

November 5, 2010

A Whale of a Time on the Condor Express

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IF YOU GO

What: Whale watching on the Condor Express

Where: Condor Cruises at Sea Landing, 301 W. Cabrillo Blvd.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday Winter

Cost: \$94 adults, \$50 children, Free for children under 5

Don't Forget: Camera, warm clothing; a bar and restaurant are onboard

Note: A variety of Condor Express tours are available

Information: 882-0088, condorcruises.com

For year-round whale watching, there's no better place in the entire world than the Santa Barbara Channel. Blue, gray and humpback whales all come to feed in the channel's nutrient-rich waters regularly.

The types of whales found in the 20-mile-wide, 70-mile-long channel vary depending on the time of year, and the species' migratory patterns allow the public — with a little help from Condor Cruises — to witness the world's largest mammals in their natural habitat, 365 days a year.

At 10 a.m. sharp on a fall weekday, we boarded the Condor Express, a quad-jet catamaran built in 2002 specifically designed for taking groups of people on safe and efficient ocean excursions. Because the 75-foot boat is jet-powered, there are no propellers or rudders that could harm curious marine life. The Condor Express can hold up to 150 passengers, but the 23 of us on board (including families from Denmark, England and Germany) were happy knowing we wouldn't have any problems getting a front-row seat on today's four-and-a-half-hour excursion.

A Whale's Tail

We'd no sooner settled into the ship's cozy galley when Captain Mat Curto announced the foggy morning's first whale sighting: a lone male humpback. Just 15 minutes into the journey and less than a mile offshore, we rushed out onto the deck and watched the massive mammal breach, blow and dive for a full hour. As is typical with humpbacks, the whale would spend five to seven minutes on the surface before diving down for another three to five, often waving to us with his enormous tail flukes as he descended out of view.

Over the loudspeaker, Curto explained that of the world's 100,000 humpbacks, 1,800 inhabit the Santa Barbara Channel seasonally, from March to December. As we admired the "singing whale," Curto also told us that full-grown humpbacks are 50 feet in length and can weigh up to 100,000 pounds. In addition, we learned that because whales exchange 95 percent of the air in their lungs (humans only exchange 20 percent), humpbacks are capable of diving as deep as 1,000 feet.

Don't Change the Channel

After photographing one last surface interval, we fired up the Condor Express' 2,900-horsepower engines and pointed her toward Santa Cruz Island. As we clipped across the channel at a quick yet smooth 24 knots (most tour boats can only cruise at 10 knots), Curto filled us in on the details of Santa Barbara Channel's seasonal whale populations.

In December, right as the humpbacks are heading south to mate off the shores of Costa Rica, the gray whales show up. The gray whales, whose population has grown from just 800 in 1942 to over 30,000 today, inhabit the channel until May — right about the time the blue whales start arriving to feed.



Families from Europe board the Condor Express: a quad jet-powered catamaran designed for ocean tourism.
Brian Coe Photos



The flukes of a humpback whale dry for a moment before another five-minute dive.



The bow of the Condor Express inches closer to the mouth of Painted Cave, one of the largest sea caves in the world.

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"The best place in the world to view blue whales is right here in the Santa Barbara Channel," Curto says. "Because of their consistent seasonal presence, all the top researchers come here to study them."

Tourists, too, come from all over the world to see Earth's biggest creature. With a maximum length of 90 feet and a top weight of 300,000 pounds, full-grown blue whales are twice the size (though not nearly as social) as their humpbacked relatives.

A Feast for the Eyes

Halfway across the channel, we were suddenly in the middle of a feeding frenzy. A group of 800 common dolphins — so named for their presence in all of the world's temperate oceans — along with brown pelicans, cormorants and two types of gulls were rounding up a school of anchovies. For 15 minutes, the dolphins were bow riding (using the pressure wave at the front of the boat to help propel themselves) and jumping beside our boat as the crowd-pleasing mammals are known to do.

The abundant marine life in the Santa Barbara Channel is caused in large part by an underwater feeding ledge that runs parallel to the Channel Islands. Heading toward the islands, the ledge goes from 2,000 feet to 300 feet deep in a span of less than two miles. As a result, cold, plankton-rich water is forced to the surface.

"Where there's plankton, there's krill," Curto says. "And where there's krill, there are whales."

In all, over 27 species of whales and dolphins inhabit the channel either permanently or seasonally.

The Hills Are Alive

Just an hour after leaving our first humpback, we reached the western edge of Santa Cruz Island. What from Santa Barbara looked like nothing more than a featureless silhouette of dark land came to life before our eyes: steep, craggy cliffs inhabited with a variety of flora and fauna. California sea lions swam nearby and climbed around the rocky shore. We approached Painted Cave, one of the world's longest sea caves, and gazed into the dark, mysterious labyrinth that winds under the island for more than a quarter mile. The cave can be explored by kayak, but our catamaran was able only to pause for a moment at the cave's entrance before jetting back toward the dock at Santa Barbara Harbor.

Not Just a Fluke

On the ride back, I sat up in the wheelhouse with Curto and Captain Dave Beezer to chat about all things aquatic. They got a call from a friend on an oil crew ship that had seen a pair of humpbacks earlier. After calling her back to confirm the whales' location — and redirecting our route home accordingly — they explained the importance of having a network of friends on the water (fishing boats, oil crew boats, etc.) and on land (our first whale was called into Condor Cruises by a resident who lives on the Mesa) to facilitate whale spotting. Not that finding whales has been a problem. The Condor Express even offers customers a free day back out on the water in the rare event that a trip ends without seeing a single whale.

In 2007, the Condor Express enjoyed 117-straight trips with whale sightings, and earlier this year, they had 126 passengers on board to witness more than that amount of whales in a single day. Even after thousands of sightings, Beezer explained why whale watching still hasn't grown old.

"The best part about my job is being able to bring a boatful of people out to see the whales and experience the excitement they're feeling," Beezer says. "I help to facilitate those moments. It's a good feeling."

Whales Watching Whale Watchers

Thanks to our tip and Curto's sharp eyes (in the end, it's still up to human eyesight to physically locate the animals), we were able to find the pair of humpbacks that the oil crew ship member had called in. The pair, most likely a male and female, was cooperatively feeding as they swam gradually up the channel.

True to their reputation as being curious and engaging creatures, one of the humpbacks swam right up to the boat, even splashing a few of the astonished viewers on the bow. For half an hour, we enjoyed the two whales at close proximity until it was time to head back to the harbor. As we pulled up to the dock, a harbor seal gave us one last species to scratch off our marine animal safari checklist.



At top, Brown pelicans paint the cliffs of Santa Cruz Island white. Above, a few common dolphins from a group of 800 take a break from a feeding frenzy to play near the boat.