

Eye to Eye

A whale. A man. What would they say to each other?

By Bill Harby



The day begins with dashed expectations. On the dock at Lahaina Harbor, we learn that Jean-Michel Cousteau won't be joining our whale watch after all. Cousteau, who is carrying on the work of père extraordinaire Jacques, is supposed to be here with the handful of honchos from federal marine sanctuaries. The feds are in Lahaina for a conference, but they're taking a break this morning from land-locked confabs to go whale watching.

As we cast off with the crew of a 36-foot Zodiac, we forget all about our truant celebrity. Skipping across the sea, we squint off the port bow and amidships and the head and the back of the stern and whatever other directions they have on boats.

No whales.

Wait, yes, there, a tiny spout a half mile away—*Megaptera novaeangliae*, the humpback whale. Humpbacks are baleen whales—filter feeders that swallow 500 gallons of food-rich water in a single gulp. As the water is expelled, the whale's baleen—a bony sieve lining its mouth—traps up to 100 pounds of food. Imagine 400 quarter pounders in one bite.

After an hour of distant sightings ...

"There!" someone yells. Yep, just 50 yards away, a humped, mottled back rolls on the surface, then

dives. Below, we can just make out the huge shape. Humpbacks usually dive for four to nine minutes, but this one is already coming up—directly beneath us. I have a *Moby Dick* moment: The angry leviathan capsizes the boat, sending us down, down, down to Davy Jones's Locker. But this gentle whale just drifts below, waving one long, white pectoral fin like a beauty queen in a parade.

She's a plus-size beauty queen (females average 40 tons, a little more than males) and now she's rising toward us again.

The crew yells for us to grab our face masks and go to the dive platform at the stern. We're not allowed in the water with the whale, says a crew member (and federal law), but we can lean off the little platform—it's at sea level—and look underwater.

I very courteously shove several people out of the way and am the first to get to the platform, put on my mask and drop down on my belly.

I stick my face in. She is there, no more than 30 yards below, her back to me, aloof. Everything is silent, blue and sublime until I hear an insane cartoon voice shout into a snorkel: "Wow!"

She hears me and pirouettes, weightless on the tip of one fluke. She's staring right at me—hey, I can tell—and suddenly I'm looking 10 million years back in time when her ancestors were already plying the North Pacific.

Humpbacks are the most articulate of all baleen whales. According to *The Oceanic Society Field Guide to the Humpback Whale*, their vocabulary includes "moans, groans, roars, snores, and surface ratchets," not to mention "oos, ees, whos, wos and foos, abruptly changing *yups*, *mups* and ups; and high chirps and cries."

But this whale just out of reach is communicating telepathically. "Calm down," she's saying. "You're embarrassing us all."

I feel another Eternal Inter-Species Truth rising up to me when the boat lurches and I back-flop into the water. An enlightened man would now swim down to the whale for a pectoral pas de deux. Or at least hang motionless for a moment and om in mammalian harmony.

Not me, stupid human. I dutifully scramble back onto the boat as fast as I can. This meeting of the minds is *way* over my head. **15**

