

Ever been snorkelling with whales?

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PETTY HARBOUR, NFLD. — Special to The Globe and Mail
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Every summer, 11,000 whales arrive in Newfoundland to feed on capelin. The humpbacks, which usually weigh about 36,300 kilograms, are some of the most aerobic in the bunch, and they lack any fear around boats. Which means that the Rock is the perfect place to come for an up-close-and-personal whale experience.

There are four of us bopping along the Atlantic in a Zodiac, outfitted in wetsuits, hoods, gloves, booties, snorkels and masks. Rick Stanley, owner of Ocean Quest Adventures and our guide, has practically guaranteed that we'll see whales. But we've been in the waters off Petty Harbour for at least 45 minutes and haven't even caught a glimpse.

"When I spot a whale, you jump into the water as quick as you can and just go after it," Stanley instructs. Whales seem to prefer women, he tells us, so I'm hoping that will help because all four of us on the tour are female. "And whales sing, so you should sing to them. That will attract them."

We motor along for another 15 minutes or so. Nothing. Then, suddenly Stanley yells, "Whales! Jump in *now!*"

We jump off the boat. The water is just 5 degrees, but fortunately the only place I feel the iciness is on my face (where it's not covered by the mask). "Remember, give'r till ya shiver," Stanley calls out. I pop my head underwater but see nothing. I decide to sing *Amazing Grace*. I discover it's not easy to carry a tune when you have a snorkel in your mouth, so I hum. Nothing happens. I try *Rolling on the River*. Still no response. I stick my head out of the water just as some puffins awkwardly skim the waves ahead, trying to fly. They look like cartoons. But, wait, what is that putrid, foul smell?

Whale breath! A second later, I hear a huge gasp and not six metres away two black humpbacks emerge, snorting water into the air. My heart is somewhere inside my snorkel. I never thought I'd get this close. "Swim toward them," Stanley shouts. I'm so frightened by their huge size that I make for the boat instead. The two whales are coming straight at me like a freight train. For a moment I think, "This is it – they're going to kill me." But they neither surface nor knock me over. They dive beneath my legs, and as I look down through my mask, one of them flips over, so close I can see the white striations on the belly. Then they're gone.

I glance around. With a giant splash, one of them raises a fin and then disappears into the water. They're playing. This time, I kick as fast as I can in their direction, but it's hard to swim in the thick wetsuit. Once again, they're gone. And then, in the distance, a tail rises and disappears. I turn in circles looking for them. I hear a loud wheeze and an enormous black lump rises from the ocean. I swim toward the whale but it dives back under. I wait. It resurfaces, and then reappears so close I can see the barnacles on a fin. It seems to be waving goodbye.

I climb on the boat with my fellow swimmers, all of us shrieking with joy. The sun begins to set as we head back to shore, past the fishermen in their small boats. Suddenly, ahead of us, a whale surfaces and blows, the vapour catching the light of the setting sun. It lets out a whistle, swings a fin into the air and gives us one last wave before disappearing into the icy deep.

Tours last a half day and cost \$199 a person. Available July and August. For more information visit oceanquestadventures.com.

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