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WHALE WATCHING OFF THE PACIFIC COAST OF CANADA AND AMERICA

It was a pleasure to be on the Pacific Coast of the USA for a family holiday this summer, where we could also indulge and enjoy ourselves whilst compiling research for TAF!

We started our two weeks trip in Vancouver and whilst we knew very well that numerous companies offer whale watching trips in the Vancouver area, we also knew from research that the boats are too numerous, too intimidating and unkind for the whales who are increasingly departing the area, especially as their food sources (primarily salmon for the Orcas) are depleted.

Canadian tourist websites still describe the waters in the Vancouver as “food rich” for the whales but in fact the food sources are reducing and, like many places in the world, the whales are being forced to move away just to survive.

August and September are supposedly the best times to visit and it was important to choose the right trip.... **environmentally-friendly and animal-friendly!**

According to studies, about 33 species of whales are found in Canadian waters including 13 varieties of commercial significance.

Whaling for profit was always a part of Canadian history with the number peaking at around 50,000 whales killed per year in the 1930s.

However, the creation of the International Whaling Commission in 1946 helped facilitate a considerable reduction in whale hunting and although Canada withdrew its membership of the IWC in 1982, commercial whaling is still banned in Canada and whale watching for tourists now takes precedence in many places.

The more protected waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Georgia Strait in British Columbia on Canada's Pacific coast are home to two distinct populations of highly social resident Orcas, most active between May and October. Boats from Vancouver will help you seek not just the Orcas but also minke & humpback whales, Pacific White-Sided dolphins, and Steller's sea lions.

The waters around the Canadian Vancouver Island are the world's pivotal region for meeting orcas. **Telegraph Cove near Vancouver is considered to be the Orca capital of the world. There is no better place to watch them anywhere, so they claim!...** In addition, 20,000 grey whales pass by here on their long northward migration from the Gulf of California to the Bering Sea from February to May each year.

Our family chose to go further afield instead of the easier to get to and more commercialized trips leaving from the Vancouver port.

The best choice is to go to Victoria, which is a beautiful small city and where you get a feel for how it once was when there was an abundance of Orcas to be seen!

Everywhere you turn, there are either sculptures or paintings of Orcas, a nice feel but also clearly promoting it as a commercialized whale watching city!

Having searched for the most whale friendly and sustainable trip, we found "Eagle Wings", situated in a small cozy marina.

Some very friendly staff took us out to see the Orcas. Very few were seen and it was clear that when the Orcas noticed not only our boat approaching but also the many (up to 12) pursuing them at high speed, they disappeared. We were out for 3 hours seeing 2 pods of 2-3 Orcas in the horizons.

It was very frustrating and sad to watch that there were absolutely no guidelines respected regarding boat noise, distance to the whales or frequency of boat trips!

A purely commercial business with far too many boats on a daily basis together with the problem of diminishing salmon stocks which have made the Orcas disappear!



Victoria, Canada. Orcas hard to find due to overfishing of main food sources and due to an exaggerated whale watching industry!

- Back on land, I took the time while in Vancouver to visit someone who used to work for the Aquarium. The Vancouver aquarium, the biggest aquarium in Canada and one of the Vancouver top tourist attractions.

I was relieved to see a bit more animal friendly and educational environment for our beautiful sea creatures.

Having seen the situation at places like Marineland at Antibes in France, with their dirty cramped pools, this seemed to be a contrast!

The sole captive dolphin in Vancouver aquarium was one who had been rescued from a vicious attack and was with a damaged fin – a dolphin who had been rescued and saved in an institution, as opposed to healthy free dolphins who are taken from the sea and condemned to die too early in a cramped chlorinated pool.

Vancouver aquarium had many captured beluga whales not long ago so the situation has not always been like this!...

- Next stop, California, and one of the highlights of our few days there was a cycle trip over the **Golden Gate Bridge**. Beautiful in its own right, but our guide had heard that a **humpback** had been seen the day before so we stopped with excitement on the middle of the bridge and were thrilled to see this magnificent species again.....

- Visiting Monterey Bay in California was another highlight of our trip. [Monterey Bay](#) is a National Marine Sanctuary and home to 27 different species of whales.

Its waters are rich in nutrients which feed the growth of plankton, and so the sanctuary has a rich food chain of krill, fish and squid for its resident dolphins and whales, who have increased in population since the whaling embargo.



Monterey Bay, California



Humpbacks, Blue whale and Orcas

To see them breaching and fin clapping was a magnificent sight. We were close enough for it to be spectacular but not so close that we were intimidating or threatening these beautiful creatures, as they enjoyed their natural habitat.

We found Monterey bay much more whale friendly than Victoria and Vancouver and with much more respect to the whales. The biologists on board also had more knowledge of whales and their history making it a much more enjoyable and interesting trip.



California is an amazing state and has much to offer to tourists – we enjoyed it as a family in many ways but to carry on and see whales at Victoria, San Francisco and especially Monterey Bay made the whole family feel that this had indeed been a very special trip....



Laguna Beach, California



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