

MIKE BALL MINKE MAGIC

> IN NORTHEASTERN AUSTRALIA, AN UNLIKELY 'MARRIAGE' BETWEEN DIVE CHARTER OPERATORS AND UNIVERSITY SCIENTISTS HAS SUSTAINED A LONG TERM WORLD CLASS DWARF MINKE WHALE RESEARCH PROJECT. IN 2011 SPORTDIVING PUBLISHER BARRY ANDREWARTHA HEADED OUT TO SEA ON THE MINKE TRAIL AND WAS SO IMPRESSED BY THE EXPERIENCE AND THE IMAGES HIS DIVE COMPANIONS CAPTURED, HE DECIDED THEY WOULD TELL THIS TALE BETTER THAN HE COULD!

Being in the water with dwarf minke whales has been on our wish list for years, and this 7-day Mike Ball expedition certainly delivered the goods. The excellent crew and minke scientist ensured high quality whale interactions and adapted our schedule to make this happen. Minkes joined us repeatedly over multiple days, with many close encounters of the whale kind and interactions lasting for hours on end. To capture both whole animals and detail, I used a 12-60mm lens, giving me wide-angle and telephoto capability on an Olympus E-410 in an Ikelite housing. What a spectacular feeling to see these massive animals so closely in their own environment!

Dr Frederieke Kroon
Stream Leader | Catchment and Aquatic Health
CSIRO Water for a Healthy Country Flagship
frederieke.kroon@csiro.au

This was my first trip to the GBR and I had joined Mike Ball's expeditions based on friends' recommendations. I now owe my friends big time, as it was a phenomenal trip. Being up close with dwarf minke whales is surreal and the photos don't do the personal interactions with the whales justice. In this particular shot the minke whale surfaced within one foot of me, and she was watching me very closely as I was trying to capture the moment with my compact Canon S90 camera.

My Camera Equipment:
Canon S90 Compact Camera, FIX S90 Housing, Inon Z-240 Strobe
Anneli Munkholm
amunkholm@gmail.com

Mike Ball's Minke Whale Expedition allowed me to repeatedly participate in an otherwise surely impossible but quite extraordinary and almost unbelievable wildlife encounter unfolding right in front of my eyes. Snorkeling face to face with a bunch of beautifully streamline, inquisitive whales was an awe-inspiringly harmonic experience I will never forget. Every time one (or more) of those gentle giants effortlessly and cautiously approached me out of the endless blue, I would become quite excited and I would feel blessed. One of them performed impressive loops right underneath me – a lucky moment that I managed to capture on my little compact camera.

Alex Koch, Germany
alex.s.koch@gmail.com





Mike Ball's Coral Sea expedition was supposed to be the dive trip of my life. Unfortunately, days of strong winds prevented us from reaching Osprey Reef. Summer clad divers with 23°-24°C sea temperatures prevented some divers from making all the dives. However with my 4 layers of insulation it didn't hinder me one bit. I was unofficially voted the keenest diver of the trip. However something a little unexpected made the trip unforgettable... Not just Mike Ball but minke whales!

Experiencing minke's underwater is something you can't compare to anything. Once they've checked you out with their massive and curious eyes, you are theirs. They are the most curious and friendly mammals I've seen in the ocean. After spending hours in the water with them, both diving and snorkelling I got to observe some unexpected behaviour. I saw them breaching multiple times, but I didn't get a photo of it, saw them blowing bubbles, missed my chance for photos again. But what I had got instead was not just a very close encounter, but a whale approaching me and presenting his... belly. It's a minke's interesting sexual behaviour indicating their willingness to mate. And yes it was a boy.

The other highlight of the trip was Mr Ball himself, the most energetic and talkative person I've met. I guarantee you won't get bored while he's around, whether in or out of the water. With his sarcastic sense of humour and the cheeky behaviour of a little boy he is proving that you need a personality to be successful in the diving industry (and proving wrong his school tutor!).

Overall it was an amazing trip and one that I'll never forget. Nikon D300, Ikelite housing and DS160 strobe
Dorota Dopierala

The northern Great Barrier Reef is the only place known in the world where dwarf minke whales aggregate on an annual basis. For around two months of the year (90% of sightings occur in June and July) divers and snorkelers visiting sites along the Ribbon and Agincourt Reefs are treated to one of the most amazing wildlife

interaction experiences on the planet. These 5-7m whales, weighing several tonnes, often make close approaches to boats and divers and sometimes interact for many hours at a time. Our week-long expedition (14-21 July) was on the shoulder of the season, and I had expected the number of whale encounters to start winding down. I was quite surprised however when we encountered whales on every day of the trip – and at almost every dive site. In total, we had 13 separate minke whale encounters, six of which resulted in an in-water interaction. These



encounters involved more than 45 whales, and we spent 24.5 hours in contact with them over the week. Fantastic!

Matt Curnock, PhD Candidate, Research Officer (Minke Whale Project, James Cook University)

I have travelled many times with Mike Ball Dive Expeditions but have never had the pleasure of diving with Mike before. The diving, crew, boat and professionalism in which the trip is run has to be one of the top dive liveaboard experiences in the world – certainly Australia.

This was a Minke Whale Expedition and this is one that should be on your list. Apart from the fantastic reef diving, hanging on a line in the middle of the ocean with these magnificent mammals is life-changing. Nearly every day they came to visit the boat and play with us. This image was taken during a lunchtime when I was on the line on my own. I felt very special as the close encounters were just for me. The whale was coming closer and closer and the eye was just watching me and I felt we had formed a bond. On the fourth circle we were eyeball to eyeball and I nearly forgot to press the shutter!

Seacam housing - Wide Macro Port - Ikelite twin strobes - Tokina 10-17mm lens, shot at 17mm

Jayne Jenkins



As a staff member of Spoilsport we are always excited about the prospect of a weeklong trip, as it gives us a chance to get to know our guests that much better and to break from routine and visit some sites we don't always have the time for. A week-long expedition during minke season and the prospect of heading out to Osprey with Mike himself? Excited indeed! Though inclement weather kept us from making the trip to Osprey, it just meant we had that much more time in the water with our minke friends! And what incredible interactions we had, definitely some of my highlights for the season and blessed with some exceptional visibility. And of course Mike's irascible presence keeping us all entertained!

Some whales are special and this individual, who we nicknamed 'Cirrus' after its cloud-like nape streak, was exceptionally friendly, making numerous incredibly close and playful passes on both the encounters we had with the animal days apart. Always incredible to share again with an old friend, I'll be looking for 'Cirrus' next season! All photos shot on Nikon D200, Nexus housing. 10-17 fisheye, 105 macro. Inon z240 strobes for macro.

• Matt gets up close and personal with Cirrus.

Shea Callaghan, Spoilsport



Minke whale researcher, Matt Curnock and I have done quite a few minke whale seasons together now and we've discussed at length what makes for the ultimate minke encounter to get the best photos and video.



It doesn't matter what conditions are like, one curious whale is all you need. On this particular trip, we had that one whale – a young female maybe only 5.5m in length, but she wanted to know who we were and with every pass on the snorkel line she came closer and

closer. Throughout the encounter I remained very still and patient. After a few hours she was coming to within cm's of my video camera lens. She was truly beautiful and presented me and the other snorkelers on the line an

encounter we'll never forget. The fact that we don't move on the line and that it's the whale that's making the decisions to control the encounter is really remarkable. She must have made at least 20 passes in front of me with less than a metre between us, creating some of the most striking photos and video I've made in the last few years. Everyone had beautiful photographs from this encounter. When it came to the photo competition at the end of the week, the standard of the images were the highest I've ever seen on any of our expeditions. Nearly all the pictures could have been in the running for photo of the year!! And of course they were nearly all of minke whales. It was a remarkable trip! The passengers were great people to have on board. To see the delight on their faces when they showed everyone their best shots they'd just taken of the whales, is priceless! There is not much in the world that compares to these moments with the minkes. Photos taken with Nikon D200 and Tokina 10-17mm lens, Seacam Housing

Julia Sumerling



Strong winds and choppy seas did not dampen my excitement for the trip ahead. "Minkes!" called out by an excited crew member was the cue to get in the water, quick. With housing in hand I slipped quietly into the water, and within only seconds I was face to face with my first minke. I was bobbing up and down like a cork in the choppy seas, as another minke headed straight towards me. "This is it" I squeezed the housing to my mask in preparation. The minke surfaced right beside me as I took a series of shots. So close you can see the hairs on it's chin. It is the eyes of these magnificent intelligent creatures that just fascinate me. Mike Ball Dive Expeditions helped fulfill my dream to swim with dwarf minke whales.

Photos taken with Nikon D300 Nikon 17-35mm lens, Subal housing.

Simon Theuma

Minke whales have a worldwide distribution but most are seasonal in occurrence due to their migration from their calving and breeding grounds in the tropics to their feeding grounds towards the polar regions. Minkes can be divided in three main subspecies, divided by the regions: the North Atlantic form *Balaenoptera acutorostrata acutorostrata*, the North Pacific form *Balaenoptera acutorostrata scammoni*, and the Southern Hemisphere form *Balaenoptera acutorostrata bonaerensis*. Dwarf minkes are found in the Southern Hemisphere but are not presently recognised as a subspecies, being more closely related to the Northern Hemisphere subspecies. Dwarf minke whales are still classified as *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. www.projectminke.com