



# Swimming with Orca in the Wild

FOR THIS AUTHOR, A TRIP TO THE FJORDS OF NORWAY WAS THE REALIZATION OF A LIFE-LONG DREAM TO SWIM WITH ORCA IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT.

*A mother and baby swim by. Photo: Rita Messing.*

“TEAM A GET READY! Fins over the side!”

Filip, the Swedish bo’sun piloting our Zodiac RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat), eases the throttle back to idle and pushes the tiller away from his body, swinging the vessel hard to port. There is a steady chop to the water today, not quite enough to cap the waves with foam, but enough to bounce us erratically up and down on the sides of the small boat, for which our backs give quiet thanks are inflatable.

A constant 15-knot wind blows into the fjord from the West—cold, certainly, but not nearly as frigid as I’d imagined it would be 250 miles inside the Arctic Circle in mid-November. And besides, while the layers beneath my drysuit keep my torso and limbs toasty warm, anticipation and muted excitement distracts from cold lips, fingertips, and toes.

Dragging my legs clumsily over the side, I grip the guide rope with both neoprene-gloved hands and gaze out, wind-whipped tears making it hard to see clearly in this monochromatic landscape. I scan a narrow slice of the middle distance, hoping more than knowing that if they surface again in this particular area, it will mean Filip has positioned the boat perfectly to intercept. For a few moments no-one speaks as we all stare out at the slate-grey sea.

Then we see them. Perhaps 300 feet away, two fins rise and slice through the waves like shining black daggers, jets of fine mist shooting into the air, before slowly sinking almost out of sight. They rise again, one after the other, like pistons in some relentless steam-engine powering forward, the spray from their exhalation only adding to the illusion.

They are heading straight for us. Heart rates increase.

“OK, let’s go! Quietly as you can into the water...” calls Rita, our guide.

## INTO THE ICY WATER

I pull my mask down over my face and put the snorkel in my mouth. Four of us slide ungracefully (and not particularly quietly) from the rubber sides of the boat into the water. If it is cold, I am oblivious.

The air trapped in my drysuit wants to lay me flat on the surface, and I must work hard to point my fins downwards. We’re supposed to turn back to the boat to give Filip the OK sign (one or both arms looped up and over, fingers touching the head), but I’m too excited and forget.

I press the record button on my GoPro and, putting my face down, I look beneath me. The

water is a milky yet saturated blue, more vivid than the grey of the surface. But the seabed is nearly a kilometer below, and with no point of reference, it is impossible to know precisely how far I can see. It could be 10 feet or one hundred, and the sensation is not unpleasantly disorienting. I tilt my head and my camera up and forward...and almost immediately I discover just how far it is that my vision extends.

Emerging from the azure gloom 30 feet or so in front of me are two orca. Side by side a few feet beneath the surface, they glide with a seemingly minimum of effort towards me. I inhale. Time slows down.

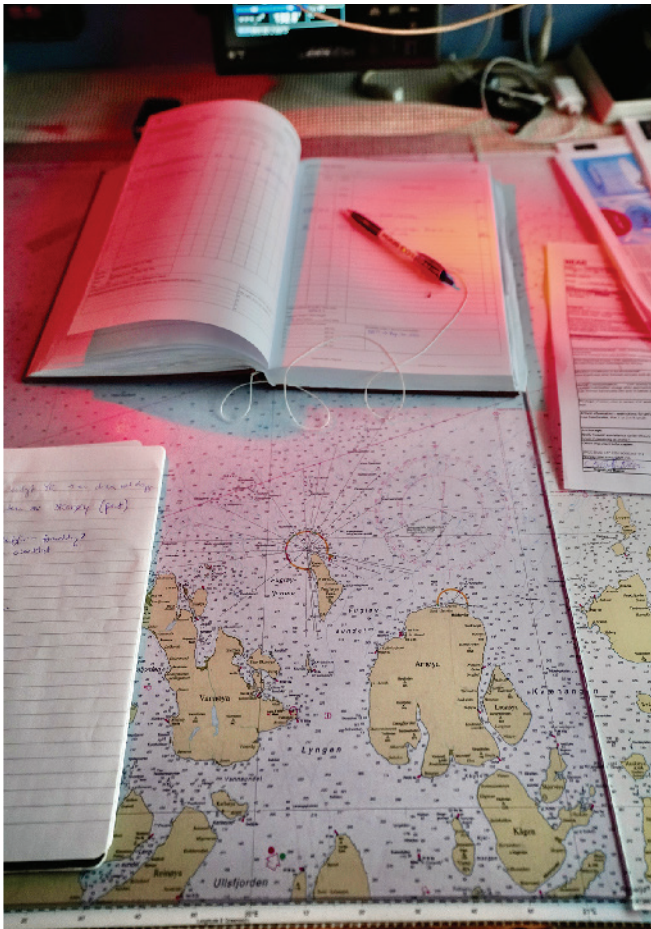
It is their form and color that strike first, at once so familiar and yet wonderfully surreal—a blunt head, two-tone negative with the distinctive lozenge eye-patch. Round, oversized pectoral fins look like giant paddles. Thick body, bulging through the middle, broad strokes of white painted across the saddle and up from the waist, stark against the black. That magnificent dorsal fin stabbing straight upward. And the strong taper of the tail, so powerful it barely undulates as the animals move through the water at maybe 10 knots.

On paper, the proportions shouldn’t work. The fins are too big, the body a little too round. The





A male orca passes by the group. Photo: Rita Messing.



A chart and logbook on the M/V Kinfish bridge.



A welcomed tea break for the swimmers.



A pod of orca swim toward us. Photo: Rita Messing.





*The Aurora Borealis viewed from Norway.*



*Dominic Green holds a freshly-caught cod.*



*A pair of orca moves toward us. Photo: Rita Messing.*

coloring is random, without logic. And yet they are beautifully perfect, as though Rodin has taken it upon himself to sculpt his interpretation of a dolphin, then asked Matisse to paint it.

They exude at once both power and grace, menace and indifference. They are only allowing us to see them in this moment because they simply don't care enough to change direction.

The nearest passes right beneath me, so close that if I reach out my hand, I might touch the tip of his 5-foot fin. But I don't. And in a moment, they have passed us by, fading back into the blue as quickly as they arrived.

I exhale.

From first view to last, the entire encounter lasts perhaps 15 seconds.

#### DAILY ORCA ENCOUNTERS

This was Day 2 of a week-long trip to the fjords of Northern Norway, to experience firsthand the wonder of orca in their natural habitat. Eleven other guests and I spent a week living aboard the M/V Kinfish, a former Norwegian research vessel that has been turned into a passenger ship by Natural World Safaris, the UK wildlife experience company.

For me, this was the realization of a lifelong dream. I have wanted to swim with wild orca since I was eight or nine years old. The trip was

everything I imagined it would be. The light at the top of the world is magical, the landscape spectacular. The Aurora Borealis, that shimmered neon green across the night sky on our first evening, was understandably breathtaking. Kinfish and her Swedish crew were exemplary, our guides knowledgeable and a joy to spend time with. Superlatives were at a premium.

We encountered orca and humpback whales every day, attracted to the fjord for the countless herring that congregate there to spawn. To view them from the ship for hours at a time was a delight that never grew old. To spend time with them in the water, in their home, was a privilege made all the more special for its rarity. It is something I shall truly never forget.

Natural World Safaris offer Killer Whale experiences in Norway throughout the month of November. Visit [naturalworldsafaris.com](https://www.naturalworldsafaris.com)

To view the video taken during the encounter described, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipriZ-gRzII>



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