

More information about WHALES OF THE SILVER BANK Expeditions

The Silver Bank

The Silver Bank and surrounds yearly play host to thousands of migrating North Atlantic Humpback Whales. In 2005, NOAA researchers aboard the R/V Gordon Gunther conducted extensive population count in the region, and the results indicate that between 5000-7000 humpbacks pass through this oddly shaped (25miles x 40 miles at it's longest dimensions) sanctuary each winter. Indeed, research indicates that the Silver Bank contains the largest seasonal population of humpbacks in the North Atlantic Ocean, if not the world.

The M/V Turks and Caicos Explorer

Our vessel on the Silver Bank, the M/V Turks & Caicos Explorer II, is a 126 ft. custom-designed live-aboard dive boat housing 20 guests in 10 well-appointed cabins. Two upper deck staterooms each feature a queen-sized bed, desk with chair, and picture windows. Staterooms 3 and 4 on the main deck each have twin beds and desk with chair, and large windows. Staterooms 5, 6 and 7 on the main deck each have twin/queen beds, desk with chair, and window. The lower passenger staterooms 8, 9, and 10 are accessed via a circular staircase from the main salon; each includes twin upper/lower beds and large portholes. All staterooms have hanging closets, wardrobe, ample storage space, individually controlled air conditioning units, and private bathrooms with shower.

On the main floor, the air-conditioned salon contains an entertainment center with TV/DVD and stereo, comfortable couches, and several tables for dining. It can be accessed directly from all staterooms and the galley. Aft of the salon area, the dive deck is equipped with individual gear lockers, wet and dry camera tables, a recharging station, and freshwater rinse baths for wetsuits and cameras. It also has a wetsuit hanging area, freshwater showers, and a bathroom. One floor up from the dive deck, a large sun deck area features comfortable lounge chairs, and provides access via an outside walkway to the two upper deck suites and the pilothouse forward. The awning-covered fly bridge is accessed via semicircular stairs from the sun deck, and features settee seating for 12 to 15, a barbecue, wet bar and helm station.

The vessel is equipped with modern instrumentation and communications including 48-mile Simrad radar with proximity alarms, autopilot, GPS and location alarm, digital depth sounder with alarm, digital bottom recorder, computerized chart system, and Satellite phone with data link. The electricity provided is 220 V and 110 V AC power (110 V AC 3-prong grounded outlets are available in all cabins and heads). The M/V Turks & Caicos Explorer II crew is composed of certified divemasters and instructors who have undergone rigorous STCW 95 training in shipboard firefighting, sea survival skills, CPR, first aid and crowd control. Ship stewards offer unparalleled service including daily housekeeping, and the chef offers an excellent variety

of delicious cuisine, from locally sourced produce, fish, and meats. If you have special requirements regarding diet, please let us know so that we may advise the ship directly. They will do their best to accommodate your needs.

You may pay for your onboard expenditures with credit cards, cash or travelers check. No personal checks please.

Our Tenders - Escort and Challenger

“Escort” and “Challenger” are simply the best tenders on the Silver Bank. They are the second generation of whale watching boats designed by Aquatic Adventures, and encompass a wealth of informed design. All the mistakes that were made with the first version have been corrected, and numerous improvements provide the driest and most comfortable platforms for whale watching available on the Silver Bank. Clean, well maintained and reliable, each fiberglass tender is 25.6 feet in length, with 10 feet of unobstructed inside beam. From the spacious dry storage areas at their bows to the quiet, environmentally-conscious engines at their sterns, Escort and Challenger provide exceptional comfort and efficiency. For your safety, and that of the whales, a professional whale guide will always operate the tenders.

A Glance at Your Week

After boarding the M/V Turks & Caicos Explorer II and getting settled in, we begin the overnight crossing to the Silver Bank. It generally takes 8 to 10 hours to reach our mooring area on the Northeast corner of the bank. You will begin spotting whales as soon as we approach the shallow bank, with numbers increasing as we near the mooring. We arrive late morning, and will be out in the tenders the very first afternoon (after an informational briefing). Each subsequent day on the bank, we have two sessions on the tenders, morning and afternoon. Each morning we depart the Explorer at around 8:30 AM and return for lunch at 12:30 PM; if we are having an extraordinary encounter, lunch can be delayed or skipped (we have plenty of fresh snacks and water on board the tenders for this possibility). Afternoons we depart around 2 PM and return to the Explorer between 5 and 6 PM, just in time to enjoy happy hour festivities and sunset on the deck. Weather permitting, you will therefore be provided with 6-8 hours of whale watching opportunity per day. Most evenings we offer brief informational videos or naturalist narrated slide shows to help you understand the various behaviors witnessed during the day. Afterwards, retreat to the sundeck or flybridge to view an array of stars rarely visible through the city lights at home.

Please be advised that whale activity is not entirely predictable, and there will be slack periods on every expedition. Cruising the Silver Bank looking for cooperative humpback whales can sometimes be frustrating, time consuming and tiring. We may approach a dozen whales before finding a whale that allows us to join them in a soft-in-water encounter. On the other hand, when we're immersed in such an encounter, the time spent “whale waiting” is soon forgotten. The majority of the time there are more than enough whales to

keep us entertained; indeed, often it's not "where is the whale?" but rather "which whale do we go to?". Even when we can't get in the water with whales, the surface activity is generally fantastic: rowdy groups, breaching, fin slapping, lob tailing and other behaviors are frequent. In addition, we are able to utilize a hydrophone to listen in on humpback song, and will do so at least once during the week.

On Friday morning we will depart for the journey back to Puerto Plata. Arrival time depends on the weather, but is typically between 4 PM and 6 PM. On Friday evening you'll have the choice to dine with the group at a local restaurant, or we can direct you to options for dining on your own. Departure is on Saturday morning by 8:30 AM. Should you have a late flight on Saturday, we'd be happy to make suggestions for activities you might enjoy locally during the day.

Weather

Weather patterns on the Silver Bank are heavily influenced by weather patterns in the southern United States. Though wind speed can vary dramatically, a typical day on the Silver Bank has winds blowing out of the N to SE in the 15-knot range. At times, fronts will move through the area, influencing rain patterns and wind speed, though rain is infrequent and tends to pass through quickly. Though the Silver Bank remains an ocean frontier, subject to variations in weather and the many moods of nature, the coral formations adjacent to our mooring area provide adequate protection from high winds and extreme rough seas. Off the bank, larger swells are possible, and the crossing to and from the Silver Bank can be uncomfortable at times. Having said that, the M/V Turks and Caicos Explorer II is an extremely stable ship and every effort is made to minimize any impact from rough seas.

Visibility

Visibility on the Silver Bank averages 40 to 80 feet around the mooring area. Having said that, we do experience days with excellent visibility (100+), sun beams cutting through still waters to reveal intricate details. Wind, swells, suspended particles, and proximity to coral heads all affect the visibility, and will create variations from one area on the bank to another. Visibility can also change rapidly over the course of a day, even hour to hour. During the month of March we will often experience a (harmless) thimble jellyfish bloom. This bloom is also quite variable in duration, lasting several days to several weeks. Water temperature ranges between 76 and 79 degrees Fahrenheit (24 to 26 degrees Celsius).

The Soft-In-Water Encounter

What is a soft-in-water encounter? "A soft-in-water encounter is not scuba diving, nor is it aggressive swimming or free diving. It is passive, non-aggressive floating at the surface, in mask, fins and snorkel, allowing the whale to develop an interest in humans. It is finding a cooperative, tolerant

and/or curious whale and meeting that whale in the water, calmly and peacefully, permitting a rare and treasured encounter between human and cetacean.”

In other words, we let the whale choose to interact with us, and to largely set the terms of the interaction. The first several minutes of each encounter require informed care. Humpback whales are extremely acoustic animals, so it is important to minimize noise when preparing to enter the water, and when in the water. Proper approach is also important; swimming after the whale (as opposed to quiet, non-aggressive approach) will often cause them to turn and leave the area. If you follow your guide’s instructions and adhere to the soft-in-water encounter techniques, you will have a good chance of turning a brief glimpse into a meaningful encounter that lasts hours.

Prolonged encounters are the goal, and when they happen your naturalist guide will instruct you on what you are able to do and what you are not able to do. Each whale is different and no encounter is exactly like the last. Certain behaviors are consistent from whale to whale, but it is up to your guide to distinguish what in-water approaches are appropriate in a given situation. The extensive in-water experience of our naturalist guides is one of the reasons why our expeditions are so successful and why we have longer and more frequent encounters than all other operators in the area.

Your Cetacean Specialists

All Adventure Quest X and Aquatic Adventures expeditions are naturalist guided, with the utmost care taken in providing you with a knowledgeable guide. One of the big differences between our operation and others is the experience and consistency of the guides on a year-to-year basis, ensuring you an exciting, educational and trouble-free expedition. Our team is extremely passionate about what they do, and they love sharing their aquatic world with you.

Tom Conlin

I’ve had the privilege of spending 298 weeks working with whales on the Silver Bank. My entire focus is on learning about whale behavior and supplying you with the type of experiences you’re expecting. This experience builds year-to-year and improves our approach techniques and understanding of North Atlantic Humpback Whale behaviors over other operators. As a licensed 1600-ton USCG Master, Master Diver Trainer and Advanced Free Diver, I have a thorough understanding of ships, boats and the sea, above and below the surface of the water.

Since 1990, I’ve relentlessly read everything I could get my hands on concerning humpback whales, but my real knowledge stems from spending 299 weeks in the field, watching, listening, and trying to discern the movements, behaviors and attitudes of the North Atlantic Humpback Whale. Recording behaviors and thoughts as they occur has helped me theorize and understand movement, breaching, lob tailing, communications, resting, rowdy groups, courtship and mother/calf interaction, as well as behavior

changes due to time of season, wind and sea conditions, positions of the moon and the variable weather patterns we experience throughout this time period. This information is passed on to the College of the Atlantic and the Center for Coastal Studies for fluke IDs and behavioral studies. I digitally record the song of the humpback whales and send these recordings to Dr. Chris Clark, head of the Department of Ornithology at Cornell University. Students of marine sciences at Wheelock College receive three college credits by joining me on a one-week expedition and assisting me in collecting this information as well as fulfilling additional requirements set by the college. This 27 year period that I have spent on the Silver Bank has given me the opportunity to contribute my work, associate and study with some of the leading organizations and researchers in the Cetacean community as well as working with and providing footage and images to film crews, leading magazines, newspapers and professional photographers from around the world: YONAH (Year of the North Atlantic Humpback, a three year DNA project with researchers from 7 nations), Malcolm Clarke, David McTaggart, Greenpeace International, NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), Caribbean Tagging Project (2008, 2009), Center for Coastal Studies, College of the Atlantic, Cornell University, Wheelock College, Atlantic Cetacean Research Center, Roger Payne's Whale Conservation Society, IFAW, Dolphin Research Center, Ashes and Snow (Gregory Colbert), BBC, Howard Hall Productions, Bob Cranston Productions, IMAX, NBC, The Today Show (2 times), MSNBC, 3 separate National Geographic Specials, Disney, Paramount, Crest Films, Segment Films, Sea Cam, 3 separate NHK of Japan specials, Amazing Animals, Discovery, Antenna 3, GBTV, PBS, CBS, ABC, Bloomberg, UFO and The Sports Channel.

Being responsible for developing whale watching on the Silver Bank has led me in a direction from operator, to naturalist, to being actively involved with the Sanctuary Commission of the "Sanctuary for the Marine Mammals of the Dominican Republic". Prior to the 1996 season, the Comision Rectora appointed me as their representative on the Silver Bank. As the person with the most time and experience on the Silver Bank I have been placed in a position to assist the sanctuary commission by providing the proper information needed to improve the guidelines established as well as educate the crew members of the commercial vessels involved. My duties included: The surveillance of all applications in regards to the regulations of the Sanctuary Committee concerning all vessels located on the Silver Bank, assisting professional photographers and film crews, training and assisting all operators, captains and crews in approach and soft-in-water encounter techniques, coordinating and determining the permanent location of anchoring and mooring positions for each vessel in the area and recommending the best mooring system for each site. I was responsible for informing and notifying the captains of all vessels of observations and adoptions of the regulations of the Comision Rectora, as well as, informing and recommending appropriate sanctions and/or withdrawing permits from any violators of the existing regulations. In 2007, I was asked by the Secretary of the Environment to rewrite the regulations, contracts and agreements for all operators and visitors of the Sanctuary. I'm happy to say

that everything that I submitted was accepted. During the 2009 season I once again assisted NOAA in placing satellite tags on seven adults prior to the migration north. On a yearly basis I learn many new insights concerning the behaviors of these magnificent mammals above and below the surface of the water. This year-to-year, day-to-day learning process has enabled me to provide our participants with an unmatched opportunity to experience sensational surface activity in tandem with unbelievable "soft-in-water" encounters.

Lorenzo Martinez

Lorenzo hails from Samana, in the Dominican Republic. Humpback whales regularly frequent Samana Bay, and in the early 1990's, Lorenzo was present when YONAH began to assess their numbers. In 1997, Lorenzo worked as a park ranger for the whale season, furthering his interest in whales (and photography). In 2000, Lorenzo attained the position of "Coordinador de Observacion de Ballenas", in charge of whale tourism oversight. It was at this time that he first visited the Silver Bank, and was enthralled with the experience of being in-water with the humpbacks. Lorenzo began working with Aquatic Adventures in 2006, where his lifetime of whale observation serves him well as a guide, tender operator, and photographer/videographer. Lorenzo also holds a PADI Advanced Open Water license.

Denise Lawrence

Denise was born and raised in Baton Rouge, but spent her summers sailing on the Gulf of Mexico with her family. Her love for the sea led her to work first as a Divemaster (on liveaboards throughout the Caribbean), and later as an Instructor. She now resides in Ft Myers, FL, where she works as a PADI SCUBA Master Instructor, USCG Licensed (100-ton) Captain, and massage therapist. Denise has now spent 12 seasons working with whales on the Silver Bank, and brings a wealth of experience to the team. Denise has a passion for cetaceans, and a love for sharing that passion with others. Her impressive skills in guiding and operating the tenders ensure quality interactions above and below water. Denise also offers massage services on-board the T&C Explorer II, helping you unwind and relax after an exciting day on the tenders.

Brandt Brown

Brandt grew up in the Pacific Northwest. As a child, he'd regularly spot whales passing through Puget Sound, and this experience instilled an early love for cetaceans and the sea. Since then, Brandt has had extensive opportunity to travel, live and work abroad, in places as diverse as Turkey and Thailand. He has rarely ventured far from the aquatic realm though; much of his time has been spent underwater as a PADI SCUBA Instructor. In addition to his substantial experience working on liveboard dive boats, Brandt has 8 seasons of experience on the Silver Bank. Brandt has fantastic

intuition for whale behavior and a natural talent for conveying information. He also has a great deal of enthusiasm to complement his skills on the water. When not on the Silver Bank, Brandt continues to explore the Pacific Northwest, the USA, and the world.

When to Come

One of the most frequently asked questions concerning a "Whales of the Silver Bank" expedition is when the best time to come to the Silver Bank is. Honestly, anytime can be spectacular. As a general rule, the season progresses as follows; the humpback whales start to arrive on the Silver Bank as early as December with a large influx of whales arriving by mid January, peaking by the third week of February, second week of March and deserting the area by the end of April. The arrival patterns of humpback whales from the northern latitudes are relatively consistent and can be characterized as follows: pregnant females, mother-calf pairs, mature females, immature females, mature males and immature males. Upon their departure, impregnated females lead the way, followed by all other classes of humpbacks, with the mother/calf pairs being the last to depart the Antilles for their three to six week journey home.

When making your decision concerning when to come to the Silver Bank there are two things you must take into consideration: weather and activity. Since this area is directly related to the weather patterns of the Southern United States you can never be guaranteed good weather no matter when you decide to join a "Whales of the Silver Bank" expedition. Every year is different and every year the good weather weeks will change making it impossible to assure any time will have optimal weather.

As outlined above, we arrive on the Silver Bank by the third week of January when the area is bustling with activity. From this point through February the whales are very energized, movements are very quick and chaotic, due to the sheer number of whales moving through the area on a daily basis. Numerous rowdy groups, individual females accompanied by escorts and mothers with calves are prevalent. Most of our encounters during this time frame are with individual whales (dancers), mothers and calves and rowdy groups. One of my theories regarding mother/calf behavior is that once a mother/calf arrives on the Silver Bank they will stay in this area for the entire season, unlike the individual whales that cruise through the area. By March these mother/calf pairs are comfortable with the tenders, the mothers aren't as protective, and the calves are leading the group, displaying adult postures and being very curious. April shows a decrease in whale population with rowdy groups being larger and more violent and numerous mother and calves still in the area. We operate only during the time frame in which we know, through years of experience, there will be plenty of activity to please our guests. Whether you choose January, February, March or April you will be placed with whales on a daily basis.

In Summary

The Silver Bank is truly a marvel of nature, hosting the largest concentration of mating and calving humpback whales in the world. Our passionate and professional guides and crew ensure you an incomparable experience during your stay on the bank, and the M/V Turks and Caicos Explorer II provides unparalleled accommodation and amenities. Our tenders are custom-designed to maximize the efficiency and comfort of your days on the water, affording more whale watching opportunity than any other operation in the area. Our goal is to educate, entertain and delight. Although you may experience variations in weather, sea conditions and visibility, our knowledge and experience will still allow us to get up close and personal to these magnificent animals, and will ensure the highest quality *soft-in-water* encounters. Having been at the forefront for developing the *soft-in-water* encounter guidelines (and for the training and oversight of other operators in the area), we are also responsible for improving those guidelines year after year. Indeed, the naturalist guides on your expedition set the standards that all others are expected to follow. Regardless of what week you choose, you will have a unique and life-changing experience on the Silver Bank.

In closing, thank you for taking the time to read this information, and we'll see you with the whales!

Kindly,

The Aquatic Adventures Team

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