

## Dominican Republic - Swimming with Humpback Whales

### HUMPBACK WHALE CONSERVATION VOYAGE ABOARD THE SEA DRAGON

#### Why this voyage?

- Swim and snorkel with humpback whales in the warm waters of Samana Bay
- A hands on sailing expedition assisting humpback whale conservation in Silver Banks, Dominican Republic
- Travel in the company of oceanographer Rodrigo Olsen and film maker and free-diver, Belinda Braithwaite
- Voyage aboard the 72ft Sea Dragon, a steel hulled sailing vessel one of 11 second generation yachts built for the Global Challenge Race



#### Trip Summary

We are very excited to be running a research voyage in the Dominican Republic under the auspices of oceanographer Rodrigo Olson and local whale conservationist, Oswaldo Vasquez. This is an exclusive Steppes charter, sailing aboard Sea Dragon, a 72ft sailing vessel, originally built for the Global Challenge Race. Sailing in March, the trip will focus on capturing video and stills of the Humpback Whales that converge on Silver Banks reef in Dominican Republic, in an effort to assist with the conservation research being conducted by Oswaldo Vasquez. There will also be efforts to obtain whale skin samples and bio-acoustic data and if conditions allow, there will be opportunity to snorkel alongside these magnificent mammals.

## Itinerary



### Day 1 Arrive Puerto Plata

Arrival day - meet with the rest of the crew on board the Sea Dragon and gather this evening for an orientation meeting and your first meal together as crew.

### Day 2 Set sail for Silver Banks

Following breakfast and a safety induction briefing, set sail for Silver Banks. Evening lecture from Rodrigo and Belinda on whale watching and underwater filming.

### Day 3 Arrive Silver Banks

Arrival into Silver Banks and dive in order to look for a suitable mooring, avoiding anchoring on the reef itself. Evening lecture from Oswaldo Vasquez, Whale and Dolphin conservationist with the Ministry of Environment, Dominican Republic.

### Days 4-8 Humpback Whale Research at Sea

The next 5 days will be spent exploring the seas around Silver Banks, looking for signs of humpback whales. This will be both from onboard the sea dragon and from pangas.



Under the leadership of Oswaldo and Rodrigo, the objective is to obtain behavioural data on the whales, using hydrophone equipment to gather bio-acoustic data and cameras (underwater and conventional) to both photograph and film the whales encountered for identification purposes. There will also be attempts to obtain skin samples, using a crossbow that fires a purpose-made dart, designed so that on impact with the whale it penetrates through the skin and top layer of blubber and then pops back out. The dart has a float attached to one end so that when it falls out of the whale it floats and can easily be retrieved from the sea. This is a tried and tested method of collecting critical bio-data and whales rarely react to the dart, besides the occasional flick of the tail.

At this time of year it is highly likely that the humpback whales will have calves in tow so any activity planned will be governed by the mothers and whether they will permit the group to get close.

Should the conditions allow and the humpback whales seem at ease, there will be opportunities to get into the water to swim with these magnificent mammals. Belinda Braithwaite, one of the crew leaders on board, is a free diver and filmmaker so she will be on hand to help you capture images of the humpback whales under water.

### Day 9 Return to Puerto Plata

Drop anchor back in harbour where Rodrigo, Belinda and Oswaldo will recap on the trip and the research done before a farewell meal.

### Day 10 Trip ends

Trip ends after breakfast.

## Notes



*You are joining a working expedition as a full member of the crew although the trip will not involve a significant amount of open water sailing.*

*Our expectations of you are fairly straightforward. Your team will depend on you to fully participate in everything on the boat although there will be a cook on board to keep you well fed. You will be expected to work hard to the best of your ability, to be conscientious, alert, to look after the boat and to care for each other. You will not be asked to do anything you are not comfortable doing. You will be shown how to do any task patiently, and for as long as it takes for you to learn the right way. This is not a graded, competitive sport but a team of partners pulling together!*



## The Yacht



**Sea Dragon** is a 72ft (22m), 90,000lb displacement steel hulled sailing vessel built in the UK in 2000. Formerly known as CB 37, she is one of 11 second generation yachts built for the Global Challenge Race - one of the longest, most demanding ocean voyages ever made with an upwind, west-about 32,000km circumnavigation. In her new role, the boat provides a superb platform of rugged capability, capacity and efficiency with a naturally low environmental footprint - perfect for the type of remote sailing expeditions we do. The British Maritime and Coastal Agency rate Sea Dragon to the highest standard of Category 0 All Oceans. Designed to thrive in the Southern Ocean and safely handle the world's worst sailing conditions, the boats were also specifically set up for volunteer crew with limited sailing experience. Today, those same qualities make her an exceptional platform for long-distance, remote expedition sailing. With a crew capacity of 14, and a cruising speed of 10 knots she is a genuine ocean explorer.



Sea Dragon can accommodate up to 12 passengers in a combination of sea berths and double bunks (but on this trip, passenger numbers are limited to 8). There are two heads with showers, a large well stocked galley, and a comfortable salon with seating for 14 people. There is a refrigerator and freezer to keep the crew in fresh food for the duration of the voyage. The vessel is equipped with twin iridium satellite phones, HF radio, and all the modern navigation equipment to keep you safe and connected despite being well offshore. The boat is equipped for coastal exploration with two Avon inflatable boats and a scuba compressor with diving equipment. Sea Dragon carries extensive on board medical capability and retains remote expert support through Medical Support Offshore and their team of highly experienced staff.



As a research vessel Sea Dragon has lab space, dissecting microscope, surface net trawling capability, and working deck space. With extensive sails, on-board fresh-water making, extended fuel reserves and almost 1kw of wind/solar power she can conduct long-range unsupported journeys for substantially lower cost than traditionally shared research voyages on large motor vessels and ships.

## The Leaders



### Rodrigo Olson

Born in Mexico, Rodrigo has spent his life sailing the oceans of the world in search of the planet's most elusive whale species. He has a degree in Oceanography and was captain of the famous research vessel 'Odyssey' which spent 5 years studying marine mammals around the globe. He has covered almost 300,000 nautical miles on sailing boats. A highly experienced diver, his ability to free-dive to great depths has resulted in fantastic footage of his interaction with many species.

### Belinda Braithwaite

Belinda rode her horse solo from Gibraltar to Paris and wrote a bestseller 'A Girl, a Horse and a Dog' about her adventures. Her adventurous life has given her plenty of on-camera experience, and led her into film-making. Her sharp eye for detail gives her the ability to quickly get to grips with the subject, land or sea, plant or animal. An experienced scuba diver, it is her free-diving ability and affinity with animals which allows her to film notoriously shy marine mammals.



### Oswaldo Vasquez

With almost 30 years experience of studying whales and dolphins around the world and with countless marine biology texts to his name, Oswaldo is an absolute authority on cetaceans. Heralding from Dominican Republic his knowledge of the humpback whale behaviour in and around Silver Banks is second to none, and as such he has worked closely with the Ministry of Environment to ensure whale tourism is done sustainably and to a strict code of conduct.

## Expedition Date for 2015

21 - 30 March, 2015

(dates from Samana Bay to Puerto Plata )

### Price per person

Twin Berth	£3,995
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#### Includes

- 9 night's accommodation on board Sea Dragon
- Full board basis when at sea
- Services of experienced crew
- Hands on research opportunities
- Loan of sailing oil skins

#### Excludes

- International and domestic flights
- Hotel accommodation prior to the voyage
- Meals and drinks when ashore
- Travel insurance & vaccinations
- Visas & gratuities
- Alcoholic drinks onboard

We can offer a fully inclusive package from the UK to include International and internal flights with transfers and accommodation as required, please ask for full details. The advantage of booking the whole trip through Steppes Travel is you will then benefit from full ATOL cover.

### Want to discuss this trip?

Please call Sue on 01285 880981 [sue@steppestravel.co.uk](mailto:sue@steppestravel.co.uk) for more details



Having spent the best part of 5 years on my 'gap year' working in travel seemed the natural progression. Most recently returning from South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula I love exploring the remote polar regions. I have been lucky enough to visit Spitsbergen, Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, and Wrangel & Herald Islands, where I encountered 105 bears. Occasionally I travel to warmer climes where a voyage down the Amazon and whale watching in Baja California would rank amongst the highlights. With a life-long passion for wildlife I love to get up close either by kayak or on foot and learn the local bushcraft skills.

Or John Faithfull - Travel Consultant - [john@steppestravel.co.uk](mailto:john@steppestravel.co.uk)



It was on a 1991 jaunt through Ecuador that I first fell for the allure of Latin America, bumping from A to B on chicken buses and high-Andean railways (more often than not on the roof). Over the past couple of decades I've broadened my experience throughout Central America, discovering more comfortable modes of transportation and enjoying stays at some of the region's luxury small boutique hotels and lodges while still running up volcanoes, clambering through caves strewn with Mayan relics and snorkelling whenever the opportunity arises. Neighbouring Caribbean also holds huge appeal for me and if you can detach yourself from its beaches, there's an exciting world of historic, scenic, cultural, culinary and environmental interests to be explored....not to mention a great selection of rums.