

SWIM WITH SOME OF THE LARGEST MAMMALS ON EARTH

Thousands of Humpbacks come to the Dominican Republic and offer you a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with whales.

BY DANIEL T. STEWART

The motor vessel Sun Dancer II silently glides to its mooring in the Silver Bank Marine Sanctuary in the Dominican Republic where it will sit for almost a week. She's one of only three boats permitted to enter the area. Eager passengers, many of whom have come half way around the world for this unique experience, wait to board the smaller dive tender boats for a short ride to be face-to-face with whales that range up to 50 feet in length.

Humpbacks, like other species of large whales, were hunted nearly to extinction before a whaling moratorium was established in 1966. These whales spend their lives migrating from polar waters, where they feed on krill and other small fish, all the way to tropical or subtropical waters to mate and

give birth to their young. At the moment, it's estimated that about 80,000 Humpback whales are spread around the planet.

Gene Flipse, Sun Dancer II's captain, briefs the passengers on procedures they'll use to get in the water with the whales. As a protected species, it is illegal to approach the whales. Instead customers put on their diving masks, fins and snorkels, slide into the water and wait for the whales to approach them. Scuba and rebreathers are not allowed. While many people would refer to this experience as "swimming with whales," very little actual swimming is required. Guests float on the surface in their wetsuits and watch.

Whales typically arrive in the Dominican Republic in December and January and stay through March or April. This is the time of year to see the male humpbacks wooing the females and a time when mothers swim side-by-side with newborn calves. Captain Flipse encourages the boat's guests to not only look but listen. Male humpbacks serenade females with the longest and most complex songs in the animal kingdom. The clear water in the Dominican Republic is also home to sperm whales, pygmy sperm whales, pilots, false killers and a variety of dolphin species including bottlenose, Risso's, Fraser's, spotted and spinner.

The Sun Dancer II's four decks are spacious, comfortable and well-appointed, with air conditioning in all interior areas.

She can sleep up to 18 guests, with two master staterooms and seven deluxe staterooms. Each stateroom sports individual climate controls, picture windows and flat screen TVs with DVD players. The spacious Dive Deck features two freshwater showers, warm fresh towels, a water fountain and separate rinse tanks for cameras and snorkel gear. For the photographer, there are two large camera tables, and all guests have their own dedicated gear station.

But the real show is taking place all around the boat where a non-stop ballet is under way and underwater. Passengers regularly report that being in the water with these magnificent creatures is one of the highlights of their lives.

Local regulations strictly limit the number of people who can get in the water with the whales. Sign up early to guarantee your adventure. For more information, log onto Incredible-Adventures.com or call 800.644.7382. Airport: Aeropuerto de las Américas (SDQ).