

During a more than two-hour series of encounters, at one point the escort and mother hang suspended vertically at about 15m, while the calf makes repeated approaches to us, giving me pictures from only a few metres away. Nearing sunset, as they begin to finally show signs of moving away, I freedive down to the adult whales as the calf moves in to rest on top of the mother's head. I take several photographs, close to them in the cool, dim light, surreal moments I'll never forget; they regard me serenely, then move slowly off, one of their massive



The Nai'a



Whales perform in front of the Nai'a



Close encounter



Tail slapping

tails passing just two metres away from me in its downward arc, the pressure wave gently lifting me off and away.

So goes day one.

For the next eight days, while each is different, there is really no let-down. On another day, again a mother-calf-escort is spotted. As we ease the skiffs in for an encounter, the escort appears to become protective, exhibiting a warning display with repeated pectoral and tail-slaps; perhaps the calf is very young, perhaps there is fear we wish it harm. We pause the skiffs and wait. Suddenly, the adult whale rises out of the water in a near-full body breach, perhaps 50 metres away. The sight of this gigantic creature rising, in seeming slow-motion, so close by, is utterly awesome and unworldly - like a four story building suddenly emerging from the sea, only to hang for a moment, then to crash down in a massive spray of water, in all directions.

We wait patiently as the whale calms down, with no need to rush, no desire to upset the mother and calf. Finally, we enter the water and slowly approach the threesome resting at the surface. For

ten breath-taking minutes, we watch as the calf moves back and forth between us and the adult whales. Eventually, the escort decides we've seen enough, and it moves toward us, stopping, blocking our path to - and our view of - the mother and calf. After a short while, it pointedly lets us know we are no longer welcome; it goes vertical, raises its tail up and begins slapping the water in loud, percussive slaps. It is a stunning display; after several minutes of thrilled enjoyment, we climb back into the skiff, happy to give the humpback whales their peace and solitude.

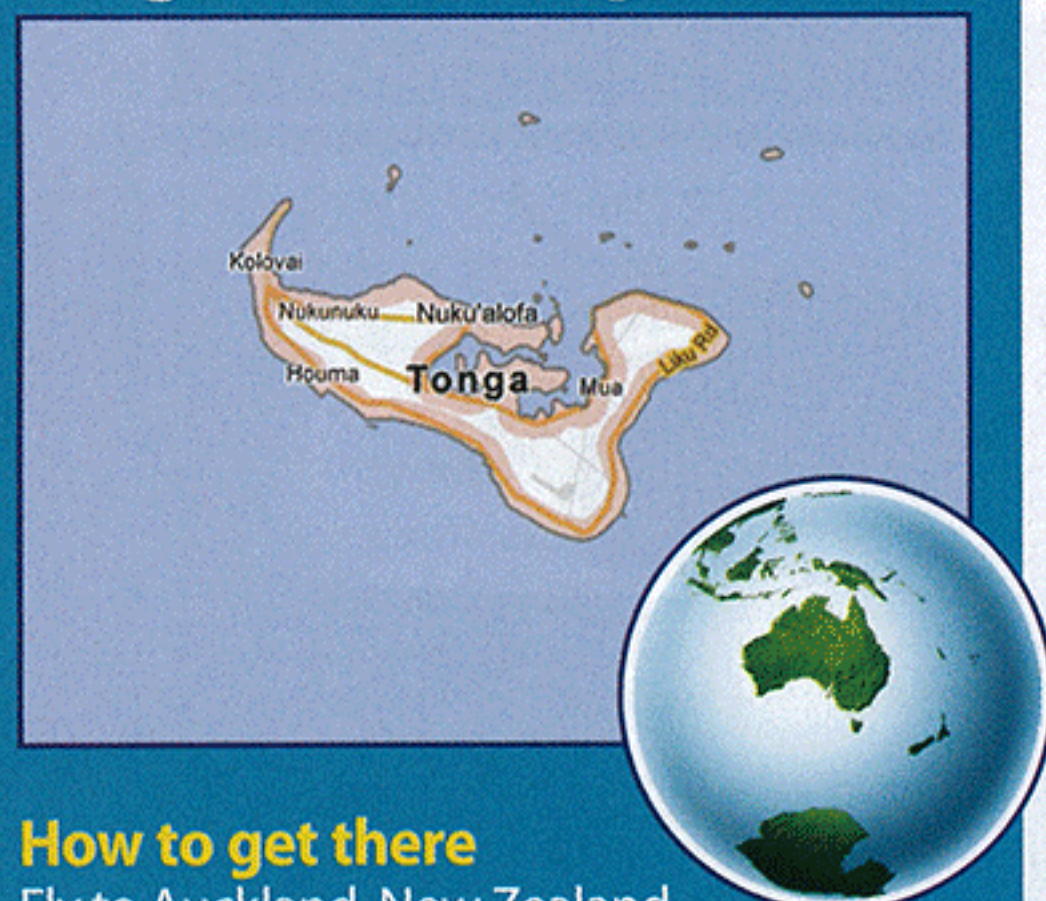
Early one morning later in the cruise, a mother and calf give us a most beatific experience. At sitting down to breakfast, just after dawn, the crew calls out that they have spotted a mother and calf sleeping on the surface, just a few hundred metres away. We jump into the skiffs and slowly approach them. They awaken, but don't move away. Quietly slipping into the water, I'm afforded a view that, for all the world, looks like a painting, in gigantic scale... clear, blue water, the early morning's sun's rays slanting across





# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

## Kingdom of Tonga



### How to get there

Fly to Auckland, New Zealand and connect to Tonga via Air New Zealand; or fly to Fiji and connect via Air Pacific.

### When to go

Year around; for whale season, from July through September.

**"There is nothing to do but to float motionless, to simply soak in one of the most lovely, ethereal scenes I've ever witnessed"**

### Entry requirements

A valid passport with six months before expiry.

### Currency

Tongan Pa'ang (£1 = 3TOP). US Dollar widely accepted also.

### Where to eat and meet

Food on the Nai'a is served in the dining area or on deck, al fresco-style, though you have the opportunity to sample some local cuisine during the many island visits on offer during the liveaboard trip.

### Where to meet

You are on a liveaboard, so your options are limited - thankfully, the lounge and deck on the Nai'a offers up some stunning views while you sup a well-deserved apres-dive beverage.



**SPORT DIVER VERDICT**

This really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for both divers and non-divers alike - if you are into big animals, this is the trip for you!

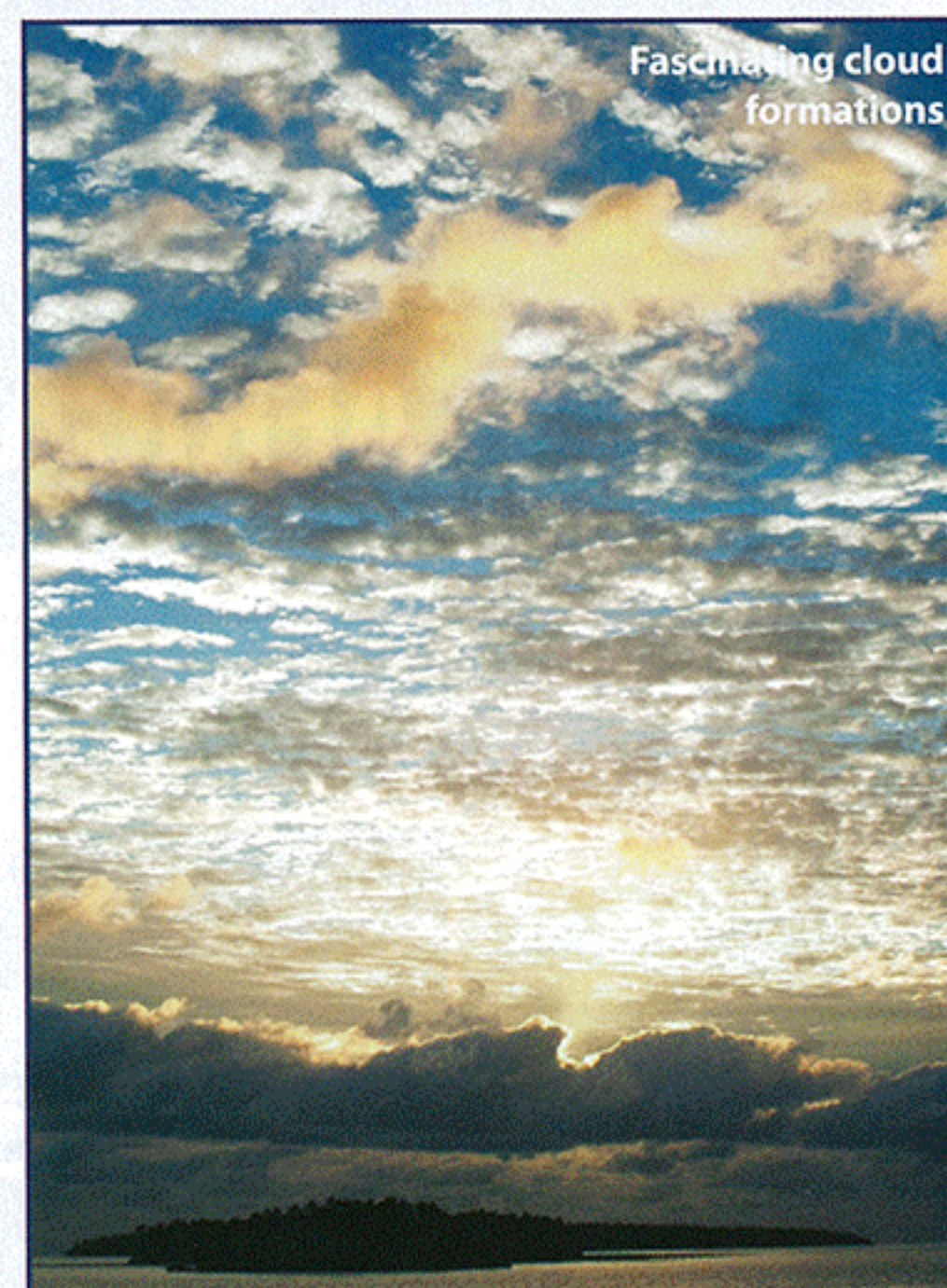


Stunning sunset

in soft beams, a mother humpback whale resting motionless a few metres below the surface, her calf nestling gently against her side. As I watch, the calf goes to the surface for a quick breath, then comes back down to snuggle against its mama. There is nothing to do but to float motionless, to simply soak in one of the most lovely, ethereal scenes I've ever witnessed. Fortunately, I do also remember to aim my camera and press the shutter periodically. As they finally begin to move away, they swim downwards slightly, then glide back upwards as they turn my way, the two of them almost touching me as they pass at the surface.

On an afternoon toward the end of our tour, Nai'a approaches a mother and calf on the surface. It seems to be lessons-day for the calf, and we follow along, fascinated, as the mother exhibits a behaviour, and the calf repeats it and practices. For nearly two hours, we watch mother breach, swim the back-stroke, spy-hop (standing vertically with the head and eyes out of the water) perform tail and pectoral slaps and more. After each manoeuvre, it is the calf's turn, and there are repeated attempts at baby-breaches, baby back-strokes, baby spy-hops and baby slaps. When the calf becomes tired, it swims over to ride on mother's back for a while, then takes up the lessons once more. Periodically, baby comes over to the side of Nai'a and gives us a look, as if making sure we are watching. You can bet we were.

The full, exciting days passed quickly, as they always do on great dive trips, but the experiences we had had in Tonga were numerous, and frankly, astounding. We had multiple whale encounters every day, with only two days without an in-water session. Added to this were island visits, interesting reef and night dives, and even a genuine Fijian kava party, complete with singing and guitar-playing late into the night by a talented crew and a (perhaps



Fascinating cloud formations

less-talented but equally enthusiastic) number of guests.

Those days with the humpback whales of Tonga were an utterly unique experience. After years of thinking about making this voyage, I had very lofty hopes, but uncertain expectations. The very thought of being in the water, up close, with these huge, beautiful whales - and even possibly their calves - was something almost beyond imagination. Well, I'll happily say it again - those hopeful imaginings were nowhere near the incredible reality. Now, that's truly special. ■

Al was assisted on this article by the dive vessel, Nai'a. [www.naia.com.fj](http://www.naia.com.fj)

For a comprehensive list of tour operators, check out: [www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators](http://www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators)