

# Nature Va'vau

# A whale of a time in Tonga

Angela Saurine dives in with the ocean's gentle giants in a tropical paradise

IT'S hard to believe a boat full of people can be so quiet.

Ignoring our goosebumps as we sit at the back with our flippers in the water, the only sounds are the water lapping against the side, the soft whirr of the engine and the faint, scratchy shhhhhhh of the two-way radio.

Each of us has our eyes anxiously peeled at a point on the horizon, looking for the slightest sign of movement.

After what seems an eternity there comes an excited cry: "There it is! At nine o'clock!"

It is quickly followed by the voice of our captain, Kam. "Go!" he says. "Go, go, go!"

We carefully slide into the water and, with our bottoms pointed up and feet moving in a cycling motion so as not to make any splash, move in the direction indicated.

Before we know it a playful whale calf is swimming towards us.

He turns and looks at us curiously out of one eye before gracefully diving out of sight.

On our next swim the same whale sticks around longer.

It playfully slaps its tail in the water just a few metres away, does a barrel roll, ducks, weaves, surfaces then dives beneath us.

I already feel it is an amazing encounter, but that feeling is reinforced when I look up and see the awe-struck smiles of my less fortunate fellow tourists on the boat nearby.

As we return I feel guilty at having two brilliant encounters in a row and don't want another swim until the other groups have had an equivalent experience.

To my relief, when the next group gets in, the calf's mother returns from

her deep dive and swims straight towards them.

We had spent much of the morning with this humpback and her calf surrounded by the idyllic tropical islands that make up the Va'vau group in the Kingdom of Tonga. Most of that time, she had been teaching the newborn lessons it would need before the long journey south to Antarctica.

She would blow a bubble to the surface and the calf would follow. She would slap her pectoral fin on the water, the calf would do the same. She would hurl herself out of the water and breach right beside the boat, showing us the white underside of her belly. Before long her offspring tried to copy, with a clumsy but extremely cute half attempt out of the water.

To our surprise over the space of a few hours we saw a dramatic improvement in its technique.

By lunchtime, it was confidently embarking on a pirouette of five breaches in a row across the horizon.

One of our guides, Adriana, who had moved to Tonga after several years working in the Galapagos, said it was the first time she had seen a female humpback teaching her baby such lessons.

Patience has never been my strong point, and it had been a disappointing two days of brief or lacklustre swims before hitting what our passionate volunteer guide Helen called a "diamond" day on day three.

Only five people including the guide are permitted in the water at a time, so we are divided into three groups, and the boat must stay at least 100m away.

On the first day we had spotted whales after a couple of hours on the water, but as Kam refuses to chase them



INVITING: The warm waters around Tonga are great for swimming. Picture: Getty Images

there is a lot of time spent idling to get them used to the sound of the engine.

In this instance the mother, calf and her protective male escort, with an unusual all-black tail fluke, don't want to play.

In the afternoon we wait for a boat with a wildlife photographer on board to finish his work before it is our turn to swim with sleeping mum and her calf.

As the first group approaches, the calf raises its flipper and slaps it on the water as if to say a friendly "hello".

Under the water the gentle giant is peacefully still, as her calf swims up to

her and nuzzles her around the neck. We are close enough to note her breathing and see remora fish picking parasites off her. At one point, the calf begins to swim towards us and opens its mouth wide.

Apparently, I didn't see it because another snorkeller swam sideways in front of me at that moment.

My second whale swim had also proven disappointing.

After what had seemed like an eternity waiting my turn, we get in and swim above a sleeping whale.

But visibility is poor and all I can see is

a blurry patch of white beneath me. But when the next group replaces us it wakes up and shoots to the surface - giving them a sensational encounter - before taking a deep dive.

This is not a holiday that comes with any guarantees. I am glad I booked a longer tour and I come to relish the mere adventure of the trip and appreciate how special the experiences we have had were, rather than greedily craving more.

If it is a bad day for whale swimming there are plenty of alternative activities. On one such day we visit Swallows

Cave, swimming into a large, deep cavern where the water is a deep electric-blue colour in parts.

The snorkelling is superb, with an array of sea cucumbers, large blue starfish, stingrays, clown fish, trigger fish, moray eels and colourful coral.

About 1000 whales come to Tonga each year and while the exact number is not known, a large proportion of those head to Va'vau.

There are six Antarctic populations that migrate north to various tropical waters each year, travelling at an

average speed of 7km/h. These whales pass about 200km off the east coast of New Zealand and stay in the shallow waters to give birth and mate for about three months.

If they didn't make the journey the calves, born without blubber, would not survive the freezing waters.

The females grow up to 19m and can weigh 45 tonnes while the males grow to about 17.5m and calves are 4-6m long and weigh two tonnes at birth.

Some mothers bring their one-year-old calves with them but after that the offspring don't return until they are five

and ready to mate themselves. Where they go between the ages of one and four instead is a mystery.

While whaling in Australia was outlawed in 1963, it continued in Tonga until 1978.

By the late 1960s there were as few as 15 breeding pairs arriving annually to this "whale nursery".

While there has been a marked increase in the number of whales making the Australian migration, the Tongan population never fully recovered.

Tonga is one of only three places in

the world you are allowed to swim with whales, and during our trip I constantly wrestled with whether or not we should be here. Some environmentalists vehemently oppose the practice.

But it is common for humans to snorkel with fish, to which we would appear giants.

New Zealand-born Rae Gill, who runs the tours, sees herself as a whale-loving conservationist, who wants to create awareness of these magnificent creatures.

She refuses to do day trips because she believes it puts too much pressure

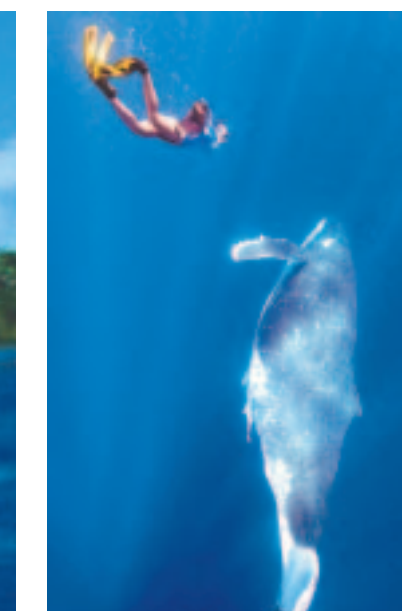
on operators to see whales and from this year will only offer four and seven-day tours.

She says she would rather see the whale tourism industry here shut down than become over-commercialised.

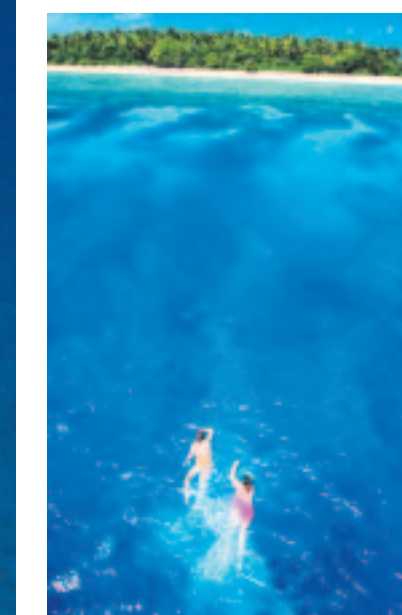
It's something every individual must decide for themselves.

All-in-all, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience which I would recommend to anyone who likes their holidays filled with adventure, excitement, anticipation and unpredictability.

But you also need to have plenty of patience.



PLAY: A humpback whale swims with a young girl. Picture: Getty Images



TROPICAL TREAT: Enjoying Tonga's top conditions. Picture: Getty Images

### Wish you were here

#### Need to know

**Cost:** A seven-day Paradise Island Adventure tour starts at \$3600 a person twin share and includes a welcome lunch and farewell dinner, five nights at Treasure Island E'u'eiki Eco Resort in the outer islands with meals and three nights at Mystic Sands Beach Bungalows with breakfast, six days on the boat with lunch, one day at leisure and boat and airport transfers in Tonga. Four-day tours are available from \$1600 a person.

#### When to go

Whaleswim tours run from late July to mid-October. August usually has the best weather, but the calves can be more playful later in the season.

#### Getting there

**Pacific Blue** ([www.flypacificblue.com](http://www.flypacificblue.com)) offers direct flights twice weekly from Sydney to the capital Nuku'alofa on the main island Tongatapu with fares starting from \$339 a person one way, with connecting flights from other destinations across the Virgin Blue network.

From there it is a 55-minute domestic flight to Neiafu in Vava'u with **Chatham's Pacific** ([www.chathamspacific.com](http://www.chathamspacific.com)) then a boat to the outer islands.

There are no international or domestic flights in Tonga on Sundays. Visas are not required for Australian passport holders.

**More:** [www.whaleswim.com](http://www.whaleswim.com) or **ph 1800 629 306.**

**Quirky fact:** Buderim ginger bears, which can be bought from Australian supermarkets, can help keep the tummy calm in choppy seas. It's a good idea to take a packet or two.

**ROCKIES & ALASKAN CRUISE**

- Number one touring company to Canada & Alaska
- Scenic Special Stays in iconic hotels
- FreeChoice Activities to tailor-make your trip
- Exclusive Scenic Enrich experiences including Capilano Suspension Bridge
- Fully escorted including cruise.

**19 day tour from \$9,940\* pp twin share (RPCV)**  
Price based on 25 May 2010 departure

**PLUS FLY TO CANADA for \$1,395\* per person**

**SPECTACULAR ROCKIES & ALASKAN CRUISE**

- Fully escorted
- Full and exclusive range of Fairmont Hotels and Resorts
- All tipping & gratuities included
- Guaranteed Upgrade to GoldLeaf Class on your two day Rocky Mountaineer
- Seven night luxury Alaskan Cruise with upgrade to Verandah Stateroom.

**21 day tour from \$10,540\* pp twin share (RPCV)**  
Price based on 23 May 2010 departure

**PLUS FLY TO CANADA for \$1,395\* per person**

**ROCKIES & VOYAGE OF THE GLACIERS**

- Upgrades to view rooms at Lake Louise and Banff
- In the heart of Alaska stay in Princess Wilderness lodges
- Exclusive Scenic Enrich experiences including the Music of Denali Dinner and the Alaska Wildlife Refuge in Anchorage
- Travel on the Midnight Sun Express.

**23 day tour from \$11,485\* pp twin share (RPRA)**  
Price based on 11 May 2010 departure

**PLUS FLY TO CANADA for \$1,995\* per person**  
Includes flight from Fairbanks to Vancouver

**SOUTH AMERICA, GALAPAGOS & AMAZON CRUISING**

- Four days cruising the Galapagos Islands
- Four days cruising the Amazon River basin
- Tour Machu Picchu
- Tour Cuzco
- Journey on board the Andean Explorer.

**31 day tour (SAAG)**  
**1st person from \$21,706\***  
**2nd person from \$19,505\* twin share**  
(Prices include land, airfare & taxes, based on 4 Sept 2010 departure)

**SECOND PERSON FLY FREE\***

**THE HEART OF EGYPT**

- Stay in the Palace Hotels in Egypt
- Luxury four night cruise on the Nile
- Abu Simbel included
- Air excursion
- Exclusive Scenic FreeChoice activities in Cairo
- Enter Tutankhamen's tomb.

**13 day tour (TACC)**  
**1st person from \$6,039\***  
**2nd person from \$4,749\* twin share**  
(Prices include land, airfare & taxes, based on 5 Sept 2010 departure)

**SECOND PERSON FREE\* AIRFARE**

**GRAND AFRICAN EXPEDITION**

- Take a cable car ride to the top of Table Mountain
- Enjoy a bush dinner under the stars in Kruger National Park
- Tour the 'Panorama Route'
- Guided walking tour of Victoria Falls.

**30 day tour (SZKG)**  
**1st person from \$18,569\***  
**2nd person from \$16,234\* twin share**  
(Prices include land, airfare & taxes, based on 6 May 2010 departure)

**SECOND PERSON FLY FREE\***

**The Ultimate Touring Experience WORLDWIDE** Call 1300 SCENIC | 1300 723 642 OR SEE YOUR LOCAL TRAVEL AGENT (Quote Code: SPRE335) | [www.scenictraveltours.com.au](http://www.scenictraveltours.com.au)

\*Conditions apply. Prices based on per person twin share, are strictly limited, are subject to availability on specific dates, until sold out. Offers for new bookings only and not in conjunction with any other offers including group deals. International airfares, port taxes and charges are additional unless otherwise stated. Any maps or other route depictions are intended as an indication only and are subject to change. Surcharges for payment by credit card applies. For flight deals flights must be booked by Scenic Tours and a \$3000pp non-refundable deposit is required within 7 days of booking. Scenic Tours reserve the right to ticket the airfare upon receipt of deposit. Flights are subject to availability of appropriate airline class and once sold out surcharges may apply. CANADA: Fly to Canada for \$1395/\$1995pp offer is available on selected departures only. Enquire for further details. Airfares are economy class inc airport taxes based on departure ex MEL are subject to specific class availability on Air Canada. Should Air Canada not be available for any reason Scenic Tours reserves the right to substitute another airline. Availability strictly limited or until sold out. Taxes from \$375pp included. SOUTH AMERICA: Price inclusive of flights within South America once tour commences and relevant air taxes. Offer available on specific departures. Tipping and gratuities are not included on any cruise content. Offer based on LAN S Class ex MEL, subject to availability until sold out. A surcharge applies from all other ports. Taxes and Fuel Surcharges are additional and subject to change. Offers available until 31 Jan 2010 unless sold out. EGYPT: Prices inclusive of domestic air taxes within Egypt. The second person free airfare offer is based on SQ N Class ex MEL and is subject to availability until 29 Jan 2010 unless sold out. \$3000 deposit required within 7 days of booking. Flights must be booked by Scenic Tours. AFRICA: Please note flights displayed in black are additional and subject to availability. Offer available until 31 May 2010 or until sold. Prices based on 6 May 2010 tour departure date. Second Person Fly Free Offer includes return flights from Australia to South Africa, based on South African Airlines in H class ex MEL. Price includes the second airfare, including taxes which are from \$824pp. Once sold out surcharges may apply. See brochures for full terms and conditions. Prices correct as of 4 January 2010. Scenic Tours ABN 85 002 715 602 Lic No 21A 002 633