

Cetacea Incognita

We were approaching the area where the North Atlantic ocean floor rises up to meet the continental shelf, just South of the Grand Banks, which are even shallower. The geography of the sea floor and the meeting of the Labrador Current and the remnants of the Gulf Stream create an upwelling of nutrient rich waters that support the entire food chain of the ocean.

It was a warm and sunny day, and I was lolling in the cockpit reading a book about the greatest mapmaker in the age of discovery, Gerard Mercator. I was deep within mid 1500s northern Europe, where there was famine, plague, pestilence, wars and Christians being tortured and burned at the stake for their beliefs (by other Christians). Starving refugees roamed the countryside and filled the surviving cities. Arks were being built at various locations across the northern tier of the continent. Many of the most educated and brilliant in the population, including Mercator himself, were convinced the end of the world was at hand. Just as the red hot poker of the Inquisition threatened our hero, I was jerked backed to the 21st century.

“Hey Doug, can you take our picture?” It was Susan, holding their Point and Pray digital snapshot camera out to me. I blinked hard, the abrupt transition from torture dungeons lit by flickering torches to the cloudless skies and bare, unbroken horizon of the empty ocean momentarily disorienting.

“Sure, be glad to,” I replied. I had carefully neglected to mention my past careers as professional shooter and recent year of travel photography, along with my intermittent progress on my book about the latter. I had not brought along any real cameras, and as of yet, hadn’t even pulled out my own digital snapshot camera that had ridden around the world in my motorcycle jacket pocket, even though we were more than six days into the passage. On this trip, I wanted to focus, no pun intended, on the holistic experience of a long, ocean spanning passage and not be constantly thinking about lighting, angles, balance, composition and shooting opportunities. I took Susan’s camera and followed her and Dirk out to the foredeck, where Spencer, our other crewmate, was already enjoying the beautiful day, camped out near the forestay.

Dirk and Susan took a good pose on the cabin top in the challenging mid-day light as I turned on the fill flash to compensate for the resulting harsh shadows. Just as I raised the camera to frame them up, Spencer shouted “whales!” I instinctively looked off the bow just in time to see a smooth slick and a rippled outline where something had just descended. The rectangle of ripples was as big as a semi-trailer and we sailed right through it.

Susan yelled, “there!” and pointed to starboard.

I swung their camera around and started banging off shots. Not knowing how to use the optical zoom yet, I simply tried to frame up the closest whales as they skimmed the surface, blew huge towers of water and air, and slowly dipped below the surface.

Spencer echoed, “Port!” and I swung the camera there, but was blocked by the mainsail.

John, our captain, jumped from below up into the cockpit and cried, “Aft!”

We were surrounded by whales. We had managed to sail right into a pod of them. We tried to count, but I couldn’t stop watching them and lost track after a dozen.

Interspersed with the whales were at least a half dozen Sunfish, the world’s largest bony fish. We first thought their tall dorsal fins were sharks or sea lions cooling off one flipper. Once close enough we could see they belonged to this slow, ungainly and bizarre looking creature, whose body looks like it was chopped off just behind the gills (see <http://www.earthwindow.com/mola.html#> for a sample). We had no idea why they were traveling with the whales, as if on a group discount, bi-species North Atlantic maritime culinary tour.

The whales were huge, at least as long if not longer than our 47 foot sailboat. I was very glad they were neither aggressive or carnivores. Their slow grace and imperturbable nature was poetic as they slowly painted an ever changing song across the calm seas.

After a time, the shouts of bearings and ranges died down, and we all just stood and watched, in awe and appreciation.

All too soon, the pod disappeared over the aft horizon, our wake drawing a straight line back into their midst.

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After a moment of contemplation, we returned to the task at hand. After being so close to the immensity of the whales and the oddity of the sunfish, the portrait of Dirk and Susan seemed a bit anticlimactic, but we were able to capture a decent shot.

As I settled back into the cockpit and the mid-sixteenth century, I was reminded of how vast, exotic and terrifying these uncharted waters were to the explorers of that age. We knew exactly where we were and where we were going. We knew pretty well what the massive creatures were that had suddenly appeared around our ship. The mariners of that time had no certain knowledge if the fabled magnetic island that would suck the nails from their wooden ship and was surrounded by voracious sea monsters was just over the horizon. They were blindly sailing across open oceans in tiny ships with little but faith to protect them and theology bound mapmaker's fantasies to guide them. On their voyages of discovery, they started with large blank areas labeled "Oceanus Incognita" and "Terra Incognita" and literally drew the first lines of reality on the maps we are still using today.

Given our reactions, I could only imagine the extent of their sense of vulnerability and wonder at the sightings of their first whales and at the density of the pods at that time. I glanced around at the horizon, again empty for a full 360 degrees, and shook my head in amazement at the majesty of the whales and the courage of those who had sailed these waters five hundred years before. I couldn't decide who I was more insignificant in contrast to, the whales or the ancient maritime explorers.



Dirk tracks a large whale off to starboard. My best guess as to species is a Fin Whale, based on the description and characteristics here: <http://www.orcaweb.org.uk/idfin.htm>