

Title:

Dancing With Whales

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Summary:

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Article Body:

We've all heard about whalewatching from boats or shore, and a few companies are now offering the possibility of actually swimming and snorkeling with whales in the wild. Is this a good thing?

Some whalewatching operators in the Kingdom of Tonga, South Pacific islands, advertise the possibility of swimming and snorkeling with humpback whales during the cetacean's annual migration from July to October. This activity sounds appealing, yet there are a number of things to consider.

To drop clients off within snorkeling distance of a whale, the swim boats must come closer than the 30 meters laid down in Tongan government guidelines in 1997. Engine noise from a maneuvering boat can startle a whale, and repeated disturbances can lead to the animals changing their behaviour and even abandoning their traditional habitat. The nursing and resting routines of the pods can be disrupted, potentially threatening the health of the whales.

This high-risk activity is not covered by most travel insurance policies. The humpback whales of Tonga are wild animals with powerful fins, and swimming near one always involves some risk. The movements of these huge creatures can be fatal to a human swimmer, either accidentally or if the beast feels threatened, and a nursing mother with calf can be especially unpredictable. Swimming into the path of a whale greatly increases the danger.

In Tonga, sharks are known to frequent areas where there are whales, especially calves, and at least one shark attack on a Tongan guide swimming with whales has

been recorded. A tragic accident involving tourists seems to be only a matter of time.

Most whale encounters occur in deep waters where unperceived currents and wave action can soon tire a snorkeler and possibly lead to panic. For these reasons, responsible whalewatching companies like Whale Discoveries do not offer snorkeling with whales.

Of course, the demand is there, and pressure has come to bear on the Tongan Government to revise its guidelines to allow boats to come within 10 meters of a whale. Several new whalewatching licenses have been issued recently, raising the number of commercial operators in this small area to about a dozen, and vessels often have to queue to drop off swimmers. Cases have been observed of boats approaching to within five meters of whale pods, and of mother humpbacks and calves being pursued out to sea.

Visitors should be aware that by purchasing such an excursion, they could be adversely affecting the noble creatures they came to see. It's a good idea to discuss these matters with the operator before booking your trip, and to avoid those who seem most interested in maximizing their own profits at the expense of the whales.

Even if you decide to book such a tour, be aware that only 10 percent of swim-with attempts are successful and there are no refunds. These concerns only apply to attempts to actually swim with whales, and whalewatching from a boat at a safe distance is no problem.