
WATCHING THE WHALES GO BY

By Phil Latham

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JUNEAU, Alaska – Sitting on this small boat in the middle of Auke Bay, it is difficult not to feel insignificant.

Let me rephrase that: Here, you completely understand man's insignificance, all doubt vanishes.

We have just seen humpback whales, a mother – roughly 50 feet long and probably weighing 100,000 pounds – and her young calf, about one-third that size. The mother is twice the length of the Merlin, the all-aluminum boat I am standing in, binoculars in my hands.

Jay Beedle, captain of the Merlin, seems to be able to spot a whale or an American Bald Eagle from miles away. Most of the time when he shouts out, "There's a whale over there!" I cannot see a thing.

Fortunately, he guides the boat as close as possible so we can watch without bothering the whales. I find myself also giving thanks that Beedle has taken up the profession of watching whales and not hunting them.

I shouldn't be surprised Beedle is so good at this. He is a 40-year resident of Juneau, which must have put him here as a young child. For many years he has lived on a remote island, some eight miles from Juneau, population: 10. His family makes up four of the 10.

As with most of Alaska, roads are scarce and there certainly isn't one connecting his island with the mainland. Beedle doesn't drive a car into work, he kayaks out to Merlin, then navigates eight miles to the dock each day.

Likewise, the island has no power, other than what the residents can produce themselves. Beedle powers his home with 10 solar panels. His neighbor on the other end of the island uses a wind generator. There's no power shortage here.

Living on an island has some unique benefits. Beedle's wife, Eileen, is one of the few people on Earth who can call her husband with the message: "Honey, there are whales outside the house again."

Professionally, Beedle is the "Marv" of Marv and Harv's Outback Alaska. "Harv" is Captain Pete Nelson.

"Next year," Beedle tells me, "I'm gonna be Harv."

This is the fourth marine business Beedle has owned and on this cold (yes, cold) morning in July, it seems to be a tough go. There are plenty of tourists to keep a thriving business going, but most of them are sucked up by the cruise ships that contract with the big 100-passenger whale-watching boats.

Most people never hear of Harv and Marv, though their service is a bit cheaper than you can get off the ship and though it is absolutely better. What's worse, local captains don't get much of the higher price, that is kept by the cruise ship. That is part of what is driving the small guys out of business.

Still, Beedle is optimistic. "Tomorrow's another day," he says and he smiles so that you know he means it.

That's why I put my money on Beedle, literally. The sightseeing tour you get from him with no more than six people on board is utterly different than you get on one of the big boats and much better. It is like going out on a boat with a friend.

Beedle is working on completing a lodge that sits in front of his house, close to the water. If you want to get away from it all – and I mean really away – I cannot imagine anyplace better to do so than this remote island.

As we pass by, Eileen waves from the house and I can imagine sitting on the front porch of that lodge, watching the whales go by and feeling as insignificant – and happy – as I could possibly be.

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If you're heading to Juneau, or you want to find out more information about Harv, Marv and the wonderful seashore lodge, you can visit their Web site at alaskawhalewatch.com, or email them at eb@alaskawhalewatch.com. Heck, you can even give Eileen a call at 907-209-7288.

If you do, ask her if she is seeing any whales out the front door today and tell her hello for me.