

:: ROD KLEIN

ALIENS FROM THE BIG BLUE

6:30 AM ON RIBBON REEF 9, FAR NORTH GREAT BARRIER REEF. THOSE WHO KNOW ME WILL TELL YOU IT HAS TO BE SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY OUT THERE FOR ME TO EVEN GET UP FOR THE 8 AM DIVE. BUT THIS MORNING IS SPECIAL.



Sometimes they come so close that our fins must be pulled back to allow the whale to pass!

At this time of the morning, normally dead quiet on most liveaboards, I'm aroused by voices outside my room. I stumble out it doesn't take me long to get into the dive deck rhythm. The other guests are excitedly pulling on wetsuits and organising snorkel gear. The Captain has made a sighting and everyone is preparing for an adventure with the incredible dwarf minke whale.

It's day two, we're on the northern Ribbons with our first sighting of the trip. Over the next weeks Nimrod delivered 10 encounters including one with 10 whales AND some great diving to boot.

In search of both adventure and scientific observation I'd arranged with Clay McCardell, owner of Explorer Ventures Liveaboards, to spend several charters aboard his Nimrod Explorer. May through July offer a magical and unusual event along the north Queensland coast – the dwarf Minke is found in significant numbers and are known to voluntarily approach dive boats AND divers on a regular basis. These interactions aren't limited to blue water encounters but regularly occur while divers are conducting normal dives on local reefs. Though it's thought divers' bubbles may affect how close some whales approach, it isn't unusual to have close interaction while on scuba.

While many countries have banned visitors swimming with whales, a very organised (and unpublicised even in Australia) swim-with-whales industry has developed based on the voluntary approaches of dwarf Minkes. An official research program is also underway to learn more about this little known species and to ensure encounters have minimal impact on the whales.

I had a couple of days in Cairns to make sure that any jetlag was history. Arriving at the local marina, the first to greet me was my old friend Demi Yokota, Nimrod's number one divemaster who was my buddy, diveguide and model on my last Nimrod trip. Demi is from Japan, speaks really interesting English and is probably one of the most colourful, (in a very Japanese way), divemasters I've ever worked with. Also, he's a great source of information on Dwarf Minke whales and Barrier Reef diving in general. It was really good to see Demi and I knew this was a good omen for things to come.

ANYTHING MINKE! On board I immersed myself in anything dwarf Minke as I was a total newbie to this experience; I soon realised I'd come to the right place. The Nimrod has an excellent dwarf Minke whale educational program with lectures, videos, and briefings on whale behaviour and proper etiquette while in the water with them. All on board can share in the research program started by the CRC Research Centre and James Cook University. After each day's encounter guests are asked to complete a brief questionnaire designed to assess both whale behaviour and their responses to direct contact with humans.



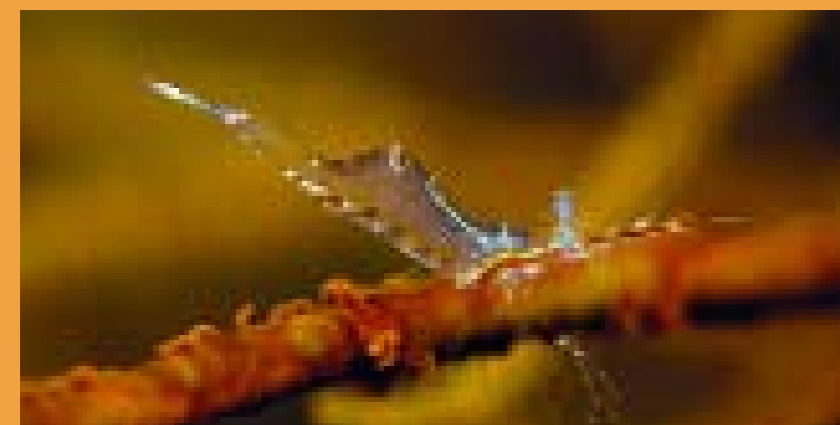


Top: This whale I called Swirl (notice the swirl marking) does a belly presentation, showing her most vulnerable parts to me. Other behaviours include spyhopping, breach, bubble blast, and jaw gape.

Above centre: Dwarf Minke makes a close pass at Lighthouse Bommie.

Below: A tiny shrimp, probably a cleaner, living with a hawkfish was so small and transparent it was almost invisible.

(All images shot with Nikon D2X in a Subal Housing)



It's important to understand the whales initiate the contact. Local dive operators, including Nimrod Explorer, do not go out to blue water areas to seek out the whales, but go to the normal divesites they frequent year round. During the May-July season, for a reason still a mystery, the Dwarf Minkes are attracted to both the diveboats AND divers and once on a mooring the whales may stay around all day. Whales also follow the boat for some distance once it's underway and whale breaching was often seen from the dive deck. Minkes are wild animals and won't always show up on cue so we'd do a normal reef dive as planned. On these occasions my most thrilling encounters took place.

Divesites like Pixie Pinnacle or Lighthouse Bommie are small intimate areas where the reeftop extends to within a metre of the surface. The moorings are directly adjacent to the divesite and the dive area of the Nimrod was no more than 20-30 metres away. The combination of diveboat, reef site and divers are like a siren call to the whales and normally by the end of our first dive at any site frequented by Minkes I could usually see at least two large whales cruising the reef.

It was amazing to sense the presence of a large Minke, see the shadow of its body cross over mine and find a magnificent creature three metres away. As part of the research, I was allowed to use scuba to photograph the whales. Although we were told that the whales were most likely sensitive to divers' bubbles, but I found little change in their behaviour if I was calm in the water, kept perfect buoyancy and didn't directly approach the whales. I could hang on the edge of the reef, watch the whales and hope for that close encounter.

Several times, while swimming slowly back to Nimrod's hangbar, the five whales with us during the dive followed me back, as curious about me as I was

“ **THE FIVE WHALES WITH US DURING THE DIVE FOLLOWED ME BACK TO THE BOAT, AS CURIOUS ABOUT ME AS I WAS ABOUT THEM!** ”

about them. Hovering at about 10 metres the whales made pass after pass around me. What were they thinking?

THE COOKIECUTTER MYSTERY One of the goals of marine mammal research is to try to identify individual animals. Each dwarf Minke has distinctive markings, scars, scratches and bites and we were asked to note the markings of whales we encountered.

Round golfball-size chunks were missing from some whales, sometimes just one or two, but others had up to 10 round sections removed from their skin and blubber layer. It's believed these are bites by the very small, very aggressive pelagic shark, *Isistius brasiliensis*, or cookiecutter shark. This one third metre long predatory shark is believed to attack the whales traveling in deep water.

INCREDIBLE ENCOUNTERS My trip brought many incredible encounters. Whales approaching me within arm's length were not uncommon and sometimes one would just swim by me so slowly, almost stop, and take a good look with its exposed eye.

I kept a fairly detailed daily journal for both the official research and for my personal records. I was there to experience dwarf Minkes but there was a lot of other great diving. Often it was hard to decide which lens to take. Areas which brought our best Minkes encounters also had some great macro opportunities. At Lighthouse Bommie Demi mentioned that, apart from great whale activity, this area included several resident turtles, plenty of olive seasnakes and soft corals housing longnose hawkfish. I descended to 20 metres to search for hawkfish, found the dark red delicate soft coral and spent a good portion of my dive trying to get the perfect shot. But then I looked closer at the same soft coral. At first I couldn't quite make out what it was. Then I realized it was a tiny transparent shrimp, probably a cleaner, living with the hawkfish and almost invisible. This little guy almost had the same features as an adult hawkfish, especially the long nose, colouring, and big eyes common. In a few minutes I found six of them, almost impossible to photograph. My first try was sort of feeble so I decided to come back.

Ascending up the bommie, one of the resident turtles approached, a beautiful unscarred juvenile, while overhead a large shadow of a passing Minke darkened the water. On this dive I had it all, olive seasnakes at the bommie base, resident turtles, longnose hawkfish, tiny transparent shrimp, and finally Dwarf Minke whales.

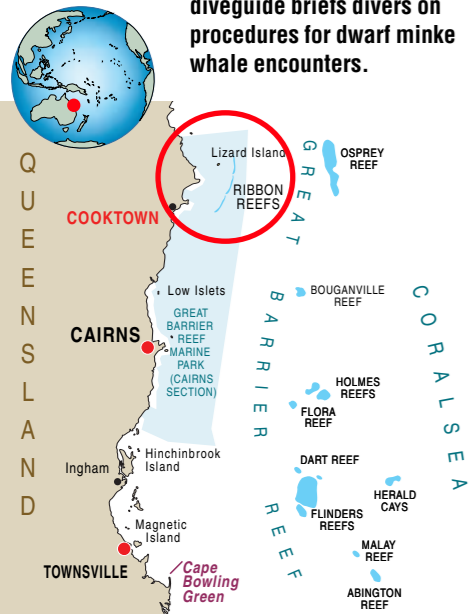




Demi Yokota, Nimrod senior diveguide briefs divers on procedures for dwarf minke whale encounters.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS This was a great adventure and wonderful education. Though Minkes aren't endangered and are now the most abundant of the great whales, their populations have been depleted by whaling in the North Atlantic and the western North Pacific, as well as in some parts of the Southern Ocean. At one time it was thought that Minkes might increase in numbers in the Southern Hemisphere because they had increased amounts of food available after the decimation of the larger baleen whales, but there's no evidence that they have increased.

Dwarf Minkes were taken during commercial whaling until 1975. Sixteen Dwarf Minke whales were taken in the Japanese research whaling program but since 1993 no takes have been reported to the International Whaling Commission. There is talk that commercial whaling might resume in the Southern Hemisphere and it would target Antarctic Minke's. It is possible that dwarf Minke whales would also be taken incidentally which may directly impact on the incredible encounters experienced here in Australia's far north Great Barrier Reef.



MORE THAN JUST WHALES ON NIMROD...

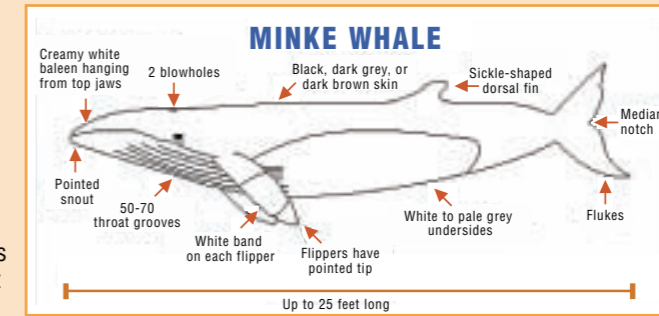
The Nimrod Explorer offers three itineraries:

- 1 Start in Cairns, steam to the northern Ribbon Reefs, the famous Cod Hole and end up in Cooktown, about 125 miles driving from Cairns;
- 2 Start and end in Cooktown with stops on the north Ribbons, Cod Hole and (if a week long charter) head out to Osprey reef in the Coral Sea;
- 3 Cooktown to Cairns. If you start or end your trip in Cooktown, the charter cost includes a 1-hour flight from or to Cairns. This low level scenic trip up the north Queensland coast is worth the cost of admission alone and is a highlight for all guests.

Cooktown itself is a small, historic town. The first European settlement in Australia, it was named for British explorer Captain James Cook who spent two months in 1770 repairing his ship, the Endeavour. The ship had been damaged on the nearby reefs of Cape Tribulation. Cooktown is a sleepy tourist town with one main street, a beautiful bay, small cafes, and my favourite, the lawn bowling club.

MINKE WHALES Until recently it was thought that there was a single, variable species of Minke whale throughout the world's oceans. The 'true' Minke whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* is known only from the northern hemisphere, while the southern or Antarctic Minke is found mostly in the southern hemisphere. Though the smallest of the great whales, the normal Minke may still reach 33 feet (with females tending to be larger than males) and exceed 10 tons. Minke whales are the most abundant baleen (filter feeding) whales and it is estimated that there are about 800,000 worldwide. The dwarf Minke whale is identified by its white shoulder

Females are thought to give birth to a single calf every 1-2 years. Mother-calf pairs are rarely observed, though in recent years researchers have started to see what is thought to be independent calves (based on their size) with a probable mother staying in the general vicinity, but not directly with the youngster. The calf will spend 10 months in the womb and up to six months nursing. The young Minke whales will mature sexually after six to eight years and might live up to 40 or 50 years, but its true lifespan is not known for



and flipper base, with a dark grey tip on the flipper. Unlike the Antarctic Minke, it has a large dark patch extending onto the throat. Female dwarf Minkes are on average about 6 feet shorter than Antarctic Minkes (in baleen whales, the female is larger than the male). The largest dwarf Minke whale that was accurately measured was over 25 feet long and weighed 5-6 tons, with the average being 15-18 feet. Minkes are distinguished by their very pointed heads. In the mid 1980s dwarf Minke whales were first recognised as a distinct form and though they're known to be only from the southern hemisphere, very little else is known about them. They've attracted great attention in northern Great Barrier Reef waters because they regularly approach close to boats and swimmers and this is why I was there. Dwarf Minkes are highly maneuverable and can jump from the water like a dolphin, can swim in bursts of 12 knots but cannot maintain this speed. They've been seen repeatedly circling a vessel cruising at 8.5 knots. Their paired nostrils (blowholes) are on the top of the head and they surface to breathe every 1-12 minutes.

certain. Some countries including Japan still hunt whales and have indicated they will continue hunting Antarctic Minkes.

Diving with dwarf Minke whales The swim with whales program is quite organised and all liveboards follow a strict set of guidelines to allow researchers to gather consistent data. (the northern Ribbon Reefs are too far for day dive boats, though there have been reports by day boats of encounters on the southern reefs) Once moored at a divesite the captain and crew would keep a keen lookout. If one or more whales were in the area, two 30-metre drift lines would be set out off the rear swimstep. Snorkelers would quietly slip into the water and take a position on one of the lines and allow the Minkes to approach at their leisure. Once the whales began interacting, with time they'd gain more confidence and begin what can only be described as 'close encounters of the third kind'. These typically lasted as long as we stayed at the divesite and, during my time on Nimrod, 5-6 hour encounters weren't unusual.