

UnCruise into Hawaii

WITH MARINE LIFE

Story and Photographs by Melody Wren

Our Zodiac skimmed through the quiet early morning waters of the Pacific, all eyes scanning for signs of whale activity, a hump, a fin, a tail or a tiny ripple. An excited hush fell on all eleven passengers. We had been assured of many sightings, but you never know with whales. "Over there!" someone shouted, and our driver picked up speed, heading towards the tail as we waited, but not for long, as a whale breached thrusting most of its body high out of the water.

We had just started our seven-day adventure on the Safari Explorer, an UnCruise ship. Every day held a promise of activity, whether it was whale watching, snorkeling, kayaking or paddle-boarding in a coveted bay or hiking to a secluded waterfall.

In contrast to a large traditional cruise ship, this 36-passenger yacht took us on an off-the-beaten track exploration of small bays and isolated locations in Hawaii. Between November and April, the itinerary includes visits to Big Island, Lanai, Maui and Molokai. Guests of all ages (from 9-85) climbed from the ship into motorized zodiacs to go ashore or participate in water activities. We



PHOTO CREDIT: UNCruise

were in the water most of the time; I was glad I'd packed three bathing suits.

A typical day started with yoga on the top deck to the welcome of a beautiful sunrise. Balance was sometimes challenging as the ship rolled back and forth, but the magic of the sunrise stayed with me all day. It was not unusual to see a tail or spout blow of a humpback whale during the class. We reached for the sky and the clouds as the sun rose behind the mountains with a gentle Pacific



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breeze. It was a beautiful way to start each morning – flexing, stretching and working core muscles that had been challenged during the previous day's activities.

Breakfast was delayed one day as a pod of short-finned pilot whales were spotted off the bow; everyone

hurried onto the deck to see them. 20 feet in length and similar to the size of a dolphin, they are called pilot whales because one male leads (or pilots) a pod of females. Apparently, the bow of our boat resembled a male so all the females followed us forcing the male to vie for attention.

Lunchtime similarly emptied the dining lounge when a pod of spotted dolphins were seen dipping under and around the bow of the ship.

Leaving our home on the water, we headed through a whale sanctuary on small skiffs enjoying sightings of humpbacks with their babies. A hydrophone was dropped into the water to capture whale songs from several different whales, a beautiful melodic sound bringing many of us to tears. According to the driver, only adult males sing, all singing the same song, but thankfully in multi-part harmony.

We travelled to Mala to snorkel in search of green sea turtles (or in Hawaiian, honu) – the largest shell turtle in the world; several were sighted swimming effortlessly through the water. We also spotted three whitetip reef sharks, a large clam, Sargent Majors, and a number of sea urchins clinging to the rocks.

Returning to the ship, we had some time before lunch so a “swim party on the back deck” was announced. Passengers started diving off the deck;



1. Kayaking beside sea caves and lava tubes along the Big Island's volcanic coast was one of the many highlights on our trip.

2. Built in 1998 and renovated in 2008, UnCruise's Safari Explorer combines comfort, elegance, and adventure, with top-class facilities. The maximum number of guests is 40. Meet other guests on one of the three public decks, in the attractive dining room, and in the cosy Wine Library. The salon offers onboard pampering and you can relax in the onboard spa with a massage, yoga mats, and modern gym equipment. Each en suite cabin has air-conditioning, heated bathroom flooring, a flat-screen TV/DVD, and an iPod docking station.

3. Meet two of Hawaii's beautiful reef fish. The yellow tang is a bright yellow surgeonfish with white caudal spine and a distinctly pointed snout. The goldring surgeonfish is distinguished by the bright gold ring around the eye and the thin blue lines that run the length of its body onto the dorsal fin.

4. Meet other guests on one of the three public decks, in the attractive dining room, and in this cosy Wine Library.



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PHOTO CREDIT: UNCRUISE



many secured paddle-boards. It was only my second time paddle-boarding but because of the calm sea and the reassuring nudges from Captain Sean, I head out and managed to stay up for about 45 minutes without falling. Paddle-boarding works your core muscles and calves; it is spectacular exercise...and fun, too.

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Every day included the sharing of historical legends we were visiting. The local cultural interpreters on board added many dimensions to the week including story telling about Hawaiian folk legends and music. Danny Akaka – who blessed our vessel upon boarding – played guitar, ukulele and sang. His wife Anna danced the traditional Hula, swaying elegantly and gracefully, while her hand movements interpreted the words of the song.

Dressed in a green grass headband and traditional dress, Halawa Valley's village elder Uncle Phillip and his son Greg welcomed us by blowing



into a conch shell. They demonstrated the traditional “hani” or “breath of life”; everybody touched noses and breathed in each other's energy. Similar to a handshake, refusing it is not an option and if you do, you might be asked to leave.

I decided to hike 4 km up Halawa mountain to see the flowing Mo'oula waterfalls. Some of us swam in the water at the base of the falls, after

which we enjoyed a delicious picnic. Returning to the ship that day, we witnessed a double rainbow over the mountains. A magical moment.

Another authentic Hawaii experience gave us a glimpse of local traditions and culture, including dinner at the Molokai museum where we were entertained by a mother/daughter duo performing. While we were there, we visited a special exhibit of heartstring

5. This relatively easy 4 km hike and cultural experience is made for outdoor lovers truly seeking a taste of old Hawaii. You will walk through a private family-owned property en route to the Mo'oula Falls. Along the way, you will see and learn about native and invasive species, ancient taro terraces, historical rock walls, and worship sites.

6. In certain areas in Hawaii, spinner dolphins are seen on an almost daily basis. Probably since the islands have formed, the Hawaiian spinner dolphins have come into nearshore daytime habitats along the west coast of Oahu. Their existence has been traced back at least 800 years.

7. Hawaii is the home to five species of sea turtles. Olive ridleys, loggerheads and leatherbacks are usually only encountered in deep offshore waters. But it's common for snorkelers and divers on all the islands to see the honu (green sea turtle) in near shore waters. Green sea turtles, however, nest in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, a remote, protected area where they thrive.

8. Hawaiians often greeted each other by sharing ha, or their breath. This exchange of breath is done when two people press together the bridge of their noses while inhaling at the same time. It's a Hawaiian greeting that welcomes the other person into their space by sharing the breath of life, which was sacred to the culture. Ancient Hawaiians recognized that their breath was the key to good health and believed it possessed mana (spiritual power). Before an elderly person died, he/she often passed down wisdom to the chosen successor by sharing ha in this fashion.



pulling photographs depicting the life of Kalaupapa – a former leprosy colony. A buffet of traditional food was accompanied by locals playing traditional instruments including conch, bamboo, and ukulele and dancing the Hula.

We again travelled on skiffs to visit Puuhonua, a place of refuge on Honaunau, specifically for people who broke the law where the penalty was certain death (prior to 1819). The day was heavy with vog – a volcanic residue often hanging in the air (unfortunately disturbing those on board with asthma or allergies).

Our next stop was Lahaina – a small town part of Maui where we explored museums and shops. I picked up an original watercolour of Hawaiian reef fish many of which we saw while snorkelling, a lovely reminder of our trip .

Every day, when we returned from an excursion, we were greeted with a new special cocktail – always refresh-

ing after playing in the salt water all day. Meals were healthy and made-to-order; food intolerances and allergies were treated with great reverence, which I personally appreciated. Warm from the oven buns and freshly caught fish were offered for lunch or dinner. The fifteen-member crew seemed to share in the duties. Even the captain was seen drying glasses after dinner one evening. The ship's atmosphere was communal and friendly with everyone meeting up in the lounge before dinner for drinks and appetizers, often accompanied by a talk from one of the cultural interpreters on the ship.

If you want to explore these beautiful Hawaiian islands in an intimate, yet causal setting, then I would highly recommend you unwind with UnCruise.

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