

# 6 Things You Should Know When Whale Watching

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There's a right way to go whale watching and there's a wrong way to go whale watching. If your tour boat bumps into a whale in the open ocean and the passengers proceed to touch it like they're at a petting zoo (like one recently did on the island of Maui in Hawaii), chances are, you're doing it wrong.

With the East Coast's whale watching season ramping up and millions of people hoping to forge a special moment with those cetacean wonders globally, we wanted to make sure we're admiring our ocean's giants in a safe and healthy way -- for both humans *and* the animals. Whether you're jumping on a guided tour boat or kayaking the seas on a solo marine mission, here are six things you should know about watching whales in any capacity.

## 1. Pay really close attention to behavior.

Be cautious when venturing into waters where whales are present and always look around before entering and exiting the area. If there is a pod hanging around, watch for changes in their behavior that could indicate signs of distress. If you notice a rapid change in their swimming pattern, lots of surface displays (tail slapping) or females shielding their calves with their bodies, leave the area immediately.

## 2. Always keep your distance.

It's true, some whales will approach vessels because they're curious about who's in their home, but it's best to keep your distance when you can. A good guideline for all whales is to keep at least 100 yards away -- which is the law for humpback whales in Hawaii. For North Atlantic right whales, you'll need to give an even broader berth -- federal regulations require a 500-yard buffer. If you find yourself getting too close to a whale, stop immediately and maneuver your craft out of the area. If you're in a power boat, keep the engine running and stay in neutral gear until the whale passes.

### **3. Take it slow.**

It can be fun and freeing to cruise the open sea at high speeds, but it's important to be aware of the creatures below that you could potentially be harming. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) **recommends boaters reduce their speed** to less than 10 knots when traveling in an area with whales. In the last 10 years, ship strikes have increasingly become the **cause of whale deaths and strandings**. In the event you hit a whale, report it to one of **NOAA's regional stranding coordinators** in your area.

### **4. Approach from the side.**

The best way to approach whales **is to parallel them** while keeping your distance. You want to **keep out of their path** and you never want to cut them off. Also, if you're close to the shore, make sure you're not blocking the whales from getting into deeper waters.

### **5. Limit your time watching them.**

While it may be tempting to watch these beautiful creatures for hours, it can be really distracting to the whales. The presence and sound of your vessel can actually **deter them from looking for food**, socializing and even breeding. In fact, noise pollution may even cause some whales to **change their migration routes**. An easy rule of thumb is to keep your viewing to **a maximum of 30 minutes**.

### **6. Never try to swim with, touch or feed them.**

Not only can **swimming be bad** for the whales -- you never want them to modify their natural behavior because of your presence -- you risk getting hurt yourself. Wild animals can be unpredictable, and let's face it, you're no match for a multi-ton mammal. Touching them can **transmit harmful diseases**, while feeding them could make them sick or **dependent on humans** for food. Plus, the more comfortable they are with boats, the whales are at a higher risk of getting hit by one.

Remember, you're a guest in *their* home. Think about it if the tables were turned: How would you feel if a group of strangers hovered around you while you ate lunch or hung out with your friends?