

KAIKOURA - ECOTOUR

❖ KAIKOURA WHALEWATCH

For many tourists, seeking sight of Kaikoura's whales is a main reason for coming to New Zealand. Many Kiwis, too, regard this as a great experience. We realised it wasn't just the sight of the whales, but the whole event that made the experience special.

- The company we booked through was totally professional and the staff as friendly and helpful as they could be. Some people are worried about going out on a boat in a rough sea. Advice is given, bookings may be cancelled and up to 80% of the ticket price refunded if you don't see a whale. You're recommended, if you're prone to sea-sickness, to take something for it about 2 hours before sailing.
- When you arrive at the terminal you're shown a video of what to expect on the trip and are given comprehensive instructions for safety on board.
- During the trip, your very well trained guide gives full details not only about the whales but also about the environment and any other species of fish, mammal or bird you might see.

The Hunt for Whales

A big part of the experience is the sensation of taking part in a search that involves advanced technology, local awareness, and the instinct of the captain. We had read a little about whaling before we went aboard, so it wasn't difficult to transport ourselves back 150 years and imagine the race in a rowboat and the fear of coming so close to one of the mighty animals.

From the reception area we boarded a bus that took us to South Bay on the other side of the Kaikoura Peninsula. The bus driver added further information about what to

expect. We went on the 7.15 a.m. sailing and boarded a 40 seater catamaran with powerful engines that drove us over light waves at more than 30 knots - the speed of a whitewater jet.

Part of the excitement comes from knowing we were travelling over a deep offshore canyon where the sperm whales may dive to 2,500 metres and stay down for up to 2.5 hours to catch giant squid and bring them to the surface to eat.

Some kilometres out from shore we stopped in an area near where whales were last seen the day before. The captain lowered a sonar scanner and soon explained that there was a whale nearby communicating with others further out. He raised the scanner and again we shot off across the waves. In only a few minutes we were told to watch for water spouts as we slowed and coasted. Again the excitement hit when we spied the fountain and two huge bulks wallowing in the placid swell.

These two were hyperventilating - charging their muscles, cells and lungs with oxygen so that they can stay down for a long time. When the tails went up for the dive, our cameras clicked from about 30 metres away. Our guide told us the whales would be down for 40 or 50 minutes and we would come back to see them later.

We felt privileged that day. We saw another couple diving and then went back to watch the original pair dive again. An unexpected bonus was a huge albatross resting on the water 2 or 3 hundred metres away. As we sped past, it rose and gracefully performed a fly-by, watching us from its large eye. It made our speed seem puny as it barely beat its wings. When we reached our whales, the albatross circled but, we were told, could see no scraps surrounding the mammoths who are messy eaters. So it flew on, probably to entertain other passengers.

After our sightings of whales, the captain turned inshore where he hoped to find a pod of dolphins. On scanning a melée of seagulls, he headed to where we saw the dorsal fins of a host of

dolphins circling, water churning with the fish they were hunting. Then something extraordinary happened. As we approached, the dolphins ceased their circling and headed towards land, gradually spreading in a huge arc before us. Soon we were amongst the eighty or more mammals and joining their chase.

Later, near the end of our time, we made our way home via a rock shelf where seals lay.

During the journey, the wind gradually increased. One person was seasick - badly. Some passenger felt just a little woozy. Most of us were elated the whole time. The mid-morning sailing had been cancelled when we returned to base, because the wind would make sailing uncomfortable. We were glad we took the early trip when the sea is more likely to be calm.

The animals, the chase, the setting of sea and snow-capped mountains and the interesting information about the whales, their breathing, fights with orca and their migratory and social habits, made this a fascinating experience.

For more information on tours: www.whalewatch.co.nz

❖ SEAL COLONY

Point Kean on the Kaikoura Peninsula

The Kaikoura Peninsula is about 5 kms to the south of the town. With the sea on your left follow the main street until you come to the carpark at the end of the road - you travel along the Esplanade, Avoca Street and Fyffe Quay. There is no public transport to the seal colony.

Without leaving the carpark, you can look out over the tidal platforms or reefs and see seals basking in the sun. For a closer look, walk over the rocks to view them. Visitors are required to keep 10 metres' distance between them and the seals for the protection of both.

The number of seals at the colony depends on the season. In winter, the peninsula is the haul-out or resting place for immature males. In late spring, females and bull males arrive for the mating season.

Ohau Point, 23 kms north of Kaikoura on State Highway 1 (there is a carpark)

This the main breeding site in the area.

The seals feed on squid, octopus and lantern fish.

KAIKOURA - ECOTOUR/ADVENTURE/SPORT

❖ SWIM WITH THE DOLPHINS

Dolphin Encounter take small groups of people to swim with the dusky dolphins south of the Kaikoura Peninsula. It's a wonderful and moving experience to be close to these graceful and intelligent creatures and be part of their play. Our guide instructed us to eyeball the dolphins! If we didn't show our interest in them, he said, they would get bored and move away. So it's your chance to look a dolphin or two in the eye and you'll be rewarded with stunning acrobatic displays and underwater ballets.

- guided commentary during the three hour trip
- 2 boats operating twice a day at 9 am and 1 pm all year; additional 6 am sailing, October to May
- seats available for those who want to observe but not swim
- all snorkelling gear and wetsuits provided
- boats have hot showers

www.dolphin.co.nz

❖ DIVING WITH SHARKS

Climb into a cage permanently attached to your boat and prepare for the adrenalin rush as the cage is lowered into the water. In no time at all, you are face to face with your first shark. It's an enormous blue - well, the guide says about 2 metres, but it seems much bigger! Soon it is joined by two other blue sharks attracted by the fish bait thrown from the boat. They glide and turn. Safe in the cage, you can appreciate the unexpected grace of their movements, and forget their bad press.

- shark-cage dives operate December to April.
- wetsuits and gear provided.
- no scuba diving experience necessary.

www.kaikoura.co.nz/shark