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Paul Mila of Carle Place: My trip of a lifetime

Wednesday July 28, 2010 9:50 AM By Erin McKinley



Tales from the Trip: Readers' Adventures in Vacationland

This Month: My trip of a lifetime

Featured Traveler: Paul Mila

Age: 63

Occupation: Freelance author and retired VP for Mastercard

Destination: Swimming with whales off the Tonga islands aboard the boat Nai'a.

His story: Swimming in the ocean near charter boat Nai'a three years ago, Paul Mila, now 63, felt a giant rush of water. Turning toward the surge, he found himself eye to eye with a giant humpback whale. Although it sounds like something out of a dream, Mila was actually in a humpback whale sanctuary near the Tonga islands on the trip of a lifetime.

MORE: [See photos of Mila's trip](#)

Jimmy Buffet was the unexpected inspiration for Mila's trip. He had read a book written by Buffet, "A Pirate Looks at Fifty," in which a trip to the Amazon turned into the adventure of a lifetime, and it stirred a desire for adventure in Mila. At the time, he wasn't sure what form the trip would take, but he was determined that for his 60th birthday, he would seek adventure.

Mila met his trip companions, Judy Hemenway and Jon Fellows, on the Internet. They connected because both Judy and Paul had written books about the ocean and had a particular love for sea mammals.

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Judy and Jon have been going on diving trips together since their honeymoon 36 years ago, visiting local and Caribbean spots. Their appetites already whet for travel and diving, the Hemenways were scouring diving magazines to help plan their next big excursion when they read about whale trips in Tonga. They read about a 120-foot motor/sail dive schooner boat called Nai'a, which means "dolphin" in Fijian, and signed up. They e-mailed their internet buddy Mila, whom they had already connected with through their love for writing about the ocean, about the trip and he decided to join them.

Nai'a is owned by Rob Barrel, a whale enthusiast who brings boatfuls of people to the whale sanctuary for the entire 4- to 6-week mating season. The whales swim there from Antarctica and stay to give birth.

"It sounded like a great idea," said Mila, who was still looking for a trip to fulfill his wanderlust. "I told my family I wanted to go."

That year, instead of receiving the standard birthday gifts, Mila was able to go on the trip.

To start the trip, Mila flew from New York to Los Angeles to meet up with Jon and Judy. Together the three companions flew from LAX to Fiji, and from Fiji to Nuku'Alofa, on Tongatapu, the largest Tonga island. After staying a few days they boarded the Nai'a and set off for the whale grounds. The trio encountered whales every day while on board, and watched over and over as they threw their bodies out of the water and crashed back with a splash.

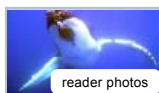
While they were not allowed to scuba dive with the whales, they were able to free dive with them using fins, masks and snorkels. "You are swimming so close to them they could wrap their fins around you," said Judy. "It is an otherworldly experience."

But the trip wasn't just about swimming with whales. The friends scuba dived on sea-mounts, underwater mountains 50-80 feet below the surface. "The sea was filled with the mournful sounds of whales around us communicating with each other," said Mila. "Sometimes it was so loud I expected to bump into a whale around the next coral head."

Although neither the Hemenways or Paul Mila know if they will ever be able to go to Tonga again, there are hundreds of other diving trips around the world they would love to try and they say they often find themselves thinking -- and talking -- about their swims with humpback whales.

"Being in the water with something that big is a humbling experience," said Mila.

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