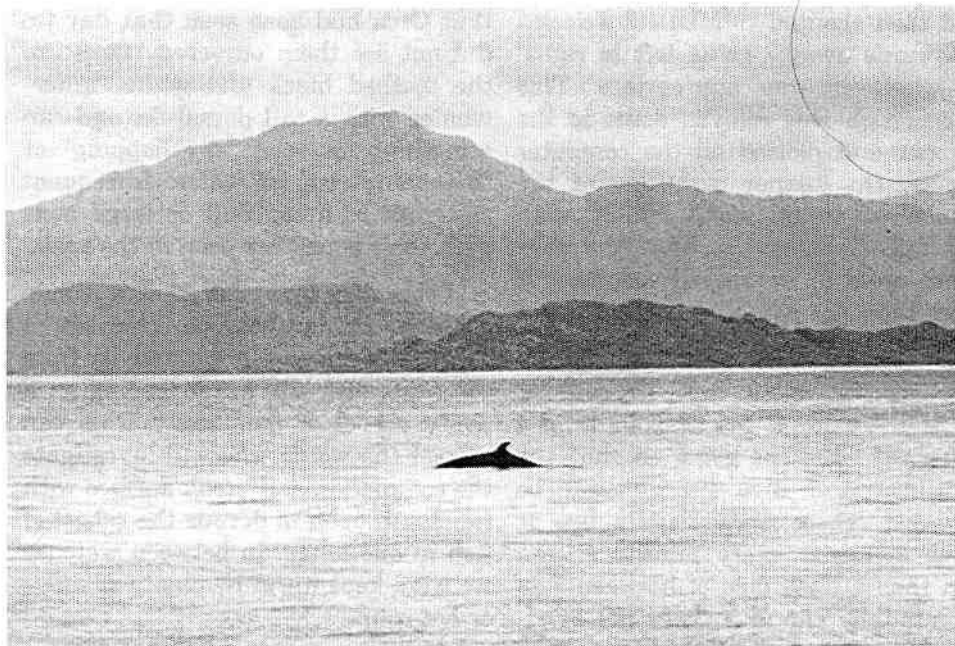


WHALE WATCHING FROM MULL by John Gripper



D ID YOU KNOW that you can see killer whales in the sea around Mull in Scotland?

In wet and windy weather, Annie and I went to Dervaig on the Isle of Mull to take part in a Whale and Dolphin survey — and enjoyed every minute of it. Sea Life Cruises have been operating specialist cruises in the Inner Hebrides around Mull, Coll, Rhum, Tiree, Muck, Eigg, Staffa and The Treshnish Isles for the last three years. The Charter Vessel is the Alpha Beta — a modern 40 foot all weather luxury trawler yacht powered by twin Volvo 250 h.p. diesel engines equipped with radar electronics and computerised survey collecting data.

The day started with an early call and breakfast at 7 a.m. (with optional porridge). Then on to the boat to take first watch. We had two watches of six people and changed every hour. The six whale watchers sat on the top deck and were given a two hour segment of sea to watch with the mast as 12 o'clock — every quarter of an hour we were moved around one place. The first sighting of the day earned you a large size Mars bar which was tied to the mast. This caused great rivalry between the crew and whale watchers. Guess who saw the first whale on our first day out? Luckily one of the crew confirmed the sighting, so I shared my Mars bar with Shona.

On a sighting, you shouted "Whale" and pointed in the direction and then shouted "Minke - 2 o'clock - 500 yards away - going left to right" or whatever was appropriate. This information was relayed down to the skipper and plotted on the computer charts. On further sightings of the whale, we would shout "Blow" with the full directions so that the dive times could be accurately recorded. If more than one whale, we would shout Whale 2 or Whale 3, with directional indications.

At the time of the first sighting a stopwatch was set going so that the sightings and dive times could be recorded. There were usually two or three sightings every minute or two and then a deep dive of between 7 to 15 minutes. The dive times are interpreted as an indicator of metabolic rates.

The primary aim of the survey is to get some idea of the species, numbers and behaviour of cetaceans in the area. Top priority is given to photo identification of the individual whales by the shape of their dorsal fin and scars on their bodies to establish their individual territorial waters. Hydrophones are used to record any communication noises between the whales.

The Minke whale is one of the smallest whales, being up to eight metres in length. They eat fish and krill, which filters through their baleen plates. On our best day we saw five different Minke whales and one of them swam around and under the boat for five minutes - this is called an "association".

Although we were told over the radio by one of the ferry boat skippers that Orca had been seen that day we did not see them ourselves. Orca are the toothed black and white "killer" whales with a tall dorsal fin and can sometimes be seen "spy hopping" or "breaching" out of water. Infrequent sightings of a big bull or large pods with their young are seen in the area.

Often the first sign that a whale could be about would be if we saw a "hurry" — this was great activity from sea birds over the water feeding on a dense school of fish below. This can attract the whale who will investigate the commotion and break surface with its mouth open to devour the school of fish in one lunge. In between watches we were kept warm by plenty of coffee or hot soup.

We would call in each day to one of the islands for a walk about (our skipper had a liking for the home-made cream cakes on Muck) and to see the seals that abounded on the rocks. The seals would often come to inspect the boat but would always bob under water if anyone pointed at them. Each day we would see Harbour porpoises in the water, they are about two metres in length and have a rounded head and a small dark triangular dorsal fin.

On two occasions we saw large schools of Common dolphins. These could be seen a long way off by the spray as they swam up and through the water. They seemed to be attracted to the boat and would come and dive alongside and under the boat leaping and surfing through our wake

—called bow riding — for about ten minutes.

Sightings of Risso's dolphins occur throughout the season as does the basking shark, which can reach 12 metres in length and is a harmless plankton eating shark, seen feeding on the surface of the sea.

It was much harder to get photographs of the whales, as they would only surface for about half a minute, quite often on the other side of the boat; there was no time to focus but if you were quick you could get a picture of them with their dorsal fin showing above the water.

There were a mass of sea birds and we had an ornithologist on board to help us identify the types of gulls, razorbills, guillemots, terns, shags, fulmars, kittiwakes, skuas and gannets.

On one of the days we landed on Langer Island in the Treshnish Islands and were able to get some close up photographs of a colony of puffins. This a comical looking bird but very photogenic. I spent some time trying to get a picture of a puffin with sand eels dangling from it's beak, but the puffins would scamper down into their burrows to avoid attack from the black backed gulls who would swoop down on them from overhead.

One day we helped with an SOS radio call when a yacht ran aground after engine failure and we had to give a tow until the lifeboat arrived.

We would get back to shore about 8 p.m. wet through, but after a shower

and a hot meal were ready for an early start the next day — whale watching can be very tiring, especially if you are trying to win the Mars bar!

We had a day on shore with the local naturalist who was able to show us the fauna and flora. We saw red deer in the hills and otters by the sea shore. Buzzards, two golden eagles and the large sea eagle were seen soaring over the mountains; orchids and other wild flowers and butterflies on the ground.

The skipper is Richard Fairbairns, who gave up sheep farming on the Island to become a naturalist and took to the sea with a wildlife tourist operation. This has now turned into a serious research operation funded by the people who come as paying guests to help with the whale watching. He has set up the Friends of Mull Cetacean Project, to undertake research on whales.

Various aspects of the research work have been funded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). The research programme has been organised by a marine biologist, Vassili Papastavrou (who is married to a practising veterinarian).

Last year Mucmhara Lodge was built, this is a large and spacious purpose built accommodation and research area with five twin bedded accommodation rooms and a sitting/dining room called the "Whale Room". The crew, cook and other helpers are mainly volunteer marine biology or zoology students.

For our week we had seven paying whale watchers — a civil engineer

and his wife, an Australian accountant, an 'Earth Watch' lady with her eighty year old mother (who were both seasick on the first day out because they had relied on their acupuncture wrist bands). We soon got to know them on pretty intimate terms as we were working closely with each other on board the boat for most of the day, but at least we didn't have to sail half way round the world together.

On a more serious note, at the International Whaling Commission in Japan, the Norwegians announced that they were going to return to commercial whaling and are planning to kill 300 Minke whales from North Atlantic stocks for so called 'scientific research'.

Each year there is still an annual mass slaughter of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands which has been supported by Denmark.

Anyone who is interested in finding out more about this whale and dolphin survey should write to:-

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