

A whale of a time in the Bay of Biscay

(extract from the *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 August 2002 © Trevor Day)

You don't have to venture far to see some of the world's largest marine mammals. Trevor Day counted more than 300 off France and Spain

"Bloody hell!" Andy shouted. This was not quite the cry our whale-watching guides, Dylan and Hugh, had been expecting but it did have the desired effect. We scrambled to see a Cuvier's beaked whale rise majestically out of the water.

Think of whale-watching, and most of us picture trips to Iceland, Canada, the US or beyond. But since 1996, the Company of Whales has been running whale-watching trips on the *Pride of Bilbao*, P & O's ferry on the Portsmouth to Bilbao run. And passengers are seeing whales and dolphins - lots of them. On the trip I joined this month, we saw more than 300.

We gathered at Portsmouth Continental Ferryport late on a Tuesday afternoon. There were 24 of us. A real mix: cousins Tom and Joshua, aged 11, with their grandmother, Judith; couples, from teens to retired; several young men - avid bird-watchers and now whale-watchers; and Jeanette, in her 70s. Her husband - who could not make the trip - had encouraged her to come by regaling her with his whale-watching adventures in the Falklands half-a-century ago.

The first evening aboard we met at 8pm and Hugh and Dylan showed us around. Billed as a luxury cruise ferry, the *Pride of Bilbao* is opulent by the standards of the average cross-Channel ferry; by comparison with a cruise ship, it is rather pedestrian and cabins are utilitarian (it's worth paying the extra £40 to get a four-berth window cabin). Nevertheless, there is plenty to see and do: restaurants, bars, cinemas, shops, a cabaret and a health club. But these are just adjuncts to the main attraction: the whales.

We assembled the next morning at 9am for Dylan and Hugh's presentation - what to look for - and how. Hugh told us about watching for the "blow" (the whale's breath of misty spray), about the dive sequence and the "breach" (a whale flinging itself bodily from the water). We learnt about the different cetaceans - whales, dolphins and porpoises - we might see.

During a short break, someone shouted from the back of the room and we spotted several common dolphins elegantly arcing by the window. By the end, Hugh and Dylan had us play-acting the different whales and guessing the whale from the shape and position of its dorsal fin. We learnt about judging distance, and giving directions based on hours of the clock.

Only seven weeks earlier, Dylan told us, he photographed a True's beaked whale that breached 24 times alongside the ferry. This was the first positive identification of this whale alive at sea anywhere in the world.

At lunchtime, the serious whale-watching began from the "monkey island" on the roof of the bridge, our group's exclusive observation platform (from the "powder monkeys" of sailing days - boys who carried the cannon gunpowder and were sent aloft as lookouts). From here we could see for up to 20 miles in all directions. On the deck below, other bird-watchers and whale-watchers looked at us enviously. The weather was reasonable - a cloud-speckled sky and moderate wind. We settled on movable seats and scanned the sea with binoculars.

The action came quickly. At 12.50pm, there were "four dolphins ahead at one o'clock". At 1pm, a school of 100-plus dolphins passed by on the port side. At 2.15pm, several common dolphins appeared out of nowhere and headed for the ship's bow. Then we crossed the shelf edge where the sea floor slopes from 300ft deep to 3,000ft and deeper. As if on cue, pilot whales rose on both sides of the boat. Blunt-headed, they are bigger, darker and slower than the dolphins. After three hours whale-watching we had seen 12 pilot whales and more than 120 dolphins.

Then, at 3.55 pm, our first fin whale - the second largest animal on Earth. We could see its breath from two miles away; an eerie feeling.

About an hour later, splashes ahead of the boat that looked like dolphins turned out to be tuna. The best part of 6ft long, they arced right out of the water.

In the evening, a flurry of activity finished the day. There were two schools of dolphins and then two fin whales came to within a few hundred yards. As they swam off behind the ferry, their massive "broad in the beam" bodies looked like submarines.

By 8.30pm, the light was fading and we climbed down from the monkey island. Several of us met in the lounge later and laughed about Hugh and Dylan's magical ability to identify a whale at long range. In truth, they don't confirm the species until they're sure but as they have been doing this for several years, they can often tell by the combination of features - the blow, the silhouette and the dive sequence - which species it is. Richard and Rob, bird-watching and whale-watching brothers, showed us the day's footage shot on their digicams. Some of their dolphin "freeze frames" would make great posters.

The following morning, we berthed in Bilbao. By 8am, 16 of us were walking through Bilbao and up into the foothills. The bird-watchers enthused over glimpses of warblers and griffon vultures. The rest of us enjoyed the warm air and the view. Bill, a voluntary wildlife warden, ticked off the 833rd bird on his lifetime hitlist - a melodious warbler. We all became excited seeing a marsh harrier hunt close by.

The ferry left Bilbao soon after 11am and the second day's whale-watching began. The wind was fresh from the north-west and the sea choppy. There were no comfortable chairs; we were crossing the whale-rich waters of the southern Bay of Biscay. The "Pyrenees underwater" are a hotspot for beaked

whales - deep-water whales that are among the least studied in the world. Hugh soon spotted a sperm whale - a rolling, lumpy log. Then, in the middle distance, a one-ton whale leapt clean out of the water, looking like a giant dolphin arcing through the air. Hugh and Dylan were sure it was a beaked whale - and they had never seen one jump so high.

Within the hour came the trip's crowning glory - and the cause of Andy's outburst. About 300ft ahead a brownish-looking whale hung momentarily in the air, as if standing on its tail, and repeated the performance three times. We were amazed.

The rest of the afternoon and evening we seemed to be dodging showers. Being on monkey island was hypnotic and exhilarating. We saw the blows of fin whales several miles away, and minutes later, the whales appeared close to the ferry, lunging through the water to catch fish or plankton. Rarely do you have an excuse for staring at sea and sky for so long - the mind slowed and the senses sharpened.

The final day was restful. We met at lunchtime for Hugh and Dylan's debriefing. This was where we finally discovered what all the sightings meant. The geographic location of each encounter had been logged, and the results plotted on a chart. We saw that most of our dolphin sightings were in shallow water, with our pilot whale encounters along the shelf edge, the beaked whales in the steep-sided canyons of the southern Bay of Biscay, and fin whales over the 12,000ft deep abyssal plain. We learnt about whale behaviour. The data we have gathered would be added to ORCA's (Organisation Cetacea's) database and passed on to other research and conservation organisations. Dylan has incorporated the data into easy-to-read reports.

On this whale-watching trip, don't expect to get up close and personal. You won't be smelling the whale's breath. But "flying" at 100ft above the ocean has a magic of its own. And there are not so many places in the world where you can see eight species of cetacean in three days - and in relative comfort.

Getting there

The Company of Whales (01950 422483; www.companyofwhales.co.uk) runs three-day whale-watching cruises between Portsmouth and Bilbao, northern Spain, from £199 per person including accommodation but excluding food (children under 15 from £189). Trips run from Tuesday or Saturday between April and October. Recommended binoculars are those with a moderate magnification and large objective lenses: 7x50 or 8x42 are good. The ship is stable enough to use a spotting telescope in calm conditions. A combination of light and warm clothing is advisable.