

# Whales play to the tune of human chorus

By Robert S. Wood

BAJA, Mexico – Do whales seek human playmates?

The adventure company brochure didn't quite claim they did, but it intriguingly reported that many a mama gray whale saw fit to bring her newborn 1 ton baby up to visit small open boats in a Mexican lagoon, even sometimes allowing the babies to be "petted."

My wife, Deanne, and I had been in the ocean with dolphins and swam with sharks, manta rays, seals, turtles and schools of friendly toe-nibbling fish. So why not whales? We signed up.



Reaching to touch whales near Baja. Photos/Robert S. Wood

After departing from San Diego, it took our old Mexican bus two days to descend the Baja peninsula of Mexico 500 miles to the salt company mining town of Guerrero Negro near Scammon's Lagoon, halfway down Baja. The next morning we drove on roads paved with salt past evaporating salt ponds to the waiting boats. Twenty-four of us piled out of the bus, donned life jackets and climbed into two 18-foot open fishing boats called

pangas, powered by big outboard motors. We then set off at high speed to look for playful whales, feeling a little silly about what we were doing.

The lagoon was nothing like I'd imagined. There wasn't so much as a cactus in sight, never mind grass or trees, just salt, sea and gleaming white sand dunes sandwiched between blue water and sky. The glare was terrific. When we reached the whale watching grounds, the lagoon looked more like open ocean with only one distant shoreline in sight. But the whales were there – 1,600 of them had been counted the previous week, including a white whale, great-grandson of Moby. They were peacefully cruising at a respectable half-mile distance. We saw their spouts, we saw sleek black backs emerge for a few seconds when they came up for air. But the closest was probably 300 yards away. Big deal.

After two hours of bobbing, waiting and watching – our allotted viewing time almost up – some of us in frustration began to jokingly call out to them, "Come on, whaleys. Don't be afraid. We're your friends. We won't bite. Look, no harpoons. Bring us your pretty babies!" We were feeling more foolish by the minute.

Then suddenly a huge black streaming back, twice the size of the boat, reared up from the deep, not 10 feet away, and looked us over. We gasped in awe. It was as big as our bus. As we gaped, the Mexican captain beside me tapped my shoulder, pointing down and said "Baby! Mama and baby."

Not 3 feet from the boat lay the head of a 2-ton "baby" whale, also bigger than the boat.

I lunged to the rail, dropping to my knees, yelled "Baby here!" and reached out as far as I could. Incredibly, I touched smooth, soft wet whale forehead. It felt like hard wet rubber. Immediately, my 11 companions joined me at the rail, which tipped the boat alarmingly and we shipped a little

water. I glanced at the captain but he just smiled and started bailing.

About half of us had touched at least once before the whales moved away and it was time to go. We rocketed back to the dock and our bus. The other boat, it turned out, had not even seen a whale up close, but its envious grumbling occupants admitted they hadn't resorted to calling for them.

After a night in the date palm oasis of the nearby village of San Ignacio, we set forth for another lagoon favored by calving grays. This time conditions were less inviting. We rose in the chilly dark and rode the bus on a bumpy dirt road to San Ignacio Lagoon, a hundred miles south of Scammon's. It was barely light when we reached the end of the road at a lonely shell beach. The sky was solid cloud and windy. There was no boat ramp or dock. The tide was out and there were white caps. Pangas were bobbing in the shallows a hundred yards offshore. So we rolled up our pants and waded out to the boats to begin another high-speed ride to the whales.

When we stopped, there wasn't a whale in sight and our boat was lurching uncomfortably, so we promptly proceeded to get silly. We chanted nursery rhymes, sang songs from kindergarten, substituting whale lyrics. We rendered rounds of "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the lagoon." We yelled, we begged, we laughed at each others puns and entreaties, we flattered and pleaded, called out endearing terms. Deanne in the bow delivered a continuous stream of melodious welcome. Even the Mexican captain, smiling at our antics, sang a whale song in Spanish.

This time we didn't have to wait. Whales have good hearing and they quickly appeared around us. Always mamas with babies, never males. It was a clear case of, "If you call, they will come."

Before our two hours were up, three mama whales had brought us

their babies, one brought a pair. Though we couldn't help ridiculously personifying and judging their actions and intent, it seemed clear that the mamas somehow wanted their babies to meet us, to connect, to be touched, strange as that seemed.

Though these huge creatures often touched the boat, it was never more than a gentle nudge. They could easily have turned us over or sunk us with ease, with a flick of that gigantic tail, as the whalers of yesteryear well knew when their boats were smashed to splinters. I asked the captain if that ever happened. "*Nunca*" (never) he assured me.

When our time was up and we returned to shore, we again found the other boat had had only one brief encounter and were even more envious, vowing that tomorrow they were going with Deanne. Someone called her the Whale Whisperer.

For our third and final voyage we returned to Scammon's Lagoon. On the way a lively young Mexican guide named Edgar verified our growing suspicions that whales wanted to interact with us but were highly sensitive to vibes given off by boaters, dependably drawn to the happy ones.

"Otherwise, why would they come to us?" he asked, "They seem to like excited children best, then expressive women. They seem to prefer higher voices. I've come to believe they love open, free independent creatures like themselves. Remember, they're wild and unspoiled, unrestrained even joyful.

"So your best chance of making contact is to be happy like them. You can attract them from far away with a simpatico frequency of happy vibrations. I find they stay away from people who are angry, rigid or unhappy. Can you blame them? I often see the mamas actually push their babies up to the boats they like. They seem to want their calves to make human contact before they leave the lagoon to begin that 4,000-mile swim to the arctic to feed. Don't ask me why."



Whales come to boats – once beckoned to do so.

He added, “But one thing I do know, if they didn’t want our company, you’d never see more than a distant spout. ”

Remembering that last voyage brings tears to my eyes, not just for the whales but for the wonderful group camaraderie that developed. Everyone wanted to be in the boat with Deanne who outdid herself in a continuous welcoming, loving out reach to the whales. Now that we knew how to attract them, they quickly came. Boy, did they come! We soon lost count of the numbers of touches we enjoyed. Baby whales were with us for most of our two hours.

Thirty-five ton mothers the size of locomotives swam directly at us and smoothly dove beneath the boat, missing it by inches, coming up on the other side, but we felt no anxiety. Instead we felt a wonderful sense of harmony, wellbeing, even love freely exchanged with our massive fellow creatures. Whales stood on their tails, 10 feet of their heads sticking out of water, in an amusing pose called “spyhopping,” recalling sentinel Meer cats or lookout prairie dogs. It was thrilling to make eye contact with a whale eye the size of a bowling ball.

In the course of two hours I looked down into blowholes, marveling at the workings of that intricate dinner plate sized muscle. Babies teased us by spouting in our faces. Mothers blew from just underwater, sending up gushing fountains of seawater. More than once a whale blew within 3 feet, sending

rainbows of spray over us, wetting us and our cameras with an earthy smelling warm whale exhaust. But we didn't care.

Everyone was laughing, exclaiming at the miracle taking place. We were torn between the desire to touch and rub and stroke – and taking pictures. Since whale movements were sudden and unpredictable, good pictures were rare. Before we were done I shook hands with a baby whale fluke the size of a car door, caressed soft whale lips, stroked whale backs, rubbed the rough looking but smooth rings of barnacles that already decorated the backs of two ton babies. I held my hand above a blowhole to feel the heat before it closed, all the while jabbering my appreciation of what was happening.

The whales seemed to reciprocate our glee. They seemed to be playing with us, teasing us, sometimes holding themselves 2 or 3 inches beyond our reach, as though laughing at us. I countered this gambit by reaching about 6 inches short of full extension to foil the tease, then suddenly extending to make contact, laughing when I succeeded. You could feel the mutual trust and deep enjoyment. It was a high-energy orgy of physical and emotional connection between two not so distant species. It was like playing with giant kittens or puppies. It was thrilling in ways hard to understand, much less convey. And we weren't the only lucky ones. From a passing boat, a woman jubilantly called out, "I kissed a whale!"

Then suddenly it was time to go. We called and waved goodbye to our wild friends from the deep who promptly sank out of sight. Back in the bus for the long drive home – still high – we compared impressions. Even the most skeptical agreed the whales had indeed been playful, apparently enjoying themselves as much as we did. I found myself imagining them discussing the welcoming siren song of Deanne.

Looking back as we drove north we had come to them and reached out, and they had responded. They came to us because they wanted to, for whatever reason. Perhaps they had some dim

racial memory of that distant time when they walked the land on legs and interacted with other creatures. Maybe that somehow stirred in them an urge to connect. Whatever it was, we were deeply grateful for the chance to frolic with descendents of our common ancestors, gaining a wider perspective on the kinship of life on earth.

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