

Journeys

Breach Season

The crystal-clear waters of the Silver Bank offer a window into the world of humpback whales

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SCOTT JOHNSON

roll out of the cabin to find an amazing sight: water spouting in all directions as *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* is surrounded by humpback whales. As *Megaptera novaeangliae* breaches along the horizon, all thoughts of breakfast vanish. There's no time like the present to grab a camera and prepare for an exciting day on and in the water.

Finding a whale on the Silver Bank is as difficult as spotting a car amid rush-hour traffic. The key is locating a humpback that might be keen on checking out the other air-breathing mammals who have come to the submerged bank north of the Dominican Republic. This is where the skill of a guide can mean the difference between a good and otherworldly experience. Rob Smith, engineer and chase boat driver for *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*, is one such guide. While coeds lounge on the beaches of the Dominican Republic 70 miles to the south, Smith eyes a spring break of a different kind for our snorkeling-only expedition.

"The Silver Bank is half nursery and half nonstop party," says Smith. "Moms come to raise calves, former moms and moms-to-be arrive looking for a mate, and the males come to chase flukes and prove who has the biggest pecs. The best in-water encounters are usually the moms and calves, but the most thrilling shows from the boat are the looking-for-love adults."

Smith finds a mom and a calf napping against a large coral head. The mom looks huge — a 40-foot whale in 80 feet of clear, blue water leaves little to the imagination. Smith tells us to don our masks and fins and slip into the water as quietly as possible. We float at the surface in a line in front of the mom's head and wait. In no time, the calf peeks from underneath the mom's belly and slowly rises to the surface. Our encounter lasts for almost two hours as the whales alternately surface to breathe, swim over to us — often passing within a few feet as if to ask, "What's up?" — and return to rest. Watching the mom care for the calf and the calf interacting with the snorkelers are among the most breathtaking experiences of my life.

DIVE IN

The Aggressor Fleet offers seven-night snorkeling-only expeditions to the Silver Bank.

When to go: Expeditions run from late January to early April

Average water temp: 79 degrees

What to wear: 3 mm wetsuit and full-foot fins for freediving

For more info: aggressor.com/dominican.php



TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1
Turks & Caicos Aggressor II departs Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, in the evening, cruising throughout the night so we can wake to the sight of whales on the Silver Bank.

Day 2
What happens when a female has nine enthusiastic suitors competing for attention? Chaos. Pec slapping and tail lobbing are among the killer moves we see unleashed to win the lady's affection.

Day 3
We feel a gentle bump from the stern and turn to see a whale looking in the chase boat as if it were seeking munchies. Humpbacks like to spy-hop to check out other spring breakers.

Day 4
We triangulate on the location of a singer and promptly slip into the water for the concert of a lifetime. I hear and feel the humpback whale's infamous song with my heart more than my ears.



Clockwise from left: Breaching humpback whales are a common sight on the Silver Bank; *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* moored near the Nursery; a calf swims toward snorkelers.

THE BOAT
Turks & Caicos Aggressor II
Total passengers: 18
Cabins: Seven deluxe staterooms; two twin shares
Total crew: Six
Length: 120 feet
Number of decks: Three

BOTTOM, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT JOHNSON; REIMAR 7/ALAMY; COURTESY DOMINICAN REPUBLIC MINISTRY OF TOURISM; INVICTUS SARLU/ALAMY

MUST SEE



Fortaleza San Felipe Get a history lesson within the walls of this 16th-century fortress that includes a museum with military artifacts. godominicanrepublic.com



Brugal Rum Bottling Plant Take a guided tour Monday through Friday to see how more than 350,000 bottles of rum are filled and shipped — and score a taste-test.



Mount Isabel de Torres Take in views of a massive botanical garden and a replica of the famed Christ the Redeemer statue from 2,560 feet above sea level.



Amber Museum Set in a Victorian-style mansion, the museum includes some amber fossils estimated to be 20 million years old and a mosquito used in *Jurassic Park*. ambermuseum.com