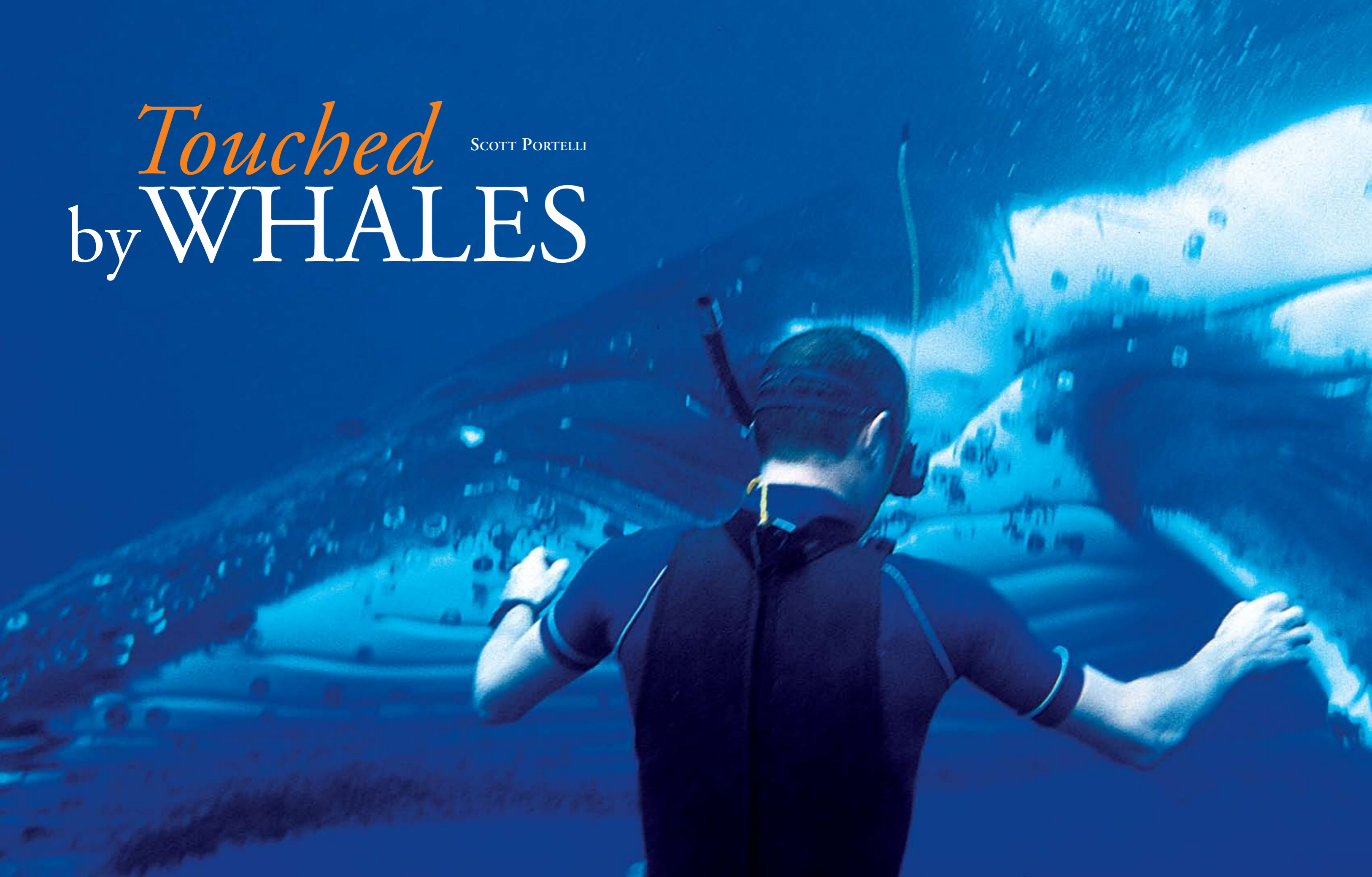


Touched SCOTT PORTELLI
by WHALES



My heart pounds with anticipation as a haunting silence echoes through the ocean.

A deep resonating breath expels when the colossus breaks the surface. The skipper's yells are a fading echo as I slip clumsily into the water, falling into an abyss with deep blue shards of light beaming into the depths. My body swims towards the shadowy outline of a mysterious leviathan. This indistinct apparition transforms into a realization as I come face to face with one of the planet's largest inhabitants, the Humpback whale.

WATCHING silently from the surface, the only noise is the amplified sound of my breath echoing through the snorkel. Time stands still. The leviathans hover beneath the surface, graceful, agile, and hypnotic as they move easily through the strong currents. A word comes to my mind, 'humble'.

In the deep blue oceans of the South Pacific, in the Kingdom of Tonga, these gentle giants frequent the sheltered waters surrounding the islands of Vava'u. Each year between August and October Humpback whales appear in varying numbers to mate and to breed. Vava'u, a tropical paradise, strewn with coral reefs, luscious vegetation, limestone sea caves and crystal clear waters welcomes the weariest of travellers. The enchanting beauty of the islands alone, will quell the escaping perfectionist. But I was here for something far more enchanting; far more unforgettable. Of the many unforgettable moments, some remain intensely vivid. My encounter with a mother and calf is such an experience.

From the moment I met this curious calf, I sensed its mischievous streak. Highly inquisitive, growing boldly in confidence with every probing pass, clipping me with his pectorals when ever he had the chance. His resting mother, the length of a city bus, kept watch over her impetuous son casting her indignant look at me each time the playful calf swam close to me. The resting mother's spatial awareness and acute senses intrigued and fascinated me. The more I observe the behaviour of Humpback whales, the more I feel that they are not just intelligent but emotional creatures as well.

For the months I was searching and studying whales, I awake each morning and walk down the half completed jetty near my island retreat. I've stumbled upon that particular mother and calf on several other occasions, which is rare, to say the least. Yet each time I entered the water with any whale, I secretly hoped that it would be this mother and calf that I had affectionately come to know. Over time I noticed that the mother was less anxious of people interacting with her playful child. It was clear that human contact over the season had removed any apprehensions this calf had towards humans and had become even more physical with each interaction. Despite the mother's relaxed disposition, she was protective. Often a mother will clearly indicate her discomfort by positioning herself between me and her calf.

WHEN YOU LOOK INTO THE EYE OF A WHALE and sense that they are looking back at you with as much bewilderment, the connection is on a level that only few people may have experienced.





WITH THEIR AERODYNAMIC DESIGN,
whales often appear motionless as they
glide effortlessly across shallow reefs and
strong currents.

A MOTHER, CALF AND ESCORT

can often be seen swimming together, but on this occasion there was a bond between them that was indicative of the continuous physical contact they made as they moved through the water.

Observing whale behaviour is a fascinating pursuit and often leads to unique encounters. I recall one blissful morning, when the sun was shining and the shallow reef made the water a luminous deep blue, I chanced upon a pod of three whales frolicking in the shallows. As I entered the water I immediately made eye contact with the calf. On the bottom of the reef two adults lay on top of each other, motionless. The connection suggests an intimate rendezvous. The calf playing on the surface descended to the two adults, and hovered just above them. Just observing the bond between these whales was an extraordinary experience, and I watched intensely hoping for deeper insight into this behaviour. Then without warning and in a synchronised manner, they ascended towards me, ever so slowly and curiously. I stayed still on the surface and all I could think was “Oh no! I am going to be on top of a whale”. To my relief the whales manoeuvred effortlessly to glide pass within inches of me. This strong physical relationship between the whales specifically between the mother and her escort in the presence of her calf touches my senses and soul. There was a sense of natural attachment between the two. They were physically touching each other as they elegantly cruised beneath me. It is common knowledge that the escort is tolerated by the female and is simply awaiting an opportune moment to mate. Rarely one will see such an intimate dance between a male and female with a calf in tow. Is this an exception or norm, I do not yet know. But this encounter blew the bubbles out of my preconceived ideas about typical Humpback behaviour.

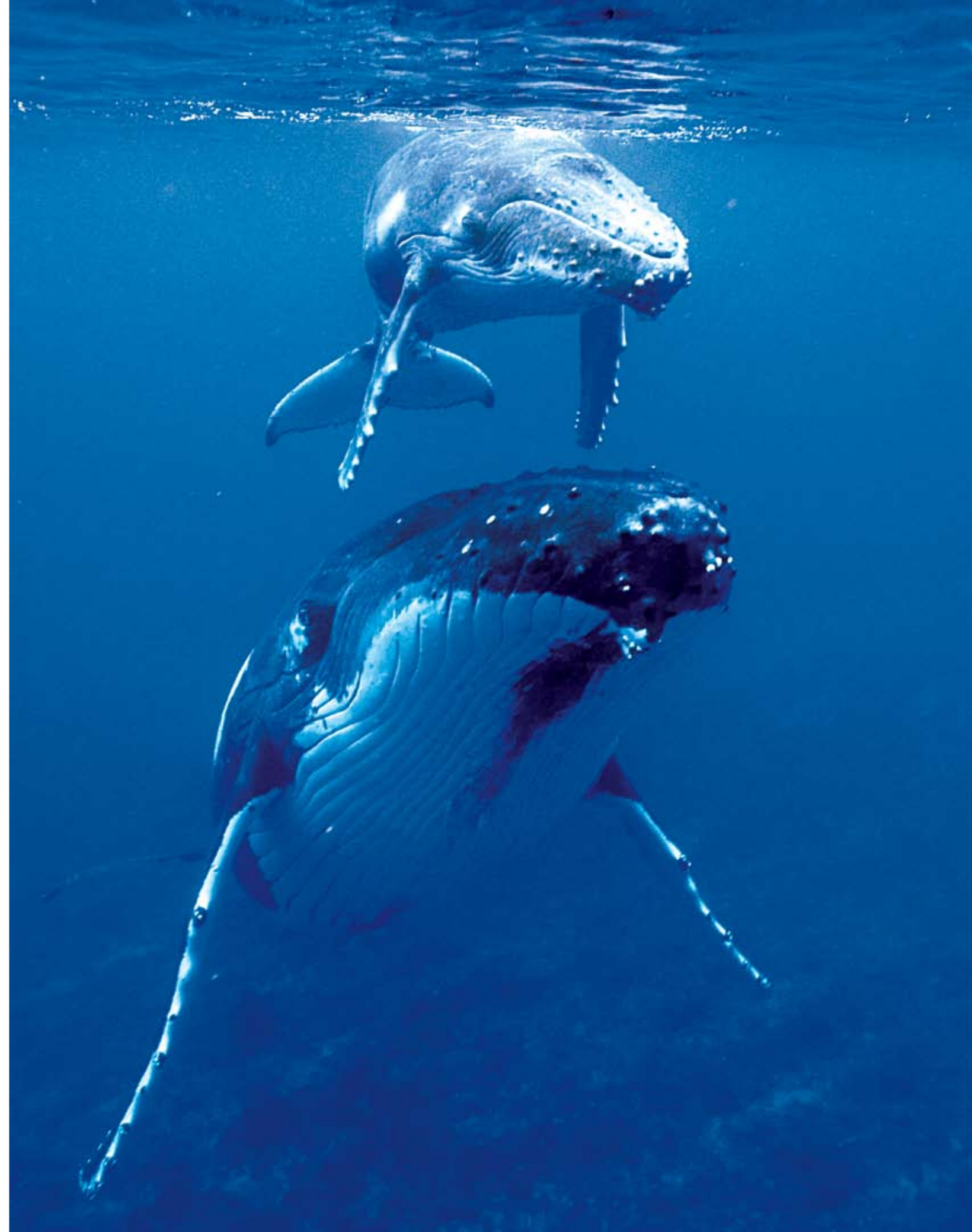


IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO SEE
a mother and calf resting on the
currents to minimize the energy
they no doubt exert from travelling
great distances.

To meet eye to eye with a 40 tonne Humpback, the rule of thumb is, get in the water and swim in the direction you last saw the whale. When the outline of a dark mass just below the surface looking somewhat out of place in the deep blue ocean is spotted, it usually is an indication that you are heading in the right direction, well presumably. In one of my whale search jaunts, I tracked the usual dark shadow, which turned into a yellow cloud. Considering a fogged mask or new phenomenon, I surged on to investigate as all good researchers do. Like a twisted vein of humpback humour I found myself swimming in humpback poo! Terrestrial myths about lightning not striking the same spot twice don't hold in whale country. Whale poo hit me again. Jest or coincidence, it's an experience that's hard to forget.

In the course of swimming with the mother, calf and her escort, it has become copiously clear, that the humpback is protective. The male escort too, ensures that nothing gets between him and his lady - not even a pint sized somewhat tactile human. It is their gentle demeanour even in the face of perceived threat, that intrigues as it inspires.

The playful young fellow, in his daring games with me has filled me with moments of immense delight and pleasure. Although I maintain a safe playing distance and keep control as consciously as I can, on one occasion I had to use his belly as a duct board and kick off to get out of his way. It didn't seem to bother him in the least and I think it actually excited him, because before I knew it, I was receiving an open pectoral hug from a three tonne little giant. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before and it happened so fast that the details almost elude me.





This memory brings a smile each time the question, “what do whales feel like?” is asked. Although I don’t condone the touching of whales but on occasion when the whale had instigated the contact, secretly relishing those moments, I do declare that whales feel like a cross between the neoprene of a wetsuit and the material of a wet t-shirt. So there you have it, you can stop wondering. Gentle giants as they are, when it comes to the Humpback’s primal instinct to mate the competition is often profuse and rowdy. The courting ritual can take hours and once the competition gets heated, you don’t want to get in their way. Each whale aggressively manoeuvres for the best position to mate. The opposition will stream a net of bubbles to deter the competition from approaching the female and their actions can become extremely aggressive. I once spent an hour and a half with six adult Humpback whales. Floating like a bobbing cork on the surface, my eyes were fixated on the activity below. I literally didn’t know which way to turn as I watched this group of six whales stylishly glide beneath me and surface only metres away to take a breath. The antagonistic show of air bubbles streamed from one of the males as he moved towards the female. As the meeting of masses continued to churn up the water, I swam to a safer vantage point. Soon one of the male Humpbacks successfully presented himself to the female in an attempt to initiate the mating. The show continued with the choreography of epic dimension. The intimate courtship of a female Humpback and a male suitor was in session. I watched with zealous interest as these two giants pirouetted charmingly around each other, oblivious to their audience.

With different frames of references, describing the emotion and sheer enormity of swimming with a Humpback whale and why it

evokes such emotions can sometimes be a difficult task. I have seen people burst into tears from the sheer exhilaration, some people go into a catatonic state and replay the moment in the head over and over again, and some people simply are excited to just be in the presence of these whales. But no matter what the reaction, the experience leaves a lasting impression and often changes their opinion of how they see whales, as more than just an animal, and can often inspire people to take action to preserve these animals and their environment. Nicknames like ‘whale whisperer’ and ‘whale toucher’ from friends and strangers indeed are flattering; but what is really inspiring is that look on their faces and the transformation that follows after an encounter with whales..

This year I was inspired to put on a photographic exhibition to support the efforts of various organisations fighting against the slaughter of Humpback whales. As helpless and incredibly frustrating as it may be, education about the preservation of whales on a global stage remains an important objective for the plight of this species. My efforts may only play a small part in this process of education. It is a hope that such effort to bring knowledge, understanding and awareness of the beauty and awesome nature of these wonderful animals, will win the hearts of the ignorant and the belligerent. I encourage you to indulge in this life changing activity, but with the disclaimer that this activity is addictive, so don’t be surprised if you keep coming back for more. And no, the whales aren’t going to eat you. ○

PUBLISHER’S NOTE: this essay won the 2007 Celebrate the Sea – Ocean Geographic Photo Journalist Award.

SCOTT PORTELLI Wildlife Photographer

Scott has been taking nature and wildlife photographs for over 12 years and has spent the last 6 years getting a feel for the underwater world. Finding affinity with the ocean and many of its marine mammals, he is eager to document these creatures and their charismatic behaviour in a unique environment.

With an eclectic range of qualifications, he combines academic achievements with a passion for adventure and photography. Based in Sydney, he has travelled the world extensively shooting in some of the most remote destinations, including Nepal, South America, Antarctica and the South Pacific.

Scott has been Scuba diving for over 15 years, exploring reefs, caves, wrecks and the deep blue sea. By documenting and sharing his images he hopes to contribute to the awareness and conservation of the fragile creatures that inhabit this planet.

