

The Ambassador Abroad... Around the World in 152 Days

In this issue, Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch begins what will be an ongoing account of his latest adventures as onboard naturalist and guest lecturer on the brand new Viking Neptune as she sails around the world!

The Viking Fleet

Viking began as a river cruise company in 1997, with 2 boats sailing between St Petersburg and Moscow, and this side of the business has expanded to around 80 vessels now with plans to have 100!

The ocean cruise side of the business began with Viking Star in 2015 and has since expanded to a fleet of 8 ships with a ninth due early in 2023 and more on the way. The newest is Viking Neptune, only a few weeks old and now embarking on a world cruise with me onboard! All the ships are identical, and carry only 930 passengers, although two have a small planetarium and Neptune has the first trial hydrogen fuel cell generator on the upper deck.

The third arm of the business is Viking Expeditions, with Viking Polaris and Viking Octantis which carry a submarine each, hi-tech RIBs and research labs with an onboard science team providing a superb premium experience for the 378 passengers onboard. Cruises include Antarctica, Arctic and Great Lakes itineraries.



Joining the Viking Neptune

The first part of this grand adventure began with a flight to Barcelona to join the ship which had already sailed a couple of two week Mediterranean itineraries since leaving the Fincantieri shipyard in Ancona. The World Cruise proper does not begin until the ship reaches Los Angeles but by joining the ship in Barcelona, it is possible to genuinely sail all the way round as Neptune will call here again next year as she heads to London for the last call of this itinerary.

A few World Cruise guests were already onboard, others joined us here and even more will begin their adventure in Fort Lauderdale. About 2/3 will join in LA where a special "launch" event has been planned.

Transatlantic Voyage

We departed Barcelona on 9th December early afternoon and by 1435 we already had our first cetaceans! Two, perhaps 3 striped dolphins were spotted leaping towards the port bow but did not hang around, and crossed to starboard. This species is rarely seen in the UK but in the Mediterranean and crossing Biscay for example is often spotted. In my experience, they are less keen on bow riding than common dolphins and seem to prefer riding the waves alongside or at the stern. Sometimes they only make a close approach and then veer off as these did.



However, one of the few good photographs I managed was the one above. The colouration suggests this may be a striped/common hybrid which is known to occur in the Mediterranean. The stripes from the eye to the pectoral and anal area which are normally dark grey to black, have a definite yellow ochre colouration. The same is colouration can be seen on parts of the beak and even an area near the white blaze towards the dorsal and the dorsal itself. The picture below is from my library and shows the more normal colouration and later a common dolphin image can be viewed.



At 1528, at least 6 more dolphins leaped across the bow, port to starboard, and although I was unable to

make a positive ID, I am fairly sure they were again striped dolphins.

One gannet was also seen shortly after leaving Barcelona, along with a number of yellow-legged and Mediterranean gulls.

The following day saw little activity other than quite distant shearwaters and gulls, until we approached the Strait of Gibraltar. Here, from around 1730, common dolphins approached the starboard bow on 2 occasions. Six or more animals were seen each time. I don't think I've ever sailed through there without seeing them, often in much larger numbers, as well as sometimes bottlenose and striped.



Sailing west into the Atlantic Ocean we were given the news that we would not after all be heading across via Madeira but turning south and sailing the old trade winds route via the Canaries. One look at the weather forecast, of 35-40 knot winds gusting 50knots, with seas to match explained this very sound decision!

The morning brought us 2-3, possibly striped, dolphins and at 1555 a much larger group leaping off to starboard. Again a positive ID was impossible because of the distance but if forced to commit I'd have said Atlantic spotted or maybe either striped or common.

We approached Gran Canaria on 12th December and had a quiet morning without even a bird but at 1340 saw a pod of 12-15 pilot whales, about 2 miles off the starboard bow and then a group of at least 5 dolphins, again possibly Atlantic spotted, leaping perhaps a couple of miles from them, off our starboard quarter.

My morning "Wildlife Watch with The Whale and Dolphin Man" again produced dolphins but sadly also once again, too far away for a positive ID or a good experience for guests. There was very little leaping but there must have been at least 10, maybe more from what splashing and brief glimpses we saw. Towards the end, at around 1130, the blow of a large

whale was seen around a mile ahead and then perhaps 200 yards off the bow. The size of the fin suggested perhaps a sei or Bryde's but a fin whale is also a possible contender.

On 14th we began seeing our first flying fish and this continued throughout the day and indeed, the rest of the voyage. More excitingly though, as we ate our breakfast at 0925, a Cuvier's beaked whale surfaced three times close to the side of the ship and swimming a reciprocal course!



We then discovered that only 20 minutes earlier 4 or 5 small whales had been seen blowing and swimming just below the surface, also from the World Café! Later still, a guest reported a whale blowing a short distance from the port side and then we were able to positively identify 12-15 pantropical spotted dolphins leaping onto the starboard bow and alongside and also share the experience with a number of guests out on the deck.



The next day we were approaching the "foothills" of the Mid Atlantic Ridge and 2 or 3 large whales were reported by guests at 0935, blowing and just lying on the surface perhaps half a mile to port. Having seen my first talk, one guest was sure they were sperm whales and the descriptions of others strongly indicate this to be the case. This was very possibly a

sperm whale nursery in fact as the females and young spend their time in the warmer parts of the ocean, with males heading to the colder areas to feed. And the area around the ridge, with all the peaks and canyons, is a great place for the large squid they primarily feed upon. Later in the day, at around 1355, one or possibly two more large whales were seen off the starboard quarter quite close to the wake.

The 16th saw the first day with what was looking like no cetacean sightings at all as we crossed the Mid Atlantic Ridge. Streaks of sargassum weed were seen and many flying fish.



The following day our record was preserved when a guest informed us that he had in fact seen a dolphin, bubbles streaming from its blowhole, directly below his balcony!

The 17th was the day that our winning streak finally came to an end and no cetaceans were spotted. This was at least partly compensated for by the brief appearance of a tropicbird (either white-tailed or red-billed) at breakfast and then another (or the same one again) just after 1100. A guest also reported what he believed to be a turtle amongst some large patches of sargassum which dived as we passed.

The crossing thus far had been largely devoid of seabird sightings since leaving the Mediterranean. At this time of year I had not expected vast numbers but we spotted not one shearwater, petrel, storm petrel or any other bird at sea until the tropicbird! Although breeding season on the Canary Islands was of course over, and many of the shearwaters for example head towards the South Atlantic, I had expected some sightings. One lady did have a storm petrel on her balcony, which sadly died there, but that was it!

The 18th brought another bird to hunt our flying fish. This time the visitor was an immature masked booby, still with some brown mottling in his feathers and

wings. Other boobies, and possibly a distant whale, were also seen but nothing we could narrow down to a species.

Sint Maarten on 19th did provide more excitement as brown boobies joined us shortly after sail-away and by 1515 there were 12 riding the updrafts around the ship and chasing flying fish.



It is interesting to note that many descriptions of this species state that they are usually silent at sea. In my experience, they can be very vocal and often squawk quite harshly at each other, particularly if they end up chasing the same fish! The same applies when they compete for a space to roost on the foremast or deck rails but on this occasion there was no competition as only one chose to remain overnight on the highest point there!

Of course as well as my wildlife watches with the guests in the Explorer's Lounge and open deck looking over the bow of the ship, I also give a series of lectures onboard. I left to prepare on this occasion just before 1530... and at 1535 guests there watched 8 to 10 "small dark grey dolphins" swim across the bow from port to starboard! Guests often describe the dolphins they see as small, and even with experience it is difficult sometimes to judge size 75 feet (23.8m) from the sea. But there was no doubting that it was dolphins I had missed by 5 minutes after 2 hours on watch!

The 20th was another cetacean free day as we cruised off the coast of the Dominican Republic and interestingly the 8 or so brown boobies that flew with us throughout much of the day and chased flying fish were all juvenile and immature birds.

We had hoped for good things the previous day but also had high hopes for the 21st as we entered the Old Bahama Channel. All we spotted during around 5 hours watching was lots more flying fish and occasional brown boobies hunting them. Late in the day though, around 1725, guests in two different

locations spotted what I'm pretty sure from the smartphone photos and film I saw were probably humpback whales.

The wildlife watch on this day was dedicated to the memory of Ken Balcomb who had died a few days earlier on the 18th. Ken was a pioneer of whale research and photo ID and his charity, Center for Whale Research, had asked that candlelight vigils or other events be held in his honour so it was my privilege to do so.

The next day, 22nd December, saw our arrival in Fort Lauderdale for the end of the Transatlantic Crossing and the start of the Panama Canal and Coastal Holiday cruise. This will end in Los Angeles where the rest of the world cruisers will join us replacing perhaps 1/3 of those onboard who have booked a two week Christmas and New Year holiday cruise. There are therefore perhaps 500 or so onboard who have already started their much longer voyage which I will share with you in future Sea Watcher Bulletins and Magazines! Happy New Year!

Flying fish image credit: Kris Simpson

All other images: Robin Petch

www.TheWhaleandDolphinMan.co.uk

Digital slide shows from this and other cruises, as well as documentary films by Dr Horace Dobbs and the Dolphin Dreamtime visualisation and relaxation experience are available from my website from as little as £10 each!



If you have enjoyed this Newsletter / Sightings Report, please consider donating to Sea Watch via my website or becoming a Member from only £3.50/mth at <https://members.seawatchfoundation.org.uk>