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Swimming with the pod in Principe

Free-diving with humpback whales off the coast of west Africa is the thrill of a lifetime, says **Ian Belcher**

You won't see this at Tooting Bec Lido. Without warning, my soon-to-be swimming companion erupts from the ocean, propelling its 40-tonne torso towards the heavens. In mid-air it twists like an Olympic gymnast, revealing knotty tubercles on its flippers and long pleats on its white belly, before crashing down. The explosion of brine is as if someone has detonated a Second World War mine.

My group, watching wide-eyed on a small boat about 100ft away, emits a communal roar. My shock and awe are tempered by alarm. Am I really about to climb into the sea with this leviathan? I've come to Principe, a tiny island off west Africa, to do just that — to swim with the humpbacks whose annual migration brings them from the Antarctic to mate and calve in the tropical Gulf of Guinea.

Despite my anxiety, I couldn't be in better hands. Hanli Prinsloo has broken 11 South African free-diving records, while Peter Marshall, a former Los Angeles life-guard, has set eight world swimming records. Their company, I Am Water Ocean Travel, combines free-diving tuition with extraordinary marine encounters around the world, from cavorting with dolphins in Mozambique to hanging out with whale sharks in Mexico.

They are here to recce the balmy Atlantic waters off Principe, which, alongside its big brother Sao Tome, makes up Africa's smallest country. The area has a stellar reputation for whale watching, but swimming with the giants will be a radical experience.

Especially in an Yves Klein-blue ocean swirling around an island straight out of Edgar Rice Burroughs's imagination, its verdant jungle punctuated by volcanic fangs spiking upwards.

We start on its northeast fringe, lying beneath an almond tree. We do yoga to stretch the intercostal, chest and shoulder muscles, creating room for the lungs to expand. We combine this with triangular breathing — inhaling for eight seconds, holding for eight, exhaling for eight — slowing our heart rate and oxygen consumption. In essence I'm becoming a local, embracing *moli-moli*, Principe's fabulously relaxed pace of life.

Pulse slowing, anticipation rising, we cruise into the Bay of Needles for our taster session. We pull ourselves down an 18ft rope at sloths' pace while equalising — exhaling through a pinched nose to relieve

pressure on the inner ear — at regular intervals. We're ready for the whales.

This is no random foray into the big blue. Peter has pinpointed potential hotspots where the seabed plummets several thousand feet over a short distance. He's armed with vast experience, 20/20 vision and high-tech binoculars to stabilise the horizon for spotting telltale water spouts and the spray of breaching whales.

Escorted by a squadron of flying fish, we navigate our way along pristine beaches on the north coast, including Banana, the backdrop for an old Bacardi commercial. We watch brown boobies diving into shoals of needlefish, and sail alongside local children transporting coconuts in

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hollowed-out canoes. But we don't get the slightest sniff of a humpback. After several hours we abandon the hunt in favour of diving around offshore rocks. The day before, fishermen spotted a large bull shark here, but today there is only a turtle and a suspicious moray eel.

The no-show continues next morning, but anticipation remains high thanks to the skipper Fernando Almeida's tales of last summer. "It was a non-stop party for whales and dolphins," he says, rubbing saltwater in our wounds. "One day we saw four different mothers with their calves."

En route we interrogate several fishermen, but none has seen a whale for weeks. Again we seek solace in free-diving, swimming through a mesmerising underwater arch off Bom Bom Island.

If the Atlantic is not delivering, Principe offers distractions. Investment by the tech billionaire Mark Shuttleworth, the first African in space (locals call him Moon Man), has alchemised a decaying cocoa plantation into two hotels and an organic farm. After hospitality training, many locals work in tourism.

Our oceanfront lodge, its tented roofs barely visible through foliage, is one of the products of Shuttleworth's initiative. Its thatched restaurant, designed to resemble a streamlined marlin, serves dishes such as octopus grilled with coconut, Thai basil and lime that are low on dairy — the mucous-generating bane of free-divers.

Along with Sao Tome, the island has as many endemic species as the Galapagos in an eighth of the space. It's a Unesco biosphere and it supports a big conservation drive. The Principe Trust NGO guards 2,000 turtle nests while monitoring coral, seabird and, more recently, whale populations. Children are given books and uniforms in return for recording sightings.

The next day our luck is in. A fisherman, Bingo, has seen a whale breaching half a mile to the south. As we approach there's a water spout. Then a tail slap, rolling fins and finally a breach. They're here.

A protocol kicks in. We watch to see if the humpbacks are resting or travelling, then time our dives to calculate a possible rendezvous. Once in the water, we stay as a group, swimming without splashing and observing from the surface. A mother's weight halves when suckling — calves drink 150 gallons of milk daily — so any distraction can be exhausting.

As I pull on my fins, the massive humpback breaches alongside our boat. Dear Lord, could it land on us? Not a chance, Hanli says. "They're so aware of their own size and know exactly where they are, and where you are. I've had huge whales right next to me without a touch."

She pauses. "Of course if one does land on you, it'll break your neck, spine and everything else," she says. "But it'll only happen once." I feel so much better.

Dark humour aside, safety is paramount for Hanli, who usually leads group swims above humpbacks in serene South Pacific seas. Principe's travelling whales are very different beasts. Each one receives serious scrutiny before we get in. This one, and the

next two, prove to be fickle companions. We jump in, they vanish, reappearing in unexpected locations. It's hard not to take it personally.

Ninety minutes later, two whales roll to the side of our boat. Solidarity is forgotten as I find myself in an Atlantic swell trying to keep up with a mermaid and a world champion. Their fins soon disappear — as do the whales. It's a bad day on humpback Tinder, with every flipper swiping left.

That night we dine at Roca Sundy, a beautifully converted plantation-house hotel, with whirring fans, Portuguese tiles and an air of tropical languor. Our final morning's yoga session shows my breath-hold is, to my amazement, four minutes. The free-diving, the depth doubled to 33ft, is even more revealing. About 10ft down, I hear the hypnotic melody of a humpback — the song that will repeat ad nauseam in these parts all season, like a sort of cetacean George Ezra track. We are soon joined by playful dolphins, which swirl and flutter around Hanli in the boat's wake.

Later, on the east coast, we find two adults and a calf lolling around, slapping the surface occasionally with their tails. We cut the engine, drift towards them and silently swim the final 100ft. We're so close.

Is that a vast dark creature surging through the depths beneath me? I'm pretty certain of it.

Once again the whales take flight. But as they pass, I'm fairly sure they're looking up, laughing and giving us the flipper.



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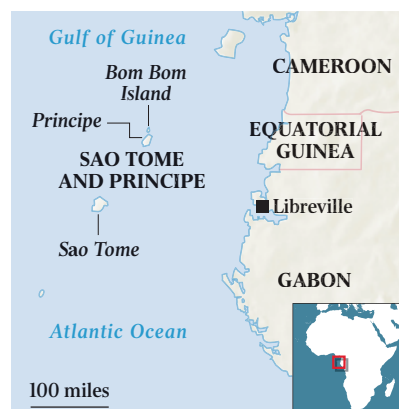
Ian Belcher was a guest of Sundy Praia (sundyprincipe.com); and I Am Water Ocean Travel, which offers bespoke free-diving courses in Principe (price on request). Scheduled group free-diving tuition weeks with humpback whales, dolphins and other marine life in locations including Mozambique, Madagascar and Mexico start at £5,600pp, excluding flights (iamwateroceantravel.com). Rainbow Tours has five nights at Sundy Praia and one at Omali Lodge in Sao Tome, both half-board, from £3,520pp including flights and transfers (rainbowtours.co.uk)



Online See a video of Ian freediving in search of whales in Principe



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MATTHIAS GARDNER/UNIZOO/REDAUX (LEFT); STEVE GRANITZ/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)



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Ian Belcher and his guide, Hanli, get ready to swim with whales. Above, the island of Principe