



WHALE TOURISM A COMMUNITY SUCCESS

BY TAMARA NYHOLT

Mention Kaikoura to the average New Zealander and it immediately conjures up images of roadside crayfish dinners and whale-watching.

Whale-watching in Kaikoura was not always the benign spectator sport it is today. Established in 1842 as a whaling station by a Scotsman, Robert Fyfe, Kaikoura hosted many international whaling crews, who primarily harvested southern right whales for their oil.

When over-hunting diminished the whale population to the point of extinction, the majority of whalers moved on to farming, although humpback and sperm whales were still hunted in small numbers in Kaikoura up until the early 20th century.

Whale Watch began in 1987 by innovative members of the Kati Kuri, a sub-tribe of the larger Ngai Tahu tribe. Visitors were initially ferried around in a small, inflatable boat, a far cry from the slick outfit the company is today. The organisation now boasts a fleet of four modern catamarans, each customised for whale-watching.

The venture is obviously now very successful. We begin our adventure at their large visitor's centre – fully fitted with a number of ticket kiosks, a café, a briefing room and a variety of whale-themed paraphernalia for sale.

The weather condition noticeboard warns us of “seasickness” potential, and the word from our ticket agent is that there are large swells of two to three metres.

“But they’re still quite comfortable,” she comforts us.



The main cabin and guide lectern

Nevertheless, a travel sickness tablet (available for \$2 each) seems like a smart cautionary move, considering the two-hour round trip.

We board our bus outside the centre that will ferry us the 10-minute journey to the South Bay marina where the boats are docked. The dirty old tour bus, past its prime and in need of a thorough clean, is the very antithesis of the modern and sleek catamaran we board. Looking more like something from Star Trek than Gilligan's Island, it's all high-tech, with large plasma screens and turquoise, business class-sized chairs.

Once we are comfortably seated in the 50-passenger enclosed inside cabin, our guide talks us through the interactive presentation

playing on the large screen. Our destination, the 2000m deep Kaikoura Canyon, is just offshore and only a short trip away.

This marvel of the natural world is a cornucopia of marine life, attracting many species, including sperm whales, which we hope to meet today. The sea conditions predicted were accurate, and we bounce through some dramatic swells at high speed. That travel sickness tablet is feeling like a good idea about now, as my stomach lifts and lurches with the boat.

Is everyone else just playing it cool or are they quietly holding on to their breakfast? I notice a good-sized stack of travel sickness bags in the pouch beside me and wonder if the trip will end up like a debauched teenage party.

The Whale Watch crew use non-invasive methods to track down the whales, including listening for the clicks the sperm whales use to communicate with each other. We are fortunate to encounter a whale shortly after arriving at the canyon simply because we are referred there by another Whale Watch boat.

Contrary to many pre-conceptions of oceanic dramatics, observing the whale generally consists of watching what appears to be a large log with a fin until the dramatic “money shot”, when the whale dives and its tail shoots up for that fleeting moment of glory. While we are waiting we are entertained by a variety of seabirds, including various albatross and petrels swooping and diving around us in the sunshine.

After our initial sighting there is quite a wait while the crew try to locate another whale. We zip around in the catamaran and listen to their communicative clicks until we finally encounter another whale “logging” on the surface.


Whale Watch is good at this whale tracking, so good in fact that they will refund 80 percent of your fare if you don't see a whale. With a boast of 95 percent success, one would assume that they don't have to shell out very often.

This second whale is a bit more flamboyant than our first encounter. When it descends again into the deep it flips us a proper tail fin salute and carries on to continue feeding at the bottom of the canyon. This is the end of our official whale-watching, and the crew suggest we head in closer to shore in search of other sea life while journeying back to the marina.

Somewhat underwhelmed by our whale watching, or log watching, thus far, we are completely unprepared for the upcoming explosion of activity. As we rapidly draw closer to the shore, literally hundreds of dusky dolphins appear.

The sea is awash in competitive activity and we are a lone boatful of witnesses to a circus of acrobatics and entertainment. If whales are the great kings of the marine underworld, then surely dolphins are the court jesters. There are spins, twists and tumbles left, right and centre. Our host informs us that dolphins do everything on the move, including mating.

A number of minutes and many photographs later, we are escorted back to the marina and the Whale Watch centre. All up it's been a grand, although pricey, adventure. Whale watching doesn't come cheap. At \$130 an adult, our expectations are pretty high and, I must admit, the antics of the dolphins transformed a merely pleasant sojourn into an event.

Anyone who loves whales will be transported by the serene pageantry of the experience. If you're looking for Whale Rider and more than the occasional fin, rent the movie. 



The dolphins made the day worthwhile



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