



# "Whales Tails"

Newsletter March 2005



Hello to you all!  
The weeks have just gotten away from me and have finally found time to write our all-important yearly newsletter.

Again I was truly humbled by the simplicity of life in Vava'u Tonga and how happy and joyful people are without all the 'extravagances' we think we can't live without! The local SPCA shop here on Waiheke Island was very appreciative of my yearly clean out on my return from Tonga!

## Tonga 2004

WOW! What a wonderful whale season 2004 has been in Tonga. The humpbacks arrived very early in the season and they were within the Vava'u Island by the end of July so there were more whales in early August than I have seen in all previous years we have guided groups in Tonga. It was great! The other 'new' experience was to swim with large pods of males (10 – 15), a very full-on experience with all that testosterone pumping around you! We certainly had the best underwater encounters we have experienced in 6 years of operation there.



Here is an example – taken by our guide, Tabatha. This small calf was extremely curious of us and gave everyone perfect photo opportunities! This photo was taken with our Nikon 5400 Digital

with underwater housing and a wide angle lens.

We had 8 different groups and all had experiences with the whale's way beyond their wildest dreams! (See some of their letters and stories in the pages 3 & 4).

We also had a German film crew with us for a few days filming a program called 'Along the Dateline through the Pacific: An Island-Trip with Klaus Scherer'. ('Auf der Datumsgrenze durch die Südsee: Mit Klaus Scherer auf Inseltour') it will air over 2 nights on the channel ARD in Germany Sunday, May 15, 9.45pm, and Monday, May 16, 9.45pm. We are in the first program on Sunday May 15 only. They had just 3 days with us and managed to get unbelievable footage of these gentle giants and some excellent interviews with Sione, one of our skippers, and an old whaler that still lives in Vava'u. The program was originally going to air on 29/29 December but due to the tsunami news during this time, the program was postponed. (More about 'tsunamis' later in this letter.)

Besides the amazing days out with the whales, our leisure days in Vava'u were filled with great snorkeling experiences around idyllic uninhabited islands, hiking, diving, great food and the tropical night's full laughter and fun.

## How much longer will we be able to swim with humpback whales?

If your passion is to come and swim with the humpback whales in Tonga or Niue, I encourage you NOT to put it off any longer. There is huge pressure from some 'do-gooders' & NGO's (who have never been to see what

we do!) to stop 'swimming with the whales, so we really don't know whether this could be the last season to swim with these magnificent animals in Tonga & Niue OR anywhere else on the planet. So I suggest you don't put it off but just 'go for it' while you still can, your life is not a dress rehearsal!

## The Asian Tsunami

It was a terrible disaster and many people lost their lives and their loved ones. It will take many years, if ever, for all the people and countries affected, to recover. Our hearts go out to them all. We did our 'bit' by contributing and helping with the appeals, but it didn't seem enough somehow. I must say that I was very tempted to get on a flight and just go there to assist them.

As a result of the tsunami, it seems that many people around the world are afraid of travelling, and in particular, to islands in case of another tsunami.

I would like to make it clear, Tonga & Niue are thousands of miles from the Indian Ocean where the earthquake and the tsunami hit, and the chances of it happening in Tonga or Niue is probably 10 million to 1. Your chances of dying in a car accident in your home country are far more likely! I fully support anyone who has this fear to realise that and not let your life be ruled by 'something that might or might not happen' in the future. The opportunity to swim with the whales may not be available for much longer.

## What's New.....

Each year we have something new... this year we have a new expedition on the island of Niue (350 miles east of Tonga). More about Niue on page 4.

2004 was the first season that most of our groups stayed out on idyllic islands in the middle of the whale nursery – this was fantastic as some mornings the whales were playing, just off the beach in front of the resort. We have included a new resort this year – Treasure Island Resort on Eu'eiki Island – It was completed at the end of October 2004 and we are very excited that our 'Paradise Islands' groups will stay there this season.



## The Whaleswim Team for 2005

I am very happy to announce that our loyal staff; Annah Evington will be with us for 8 weeks and Scott Portelli for 3 weeks in Vava'u this year!! Libby Eyre, our wonderful researcher will be with us for 2 groups, an opportunity to assist Libby is available. Like me they have fallen in love with Vava'u, our Tongan family and of course, the magnificent humpback whales and take their annual leave (plus some without pay!!) from their 'real jobs' to be there with us!

We have 2 new volunteers, Annie Muscat and Kris Madden who will be part of our Team for the season ...PLUS Mark Jones, ('his nick name is The Fish') a marine biology student from NZ who worked with us last season and will be with us again in for the Uni holidays in 2005. See you in Tonga or Niue!!!

Rae Gill

Tour Director WhaleSwim Adventures

## Experiences from our enthusiastic Staff!

Annah Evington - Tonga 2004



Annah - your Guide

*"Hi WhaleSwimmers, past and future. I can't believe that it's the end of March 2005 and that another wonderful whale season is coming up already. Just four months to go before the humpbacks start cruising past the east coast of Australia on their way to the beautiful waters of Vava'u and Niue.*

*I'm delighted to say I'm able to spend more time with the whales this year. Work commitments in 04 meant that I was only able to be in Tonga for three short weeks and I can tell you, it was very, very hard to leave. The group that I was guiding for were a fabulous bunch of people, the weather was gorgeous, I'd been given such a lovely welcome back by my friends and colleagues in Vava'u, and there were so many whales! We had a number of really easy-going mother and calf pairs in particular that were so wonderfully co-operative. Our group had numerous extended and utterly sublime encounters with them and all were moved beyond words by the sense of timeless tranquility that moves through you when you are able to just 'be' with the whales for prolonged periods. They are such very special creatures and being in their environment with them such a privilege.*

*On my return to Australia, and back to the daily reminders of the escalating challenges created by our being on this planet, I again felt blessed by having been to one of the places in the world where life is simple and true. I shared (endlessly I was told) tales of Vava'u - this place where TV and 'news' don't rule, where the people sing as they stroll along the streets and where people really are living in community. They work, sing, play and practice their faith together with their families and friends most every day of their lives, food is simple and plentiful, and life is pretty straightforward. The horror of endless choices and sensurround commercial exhortations doesn't impact on their lives and, even after just a few weeks, it had ceased to have meaning for me too. Bliss.*

*Niue is another of these very special places. Rae and I were there a year & a half ago on a little scouting mission and fell in love with it. A simple and quietly paced place, this beautiful palm fringed pearl of an island in the middle of the South Pacific not only boasts some of the most exceptional scenery and stunning snorkeling spots I've encountered, it has humpback whales visiting too!*

*The tiny Niuean community has been struggling to make a go of things for a few years, but with an increasing number of whales stopping by and Niue's decision to follow Tonga's lead and offer whale-swimming opportunities, in addition to word getting out of a unique landscape, truly adventurous expedition opportunities and incredibly crystalline waters, a tourism industry is emerging. Niue is one of only three places in the world that you can swim with humpback whales, and the most unknown.*

*Now, for those of you that love diving...let me tell you - Niue is sensational! The island is a coral plug basically,*

*pushed up out of the sea eons ago, and now with coral platforms skirting it. There are no rivers, streams or pollutants running off into the ocean, and visibility of up to 60 meters is not unusual. It's like diving in an extremely well kept aquarium and quite mind-boggling. The dive operators, Ian and Annie, know the island like the back of their hand and run a really smart operation - I thoroughly enjoyed my diving with them. And ask me about Snake Gully - woohoo!*

*While some of the island services are a little on the basic side, The Matavai, the largest hotel (well, actually, the only hotel) on the island is modern and well appointed and has absolutely spectacular ocean views from its cliff-side location. That combined with a really friendly and community minded manager, good food and an excellent pool makes it a winner. There are a number of lovely and friendly little motels and B&B's available, but the Matavai views were hard to go past and the manager so helpful, that we have decided to base our tours there.*

*Niue is truly a gem, and, though I hesitate to use such a hackneyed phrase, it really maybe one of the last 'undiscovered' Pacific paradises. If you have a sense of adventure and love the simple, raw beauty of nature when she has been experimenting a bit, you'll love Niue.*

*Come join us there for a whale-swimming adventure in August - or I'll see you along with our Tongan bound whales in Vava'u in September!"*

**Yours swimmingly  
Annah**

## Scott Portelli - WhaleSwim Photography Group Leader



Scott Portelli

*"The encounters this year were exceptional. On one occasion we spent an hour and a half with six adult humpbacks. We stared down into the depths watching every move these leviathans made, a transcendental experience, as six adult humpbacks frolicked around us. Floating like bobbing corks on the water's surface, our eyes were fixated on the*

*activity below. I literally didn't know which way to turn as I watched this group of whales gracefully glide beneath me and surface only metres away to take a breath. But things were about to get rowdy.*

*Their actions became more deliberate. An 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 we moved to a safe distant. One of the male humpbacks presented himself to the female in an attempt to initiate the mating. Just as it started to get interesting the group of humpbacks began to take their activities further out to sea. We decided it was time to take our voyeuristic behaviour elsewhere.*

*Over the past three years I have spent a great deal of time in the water with these magnificent creatures observing all types of behaviour. Whales gracefully glide through the water without any real exertion, and the perception is one of slow motion. Watching a whale propelling itself at high speed from the depths to breach less than 50 metres in front of us was an extraordinary sight. All of a sudden there was 45 tonnes of whale*

launching out of the water. A split second later we lifted our heads out of the water to witness a dramatic splash. The first of several splashes, as she continued to breach. This impressive behaviour is the epitome of the humpback whale.

As most people experience whale watching primarily from above the water, observing the natural behaviour of these gentle giants in their own environment is a unique experience. People often feel a strong connection to these marine mammals that can only be expressed through a mutual understanding of one's presence. But describing the emotion and sheer enormity of swimming with a humpback whale and why it evokes such emotion can sometimes be a difficult task. Some people cry, some go into a catatonic state, and some are simply on a high for days after an encounter. If you have ever dreamed of swimming with a whale, you may want to pinch yourself, because in Vava'u it is reality".

**Scott Portelli**

## A 'WhaleSwim experience' from one of our 2004 Guests!



*"As quietly as we could we slipped into the clear sapphire blue water and began slowly swimming towards where a mother humpback and her baby calf were lying near the surface. She seemed to be completely unperturbed by our presence, with the exception of one watchful*

*eye that gave us a mildly interested gaze. The other eye was planted firmly on the antics of her newborn calf, who swam towards us in apparent delight at having the chance to swim with another species.*

*I never thought it was possible to gasp underwater. But as this surreal scene unfolded around us an overwhelming feeling of total awe and sheer ecstasy flooded through me.*

*Off to one side, a male 'escort' lay motionless like some giant spaceship, singing to the female in a deep cello-like voice. They say that a whale's song carries for thousands of miles through the ocean. The sound resonates throughout your entire body and it's one you can never forget.*

*Before departing on this voyage, I must admit that I felt some apprehension. I had visions of being flattened by a massive tail fluke, even if it was by accident. Would they be able to tell we were there? What if they accidentally bumped into us? How big a turning circle does such a huge animal need?*

*Reassured by Rae and the fact that many others had gone before me without incident, I put my fears behind me and hand in hand with other members of the group we took the plunge - not really knowing what to expect next.*

*As the young calf twirled and pirouetted around us in the water, I knew from that moment that I was completely hooked, and wanted to stay there and just be with them forever.*

*The one thing that astounded me was their curiosity. In almost all of our encounters the whales seemed to take as much interest in us as we did in them. Rather than swim away, they stayed to observe us, and sometimes to play with us. You could almost imagine that the mother was teaching her young one about us. "See son, these are humans, mostly harmless, but be wary,*

*and keep a bit of distance, you never know what they might do."*

*My experience with these gentle giants soon taught me that if they didn't want us to be there – a few strokes of their tail and they would be gone far away. But they seemed to enjoy the interaction and seemed to know that we meant them no harm. When they decided they had had enough, or that there was other whale business they needed to attend to, they simply turned and gracefully swam away.*

*I have seen whales in the wild in many parts of the world from Australia to Antarctica – but nothing comes close to this experience. While watching whales from a boat or the shore is an absolute delight, what happens under the water is indescribably beautiful.*

*And now as I go to bed each night with the memory of these giant creatures that have such power and strength, and yet are so calm and gentle, I feel enormously privileged to have been allowed to share their world even for a brief time".*

**Kris Madden,**

**Paradise Islands Tour, September 2004**

## The 2004 Guests . . .

What a year!! We seem to attract really great people on our expeditions and most are pleasantly surprised how the groups 'gel' so quickly. Like me, most of our guests are independent travelers – who are not usually 'group' vacationers – and somehow our groups work very well – much to everyone' delight! I think it is because 'whale-swimmers' are special people. It certainly takes courage to enter the water with huge 40-tonne marine mammals! After the first time, you absolutely know there is nothing to be nervous about!

We had guests from Spain, UK, Germany, Italy, USA, Singapore, NZ and Australia during 2004 and all had a great time....

Here are some of their photos and comments.....



*"What a whale of a time I have had. Who would have thought it possible that day-after-day the sea would reveal such awesome experiences so*

*generously. Not just to have met the beautiful whales of Tonga but also the wonderful & special people.*

*Rae & Annah, you are both a set apart from the norm. 'SP's' = SPECIAL PEOPLE. I am honoured & humbled to share time with you both. PLUS the Gang were brilliant - I haven't had such a fabulous holiday EVER! Thank you my friends.*

**Sarah Simon**

**Melbourne Australia**



*"There are no words to describe this amazing experience!"*

**Lorrie Graham**

*"Truly an amazing humbling experience"*

**Gary Graham California, USA**

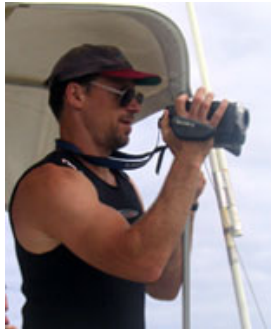


"As the Great Chief said 'Sometimes you have to catch up with your soul'. Thanks Annah & Rae for this experience!"

**Rembert Euling  
Majorca, Spain**

"There isn't much to say! I just can't find the words to explain the experience. It was absolutely fantastic! Thanks a lot Rae & Annah. Hope to see you soon. Big kisses, hugs & love, Kira"

**Kira Euling  
Majorca Spain**



"Thanks so much Rae & Annah - we have had the most amazing, breathtaking & spiritually fulfilling vacation here in Tonga with you & all our new friends & (of course!) the whales!

We feel very fortunate to have met you, our fellow whaleswimmers and to have been allowed by some very generous whale spirits to share some time in the sea!

We will never forget this!! Thank you - may our paths cross again!"

**Pete & Cheryl Donovan  
USA**

**About your destination . . .**

**The beautiful people of Tonga . . .**



The people of Tonga are happy, open-hearted and generous. Our Tongan Feast and Dance Nights are fantastic. The traditional food cooked in the ground is delicious and there is always plenty of it. The feast also includes a kava-ceremony. Kava is a traditional drink and many of our guests fully participated - some were even seen

on several evenings partaking in more kava-drinking at the local kava hall! Consequently, some were worse for wear the next morning!!

The beautiful rich singing voices of the Tongan people can be heard most mornings, wafting from the many churches in Vava'u. (A visit to church is a treat not to be missed!)

**The weather . . . . .**

It is kind to us for MOST of the season – however, the weather can be wet and windy for a day or two at a time – the whales can be a bit scarce (mainly because we can't spot them as easy) BUT we manage to experience some wonderful encounters. (Like this one that breached right next to the boat!) August and early Sept can be cool at night even though you are in the tropics, but the majority of the days are sunny (as you can see by the photos in the newsletter!) SO if you are planning on joining us in Tonga in 2005 – PLEASE BRING YOUR SUNBLOCK!



**. . . . and Vava'u!**

What can I say!! It's paradise! Our days spent out among the islands with the whales and nights staying at beautiful resorts on these islands – make our tours unique.

**WhaleSwim News!**

**Our first expedition to Niue Island South Pacific!!**

The Niuean people – (just 1400 remain on the island there were 22,000, the majority have gone to NZ and Australia to experience the 'other' world . . . .) - have a quirky sense of humour and everyone waves to you as you drive around the island. (I remember that this was common practice back in the 50's in NZ – a time when we had time for each other.)

Niue is the perfect destination if you want a fabulous holiday away from 'civilisation'!

The population of humpbacks whales hanging out around Niue – 'The Rock of Polynesia' - have increased to healthy numbers, which gives us a really good reason to have a whale-swim – adventure expedition on Niue for the 2005 season!

With activities such as swimming with humpback whales, diving (for the divers!), snorkeling, hiking, caving, bush exploration, climbing coral cliffs and even coconut crab hunting at night – for those who are game – Niue is a perfect destination for an unusual holiday!! We also include a village tour and Fia Fia (traditional feast and dance) evening, a seafood banquet and meals at various local cafes and restaurants – and in particular – at Willy's Wash-away Café ... and that's another story!! We will surprise you with the details!

**Tour:**  
**Experience Niue & Swim with the Whales!**  
August 15 – 22 2005 - see tour prices on page 5.

**New Booking & Payment System Online!**

To book your tour just Click the 'Book your Tour' icon anywhere on our website and enter the details PLUS any extra nights accommodation and you will be sent a invoice immediately with all the details including different payment options and dates for deposit and final payment for your vacation with us.

YES! At last we have a credit card payment system online. You can now pay for our tours with your credit card, however there is a 3.6% transaction fee added. Unfortunately, the online payment companies charge heavily for providing this service. We hope this makes your tour booking easy and efficient.

## Whale Fact's

### Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae* - Family: balenopteridae).

They belong to the Rorqual (groove throated) family and in place of teeth, they have baleen plates hanging from their upper jaw which is used to sieve their 'food' from the huge mouthfuls of water. The full grown males measure 12.2-14.6m (40-48 ft), and the females slightly larger at 13.7-15.2m (45-50 ft). They weigh 25-40 tons.

The South Pacific Humpback whales swim 8,000 kms (5,000 miles) from the Antarctic (March/April) to the islands of Vava'u 16,000 kms (10,000 miles) round-trip!) to mate and give birth each year from July - Oct. On migration, humpbacks may not feed for as much as 8 months of the year.

They return to the Antarctic and from December - March they eat around 1-1.5 tons of plankton, small krill and other schooling fish per day, sieving the food through 270-400 baleen plates, made up of fine black keratin, around 30 inches (76cm) in length. They stack on large amounts of blubber to see them through the big 'swim' and the breeding season.

It is now thought that many female humpbacks, those who are not engaged in breeding activities in a given year, probably remain somewhere in the Southern Ocean to feed, build up their fat reserves for the following seasons migration and mating.

### Humpback Calves

A Humpback Whale calf drinks around 40 litres of milk every day - the fat content of about 45-60% (human milk is approx. 2% fat) for up to ten or eleven months until gradually weaned onto solid food. Calves stay with their mothers for about a year, sometimes two. This is thought to be due to the necessity of learning complex foraging skills, such as bubble-netting. They weigh 5 - 6 tons and are about 3 - 4 m (12- 13ft) long when born.

### Whale Song

Singing has been reported only in males, with one exception, where a female was heard to sing. Long complex songs are unique to each population, with each song made up of distinct themes lasting for 10-or even 30 minutes and repeated continuously for hours, changing gradually each season. Song is generally heard during the breeding season, although it has also been reported on migrations and during the spring, autumn and even midsummer on feeding grounds. It has been observed that the song sung by humpbacks from eastern Australia will be sung the following breeding season in Tonga. (Maybe they learn that years 'latest hit' in the feeding grounds of Antarctica!)

## Travel Tips

Getting to Tonga and Niue takes a little more effort than flying to an international city in the Pacific Rim, BUT it is certainly worth the extra time!

We also advise that if you are traveling long distances (from Europe, Asia or USA) that you break your journey with one or 2 nights enroute or arrive in Vava'u at least a full day before the expedition begins in Tonga and have a couple of days in Samoa enroute to Niue. The time change and the long flights can take their toll so we advise some extra sleeping time before your expedition!

**For Australians** – we recommend that you fly Polynesian Airlines direct to Tonga from Sydney every Wednesday and return every Tuesday.

Contact Jessica at TravelScene Byron Bay Tel: 02 66856733 or email

[jessica@travelescenebyronbay.com.au](mailto:jessica@travelescenebyronbay.com.au)

Many of our US and European whale-swimmers have found it a challenge to find a travel agent who know how to can book the airfares to Vava'u and Niue.

**In the USA**, Jo Coltrane at Travel Unlimited/Oceans Unlimited is fantastic! – she will make it easy for you. [coltrane@psln.com](mailto:coltrane@psln.com) Free phone: 888-832-1021

**For Europe**, we have a list of agents - go to [www.whaleswim.com/en/tonga/travelagentseu.html](http://www.whaleswim.com/en/tonga/travelagentseu.html)

**For UK**: online fares at <http://www.airline-network.co.uk> Just make sure that you enter a Tuesday date for departure from Heathrow and TBU for destination. The fares start at GBP813 return to Tonga.

## Free Video CD Rom of our expeditions in Tonga

Complete and submit our order form for a free CD about WhaleSwim Adventures and video footage of our expeditions in Tonga.

[www.whaleswim.com/en/contact/cdorder.html](http://www.whaleswim.com/en/contact/cdorder.html)

## Your Encounters with the Humpback Whales in Tonga on video!!

**Marnie Harrison and her Team from Wild Focus Films will record your experience!**

Marnie or one of her Team will be aboard our whalewatching vessel for 1 or 2 days during our expedition to film YOU swimming with the whales and having a great time in Vava'u.

Cost: T\$120 per copy DVD or VHS video (NTSC & Pal versions)

## In Summary. . . .

### Our expeditions in Vava'u Tonga 2004

[Whales in Paradise' 9-day/10-nights](#)

5 - 15 August 2005

30 Sept - 10 October 2005

Price: AUD\$3,795

[Deluxe Expedition 7-days/8-nights](#)

19 - 27 August 2005

Price: AUD\$3,250

[Paradise Islands 9-days/10-nights](#)

26 Aug - 5 Sept 2005

9 – 19 Sept 2005

Price: AUD\$3,495

[Paradise Islands Small Group 10-days/11-nights](#)

19 - 30 Aug 2005

16 – 27 Sept 2005

Price: AUD\$3,795

[Photography/Small Group 9-day-10-nights](#)

30 Sept - 10 October 2005

Price: from AUD\$3,250

### Our expedition in Niue 2005

[Experience Niue - Swim with the Whales!](#)

15 – 22 August 2004

Price AUD\$2,850 for snorkelers

Price AUD\$3,095 for snorkelers

## Thank you for your interest in our expeditions!!

Whaleswim Adventures is now in our 7th successful year of expeditions.

We are the most professional and we work with the most experienced operators and guides in all of our whale and dolphin locations around the world.

We are committed to continually striving to improve our product and service to you.

We are environmentalists, conservationists and contribute to the local communities in Tonga and Niue in education and by encouraging our guests to purchase Tongan handicrafts directly from the local villages or market.

The WhaleSwim Team looks forward to sharing our extraordinary expeditions with you in 2005!

**Rae, Annah, Libby, Scott, Mark, Kris and Annie.**

### Contact Us . . .

We are always happy to assist with questions and information that you require so send us an email!

#### Rae Gill

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**ADVENTURES**

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### Our Whaleswim Team for 2005!!



Rae Gill  
Tour Director



Annah Evington  
Australian Manager  
& Guide



Scott Portelli  
Photography Guide  
& Guide



Libby Eyre  
Researcher & Guide



Mark Jones  
Marine Biology Student



Kris Madden  
Journalist/Guide



Annie Muscat  
Whale-lover & Guide