

Whale Song

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Since the whaling moratorium was introduced in 1966 whales are now only hunted only by whale watchers, with the best off-shore sightings at St Lucia off the KwaZulu-Natal coast.

Ask any South African where the best spot is to sight a whale or two and they will, without hesitation, point you in the general direction of the eastern Cape coast – and more specifically to the quaint but popular seaside resort of Hermanus in Walker Bay. Just about everyone has heard that the cliff path, stretching languidly for 12 km from one side of town to the other, offers the best land-based whale viewing in the world.

While the whale crier of Hermanus alerts visitors to the presence of Southern Right whales on his kelp horn, a few more adventurous and discerning whale watchers head much further up South Africa's eastern coast to the warm waters that lap the golden shores of the KwaZulu-Natal coastline, for a two hour boat-based tour that has you out there, braving the pounding surf and rolling waves to see the distinctive Humpback Whale.

Think nothing less than fresh ocean smells assaulting your senses, a strong sea breeze tugging at your hair while you hold on tightly and enjoy an exhilarating ride through rough surf and rolling waves, which guarantees a salt spray and unusual sightings, from pods of curious dolphins to flying fish and pelagic birds ... where every seagoing creature from whales to sharks could make a captivating guest appearance.

While the Cape is generally considered the best whale watching location in the country, this only holds true for land-based sightings. The province of KwaZulu-Natal offers two top off-shore whale watching locations, one at Shelly Beach, and at South Africa's prime location for off-shore viewing, St Lucia.

Humpback Whales generally migrate along the eastern coast of South Africa from mid-May to the warm waters off Mozambique and West Africa, where they mate and calve before returning between October and November, with some of the last stragglers seen passing through around mid-December on their way to summer in the Antarctic.

St Lucia, with its town development restricted to below tree canopy height, is a world heritage site offering a unique integration of nature and man – and is also one of the best whale watching spots in South Africa. It boasts the enviable record as the whale watching concession with the highest annual number of recorded boat-based whale sightings in South Africa since 2000; and avid whale watchers will be quick to advise you that the Humpback whales in the warm Indian Ocean are more lively and far more likely to treat spectators to an awesome display of playful whale acrobatics.

The St Lucia tour offers an energetic ocean ride that starts with a direct surf launch; it will take you past the Jolly Rubino shipwreck and offers a view of the second highest vegetated dunes in the world, while in pursuit of the largest water mammal on the planet, the Blue Whale, or its gregarious cousin the Humpback. If your luck is in, the two-hour boat trip could have you floating within 50 m of your friendly but somewhat giant-sized quarry, while your tour guide regales you with sea lore and whale facts.

There are daily tours from St Lucia, weather permitting, from the middle of May to the middle of December, and the Whale Hotline on 083 910 1028 will keep you up to date with the latest whale sightings for land-based viewing in the vicinity.

The knobby headed Humpbacks come as close to shore as three kilometres off the KwaZulu-Natal coastline and land-based viewing is also rewarding. The KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservations Services has purpose-built whale watching towers at Cape Vidal, Amatikulu and Mpenjati nature reserves.

Humpback Whale The humpback is a distinctive baleen whale that weighs upwards of 30 tons. They migrate up to 25 000 km in a year, spending summers feasting in polar waters and migrating to tropical or sub-tropical waters for winter and breeding. Humpbacks eat mostly krill and small fish in summer and fast, living off their fat reserves, during winter.

Whale watching at St Lucia Advantage Charters is the only licensed whale watching operation in St Lucia, this allows boats within the protected 300 m radius of whales, a precaution that regulates the amount of tourist intrusion into the whales' environment. Sightings between mid-May and mid-December are virtually guaranteed with a 40% cash back if no whales are seen. Trips can be booked on 035 590 1259 or advantage@zululink.co.za. For more information visit www.advantagetours.co.za