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Whale Watching from Coast-to-Coast

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

"Call me Ishmael. I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which ... induced me to set about performing the part I did ... Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity."

- *Moby Dick*, Chapter 1

The great white whale obsessed Captain Ahab, but nowadays you can gain a much healthier respect for the mightiest mammals on earth through whale watching.

And, whether you enjoy this increasingly popular pastime on the east or west coasts of North America, you'll find KOA campgrounds located conveniently close to top whale watching areas.

Maine offers some of the best whale watching on the Eastern U.S. Coast. Activity is further concentrated in the Bar Harbor area, where the [Bar Harbor Whale Watch Company](#) offers daily guided trips from late May until mid-October.

Zack Klyver, a company naturalist, said consistently good sightings and diversity tend to occur most often from mid-June through mid-September. Fall provides the advantage of clear sunny days without fog, less crowded boats and views of foliage in autumnal majesty.

Klyver said boat passengers usually see four species of larger baleen whales: finback, humpback, minke and northern right. Harbor porpoise also are seen through the season, and schools of several hundred Atlantic white-sided dolphins appear when the water warms up, he said.

"Some populations of whales are doing well, while others are holding on," Klyver said.

The estimated humpback population in the north Atlantic has increased in recent years, and finback whales also are abundant. Finbacks, the second largest whales on earth, typically measure 45 to 65 feet and weigh 40 to 50 tons but have topped out at 89 feet and 130 tons. Northern right whales, however, number just 300 to 350 in the north Atlantic and are endangered, he said.



A humpback whale breaches the surface off the shore of Virginia Beach. Photo courtesy of Virginia Beach CVB.

Three KOA campgrounds are conveniently located for whale watching in Maine: Bar Harbor, Saco and Freeport. Whale watching in the north Atlantic extends into Canada, where four KOA campgrounds are close to top opportunities: Gros Morne, in Newfoundland; Seal Island and Halifax, Nova Scotia; and Cavendish, Prince Edward Island.

Another whale-watching Mecca comprises Chesapeake Bay, shared by Virginia and

Maryland, and the nearby warmer waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Each year, from January through March, the [Virginia Aquarium](#), in Virginia Beach, Virginia, gives visitors an opportunity to embark upon two-hour, narrated [whale-watching boat tours](#), to catch a glimpse of the creatures as they breach. Juvenile humpback whales seen off the Virginia Beach coast have ranged up to 30 feet long and weigh up to 40 tons. The Aquarium has been conducting the boat trips since 1991.

The Aquarium also offer visitors Whale Watching Getaway packages that start at \$98 this year, which includes the boat trip, three days/two nights accommodations, admission to the Aquarium and a dining certificate.

Boat trips this season are scheduled from December 27-30, 2004, and January 2-March 13, 2005.

"The winter months are definitely the prime whale-watching months, when the fin and humpback whales make their annual retreat off the Virginia Beach coast," said Jessica Rinck, representing the firm that handles public relations for the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Besides the Virginia Beach KOA, other KOA campgrounds near Chesapeake Bay include Chesapeake Bay/Smith Island, Williamsburg and Williamsburg/Colonial, all in Virginia.

On the West Coast, California and Alaska offer some of the top whale-watching opportunities.

In California, a natural drama occurs each spring in Monterey Bay. Gray whales making a 6,000-mile migration from Baja California, Mexico, to summer feeding grounds in Alaska have to survive one of the most perilous parts of the trip in the bay. There, packs of killer whales – orcas – wait to ambush gray whale calves. Mother gray whales are able to protect some calves, but others fall victim to what scientists consider among the most efficient predators of the ocean because of the teamwork and intelligence displayed by killer whales.

[Monterey Bay Whale Watch](#) offers daily tours throughout the year. The company's Web site says May through November present the best opportunities to see humpback and blue whales while gray whales are common from December through April.

Visitors to the area can stay at the Santa Cruz/Monterey Bay KOA.

And, for to experience a premiere adventure opportunity, consider a trip to Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, a 3.3 million acre park located 60 miles west of Juneau.

Last summer was a record year for humpback whales in Glacier Bay: 13 mother-calf pairs were identified within the park, according to Courtney Newman, an account executive for Allison & Partners, the public relations firm that represents Glacier Bay's concessionaire.

Park visitors can whale watch by taking an all-day boat tour that also allows them to see glaciers and look for other wildlife such as bears, mountain goats and seals. Or, for a more intimate wilderness experience, visitors can paddle sea kayaks among humpbacks and orcas.

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