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PHOTOGRAPHY 22 / 01 / 08

Big Shot - Underwater playtime

By Colin Doeg



Although Tony Wu wanted to get into the water with a sperm whale, the mystique surrounding them was daunting.

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PHOTOGRAPHER:
TONY WU

SPERM WHALE
PORTRAIT

EQUIPMENT

Nikon F90X with 20mm lens, Nexus housing, natural light and shutter priority at 1/320th second, Fujichrome Provia 100F pushed one stop. Website: www.tonywublog.com

Although Tony Wu wanted to get into the water with a sperm whale, the mystique surrounding them was daunting. Local fishermen warned of their aggression and there were large, intimidating arrays of sperm whale teeth on display around the islands.

Nevertheless, that failed to deter Singapore-based Tony, 40, who has had a lifelong fascination with the sea since he was a child. When he came across a boat owner and skipper - Captain Takahashi - who knew where the whales could be seen during their annual migration, he determined to return to the Bonin Islands, a remote collection of Japanese-controlled volcanic outcrops some 1,000km southeast of Tokyo and only reachable by a 25-hour sea trip.

The islands are adjacent to deep ocean trenches from which upwellings attract huge schools of fish, including pelagics and large predators. Originally, he had gone there to photograph the many species of dolphins that make the Bonins their regular stopover, diving from Captain Takahashi's 16m vessel, Dancing Whale.

During one of these trips, Takahashi-san told him of the sperm whales' annual visits and how he had found an area where females and their calves appeared to congregate for several weeks each year. That was enough for Tony, and the result was that he found himself free-diving way out in the blue... with a whale heading straight towards him.



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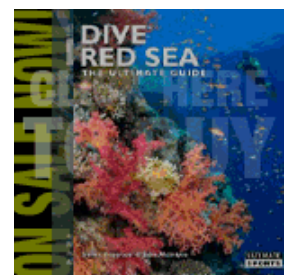
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'It was a juvenile, some 11m long and looked like a large, grey submarine set on a collision course with me,' recalls Tony. 'Desperately, I kicked for the surface but it followed me up.'

'Then it opened its jaws and swept me with its sonar. The sound reverberated throughout my body like the noise at a rock concert. That was when I remembered Takahashi-san's parting advice to me: 'If it turns its sonar on you, beware - it might think you are food.'

'The whale surfaced right in front of me, its sonar hosed me even more intensely and it approached me again.'

I finned backwards as hard as I could but was no match for the current. It just kept pushing me towards the whale and I ended up spread-eagled on top of its head as I clutched my camera.'

Events took a dramatic turn when the whale took Tony's left fin in its mouth. However, Tony remained calm, reminding himself that it was only a juvenile and probably just curious. The sperm whale released the fin, and Tony floated away before being swept back on top of the whale's head again.

This happened several times before Tony took a deep breath, snorkelled down and snapped off a few frames before surfacing and ending up on top of the whale's head yet again.

'We kept on repeating this performance until I had exposed 36 frames. It kept on nuzzling me but its sonar was no longer raking me and, looking back, I realised it never made a threatening gesture.'

'As I swam back to the boat, it swam beneath me. Our eyes met and I saw only playfulness in its eye and a curiosity that matched my own. For the first time, I felt certain of my safety. Back on the boat, I grabbed another camera and plunged back into the water. The whale was waiting for me and I spent over two hours snorkelling with it, swimming down beside it and letting it chew my fins as I took more images. However, big swells were running and the water was so cold that, eventually, I became so exhausted I had to get out.'


'As I dried off, it surfaced next to [our boat] Dancing Whale, spy-hopped and then raised its tail flukes and soaked us with water six times before it swam away. So ended one of the most memorable encounters I have ever experienced in more than 12 years of diving and underwater photography.'

Some of the photographs showed a large fish-hook embedded in the animal's mouth, and one made the front page of a leading Japanese newspaper, spurring a debate on fishing practices. This delighted Tony, who is a dedicated conservationist as well as an award-winning photographer, photojournalist and author. Since taking the image he has changed to Canon digital cameras in housings made by Zillion Japan.

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