

WHALE WATCHING



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"You know how many whales you're going to see, right?" My math teacher asked as he reluctantly signed off on my field trip permission slip. I knew. I held up my hand, curling a big, fat zero with my thumb and four fingers. I was suckered into his pessimism. I didn't want to appear naïve enough to believe in a cheap tourist trap like "whale watching."

His was the last signature I needed to excuse me from class on Thursday, April 7, for Mr. Kay's field trip to Santa Barbara's sea harbor. My Marine Biology class was to board the Condor Express, a double-decker tour boat, with his other science classes and supposedly spot some whales. I wasn't getting my hopes up.

Even though I knew we weren't going to see any whales, I was still excited to finally go on a field trip. I hadn't gone on a field trip since fifth grade. I had gone on class trips - Catalina, Yosemite, Astrocamp - but I hadn't gone on a real, get-this-permission-slip-signed-by-Wednesday, bring-a-hat-and-sunscreen, school bus field trip since elementary school. I suppose the main attraction of the trip was the whales, but since I had already given up hope in that, I was more excited to eat lunch on Santa Barbara's State street and spend a couple hours on the school bus.

We started a bit behind schedule on Thursday morning; the big, comfortable, expensive tour buses arrived late. They were nothing like the yellow school buses we used to take on field trips in elementary school. They had reclining seats, arm rests, tv monitors, and a bathroom. When we got on the Pacific Coast Highway around 7:30 a.m. the road was empty and a bit damp from the early morning rain.

I've always found long rides in school buses to be enjoyable: the excited, social energy on the way to the destination; the sleepy, satis-

fied atmosphere on the way home. My excitement on the bus was interrupted when I started feeling nauseous. I was just a bit car sick, but it was a sudden reminder of my nausea-proneness that I had been able to forget about until then. A feeling of impending doom overcame me: I was going to vomit all over the Condor Express.

We arrived right on time, just around 9 a.m. All ~100 of us filed down the sea port, across the swaying dock and onto the deck of the brilliantly white boat. Her name was painted in a two-tone nautical blue across her sides (CONDOR Express). She was beautiful. Ribbons of the two different blues wrapped around her adjacent sides to a 13-digit phone number painted just as prominently as her name (1-805-888-77-WHALE). The guardrail that perimetered the boat was dizzyingly pitched inwards. The cozy wood-paneled interior cabin of the boat was loaded with tables and booth seating. Two 42-inch plasma screen TVs displayed a navigation map. The tables were centered around Café Condor, a concession stand staffed with two young men serving freshly made egg sandwiches, breakfast burritos, grilled hot dogs, instant ramen and candy to passengers. I stepped into the bathroom as soon as I boarded. It was as compact as an airplane bathroom but less engineered, more homely. There was a small window at eye level opening directly to the deck. I looked outside as I was doing my business. I locked eyes with a passing biology student. The Condor Express took off.

When I came out of the bathroom, all the tables had been filled with the vaguely-familiar faces of Mr. Kay's other Marine Biology section, Biology, and AP Environmental Science students. A long line for Café Condor had already been formed. I joined my friends on the deck as the boat hurtled out of the harbor and into the open sea. The deck's speaker system played the tour guide's excited commentary from the wheelhouse.

"This morning we're going to take a trip out in the Santa Barbara waterfront and see if we can spot some humpbacks, gray whales, blue whales, minke or maybe even some fin whales," he said. I was still unconvinced.

The boat went very far very fast. We passed a buoy crowded with sea lions. Santa Barbara's Stearns Wharf shrunk into obscurity. Oil rigs visible from the shore as just faint blips on the horizon zoomed past us. Something felt a little bit off, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Somehow, my phone still got four bars of service.

I made myself more familiar with the boat as we moved towards the notion of whales. The boat was packed with sophomores, juniors and seniors I only recognized as passing faces in the hallways at school. Some mingled in the cabin, some sat alone. I went to the upper deck and saw some even more unfamiliar faces. I marveled at the size of our school, so big that there were people I had never even passed by in all my three years of passing by. I later realized that some of these strangers hadn't come with us at all. It was a public tour. Something still felt a bit off.

The boat decelerated. The tour guide saw something. Students rushed out of the cabin onto the deck. We had entered whale watching waters, the tour guide announced over the speaker system. We were all crowded against the guardrails, my disbelief was wearing thin. Suddenly: fingers pointed, voices gasped, the tour guide boomed. I missed it!

The boat sped over in the direction that the fingers had pointed. We all watched, iPhone cameras and binoculars readied. Finally: "There!"

A few hundred feet in the distance, the small, dark dorsal fin of a minke whale crested just above the surface. I was watching whales.

We pursued the minke, trying to get in closer. It would pop up for a few exhilarating seconds every minute. Some minutes it would dis-

appear and then pop up on the other side of the boat. Soon, a second dorsal fin poked out alongside the other one. We were pursuing a pair! They wouldn't come too close to the boat, they always remained at least a hundred feet away.

"It is very rare to see minke engage a boat like this!" The tour guide screamed.

They were two of the most friendly minke the crew had ever seen apparently. We travelled with them for about forty minutes before heading back. I was so happy. I couldn't believe our luck. Even though we only ever got to see a small strip of their backs, that was enough.

Students returned to the in-door cabin and ordered more food. I stayed on the deck, chatty and giddy and satisfied. All of a sudden I saw some fingers point out to the sea in the same way they had when we first saw the minke. My eyes bolted in their direction. Immediately, a dolphin shot out of the water just a few feet away from the boat. I screamed. The boat decelerated. Students rushed out of the cabin once more.

"To the left of the boat, now, we're seeing some very playful long-beaked common dolphins," the tour guide announced, less excited than he had been for the whales.

The dolphins were more than I could've ever bargained for. A pod of about 20 surrounded our boat. We could spot even more in the distance. They were fast, energetic and magical. They clicked and whistled their signature dolphin noises for us. I was nearly in tears.

The Condor Express played with the dolphins for about 20 minutes before heading back to the port. When I stepped back onto the dock I finally realized what seemed a bit off earlier: I hadn't felt seasick at all!

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