

# Dances with whales

It is one of those still, glassy-water spring mornings when you can see whales breathing from 2km away. I'm standing on the prow of the research vessel Moon Dancer in Queensland's Hervey Bay when a humpback whale calf breaks the surface just in front of the boat. It is so close I can smell its briny breath; as the water vapour clears, it dives under again.

"Where's the mother?" everyone is asking. I look around and freeze. The massive shape of a female humpback whale is rising slowly through the clear water towards me. She surfaces almost close enough to touch, rolls gently on her side to look at me, breathes, arches her back and slowly dives, leaving a footprint of clear water in her wake.

It's the moment I gain a visceral understanding of the real size of a humpback whale.

You would be lucky to have such a close encounter on



**Into the deep:** The Oceania Project has been involved in researching humpbacks in Hervey Bay since 1989, using photo

## *Jesse Blackadder lends a hand on a marine research vessel in Queensland*

a commercial whale-watching trip of a few hours' duration, but sign up as a humpback whale research intern and such face-to-face meetings with whales happen every day.

For six days I am a research intern with Trish and Wally Franklin of the Oceania Project. The Franklins have been researching humpback whales in Hervey Bay since 1989, using photo identification to build life histories for individual whales and observing their social behaviour.

They take 12 expeditions a year, each carrying about four interns and several trained researchers. You don't need special training to be an intern, just a willingness to help and follow instructions.

Moon Dancer heads out on a Sunday morning, motoring gently around the far reaches of Hervey Bay, following whales along the remote shores of Fraser Island. At night we drop anchor close to the island's sandy shore and try to spot dingoes loping along the beach.

I could sleep in the boat's cosy cabin but I jump at the chance to take a swag out on the deck and doze under the stars, with the haunting songs of nearby whales carried up through the hull like a ghostly refrain.

Interns are rostered on whale observation from the top bridge, collecting and recording water quality samples, scooping up the small pieces of skin that whales slough after breaching or slapping, and helping out with





photo identification to build individual life histories

## and's Hervey Bay

cooking and cleaning up. It's not onerous; between tasks there's plenty of time to sit in the sun on the Moon Dancer's wide decks and watch the whales as they go about the business of feeding their young, jostling for attention, breaching, slapping their tails and pectorals loudly against the surface of the water or just resting quietly.

This is one holiday where you hope for a mugging, wherein a pod of whales gets curious and comes over to the boat for a close look. A spy-hopping whale sticking its head out of the water to look you in the eye from a few metres away is an unforgettable experience.

There is a practical outcome to the research work. As a result of the Franklins' identification data, Australian



Pictures: Trish and Wally Franklin/Oceania Project

communities can adopt individual whales through the Humpback Icon Project.

Casey Shire from Victoria has taken Sweetheart. In NSW, Waverley has chosen Liberty and Port Stephens has adopted Panda. In Queensland, Coolool has opted for Hope. Since the project began, more than 50 communities across Australia have adopted whales.

It's a good feeling to be even a small help to such wonderful creatures.

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## Checklist

Whale research expeditions aboard Moon Dancer take six days (Sunday to Friday). This year's voyages run until October 23; some sailings already have waiting lists. More: [www.oceania.org.au](http://www.oceania.org.au).