

The Ambassador Abroad...

Around the World in 152 Days (Part 4)

In this issue, Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch continues the account of his latest adventures as onboard naturalist and guest lecturer on the brand new Viking Neptune as she sailed around the world!

Auckland Onwards

We enjoyed 3 days in Auckland and photographed mainly red-billed but occasionally black-billed gulls and white-fronted terns around the harbour.



White-fronted tern, with lunch!

Sail-away was 3rd February and then there were also Australasian gannets, southern black-backed (kelp) gulls and both Cook's and black-winged petrels.

Cetaceans were not seen until 12-15 common dolphins leaped towards the bow after we left Tauranga the following evening. More surprisingly, a single flying fish was seen, the furthest south I have ever recorded one.



Common dolphin

Another 7-8 common dolphins escorted us in to Napier on 5th February and Donna, one of our regular watchers, heard a whale blow and saw it briefly earlier in the morning. Over 20 common dolphins leaped towards the starboard side during the early

evening too but guests reported over 100 further away which we hadn't noticed in the excitement!

Wellington the next day produced no cetaceans but as well as the usual seabirds, many flocks of fluttering shearwaters were added to our sightings record.



Fluttering shearwater, Wellington

Our voyage down the west coast of South Island brought us our first albatross at breakfast and two more later, one possibly white-capped, the other black-browed. A sperm whale was then seen blowing 3 times, less than a mile off the port bow in a pretty big rolling sea. Three more white-capped albatross and an immature royal albatross began our afternoon but as the day went on we added another 8 sightings, mainly of white-capped. Guests also reported 6-8 blows forward and to starboard that evening.



White-capped albatross

February 8th was our last day in New Zealand waters and saw us visit both Doubtful and Milford Sounds where we could at least shelter a little from the rough

seas! We looked carefully for signs of the small and protected population of bottlenose dolphins, threatened by the increased boat traffic and other human impacts on their environment, but there was no sign. A few NZ fur seals were spotted but guests also reported a whale blowing shortly after we entered Doubtful Sound and later both head and blow were seen. Most of the sightings were seabirds though and big flocks of sooty shearwaters, as well as white-fronted terns, kelp gulls and white-headed petrels and others could be seen particularly in the fjord entrances. Many albatross were seen during the day too, mainly white-capped but also royal and at least one wandering.

The next day in the still rough Tasman Sea added Buller's albatross to our species list and also confirmed white-headed as one of the petrel species but there were more sightings of wandering, royal and white-headed albatross, sooty shearwaters and others. Our watch on February 10th began with at least 80-90 common dolphins leaping and surfing on the bow wave and clearly foraging and feeding. Amongst them was at least one striped dolphin which I managed to photograph!



A striped amongst the commons!

Later in the morning another group of 10-12 approached the port bow and at intervals during the afternoon groups of 4-5 were seen on at least 3 occasions as well as more seabirds.

For all the great sightings we enjoyed, we couldn't help being a little concerned about our wildlife experiences in New Zealand. Doubtless weather and sea conditions had played a role, but we had seen much less than ever before. And we had begun reading about concerns of large-scale die offs of seabirds brought on by warming waters which were causing prey species to move elsewhere and/or swim deeper. And there had been fewer dolphins around too. This was a trend we would find would continue.

Australian Adventure

Hobart was our first Aussie port, on 11th February and common dolphins twice escorted as we left and seabird sightings included gannets, kelp and silver gulls, pied cormorants, Buller's and white-capped albatross and huge flocks of short-tailed shearwaters. These breed in large numbers on Phillip Island, more famous for its little penguins, and our next port of call.



Little penguin

Common dolphins were seen during sail-in there too, on two occasions.

Geelong on 13th re-introduced the greater-crested tern, not seen since the Pacific Islands but the most exciting report was that a guest had seen a spotted ray as we sailed in to the bay during the morning and there were many jellyfish too as well as pied cormorants and silver gulls around the marina and tender port.

February 14th turned out to be a superb cetacean day. It began at around 0830 as we passed Wilson's Promontory and the Curtis Islands group with at least 20+ common dolphins reported by regular watchers Jesse and Roger and then later in the morning other guests reported 5-6 more, briefly to port.



Just 4 (yes, look again) of the 200+ common dolphins seen!

The afternoon however saw a further 8 encounters, with groups from 10-12 to 50 or more for a total of

around 200+ individuals! Additionally, a couple of Buller's Albatross and occasional greater crested terns, southern black-backed (kelp) gulls and Australasian gannets joined us briefly and a fur seal or sealion also poked its head up briefly!

Eden is a place I had long wanted to visit, the location for an incredible story of human-orca cooperative whaling! Old Tom was the best known individual from a pod of orca which used to drive humpbacks into Twofold Bay allowing first the native Yuan people, and then the Davison whaling family, to take what they needed after the orca had taken the "lips" and tongue. Old Tom's skeleton has pride of place in the whaling museum there and the amazing story is told more fully along with many other exhibits.



Old Tom in the Eden Killer Whale Museum

Sail-away attracted a group of 7-8 bottlenose dolphins who leaped alongside the port bow and we also spotted our first flying fish for a while.



Bottlenose dolphin

February 16th/17th saw us in Sydney so most of our wildlife activity was land-based but flocks of flesh-footed shearwaters were seen once we left the harbour area and silver gulls and pied cormorants were frequent within it. Dolphins are seen there, even under the famous Harbour Bridge but not this time!

Our next sea day was very quiet, with only one or two shearwaters and grey-faced petrels with just distant splashes once suggesting the presence of dolphins. Mooloolaba the following day was similarly quiet but we were anticipating much more in the coming days as we headed up the coast inside the Great Barrier Reef.

The Great Barrier Reef

In addition to my own talk covering this important eco-system we were fortunate to have the excellent reef pilot Vikram Hede onboard who also gave some great talks about navigating the reef, the wildlife and the challenges it faces. Anticipation was high!

From early in the day we enjoyed sightings of wedge-tailed and flesh-footed shearwaters, flocks of brown noddies and occasional brown boobies and black-browed albatross. Flying fish darted over the surface.



Brown booby

Our first cetaceans came at 1123 when Jesse spotted what turned out to be 20 or so bottlenose dolphins a couple of miles away. They were associating, and probably feeding, with brown boobies but came leaping over to see us in 2s and 3s.



Bottlenose dolphin on the Great Barrier Reef

They appeared to bow ride, then surfed alongside before returning to their feeding area. Another 4 or 5

joined us in the early afternoon, then another 2 but not before we had enjoyed a great frigatebird circling above us riding the air currents. There was clearly food around because small feeding frenzies, particularly of shearwaters, often developed and “boils” of fish could be seen with tuna or other large fish often appearing at the surface.



Wedge-tailed shearwaters

The next two days saw us first in Airlie Beach and then Cairns with just the usual seabirds hang around. Then on 23rd we once again cruised northwards but this time, much less was seen although the scenery was wonderful. Occasional small flying fish were chased by a single brown booby although there was a good variety of terns with clear views of sooty, greater crested and black-naped terns for sure. Dolphins were seen, but only briefly and far away.

Thursday Island on 24th turned out to be a very short stop as we dragged our anchor in the stormy weather and so soon sailed onwards heading for Komodo Island after 3 days in the Arafura then Timor Seas. Once again, few cetaceans were seen, in fact just one whale blow away to starboard, but brown boobies, shearwaters, terns and occasional frigatebirds braved what became gale force winds.

There be Dragons!

It turned out that rather than the better known Komodo Island, we were actually landing on nearby Rinca Island to see the famous dragons. Here, as well as a close up look at these enormous monitor lizards, we enjoyed an early morning sighting of 60+ pantropical spotted dolphins as we approached, followed by at least 12 more leaping in to the starboard bow. Two guests later reported having seen 2 whales away to port which possibly were Bryde’s or sperm whales but we’ll never know! The sail-in also featured 5 great frigatebirds circling around the anchorage and around 100 terns on the rocks in the

shallows as well as a needlefish tail-walking away from us.



Pantropical spotted dolphins, note the damaged fin!

Our time in the anchorage also produced some good sightings, starting with a dugong alongside us, seen by our regular watcher Daryl. What seemed to be a family pod of 15 bottlenose dolphins swam slowly around the bay from time to time, sometimes actively foraging and another group of 5 or so was sometimes seen further away nearer the entrance. We were also treated to the sight of white-bellied sea eagles soaring over the tender dock as we entered and left the Komodo’s territory.



Komodo dragon, not a marine creature, but they do swim!

Bali and Beyond

First of March was the day of our arrival for a 3 day stop in Bali. Daryl once again came up with a great early sighting, this time a small pod of pilot whales on the port side and then later 3+ large grey dolphins far away to port, probably bottlenose. Our sail-in was also accompanied by up to 5 brown boobies swooping around the bow to chase flying fish and there were pied cormorants and greater crested terns on the channel buoys as well as great frigatebirds and cattle egrets around the harbour, as well as the occasional Pacific reef, and purple, herons. We added black-

naped and a few Caspian terns on the safe water buoy as we left.



Purple heron

Our sea day on 4th saw a sea snake reported by Roger, a possible sea turtle and a few flying fish. Semarang, the next day, revealed no significant wildlife and the following two sea days in the Java and South China Seas were quiet too. Guests did however report a brief sighting of “small dolphins with long beaks” early on 6th and two brief sightings later that day and a couple of great frigatebirds whereas 7th revealed just a few flying fish in very choppy seas.

An interesting sail in to Ho Chi Minh City on 8th passed huge fish farms and nets strung between posts in the river and produced sightings of greater crested terns, little and great egrets, little black cormorants as well as swallows or martins. It was similar on the sail-away on 11th with smaller, possibly black-naped terns also.



Little and great egrets in the Saigon River

Another South China Sea day produced just a brief interaction with 2 common dolphins and a few swallows or swiftlets which had remained with us although we did pass a few fishing boats and HMS Queen Elizabeth. Koh Samui the following day featured just a handful of distant birds and on 14th, there were flying fish at intervals, sometimes in groups of 10-12 at a time.

The next two days were spent in Singapore, a “fine” city, so called because of all the penalties for breaching the many strict regulations but also one of our favourite cities with beautiful botanical gardens and the famous Gardens by the Bay. We had some great wildlife encounters in the city, including monitor lizards (one of which we filmed catching a terrapin)



Malaysian water monitor and terrapin

and many beautiful birds but at sea there was little to see although flocks of lesser crested terns and a parasitic jaeger were seen during our approach.

Roger spotted a pair of dolphins in the early evening of 17th which rescued an otherwise .

Our berth at Port Klang, Busted Cruise Terminal on 18th was surrounded by mangroves and as a result we witnessed Brahminy kites and white-bellied sea eagles



Brahminy kite

hunting over the water as well as cattle egrets, little egrets, house crows and swallows. These were also much in evidence the following day in Langkawi but Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins were also reported not far from the ship. This is a species we have seen here before, and also in Georgetown, Penang which was our next call on 20th and the place where we were to again see them ourselves as we sailed away down the channel.



Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins

Just as exciting though was a huge flock of 350+ terns which fed in the wake and alongside! Patong Beach, Phuket was our next call but it was the following day, our first sea day crossing the Indian Ocean which was to be one of the best.

Crossing the Indian Ocean

There were regular sightings of at least 3 flying fish species from early in the morning of 22nd and then at 0945 a large group of short-finned pilot whales were spotted. They were well spread out and swimming slowly perhaps a mile to starboard. Some passed within 250 metres of the port bow after crossing ahead of us leaving perhaps 12-15 in the main group to starboard with at least 10 more a mile or so beyond them. At 1110 we briefly saw 5-6 relatively small dolphins to starboard and then 4-5 larger ones close to port a little later. Then, at 1142, another group of 25+ pilot whales were seen off the port bow only ½ mile away and then ultimately in the wake.



Short-finned pilot whale

A small group of striped dolphins were also in the vicinity and then only 10 minutes later 12-15 came under the ship and surfaced to starboard with much leaping. That afternoon, guests enjoying lunch in the World Café, aft, reported seeing 10-12 more dolphins away to port with us seeing 2-3 spinner dolphins very

close to the port bow at 1425 and 6-8 more being reported at 1440.



Spinner dolphins

The next day was quieter, but two fins were spotted by guests, chasing large silver fish to starboard and we saw a needlefish jumping and tail-walking away to starboard, many flying fish and a distant tropicbird. However, 24th was another busy day, beginning with what appeared to be a logging beaked whale to starboard near a floating garbage patch and then 10-12 probable spinner dolphins at c1000 close to the bow and then in the wake. At 1103, 3 more beaked whales appeared, about a mile to starboard, surfacing in a delayed line abreast formation aimed towards our wake. We watched them submerge then surface again before they went down for a final, deeper dive but did not manage a good photograph! More cetaceans were logged at 1215 and again at 1230, this time groups of dolphins between one and two miles away to starboard causing big splashes sometimes. The afternoon brought us a report of “2 white birds, port side” and our own sighting of a turtle close to the port side. At 1722, Daryl watched a whale blowing far away to starboard and then as night fell 4-5 dolphins leapt in to the starboard bow as an electrical storm began dancing over the Sri Lankan coast and Venus appeared below a beautiful new moon.

These were waters where we hoped to see blue whales. They are here off the southern coast of Sri Lanka in the deep trench off Mirissa, from November to April and then off Trincomalee in the north east, for most of the rest of the year Maybe Daryl’s whale was one of that species, we’ll never know, but sadly we sailed through the best areas in the dark and nothing more was seen that evening.

Colombo was our home from 25th until our departure on 27th and we’ll continue the story from there.

*Short-finned pilot whale and spinner dolphins: Kris Simpson
All other images: Robin Petch*