

Closer encounters

How to keep your (social) distance while watching the whales this season.

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Getting up close with Hervey Bay Whale Watch & Charters.

- From Travel
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Winter sees humpback whales embark on an annual 5000km journey from the krill-rich feeding grounds of Antarctica to the warm waters of northern Australia to breed and give birth. The migration path, sometimes referred to as the “humpback highway”, is a chance for fleeting encounters with these majestic giants on tours

operating along Australia's east, west and southern coasts. And at times it can seem these sociable mammals are just as curious about their human observers.

Social distancing, lower passenger numbers and increased options for private charters are just some of the factors that could make this year's whale-watching season different. Here's a selection of some of the exclusive options offered for those who want to avoid crowds and experience whale encounters with a touch of luxury.

Great Barrier Reef, Cairns, QLD

For an indigenous perspective on whales, set sail from Cairns with Dreamtime Dive & Snorkel. Private charters, for \$11,370 a day for up to 60 passengers, also allow guests to spend time snorkelling at two sites on the Great Barrier Reef. Interpretative talks by an indigenous sea ranger make this a whale-watching tour with a difference.

dreamtimedive.com

Whitsundays, QLD

Ocean Dynamics offers private whale-watching charters, available from any Whitsunday Islands location, starting from \$1500 for three to four hours. Guests have the option to add diving, snorkelling and/or a visit to Whitehaven Beach to their itinerary, at extra cost. Two fast vessels, Ocean Spirit and Ocean Addiction, are used, maximising the chances of spotting whales as they journey through these tropical waters.

oceandynamics.com.au

Southern Great Barrier Reef, QLD

Keppel Explorer, which departs from Yeppoon, offers bespoke VIP whale-watching tours circumnavigating the Keppel Bay islands, including Pumpkin and Great Keppel, with their secluded beaches and sea caves. Customised tours are designed to meet each client's needs, with half-day tours costing \$1200 and full-day (six hours) outings for \$1600 for up to 12 guests.

keppelexplorer.com.au



Swimming with whales off WA's Coral Coast.

Hervey Bay Marine Park, QLD

Humpbacks like to linger and play with their calves in the calm waters of Platypus Bay, off Fraser Island. Last year, Hervey Bay was named one of the world's first two "whale heritage sites" by the World Cetacean Alliance. Hervey Bay Whale Watch & Charters, which operates from Kingfisher Bay Resort on Fraser Island, begins tours this weekend, offering private charters that include whale swims. The vessel Quick Cat II can be hired for up to 30 people for \$2250 for 5½ hours. Private charters for families and groups are also available with Whalesong Cruises, and Freedom Whale Watch.

herveybaywhalewatch.com.au

whalesong.com.au

freedomwhalewatch.com.au

Cook Island Aquatic Reserve, NSW

Launched in the Tweed region of northern NSW last winter, this immersive marine experience by Watersports Guru, available from July to October, hails the "Big 3 of the Sea". The three-hour tour is an opportunity to see humpback whales and inshore bottlenose dolphins by boat, followed by snorkelling with green turtles off Cook Island, near Fingal Head. Private boat tours for families or couples (living at

the same address) are available for \$1395 for the “Big 3” or \$900 for whale-watching only.

watersportsguru.rezdy.com

Bouddi National Park, NSW

Guests of Pretty Beach House, one of Australia’s most exclusive lodges, 90 minutes’ drive north of Sydney on the Bouddi Peninsula, can take private whale-watching charters on the lodge’s sports cruiser. A four-hour charter, including skipper, gourmet lunch and drinks, costs \$3300. The luxury vessel has a galley, dining room, leather lounge that seats five and a bathroom with shower.

prettybeachhouse.com

Wilsons Promontory, Victoria

Wildlife Coast Cruises has launched new whale-watching tours along the Wilsons Promontory coast. From September to November, tours depart from Port Welshpool in Southern Gippsland, allowing visitors to experience The Prom’s beaches, turquoise waters and wildlife from the sea. On a six-hour tour, you can expect to see humpback and southern right whales, seals and dolphins. Private charters are available for up to 100 people for \$1200 an hour, with catering options available.

wildlifecoastcruises.com.au



Getting up close to humpbacks on a swim with the whales tour. Picture: Tourism and Events QLD

Freycinet Peninsula, Tasmania

Exclusive whale-watching charters around the spectacular Freycinet National Park coastline are offered by two of Tasmania's luxury lodges, Saffire Freycinet and Picnic Island. At Saffire Freycinet, whales can be viewed from the lodge's custom-built 12.5m vessel MV Saffire, with three tours available, including to Schouten Island and Wineglass Bay. Picnic Island, a private escape for up to 10 guests, offers daily whale-watching trips in Coles Bay and around Schouten. On-demand charters are available with Freycinet Aqua Taxis for \$220 an hour for up to five people.

saffire-freycinet.com.au

picnicisland.com.au

Ningaloo Reef, WA

Australia's largest fringing reef, Ningaloo has long been famous for swimming with whale sharks. It is also possible to swim with humpbacks during their migration along the West Australian coast to and from their breeding and birthing grounds in Exmouth Gulf and the sheltered waters as far north as the Kimberley between July and October. Exmouth Dive & Whalesharks Ningaloo offers private charters for a full-day tour with whale watching and swim or a two-hour sunset

whale-watching tour. Premium WA wines and cheese are served to add a touch of decadence.

Working with local operator Live Ningaloo, luxury beach safari camp Sal Salis gives guests the chance to swim with humpbacks as they migrate past the property between August and October. Private tours for up to 10 people include swimming and snorkelling with whales, whale sharks and manta rays, and cost \$5500. The resort arranges free transfers to the departure point.

exmouthdiving.com.au

liveningaloo.com.au

salsalis.com.au

In the know

There are no guaranteed sightings on a whale-watching tour, but as the marine mammal population is increasing every year, the chances are excellent. In pre-whaling days about 10,000 humpback whales were estimated to migrate along Australia's coastline, with about 30,000 living in Antarctic waters. By the time whaling was banned in 1963 the total had declined to about 200. This year, scientists estimate the population has recovered to number nearly 40,000.



Whales can be identified by their flukes. Picture: Tourism WA

More to the story

Every humpback whale has a unique pattern of pigmentation on the underside of its tail fluke. Like a fingerprint, the markings can be used to identify individuals. The classic shot every photographer covets is that of a tail in the air as the whale dives, and such images can be an important source of data for scientists. Whale-watch tourists can submit their images of flukes to the Happy Whale online database to be matched with other details, helping to collate valuable information about whale life, population size, migration, travel speeds, movement and association patterns. Southern Cross University Whale Research Group has a catalogue of tail fluke images that identifies more than 1300 humpbacks known to travel along Australia's coasts. It works in collaboration with North American researchers who have developed an advanced algorithm to identify and match individual humpback whale images.

happywhale.com

scu.edu.au