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## **Whale of a time in Monterey Bay**

*By Jackie Burrell*



Humpback whales feed on schools of anchovies less than a mile outside of the Moss Landing, Calif., in the Monterey Bay on Aug. 10, 2014. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

We have our doubts as we pull away from Monterey's Old Fisherman's Wharf. We're aboard the *Greatland*, a whale-watching boat bound for the massive submarine canyon that divides the bay, where humpback whales feed and dolphins cavort with 98 percent certainty.

But these are wild animals. In the wild. How can the ship's crew possibly know?

Wide-eyed and humming the "Gilligan's Island" theme song -- we can't help ourselves; the crew keeps calling this a "three-hour tour" -- we begin scanning the blue horizon and dialing down expectations, just in case: If we see just a couple of creatures, we tell ourselves, that

will be awesome. One whale and we'll be perfectly happy. Or a dolphin. A single dolphin. Aw, heck, it's a beautiful day on the waves -- we'll settle for a sea gull.

Moments later, we are surrounded by dolphins, hundreds of them leaping from the waves and keeping pace with the boat, racing alongside. Half an hour later, we see the first of what will ultimately be a dozen humpback whales, surfacing in groups of twos or threes, exhaling geyserlike plumes, basking on the surface, then diving down, their flukes giving a final salute above the waves -- only to resurface five or 10 minutes later in another location.

How do we know it's 12 whales and not two showing up six times? A whale's fluke is as distinctive as a fingerprint, the shipboard naturalist explains, and marine biologists track migrations whale by whale using photo databases such as the one housed at the Cascadia Research Collective in Washington state.

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Soon, passengers' childlike glee has given way to freshly educated oohs and ahhs, as the whale with the nearly white fluke resurfaces alongside the cetacean with the gray-streaked fluke and the one whose tail clearly did not fare well in some undersea battle. There's a bite missing.

Whatever this planet's climate and environmental concerns -- and there are many -- these are glory days in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, where the sea is positively teeming with wildlife. And it gets better: Conservation efforts and changes in how those fisheries are handled are making an impact.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch just added 21 previously endangered California fish species -- from commercial fisheries declared a federal disaster in 2000 -- to the go-ahead-and-eat-them list. And whale populations are making a comeback as well. We're seeing more whales now because, ridiculous as this sounds, there are more of them. Devastated by commercial whaling, the humpback population in the North Pacific Ocean stood at 1,400 in 1966, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. By 2011, there were more than 20,000.

Gazing into Monterey Bay, one is filled with hope -- and glee and every other happy emotion that takes hold when dolphins frolic and whales cavort. Yes, that 98 percent sighting rate is for real.



Humpback whales feed on schools of anchovies less than a mile outside of the Moss Landing, Calif., in the Monterey Bay on Aug. 10, 2014. The humpback whales are lunge feeding, where they lunge through a bait ball close to the surface of the water with their mouths open. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

Plus, there's a 100 percent chance of clam chowder as you walk down Fisherman's Wharf afterward.

### Whale-Watching Tours

Heading out to see whales? Several whale-watching ships dock at Monterey's Old Fisherman's Wharf, and tours depart every hour or so. Here's what you need to know.

**The whales:** From April through November, Monterey Bay is the feeding ground for humpback whales, fin whales, orcas and blue whales, as well as Risso's dolphins and other sea life. From December to April, you'll see gray whales migrating south from the Bering and Chukchi seas to Baja California. And sea lions, seals and otters frolic all year long.

**The tours:** Most whale-watching trips run 2 ½ to 3 hours; passengers board 30 minutes before departure time. The tours are narrated by a marine biologist or naturalist. Find a perch on the deck for the best views; if you get cold, you can always retreat inside to the warmth of the glassed-in cabin.

**The tab:** \$37 to \$45; some tour companies offer children's rates. Each tour company runs two or more tours per day. It may be possible to just walk up, but reservations are a good idea, especially on weekends and during the summer.

**The details:** Park in the Fisherman's Wharf pay lot at the corner of Del Monte Avenue and Washington Street. Some tour companies have restrictions -- Princess, for example, does not allow children younger than 5 or pregnant women. Dress in layers -- it's cold on the deck and warm in the cabin -- and wear boat-appropriate shoes, i.e., flat-soled, closed-toe. Bring sunglasses, sun block, lip balm, a hat and motion-sickness medication, if you have a tendency in that direction. A camera is a must.

The snacks: Most of these ships have a snack bar, but you can bring your own food aboard -- and there's a great sandwich place adjacent to the parking lot. The year-old Wharf Marketplace (290 Figueroa St.) sells gorgeous Monterey County produce that was harvested that morning, as well as fresh bread, wine and deli items. Pick up tasty sandwiches at the grab-and-go cafe; [www.thewharfmarketplace.com](http://www.thewharfmarketplace.com).

The tour companies: Four whale-watching ships dock at the end of Fisherman's Wharf, including Princess Monterey Whale Watching ([www.montereywhalewatching.com](http://www.montereywhalewatching.com)), Monterey Bay Whale Watch ([www.montereybaywhalewatch.com](http://www.montereybaywhalewatch.com)), Chris' Whale Watching ([www.chriswhalewatching.com](http://www.chriswhalewatching.com)) and Randy's Fishing Trips ([www.randysfishingtrips.com](http://www.randysfishingtrips.com)).

### Chowdah on the Wharf

After your whale-watching expedition, stroll down the wharf, where nearly every seafood restaurant has a barker out front offering samples of clam chowder in little plastic cups. It's all New England style, creamy fare -- heavy on the potatoes and roux -- but it's free and it's fun. The best of this bunch is from Domenico's on the Wharf, where the chowder gets a little added zip from pancetta and all the seafood hews to the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch list.

But the best chowder overall is actually on the other pier -- the Commercial Wharf -- at Loulou's Griddle in the Middle, which is conveniently close to where you left your car. Loulou's won the people's choice award at the 2013 West Coast Chowder Competition held in Monterey.