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One Giant Leap

As KERI HARVEY discovers, not much beats watching these leviathans heave themselves out of the deep

PICTURES LLOYD EDWARDS, MARTIN COETZEE, ADVANTAGE TOURS & CHARTERS, DYER ISLAND CRUISES

Lloyd Edwards has had a lifelong love affair with whales. "We still know so little about them," he says, his sea-blue eyes transfixed on the ocean as he steers his boat Winkle out of the harbour.

He's been watching whales almost daily for 22 years in Algoa Bay, off Port Elizabeth – long before permits to do so by boat were available. Now he's a licensed whale-watching boat operator, and shares the whale-watching experience aboard Winkel, while simultaneously collecting data for his master's degree on Bryde's whales.

Throughout winter and spring, South Africa has whales coast to coast. Southern rights, humpbacks, Bryde's and Minke whales are just a few of the species to be seen. Some are passing by, others stay throughout the year, but all will take your breath away when they breach like living rockets from the ocean's surface.

This morning it's a smooth ride out into the bay across an unusually glassy sea. All aboard are twittering in anticipation of seeing whales. Some are speaking French and German, but the language of excitement is universal. Ten minutes into the trip, Lloyd slows the boat and six heads spin around scanning the ocean surface for fins or tails. There's nothing to be seen. Lloyd smiles and says, "Just be patient, there's a southern right close by."

The chatter stops dead and six sets of eyes scan the sea, none quite sure what will happen next. Then there's an almost choreographed gasp as a southern right clears the ocean in a mighty breach and belly flops back onto the surface of the sea, sending spray flying in all directions. The watchers are caught completely off-guard and fumble clumsily for their cameras. "Just save that one to memory," says Lloyd, "there should be more." Cameras are now ready.

Lloyd turns Winkle in a different direction towards St Croix Island – here live penguins and also huge schools of dolphins. It's also quite likely there'll be more whales to see en route. As he steers us smoothly out to sea, questions are fired from around the boat. Lloyd has likely answered them all a thousand times, but he never tires of whale talk.

"Whales are so mysterious, that's why they keep me captivated," he answers one guest. "Besides, every day at sea is different – the conditions, what you see and how the animals behave. Always something new."

One theory why whales breach, Lloyd explains, is just for fun. But it could also be for communication, or to increase muscle tone in the calves, learnt from copying their mothers. Many believe it's to shake off parasites since they land on their backs where parasites usually live. "Except," says Lloyd, "the Bryde's whale breaches at 45 degrees with no real force and lands back on its stomach.

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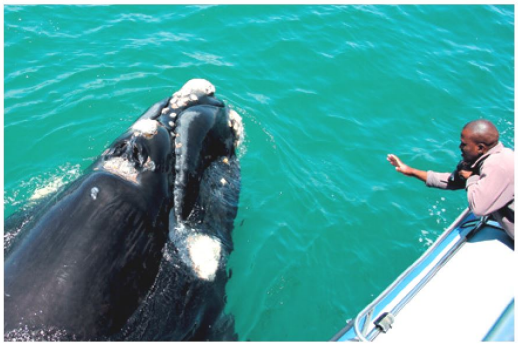








OPPOSITE: A humpback whale rockets out of the water in front of Cape Recife lighthouse. TOP: Lloyd Edwards owns Raggy Charters and is happiest at sea, especially if there are whales about. In the background, an unusual white southern right calf and its mother lie in the water. TOP RIGHT: Whale watching around the world is a massive industry, and South Africa boasts the finest from boats and from land – from St Lucia all the way round to the West Coast. ABOVE: The term 'spyhopping' refers to a whale popping its head out of the water in a vertical position, as this humpback is doing in the bay off Port Elizabeth. RIGHT: Not drowning, but waving. A humpback off the coast of St Lucia rises from the depths of the ocean. BELOW: As big as a boat, a southern right whale swims alongside a Dyer Island Cruises whale-watching boat.



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"Breaching could also be a defence mechanism to cause a commotion, except you have sperm whales slapping their tails on the water to ward off killer whales. These are the complexities of trying to understand whale behaviour."

The good news is that experts believe southern rights and humpbacks are increasing in number. In Algoa Bay, Lloyd regularly sees up to four whale species in a single day: southern right, humpback, Bryde's and Minke. He has recorded up to 30 southern rights and 30 humpbacks in a single outing. "We occasionally see killer whales, already twice this year."

While humpbacks and southern rights migrate to our waters during winter and spring, Bryde's whales are resident along our coastline because they feed on small bait fish available throughout the year. Some Bryde's live inshore and others far offshore between 50 and 100km off the West Coast, beyond the reach of boat trips. Besides, there are no registered whale-watching boat operators along the West Coast.

However, land-based whale watching along the West Coast is excellent and the Whale of a Heritage Route initiative logs whale sightings at 24 places along the West Coast, from False Bay to beyond Lamberts Bay – so whale watchers know what was seen where and when.

"You're here at the very best time to see southern rights," adds Lloyd, as he stops to scan the horizon briefly. "June to October is southern right season between Lamberts Bay and East London, though they're off Saldanha and St Helena Bay up the West Coast all year." Humpbacks are seen off PE between June and January, off St Lucia end of May to early December, and along the West Coast between May and November.

Bryde's and Minke whales occur all year, but are seen most often off PE in late summer and early winter when they chase schools of bait fish. Lloyd smiles and says, "The Sardine Run is not just off the Wild Coast and KZN, it comes past PE too, and with whales behind it."

Bryde's and Minke whales are also spotted off St Lucia on occasion, and spinner and bottlenose dolphins are often seen on boat trips. In late October and November, rare leatherback and loggerhead turtles can be spotted here too – and just wait for the joy of seeing a flying fish.

"The more we research whales, the more we realise how little we know," says Lloyd. "We still don't really know why whales breach, never mind all their other complex behaviours. When I started collecting whale data more than 20 years ago we believed there was one species of killer whale or orca, and that groups were male dominated. Now we know there are possibly seven subspecies of killer whales, and that groups are in fact female dominated. You see what I mean?"

Everybody knows Hermanus offers spectacular land-based whale watching; fewer know that Witsand has sublime whale watching from its beach. It's a southern right nursery, and seeing multiple whales breaching and lobtailing is common in season. Gansbaai nearby is just as exciting. The area is a breeding and calving ground for southern rights from June to December, which makes for spectacular sightings.

One of the permit conditions, explains Lloyd, is that all registered operators must record what is seen, and photograph the dorsal fins or the tail flukes of whales. This info is submitted monthly to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism to assist with research. "I also send info on killer whales to researchers around the world. I may not be able to save the rainforests, but I can help whale conservation."

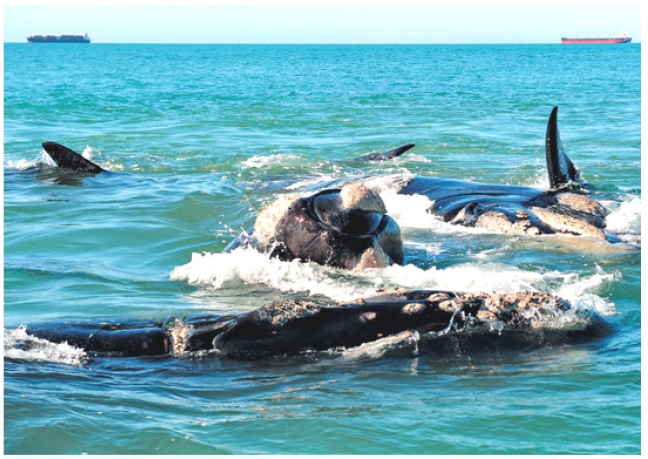
We're close to St Croix Island now and without warning our boat is surrounded by bottlenose dolphins. The sea is boiling with them, and all aboard Winkel are spellbound. "There are about 200 here," estimates Lloyd, "but we often see double the amount, and common dolphins further out can be in schools of up to 2 000." It's spectacular, and you expect any minute to hear David Attenborough's voice as if you're in a *BBC Wildlife* production.

"I have watched whales around the world," continues Lloyd, "and we definitely have some of the best whale and dolphin watching there is. We have both diversity and numbers. And just when you think you've seen it all, you realise you haven't. I'm hooked on whales and always will be." ■

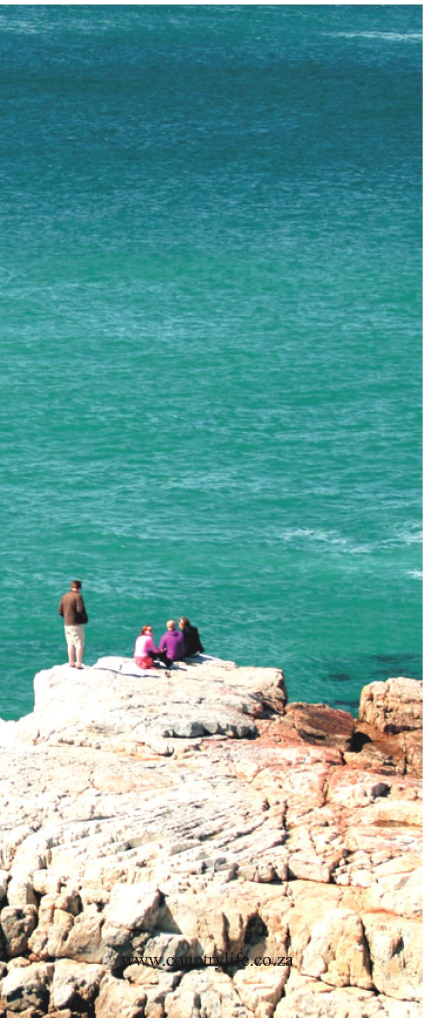


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TOP: Some click their cameras, others watch in wonder as a school of common dolphins passes the boat on a cruise in Algoa Bay. TOP RIGHT: Southern right whales mate in the shelter of Algoa Bay. ABOVE: Killer whales are also seen on occasion in Algoa Bay, but are always on the move. LEFT: Southern rights are easily seen from the coastline along Walker Bay and Hermanus. BELOW: The Whale Crier of Hermanus walks the immediate coastline blowing his kelp horn in code.

Top Spots for Watching Whales

At Sea

- **St Lucia** Advantage Tours & Charters 035 590 1259/1180
  advantage@zululink.co.za, www.advantagetours.co.za
- **Port Elizabeth** Raggy Charters 073 152 2277
  info@raggycharters.co.za, www.raggycharters.co.za
- **Plettenberg Bay** Ocean Blue Adventures 044 533 5083
  083 701 3583, info@oceanadventures.co.za
  www.oceanadventures.co.za
  Ocean Safaris 082 784 5729, info@oceansafaris.co.za
  www.oceansafaris.co.za
- **Gansbaai** Dyer Island Cruises 028 384 0406/082 801 8014
  bookings@whalewatchsa.com
  www.whalewatchsa.com
- **False Bay** Simons Town Boat Co 083 257 7760
  www.boatcompany.co.za

On Land

- **False Bay and West Coast** False Bay and West Coast whale log
  079 391 2105, www.awhaleofaheritageroute.co.za
- **Southern Cape** De Hoop Nature Reserve, 028 542 1254
  www.dehoopcollection.co.za
- **Hermanus** Hermanus Whale Festival 3-6 October, 028 313 0928
  festival@hermanus.co.za, www.whalefestival.co.za

