

FOR CRUISERS WHO PREFER FLIPPERS TO STILETTOS

Jocelyn Pride swims, snorkels, kayaks and hikes around Hawaii aboard the 36-berth *Safari Explorer*.



Mother Nature's orchestra is playing. Low melodic cymbal-like grunts and groans suddenly change to piercing shrieks higher than the trill of a piccolo. It's hauntingly beautiful and strangely restful. I'm being lulled to sleep by a whale.

Hawaii is the breeding waters for Northern Hemisphere humpbacks. Listening to whale song puts a different spin on "nightly entertainment". The inbuilt hydrophone hooked up to the TV/DVD sound system in each of the 18 snug but elegant cabins on board the *Safari Explorer* is all part of Un-Cruise Adventures' "unexpected encounters" promise.

Dan Blanchard, CEO of Seattle-based Un-Cruise Adventures is also on board (and on holiday). Like his vessels, Dan is built for adventure. He looks more comfortable jumping off the deck than

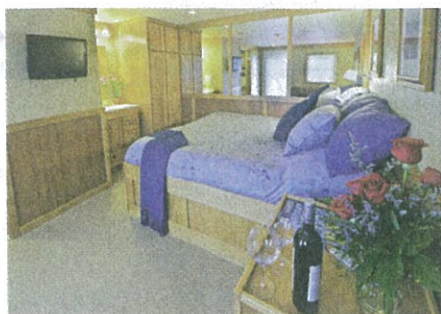
sitting behind a desk. "People are looking for a challenge," Dan says. "We love it when guests step out of their comfort zone and open themselves to nature."

So it's "aloha" as we island hop the crystal waters of Hawaii on 44 metres of nautical mastery stacked with kayaks, skiffs, paddleboards, snorkelling and hiking gear.

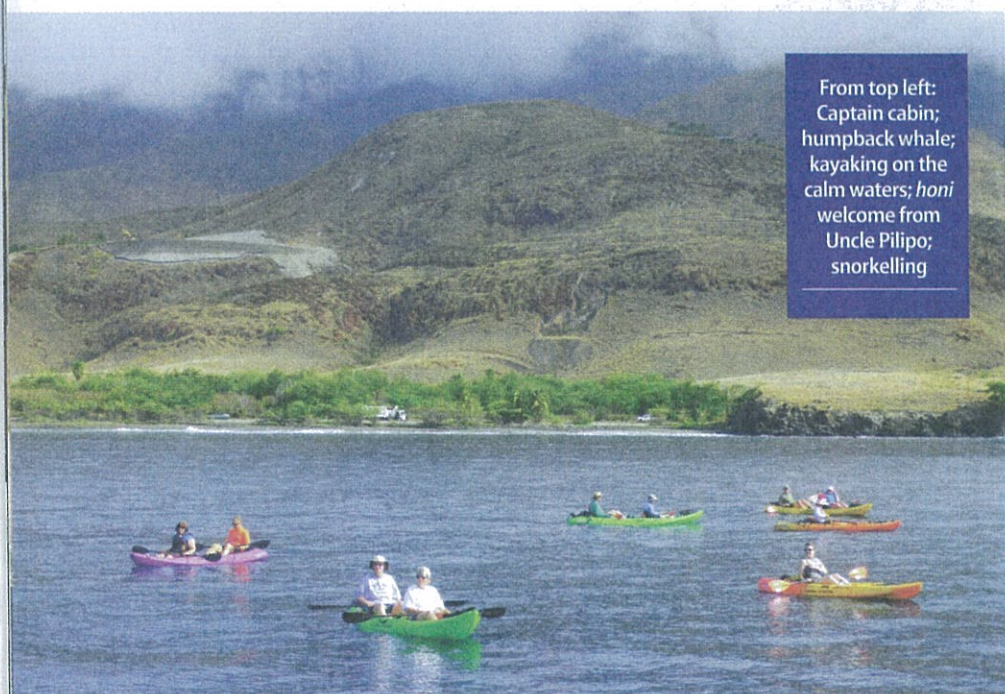
Most days are spent in and out of the water. Age and experience are irrelevant. I fess up early that I missed out on the water-baby gene. One life jacket, two noodles, a kick board, flippers, a guaranteed-not-to-fog-up-mask and snorkel (all supplied) has me snorkelling like Jacques Cousteau (well almost).

At Kealahou Bay off the Big Island, the turquoise water is so clear it's invisible. Coloured fish fill the front of my mask as they dart in and out of coral gardens. >

Passengers take to the water on paddleboards (left) or with snorkels (above)



'WITH WHALES AROUND US 24/7, IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO LOOK. IT'S LIKE BEING IN A BATHTUB FULL OF SPOUTS.'



From top left:
Captain cabin;
humpback whale;
kayaking on the
calm waters; *honi*
welcome from
Uncle Pilipo;
snorkelling



FACT FILE

CRUISE LINE: Un-Cruise Adventures

VESSEL: Safari Explorer

PASSENGER CAPACITY: 36

TOTAL CREW: 15

PASSENGER DECKS: 3

ENTERED SERVICE: 1998, refurbished 2008

TONNAGE: 3,000

FACILITIES: Above-deck cabins with windows, air-conditioning, TV/DVD, private bathroom; wellness centre; dining room; wine library; bar/lounge; adventure equipment provided.

BOOKINGS: 7-night Big Island to Moloka'i (or reverse) cruise aboard *Safari Explorer*, November 2015 to April 2016, is priced from US\$3,995 per person, twin-share. For bookings see un-cruise.com

A perfect scene, except it's bittersweet. This is the place Captain Cook was slain in 1779. A monument marks the spot.

Off West Maui we snorkel the Olowalu reef and watch an underwater turtle wash in action. Green sea turtles float by and hover as yellow tang fish hover over their shells feeding on algae. "It's their daily ritual," says Jill, a fresh-faced expedition leader. "With clean shells turtles move quicker."

Even when clean, the crinkled and knobbly shelled turtle juxtapositions with Giant Pacific manta rays. One morning, off the Kona coast, we come across a group of manta rays "flying" alongside the skiff. Sleek, paper-thin wings spanning seven metres tip to tip furl and unfurl as they flip and flop beside us. The largest curls right over showing its white belly before vanishing beneath the surface. That night we don wetsuits, cling to surfboards and float face down to watch as mantas emerge from blackness swooping plankton into their massive mouths.

With sea life, especially whales, around us 24/7, it's hard to know where to look. It's like being in a bathtub full of spouts. The air is filled with the sound of whale blows or slapping of flukes. One morning a juvenile humpback puts on a real show – eight breaches in a row before smacking the water in a spectacular finale. Another day, while we are kayaking, a mother and new-born calf cruise close to the shoreline.

In addition to wet activities, there are land-based options. On Lana'i, we hike the rugged cliff tops along the coastline and poke around artist's studios in the 1970s style village. Locally called "the private island", 97 per cent of the rolling hills and lush vegetation is owned by one person – Larry Ellison, former CEO of Oracle.

Soaking up the culture continues on the most isolated and rarely visited Moloka'i. The pure sound of the *pu* (conch shell) echoes through the beautiful Halawa Valley (known as the oldest settlement in the Hawaiian islands) inviting us to enter the lush forest home of the last living Hawaiian to be born, raised and still live in the valley, Anakala (Uncle) Pilipo Solatorio.

Pilipo greets us each with a *honi* (traditional kiss and exchange of breath) and shares his wisdom through stories and music. We learn the art of making *poi* (traditional staple made from taro) and wander through the rainforest.

After every activity, "welcome home" drinks and snacks are set up in the bar/

lounge area or on the back deck of the *Safari Explorer*. The cocktail menu is extensive and a daily special is served with hors d'oeuvres for happy hour.

The dress code in the open seating dining room is "whatever's comfy" and the food is top notch. For each meal, there's one sitting and three menu options: meat, fish and vegetarian (food allergies catered for). We lunch on local delicacies such as seared Ahi with mango salsa and salad greens and chat over dinners of roast beef tenderloin with pinot noir reduction and cherry jus.

Stewards buzz around the room and by the second day know personal nuances such as over-easy or sunny-side up, medium or rare and red or white (all drinks are included).

The best thing about an activity based cruise is there's no such thing as overeating (well in theory). And if the hiking and water sports aren't enough exercise, there

are yoga sessions each morning and fitness equipment on the top deck.

Cabins vary in size and configuration and are fully serviced. While my Master cabin initially looked small, the clever design makes it functional and cosy. There's a queen bed (quality linen), vanity (in main room), desk, chair and private shower/toilet (toiletries and hair dryer provided). Many cabins have king beds and Jacuzzi tubs and the Commodore suites have a separate sitting area.

With each cabin opening directly onto the deck, there's always a sense of place and space. There's also an open-bridge policy – a good place to hang out with the captain and whale watch.

The *Safari Explorer* is a great introduction to expedition-style cruising; all the toys without skimping on creature comforts. Most of my 34 ship mates are seasoned Un-Cruisers and already planning their next adventure. 🐋



the VERDICT

Highs: The intimate interaction with wildlife with a flexible itinerary guided by nature. Expedition leaders who really know their stuff and adapt activities to cater for all fitness/experience levels. Inclusive cost (full bar, meals, all equipment and activities).

Lows: Generator noise can sometimes be heard at night. Ear plugs recommended for light sleepers. There's no lift.

Best suited to: Adventurous types who prefer sunscreen to make-up, flippers to stilettos and like their Bloody Marys on the spicy side. Perfect for multi-generational groups.

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