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Orca Spotting in the Salish Sea

by Roddy Scheer

It wasn't looking good. We'd been in the whale watch boat for more than an hour and covered fifty nautical miles with nary a gull sighting, let alone orca whales. Ever since my nine-year-old daughter Eliza had caught a late-night rerun of *Free Willy*, she had been obsessed with seeing wild orcas swimming in our home state's waters. So here we were, chugging along on the M/V Sea Lion, the 55-foot whale watch boat operated by San Juan Safaris out of Friday Harbor on San Juan Island.

But even though the weather was cooperating, the whales were not. Where were they? The on-board naturalist was keeping the kids entertained with native tales and scientific facts about orcas, and the mountain and ocean views were astonishing in every direction, but still no whales. Sporadic chatter over the VHF radio tantalized us with reports of isolated orca spottings to the north, so our captain pushed into Canadian waters, hoping this trip wouldn't turn into the rare dud that yields no whale sightings.

Just then, I saw a glint off the water in my peripheral vision. As I turned to look over the starboard rail, an orca breached just fifty feet from the boat. And then another. And yet another. Eliza's jaw was dropping with each successive breach. The captain cut the engine and we began to bob quietly in the swell. Before we knew it we were in the middle of a group of cavorting whales. The great creatures seemed to be curious about us, the only boat in sight for several miles.

A few more minutes went by and just when we were beginning to think the party was over, a mother orca and newborn calf surfaced together, only about ten feet from the boat. And four other adult whales followed in procession. We could hear the force of air from their blowholes. Eliza was grinning from ear-to-ear, snapping pictures. For ten more minutes the show went on, the lines blurred as to which species was watching which.

And then the whales were off, racing north, destination unknown. Perhaps they were getting hungry for dinner too. After a few more minutes of optimistic drifting, the captain fired up the engine and we began the long journey back to Friday Harbor, mission accomplished on one of the best afternoons of our lives.

FINDING THE WHALES

by Northwest Travel Magazine staff

Whales follow food, and where the food swims is influenced by the tide. According to Captain Shane Aggergaard, founder of Island Adventures, this is the secret to

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Orca's "spyhopping"

spotting whales in the Salish Sea. He has been spotting and tracking whales since 1996, and, during that time, has found consistent patterns enabling him to predict with 96 percent accuracy where whales will be, and when, on any given day.

"Our resident killer whales [orcas] move 100 miles a day," Aggergaard says. Their favorite food, when they're running, is Chinook salmon. "Finding whales is all about where the fish are in relation to the tide."

For a map pinpointing Aggergaard's whale sightings, go to *island-adventures.com/whale-watching-tours/guarantee.php*, and click on the dot map.

WHEN YOU GO:

For more information about visiting the San Juan Islands, go online at *visitsanjuans.com*. For ferry schedules and fares, visit *wa.gov/ferries*.

Charters:

>> **San Juan Excursions**, 800-809-4253, *watchwhales.com*.

>> **San Juan Cruises**, 800-443-4552, *whales.com*.

>> **Island Adventures**, 1801 Commercial Ave., Anacortes; avoid ferry traffic and go whale watching directly from Anacortes; 800-465-4604, *orcawhales.com*.

>> **Island Mariner Whale Watching Cruises**, 2621 S Harbor Loop Drive, Bellingham; whale watching departing from Bellingham, on the mainland; 877-734-8866, *islandmariner.com*.

>> **Puget Sound Express,** 227 Jackson St., Port Townsend; whale watching cruises from Pt. Townsend on the Olympic Peninsula to the San Juan Islands; (360) 385-5288, *pugetsoundexpress.com*.

Attractions:

>> **The Whale Museum** features exhibits about the orca life cycle and the marine ecosystems in and around the San Juan Islands. Youngsters can "adopt-a-whale" for $35 and get periodic updates on the health and whereabouts of a specific orca from the "Southern Resident" pods; 62 First St. N, Friday Harbor; 360-378-4710; *whalemuseum.org*.

Lodging: San Juan Island whale watching is a day trip from Seattle or Vancouver, B.C., but if you decide to spend the night on the island, you'll find plenty of lodging options.

>> In Friday Harbor, walking distance to the ferry: **Friday Harbor House**, 866-722-7356, *fridayharhorhouse.com*. **Bird Rock Hotel** or **Earthbox Inn & Spa**, 800-793-4756, *earthboxinn.com*. **Island Inn**, 360-378-4400, *123west.com*. **Tucker House Inn/ Harrison House Suites**, 360-378-2783, *tuckerhouse.com*.

>> In the center of the island: **Lakedale Resort**, 800-617-2267, *lakedale.com*

>> On the north end of the island: **Roche Harbor Resort**, 360-378-2155, *rocheharbor.com*.

Friday Harbor Dining:

>> **The Bluff**, 866-722-7356, *fridayharhorhouse.com/dining.php*

>> **Backdoor Kitchen**, 360-378-9540, *backdoorkitchen.com*

>> **Coho**, 360-378-6330, *cohorestaurant.com*

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San Juan Safaris