

Minke business

On the Great Barrier Reef, **David Levell** meets creatures so curious, he wonders whether he's part of a whale-watching expedition, or a people-watching expedition for whales.



Eye to eye: a dwarf minke whale on the Great Barrier Reef

five miles from Lizard Island in the Great Barrier Reef's northern waters, Eye To Eye Marine Encounters' vessel *Undersea Explorer* is surrounded by whales. Shiny grey backs and fins break the surface, circling ever closer. Pointy snouts appear, briefly cruising horizontally above the waves. It's already enthralling, and whale watching usually peaks about now, but with dwarf minkes this is only the curtain-raiser.

As tourists and scientists don wetsuits, masks and fins, a snorkelling crew member trails out two lines festooned with mountain-bike inner tubes. Slipping into the sea, we loop a tube around shoulders or waists, securing ourselves hands-free to a moving boat. ▶



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A vertical rise towards
snorkellers on the line

A first downward glance reveals a glowing white shape gliding in the blue depths – a minke pectoral. Soon the small whales are visible in all directions, up to eight at a time and very close, approaching and cruising by in pairs and threes just a few metres away.

Their asymmetrical patterning is exquisite, with blacks, whites and greys beautifully harmonising in fingerprint-unique patches, streaks and swirls. Their peculiar vocalisations, four-note bursts of metallic clicking, sound rather like the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played on an electric guitar. Even more striking, however, are those special moments when you catch them regarding you almost quizzically, their eyes alive with intelligence and interest.

The lines bob in the swell as the boat drifts, engines off, with snorkellers acting as human sea anchors gently moving through the water on the windward side. In almost constant attendance, minkes are still frolicking boatside at sundown, three hours later.

"There's nothing on the planet like this animal," says skipper John Rumney, who's been bringing snorkellers face-to-face with dwarf minke whales since 1996. "You're one of the most privileged people in the world to be blessed with them visiting you. It broadens your ability to be more receptive to nature. You've finally connected with something other than a person."

WILDLIFE RARELY, if ever, enjoys this much control over such encounters. Once whales are sighted, the boat's engine is cut and it's their choice whether or not to approach. The average in-water encounter time is two hours and the whales frequently outlast their human visitors. Often it feels more like the minkes' own superbly managed people-watching industry.

One simple fact makes all this possible. "It's the most curious animal in the world," says marine biologist Dr Alastair Birtles, leading minke authority and veteran of 18 seasons of observational studies with Rumney's Eye to Eye. "For some reason, they are insatiably interested in us." According to Birtles, studies quantifying curiosity in animals have rated dwarf minkes way out on top, but no-one knows why.

The smallest (up to 7.8m) and most patterned baleen whale, dwarf minkes are truly creatures of mystery. Discovered only in the 1980s, they are currently rated a subspecies of the northern minke, but may be a separate species. The encounters occur only in the Ribbon Reefs north of Cairns for a few weeks midyear. What they do or where they go outside this time is unknown, although the first ones tagged (last July) have been tracked moving down Australia's east coast. ➤

TRULY GLADLY DEEPLY

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Green turtle
at Lighthouse
Bommie

Unknowns abound. Birtles has never seen them act aggressively, feed or mate – although they clearly have courtship in mind, judging by frequent and self-explanatory “belly presentations”. Even so, nightly onboard talks reveal a lot has been learned since Eye to Eye initiated minke field research in the ’90s. Birtles shows guests how to tell males from females and spot behaviours such as vertical rises, pirouetting and “motor-boating”. Tourists’ photos and videos form a vital part of research, aiding the identification of individual whales.

CRUISING THE RIBBON REEFS between Lizard Island and Cooktown for four to six days, Rumney’s minke trips have no fixed itinerary, but always include prime dive and snorkel sites. The Cod Hole atop Ribbon 10 is famed for its half-dozen resident potato cods, big, spotted and fearless, which relish close human encounters. Lighthouse Bommie, a submarine pillar between Ribbon 10 and 9, is high-rise coral accommodation for a dazzling variety of sea life from psychedelic nudibranchs to rococo-frilled lionfish.

The site is also a dwarf minke hot spot with more than a third of all encounters, supporting speculation that the gaps between the Ribbon Reefs serve as doors to the open ocean. “They go out and come back with more cookie-cutter scars,” says Birtles’ shipboard colleague Dr Dean Miller. Seen on many a minke, these white circular scars are from cookie-cutter sharks, small deep-water predators thankfully satisfied with just an ice-cream scoop’s worth of flesh.

True to Lighthouse Bommie’s reputation, two minkes show up just after the pre-breakfast dive. Alas, the first snorkellers are barely

online before both whales flee with a flick of their tails, spooked by the unwelcome attentions of a remora (sucker fish) wanting a free ride. While fleeing, the encounter is a boon to scientists keen to witness any kind of minke behaviour.

In contrast, a lone minke sighting further up Ribbon 10 yields an exhilarating interaction exceeding four hours. Drifting 13km, the ship and its trailing snorkellers become, as Birtles says, “a kind of travelling minke attractant”, with up to 23 visiting the lines. Time seems to stop as the day turns into a whale-filled, watery reverie.

For Birtles, the highlight was recognising Bento, a female named for her twisted, possibly shark-mangled dorsal fin. Bento has now appeared a record seven years straight, which raises questions of reproduction (she’s never been seen with a calf), but adds weight to notions of a long-term seasonal resident population. “If they are consistently found in the same area, there must be an evolutionary importance,” Birtles muses.

Along with such tantalising snippets of data are the intangibles that no-one can deny. “I guarantee all of you have had an emotional response,” Birtles says as we steam towards Cooktown at the trip’s end, and he’s right. When a minke meets you on its own terms, in its own domain, keeps close company for hours and looks you in the eye, you can’t help but feel you’ve been granted a window into some part of its unknowable soul. 🌐

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