

Whale odyssey in the southern Oceans (Part 2)

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On the morning of the 7th at about 150 km from Elephant Island (famous to have host the Endurance crew for four and a half months in 1916 before its rescue) we began to have our first Antarctic encounters: few fin whale heads were spotted sticking out the breaking waves just few tens of meters away from the ship. I really hope they were more curious than scared... Anyway the majority reacted diving while others slightly changed their route but not before a good look to the JCR. During the afternoon we had few other whale sightings but visibility was too bad and we could not identify the species. In the evening we finally entered Marian Cove at King George Island, the first of our Antarctic sampling sites. And with great excitement by all of us, two humpback whales were calmly swimming at the edge of glacier... The humpback whales remained to supervise our work in Marian Cove for the following four days.



During one of the many deployments of the Conductivity, Temperature and Depth instrument (CTD), two whales decided that was time to closely investigate this alien object moving up and down from the ship. They swam straight to the cable to dive at just few meters in the direction of the CTD that was collecting waters at 125 meters of depth. If panic was there, British can keep it well inside and apprehension was notable only by the changing colour, from pink to white, on the CTD operator faces. After 30 long minutes, the CTD re-emerged apparently untouched and welcomed with the same enthusiasm of the first spaceship on the Moon. If the CTD was safe, I will not bet one cent

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about the quality of the water collected while two nosy 14-meter-long beasts were wandering nearby.

On the 11th afternoon all data were gathered and we were ready to resume the navigation to our second Antarctic sampling site, Børgen Bay on Anvers Island. While clumsily climbing the steep five series of ladders to the Monkey Island we could not imagine that the



following four hours would have been an example of what the sea might had been before the whaling swept away the majority of the whales from our world. On a calm dark-blue sea surface, whale blows appeared as daisies on a meadow. Everywhere we lie our eyes there was a white and bushy cloud made by the condensed air breathed out by the whale. It was incredible. We made 50 sightings in three

and a half hours of observation. A total of 101 individuals meaning 1 whale every two minutes. And those were just the whales visible before the Earth curvature was cutting off our observation sector.

Humpback whales were heavily exploited by the whaling industry resulting in a crush of population worldwide. The best guess is that during the most intensive periods of exploitation, about 213,000 humpbacks were slaughtered in the Southern Hemisphere. The species was therefore listed as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Since the international ban of whaling in 1986, at least the southern humpback whale populations appeared to be making a strong recovery, and the species is now rated Least Concern (LC) by the IUCN although pre-whaling numbers are still far to reach.

After the night break, observation resumed on the 12th morning and humpback whales sightings continued although at lower rate due to the snow storm that reduced the visibility at 200-300 meters. We were now navigating at a latitude of 64 degree south. The result was that massive icebergs were

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more and more visible and the sea surface was getting more and more covered by ice in some areas. We spent four snowy days in Børgen Bay, sampling benthos, mud, water and plankton. A couple of times in the middle of the bright nights we were visited by some humpback whales. We could hear them breathing before even spotting them.



The biggest surprise happened at 2am (Falkland time) of the 15th when a chinstrap penguin began to cry loudly. The poor animal was seen frantically try climbing a piece of ice at 10 meters from the ship. When we checked carefully we spotted two massive black dorsal fins moving along the glacier edge. They were immediately

followed by few other smaller dorsal fins and one very small. Killer whales! The poor penguin had all the right to be afraid and continued whining long after the dolphins moved away.

On the 16th morning we resumed the navigation to the last sampling station at Sheldon Cove, on Adelaide Island. There were no encounters on the way to Rothera Wharf base, the British Antarctic base located at the entrance of Sheldon Cove. Neither have we spotted any cetaceans during the four days of sampling and the 3 days of stay at the base. Finally, on Christmas day, on the way back to Anvers Island we start again to observe humpback whales. They were lazily moving south following the krill that how some researchers at Rothera told us, was appearing later this year.

On the 26th we stopped for few hours at the American field base of Palmer before finally heading back to South America. Humpback whales were all around the base and in the waters southern of Anvers Island. On the 27th we were navigating in the open waters of the Drake Passage. Sea conditions were pretty good and we had few encounters with fin whales and, finally, with some dolphins! A group of 5 hourglass dolphins came to bow ride in the middle of the Drake Passage. They are known to be common in the area and together with killer and pilot whales are the only other dolphins to be regular found below the Polar Front.

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The other days of navigation to our destination, Punta Arenas in Chile, were mainly used to clean and re-pack the equipment with few occasions to remain in observation. On the morning of the 31st everything was ready for the end of the expedition and finally we could spend a couple of hours on the Monkey Island. We were now deep inside the Magellan Strait off Magdalena Island. The sea was flat

calm and the sun had still to come out. Suddenly few splashes attracted our attention. Several Commerson's dolphins in groups of 2-3 individuals were converging to ship bow. The dolphins were surrounded by flocks of birds, mainly terns that were diving all around. They were clearly feeding. I wonder if the Commerson's were also feeding. In the Falkland Islands we rarely observed Commerson's dolphins feeding during the day. We were so concentrated to count dolphins that we did not notice immediately the whitish clouds suspended above the sea few kilometres ahead. When finally we moved our sight, there they were: tens of sei whales were swimming in all the directions. That was a very good surprise! We were not aware of the presence of so many animals just off Punta Arenas.

The harbour was now in sight and our trip to Antarctica and back, over. The cruise could not be over however, without a last species being spotted. Just few minute before the anchor was released, two Peale's dolphins came jumping in the direction of the ship. As soon as they realize that we were going to stop they turn around and disappeared.





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What an amazing experience this trip has been!