

## Whale watching: 10 of the best

Watching the oceans' cetacean stars is one of the world's most popular wildlife activities. Victoria Homewood selects the 10 best whale-watching destinations around the world.

By Victoria Homewood

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Whale-watching is one of those things that has a broad-based appeal, luring visitors of every age and stripe to a wide variety of locations worldwide. Something to do with the visceral impact of seeing and hearing these majestic creatures at close quarters and, perhaps, the added fun – usually – of having to board a boat to do so.

Here are 10 of the best whale-watching sites worldwide, along with details of how to organise a trip to your chosen site.



Norway is one of the best places to observe killer whales Photo: SPECIALISED TOURS

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## ALASKA

California's 20,000 grey whales will travel along the coast of south-east Alaska on the way to their summer feeding grounds. Whales return year after year, and especially to Point Adolphus, part of Glacier Bay National Park, Chatham Strait and **Alaska's** famed Inside Passage to the south, the last a major migration area.

You will see whales in spring, but summer is the best time to visit. Cruises to the area often have many whale sightings.

Two excellent whale-viewing lodges in the state are The Lodge at Whale Pass, in Ketchikan, and Favourite Bay Lodge in Angoon. As the name Whale Pass suggests, this is a prime whale-viewing lodge, with several types of whale visible, often from the lodge itself (or take a sea excursion or explore by kayak). At Favourite

Bay, humpbacks, orcas and porpoises feed locally.

- Original Travel (020 7978 7333; [originaltravel.co.uk](http://originaltravel.co.uk)) can tailor-make trips to Alaska: a typical 14-night itinerary to the state, incorporating a week's full board at both lodges, with flights, would cost from about £6,000 per person.

## AZORES

Closer to home, the waters around the nine islands of the **Azores** are great places to see 20 or more species of dolphins and whales. Between April and September expect sightings of blue whales, orcas and spotted and striped dolphins. Last year there were also sightings of the rare northern bottlenose whales, usually found around the Faroe Islands.

- Archipelago Azores (01768 775672; [azoreschoice.com](http://azoreschoice.com)) has a new tour for 2010, "History of the Whales", devoted to the whales and dolphins of the Azores. From £1,090 (valid from May to October), with seven nights' b & b at the Convento São Francisco in Vila Franca (the old capital of the Azores). Includes return flight (with SATA), airport transfers, introductory lecture, a tour of São Miguel, with lunch, and four half-day whale and dolphin-watching trips.

## CALIFORNIA

The rich feeding grounds of the Sea of Cortez off **California** and the sheltered bays along the Pacific coast combine to produce superb whale-watching experiences. Thousands of dolphins, and the chance to get close (but not too close – reputable operators worldwide should stay at least 100 yards from whales) with the grey whale, are the highlights of this destination.

For all that operators should keep their distance, grey whales are often inquisitive and can appear to revel in human contact. Anyone who visits these waters will hope to see the huge 40ft "blow" of water vapour that marks the surfacing of the magnificent blue whale: California is considered one of the best places to see the phenomenon.

If you want to see blue whales or humpback whales, you'll find them in the waters off much of the state's central coast – from Point Reyes to the Santa Barbara Channel. Many other whales share these waters, including more elusive species such as the dwarf sperm whale.

- Wildlife Worldwide (0845 130 6982; [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)) offers a trip to Monterey Bay, including seven nights' b & b and some meals, from £2,199 per person, including flights, transfers, boat trips, half a day kayaking and entry to Ano Nuevo State Reserve.

## ICELAND

North-east Iceland offers whale-watching trips on beautifully restored fishing vessels. Minke whales and white-beaked dolphins are regularly seen and occasionally humpback and blue whales. Also worth a visit is Husavik's fascinating Whale Museum, located by the port. The first of its kind in Iceland, it has interpretive displays on the cetacean species found around Iceland, along with whale skeletons and other exhibits.

- Discover the World (01737 218800; [discover-the-world.co.uk](http://discover-the-world.co.uk)) offers a week-long self-drive holiday exploring the volcanic and geothermal wonders of the north, with a choice of accommodation (hotel or summerhouse). From £842 per person (for travel in May), including Iceland Express flights from Gatwick, domestic flights between Reykjavik City Airport and Akureyri, b & b and five days' car hire. There are various whale-watching excursions available at Husavik; a typical three-hour trip costs £35 per person.

## NEW ZEALAND

A trip to the South Island of New Zealand would not be complete without heading to Kaikoura, a small town on a coast where deep water and the mixing of warm and cold currents forces nutrients to the surface. This attracts sperm whales and several species of dolphin, with the chance to witness the world's smallest and rarest dolphin, the Hector's dolphin, which is only found around New Zealand.

- Naturetrek (01962 733051; [naturetrek.co.uk](http://naturetrek.co.uk)) offers a 22-day "New Zealand's Natural History" tour which stops at Kaikoura. There is an option to take a whale-watching cruise off the coast at Kaikoura and whale sightings are also possible at other points during the tour, such as the trip across the Cook Strait, or around Tiritiri Matangi. From £4,595 (October 30–November 20), including flights, accommodation, meals and a guide.

## NORWAY

Norway is one of the best places to observe killer whales. The number of sightings in some areas has recently declined, but not in the magical Lofoten islands, an archipelago above the Arctic Circle. Their nutrient-rich and deep waters mean that you are sure of a sighting – and you'll need to travel just six nautical miles offshore, a one-hour boat trip.

Late October to mid-January is the time to go, when the whales follow shoals of Atlantic herring (there is also the possibility of seeing the Northern Lights).

- Specialised Tours (01342 712785; [specialisedtours.com](http://specialisedtours.com)) offers a four-night Tromso/Lofoten tour from £1,095, including flights from Heathrow, one night's b & b in Tromso and a scenic voyage to the Lofoten Islands for two nights' half board. Join an Orca Safari for an additional £125 per person.

## SCOTLAND

Scotland is an exceptional place for wildlife watching. Gairloch, on the spectacular north-west coast, boasts waters with an abundance of marine wildlife; or head to the west coast, particularly the south end of the Isle of Skye or farther south to the Isle of Mull.

It offers glorious beaches and rocky islands, and is a good spot for porpoise, dolphins, minke whales and basking sharks, and is also a haven for bird watchers, with sea eagles, golden eagles and puffins. Visit from mid-June to the end of September.

- Responsible Travel (01273 600030; [responsibletravel.com](http://responsibletravel.com)) offers a three-day trip to the Isle of Mull from £395, excluding flights but including accommodation and two full days' whale-watching with a small family-run business that works closely with the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust.

## SOUTH AFRICA

The whale route extends 1,200 miles from Cape Town to Durban. So many species of whale and dolphin can be found in these waters that you can often spot them near the shore. Hermanus is the best land-based centre, and whale season runs from June to November: check out the annual Hermanus Whale Festival. There are also wonderful walking and hiking opportunities.

- Bushbaby Travel (01252 792984; [bushbabytravel.com](http://bushbabytravel.com)) offers a five-night trip to view the Southern Right whales in Walker Bay from £1,140 (valid for departures until end of November), staying at Schulphoek Guest House on the ocean's edge (you can watch whales from the hotel), including b & b, flights from Heathrow to Cape Town, and car hire.

## SPAIN

Whales, dolphins and numerous seabirds can be found in the Bay of Biscay off Spain's northern coast, but even if you have to wait a while between whales, or fail to spot any, the inland scenery will make amends. The

limestone peaks of the Picos de Europa in the heart of the Cantabrian Mountains and the plains of the upper Duero Valley offer a variety of scenic hikes.

Otherwise, August is the time to go (when everyone else is on the south coast) for sightings of a range of whale and dolphin species such as fin, killer and pilot whales and Risso's dolphins.

- Out of the Blue (0845 290 3218; [www.oceansworldwide.co.uk](http://www.oceansworldwide.co.uk)) offers a visit to the Bay of Biscay. Prices start at £245 per adult for June-September departures. This price includes three nights' accommodation on the Pride of Bilbao, guided walk in Spain and the services of two professional guides.

## VANCOUVER ISLAND

When 20,000 grey whales make their annual journey from their winter home off the Mexican Baja Peninsula to their summer feeding grounds, they pass Vancouver Island's west coast, offering some superb viewing opportunities. Humpback and minke whales can be sighted, along with seals, sea lions, porpoise, otters and an incredible variety of marine birds. Star of the area, however, is the orca, or killer whale.

From the King Pacific Lodge you can view the whales with a guide, and local whale researchers are available to help identify pods and listen in on their conversations with hydrophones. Other activities from the lodge include wilderness kayaking, hiking and heli-fishing and trips to see the rare "White Spirit Bear".

- Original Travel (020 7978 7333; [originaltravel.co.uk](http://originaltravel.co.uk)) offers a two-week itinerary to Canada incorporating a stay at King Pacific Lodge from £4,000 per person, including flights from London.

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