

WHALE



17 July, 2003 diary by Shirley Apthorp (Berlin-based music journalist on holidays at the Great Barrier Reef) *used with permission of the author.*

It's the fifth day of the trip, and by morning, our captain John was getting anxious. After our night dive at Pixie's Gardens, he'd taken us overnight quite a distance south to where other boats had reported recent whale sightings. Nobody had anticipated as few sightings as we'd had; it was their first trip in eight years, they said, where they'd had such bad luck with the whales.

After our morning dive, it was straight on out to sea in search of whales. John sat in the wheel-house, forehead furrowed in anxiety, chanting, "Come on, Minkies!" while the rest of us stood or sat around the upper deck, staring at the surface of the sea until our vision blurred.

Suddenly Alastair, our resident Minke researcher, from his perch up on the roof, cried, "Breach! Breach!" and sure enough, out there amidst the white tops of the waves, there was an extra white plume. But that was all. Everything was calm again, and we stared at the waves until we could imagine we saw dark shadows between them.

Then, suddenly, "Minke on the port bow!"

The long grey body rolled past just centimeters from the boat, breached with a languid arch of its back just in front of us, turned and passed again. I tore on my wet-suit as fast as I could, and was first in line, splashing into the water directly behind Alastair.

The snorkelers are put out on two ropes which stream back from the boat in the current, with strict orders to hold on and move as little as possible. "Swimming with the whales" sounds all very well, but the whales are not really comfortable around free-swimming, active people, and will keep their distance. If the snorkelers are strung out along a rope and float calmly in one spot, the whales will come much closer; they are reassured by the predictable position of the people, and come nearer with each successive pass.

I'd seen it all on video the night before, but I was still quite unprepared for the enormity of the encounter when it happened. This vast, elegant, grey-and-white patterned creature comes swimming along directly underneath you, not more than six metres away. You hold your breath, afraid to move, turn your head slightly and see another, passing on a slightly different angle, just as close. For a time you hang suspended above the bottomless blue water, astonished and jubilant, but shouts on the boat and gestures ahead make you look around excitedly for another encounter. It comes far closer than you expect. A finely-chiseled triangular snout is heading straight towards you, behind it the improbably long and round body.

This time you can see the scratch along the ridge of its back, the fine folds of its throat, the benign droop of its eyelid. It rolls past like the closing credits for a big-budget movie, on and on, until with faintest motion of its tail it's gone. This is it, this is the ultimate, you feel. But before you can fully digest what's happened, you're staring directly into a huge, round eye, the size of your own hand and so close you could reach out and touch it. Of course, you don't; one of the firmest rules in in-water whale encounters is never to touch the creatures. The oil from your skin can damage their protective outer layer, making them vulnerable to infections. And anyway you don't need to; this is so clearly a two-way interaction that there's nothing physical contact could add. That close, the creatures are imposingly vast, but equally strikingly both curious and gentle. They look, you look back, they roll effortlessly past. How can anything so big be so graceful? They pass, and pass again, until you're sated with elation, not quite able to believe that anything in the water could be quite so vivid and astonishing.