

## Family



## Travel

*Getting close  
enough to  
touch an  
orca can  
leave you  
changed.*

BY MARIE SHERLOCK

Jean and Tom Averna aboard the "Squito" (above).

Killer whales are actually more closely related to Flipper than to Moby Dick (right).

# Whale-Watching in the San Juans



**W**hoa! Did you see that? It was a double spyhop! Look—over there! It's a double breach! I can't believe this!"

Tom Averna is excited, and his enthusiasm is contagious.

He's describing the antics of the orca whales that are cavorting alongside the "Squito," Averna's 43-foot boat. Breaches are full-body jumps; "spy-hopping" is what a whale does when it thrusts its majestic head out of the water—to keep an eye on what's happening topside.

Averna is the owner of Deer Harbor Charters, a whale-watching operator located on Orcas Island in the San Juans of Puget Sound. My husband and I and our two sons are on his afternoon cruise, which departs from Rosario Resort. Tom's wife, Jean, and their twin 10-year-olds have joined us, and on this particular day we've hit the proverbial whale-watching jackpot: We're being entertained by a "superpod." As many as 88 whales from three separate pods have converged and are putting on a show not more than 30 feet away.

### Big dolphins

The first hour or so of the trip is spent motor-ing to the west side of San Juan Island, where most orcas congregate. The waters are pretty choppy, and I am having a hard time relaxing, even though we're all suited up in life preservers. Elizabeth Petras, the onboard naturalist, diverts my attention by offering information about the whales we're hoping to see.

Orcinus orca, the "killer whales" of "Free Willy" fame, are the largest members of the dolphin family. While they're not the world's biggest marine mammals—blue whales hold that honor—adult orcas can still reach 30 feet long

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**BIRTHDAYS ARE BIGGER.**



**San Juans**, continued from page 11  
and weigh 14,000 pounds.

Orcas are found in small groups, or pods, which may be resident (meaning they stay in the same general area year after year) or transient. The Puget Sound is home to three resident pods. And researchers have determined that resident pods are matrilineal: Males and females remain with their mother's pod for life. I think I like these creatures.

### Superpod encounter

As Petras explains all this to us, we have no idea that within minutes we will see all three pods for ourselves, nor can we imagine the impact the experience will have on us. While our orca encounter lasts no more than an hour, we will undoubtedly remember it for the rest of our lives.

We are treated to dozens of breaches, spyhops, and tail-lobs—several times in tandem. Due to the sheer numbers of orcas present, it is difficult to take it all in. Petras points to a breach on the right, while a passenger is oohing over a spyhop on the left. Several times, after witnessing a particularly impressive series of gymnastic moves, the passengers spontaneously burst into applause.

The grand finale comes when a subpod of

about six orcas blesses us with a "swim by" and comes within five feet of the port side of the "Squito." I was the one who had been chanting mantras to calm myself as we rode the choppy seas at the outset of our journey. Now I find myself hanging over the side of the boat, snapping photos. Had I reached out, I could have touched the orcas. As they breach, they splashed my boys and me!

Not all whale-watchers are so lucky. Averna is quick to point out that he can't guarantee that his passengers will see any whales on any given day. But he is able to give his customers a good prognostication by using the services of a whale-spotting concern that operates out of Victoria, B.C. Averna estimates that throughout the entire whale-watching season (May through September), he probably has a 70 percent sighting record. In June, however, the chances of an orca encounter rise to more than 90 percent.

### Dwindling numbers

On the trip home, 8-year-old Ben and I sit with Petras to learn more. She notes that while orcas are neither an endangered nor a threatened species, this particular group of pods has seen its population diminish in recent years, from 95 to 88. The popular explanation among whale experts, she says, is that the dwindling numbers of king salmon—the killer whale's primary food source—has meant a decrease in the orcas' numbers.

When Ben hears this, he tells Petras about his school's project. Students are growing salmon fry and then releasing them into Johnson Creek. Petras congratulates him on his efforts, and Ben lights up when he realizes that his actions may actually help

these majestic creatures.

Jean Averna believes that seeing whales in the wild "help people see why the environment is so important. They're a good thing to get addicted to."

When my 6-year-old, Scott, tells Jean that the whales splashed him, she replies, "They only do that to people they love."

Lest you think this sounds like one of those "little white lies" we tell kids, consider this: Despite the killer whales' aggressive behavior toward other marine life—they stalk everything from salmon and seals to other whales, even the mammoth blue whale—there has never been a recorded account of an attack on humans. In fact, according to Petras, these whales appear to display a peculiar affinity for our species.

## The Fine Print

■ **Tour operators.** Tom Averna's company, Deer Harbor Charters, operates morning and afternoon tours out of Rosario Resort and Deer Harbor Resort, both on Orcas Island, from May until October. Call 800-544-5758 to schedule a tour, or visit the web site at [www.san-juan.net/orca](http://www.san-juan.net/orca).

There are a number of other tour companies in the Puget Sound area. Contact the San Juan Island Chamber of Commerce (360-378-5240) or the Orcas Island Chamber of Commerce (360-376-2273) for names of operators.

Before signing, ask if the tour group is a member of Whalewatch Operators Association Northwest. Make sure that a naturalist, who will make your experience both educationally and environmentally stimulating, will be on board. Also inquire as to whether the business uses a whale-spotting service.

■ **Suitable ages.** Children under age 5

## Profound impact

An encounter with orcas can leave a profound impact. Scotty can't stop talking about how the whales showed they loved him. And though I am sometimes unsure of his nonchalant big brother's feelings, I was set straight about Ben's impression of our whale-watching adventure when, on the day we got home, he grabbed the phone out of my hand to be the first to report the news to my sister: "We saw a superpod!"

As for my husband and I, we are victims of the "orca addiction" Jean Averna alluded to. We're planning another family trip to visit our orca friends this summer. ■

*Marie Sherlock is a frequent contributor to Portland Parent.*

aren't allowed on Deer Harbor Charter tours. "It's mostly a safety issue," says operator Averna. "We're simply not baby-sitters."

■ **Cost.** Expect to spend about \$45 per adult and \$30 per child for a 4-hour whale-watching expedition. If this sounds too rich for your budget, consider visiting Lime Kiln Park on the west side of San Juan Island. This is the only nationally recognized whale-watching park in the U.S. When we stopped by the day after our orca encounter, visitors at the park told us that they had been entertained by a pod not more than an hour before we arrived. And even if you don't luck out, the vistas from the viewpoints here are breathtaking.

■ **Getting there.** The San Juan Islands are about 6 hours by car from Portland, even less if you're able to slip on to a ferry in Anacortes only minutes after arriving, as we did. Take I-5 north to exit 230, then turn west onto Highway 20 and follow it to Anacortes.

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