

A UNIQUE ENCOUNTER WITH SPERM WHALES
BIRTH OF A GIANT



An adult Sperm whale
Physeter catodon
freely swimming
in its element - the open sea.

Diving and underwater photography legend Kurt Amsler experiences the encounter of a lifetime when he meets a Sperm whale giving birth to its baby



TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY KURT AMSLER

American whalers came to the Azores, off the coast of Portugal, in the early 19th century. Although they didn't initially operate in these waters, the islands were used for provisioning and supplementing crews with energetic young men from the archipelago. In time, Azoreans took up whaling themselves, establishing their own whaling stations along the coast.

Whaling in the Azores significantly declined in the 1970s and officially ceased with the International Whaling Commission (IWC) ban in 1986. In its stead, a lucrative new business has arisen: now visitors hunt whales with photo and video cameras rather than harpoons. This is what brought me to the Azores.

For five days we cruised the islands of Faial and Pico. Nine hours a day in a small boat gets long and tiresome, but it's necessary for close encounters with the giant sperm whales of the Atlantic.

A beautiful image of the mother Sperm whale introducing her newborn child to the other whales and to the photographer.



The newborn baby can not yet swim properly and is kept at the surface by the mother and the midwives.



■ A truly unique photographic sequence showing the mother giving birth - surrounded by midwives - and the first breath of the baby, again with the help of the midwives.





■ The enormous mother arrives to carefully check out the photographer.

Photographer Kurt Amsler dives with a Sperm whale in the Azores (photo by Fred Buyle). Right, the mother introduces her child to the other whales and to the snorkelling photographer.



Both technically and physically, sperm whale photography poses some of the greatest challenges to the underwater photographer. In addition to being extremely shy, sperm whales use echolocation to detect sound and movement for up to several miles. To avoid scaring them away with engine noise and scuba bubbles, boats must remain far from the whales, and freediving is the only practical way to approach them.

The day started promisingly with three sightings and an underwater encounter to within about 65 feet. From a small boat like the one we used, it is not possible to see whales from the surface. Therefore, we worked with *vigias da baleia* — people who watch for whales

from hillside observation towers, remnants from when commercial whaling was still practiced in the Azores.

Centuries ago Azoreans constructed lookouts high above sea level on several of the islands. From these vantage points they used binoculars to spot their quarry and communicated the locations to the whalers with smoke signals, rockets and eventually radios. These observers were the most important men in the Azorean whaling trade, as only they could direct whalers to their targets. The local whalers were generally fishermen, craftsmen or farmers who dropped what they were doing when a whale was spotted. The cry "*Baleia! Baleia!*" would send them

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The gigantic Sperm whale mother approaches on the surface, checking out the photographer.

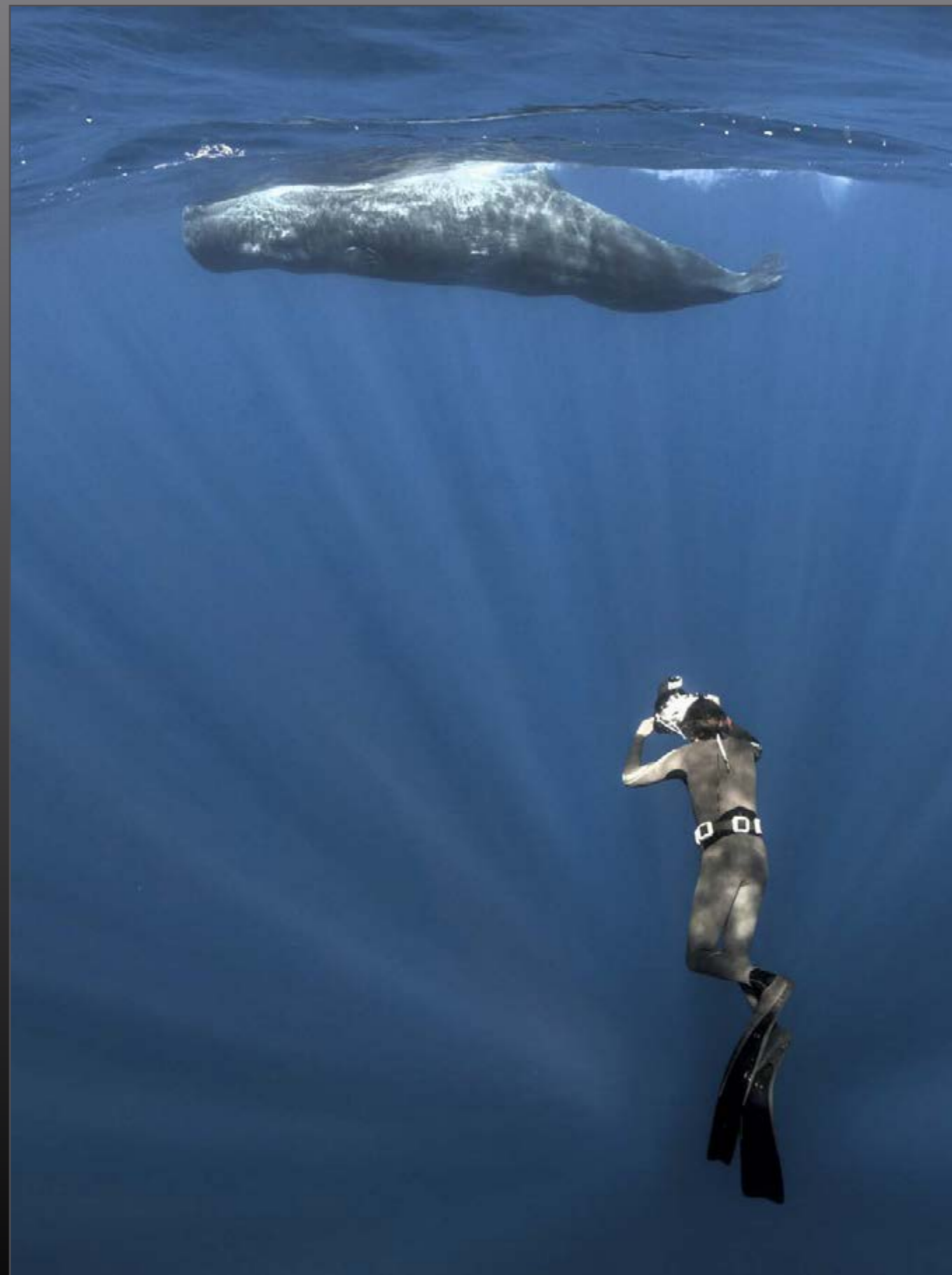


running to the harbor, where their boats — at first slender rowing boats called canoas, evolving to motor boats by the second half of the 20th century — were always ready to set out.

Our boat's radio suddenly crackled, and from the driver's reaction I could tell it was a good message. A group of about six animals had been spotted about one nautical mile to the south. Courtesy of twin 150-horsepower motors, we reached the spot quickly and saw our quarry. The pod was swimming in circles very slowly — a decidedly strange behavior. We cut the motors to avoid scaring them away, and we kept to a safe distance of about 100 yards. With a last look at the pod's position, I gently slid into the water.

For the first 60 yards I swam as fast as possible, scanning the blue to try to glimpse the animals, but there was nothing but a big murky cloud. I soon realized that the cloud suspended in the water was actually blood, which appeared greenish because of the loss of red light underwater. This explained the pod's strange behavior. I thought they must be watching over a wounded member.

Female sperm whales are famously social. They form networks with their young and live in groups of 15 to 20 animals. Sexually mature males leave the pod and form associations with older males but travel alone. I assumed (correctly, as it turned out later) that this was a pod of females.



Photographer Kurt Amsler dives with a Sperm whale (photo by Fred Buyle). Left, after 20 minutes the baby can swim independently and is able to dive by itself.



Once the process of birth had begun more Sperm whales arrived to share the event.

As the whales' communication sounds intensified, I could make out the group about 20 yards away, huddled just below the surface. But with the sun directly in front of me it was difficult to see exactly what was going on.

I descended to 50 feet to carefully pass beneath them. My descent revealed that my initial assessment was wrong: there was no wounded animal; it was a mother giving birth. The placenta and bits of skin were floating in the water around the calf, which had left the womb only seconds earlier.

Even at birth, sperm whales break all records for toothed whales: A baby can weigh more than a ton. Bulls can reach a length of 60 feet and weigh more than 40 tons; they are the biggest toothed predator and have the largest brain of any animal. Despite these impressive statistics, newborn sperm whales remain relatively helpless. Unable to swim in the first minutes of life, an infant sperm whale relies on a group of females to help it enter the world.

Photographer Kurt Amsler prepares to dive. Top right, a tentacle of a giant squid, the usual prey of Sperm whales. Below, more Sperm whales join the event.



Five midwives floated the still-immobile newborn to the surface to take its first breath, while the mother, still weak from birthing, watched from below. With every passing minute the calf became increasingly mobile until it could swim independently for short distances. I heard its communication, which had a higher pitch than the others — like the voice of a child.

To avoid disturbing the animals I moved carefully and maintained a distance of about 30 feet. Up to this point the whales had not noticed my presence, but suddenly the mother wanted to identify the stranger in their midst.

Quietly but directly, the 30-foot-long giant turned in my direction and swam right up to me. Her massive head got bigger and bigger as the displaced water pushed me away. Water churned around me as the noise of her exhalations thundered in my

ears. I saw her eye looking at me, and I discerned no aggression at all.

Sperm whales are stocky, and their characteristic bulbous heads can account for up to a third of their total length. Researchers believe that the whales' heads serve as "acoustic lenses," focusing sound waves sent out during echolocation. Emitting high-frequency clicking sounds, the animals scan the surrounding environment and are able to image a large area.

Whales communicate perpetually and are audible to others over great distances. As the birth was communicated, more and more animals arrived for the event. As the giants congregated, I realized that I was fully accepted.

The mother swam to the other groups of whales to present her child. Incredibly, she even did the same for me, stopping and allowing the baby to swim toward me. After





■ The child checks out the photographer. Right, one of the original whale watch outposts. Below, the expedition team: Andreas Gruber, Kurt Amsler and Bea Metzger.



about 20 minutes, the baby was already stronger and faster — and eager to venture away on its own, which the mother did not like at all. Using her immense, toothy mouth, she brought her little runaway back to the surface.

As the event came to its conclusion, the whales disappeared into the blue of the Atlantic, while the mother descended with her child into the depths.

Sperm whales swim in all oceans. They're most commonly found in the tropics and subtropics, but they also explore colder seas. In 2004 a sperm whale was even spotted in the Baltic Sea for the first time.

The average dive time for a sperm whale is 45 minutes, but some may extend up to 120 minutes. How it's possible for sperm whales to hold their breath for such extended periods has not yet been fully explained, but it is

known that they are able to restrict and slow their metabolism to a minimum while diving, during which time blood is directed only toward essential organs such as the heart, brain and spinal cord.

Unfortunately, these hearty and majestic animals are still in danger. Commercial whaling continues by some countries — notably Japan, Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands — that found loopholes or declared an objection to the IWC's ban, resulting in the death of thousands of whales each year.

In my 45 years of underwater photography, I have documented many spectacular and unique situations, but this experience provided the single most powerful encounter of my life. I'm sure my images will spread awareness and encourage people to support the protection of these intelligent and endangered marine mammals.

THE SPERM WHALE

Physeter macrocephalus or
Physeter catodon

Even at birth the sperm whale breaks all records for toothed whales; a baby whale can weigh over a ton. But it is their diving capabilities that really stand out. One specimen which was equipped with sensors and transmitters dove to a depth of 2,270 meters. The bulls can reach a length of 18 meters and a weight of 40 tons. As such they are the biggest predators on the planet. The body is stocky and the characteristic bulbous head can account for a third of the total length. The dorsal fin is small and it has short and stubby pectoral fins. The tail fluke is shaped like two equilateral triangles and is slightly rounded at the top and deeply notched in the middle. The one blowhole is located at the upper tip of the head. The huge head of a sperm whale is to a large part filled with an oily substance, also called spermaceti. It is believed that the head also serves as an "acoustic lens" focusing sound waves sent out during echo location. Emitting high-frequency clicking sounds the animals scan the surrounding environment and are able to image a large area. The sperm whale is found in all oceans. It is most common in the tropics and subtropics, but is also found in colder seas. In 2004, a sperm whale was even spotted in the Baltic Sea for the first time. On average, the males dive deeper than females. The duration of a dive can be from 20 to 120 minutes. How it's possible for sperm whales to hold their breath for such extended periods of time has not yet been fully explained. It is known that they are able to restrict and slow down their metabolism to a minimum while diving, during which time, blood is directed only towards essential organs such as the heart, brain and spinal cord. In addition, sperm whales have 50 percent more hemoglobin in their blood than humans do, enabling them to store large supplies of oxygen. Sperm whales' preferred prey is squid, and parts of the fabled giant squid has regularly been found in their stomachs. Females form social networks with their young and live in groups of about 15 to 20 animals. Sexually mature males then leave and later form associations or groups with older males but travel alone.



Above, an image of the preserved whale factory at Horta Island of Fial. Right, two archive photographs of whale hunting at the Azores as it took place until 1984.

Bookshelf

Moby Dick by Herman Melville

This novel, which is now a literary classic, was, incredibly, a commercial failure when it was first published in London and New York in 1851. And it was only a long time after the author's death in 1891, when the book was well out of print, that its reputation rose during the 20th century. One of the most distinctive features of the book is the variety of genres that appear. Melville uses a wide range of styles and literary devices to blend the complexity of the fascinating whale, the ethical ambivalence of hunting these magnificent creatures, and the incredibly diverse appreciation of whales and whaling across the world's cultures. *Moby Dick* is based on Melville's actual experience on a whaling vessel. He described the whale in either florid mythical terms or in the language of the early marine biologists; some passages are written using the old jargon of the New England Quakers, others like the preaching tales of old Bible translations. In any case, he moved with ease from the language of a sailor to the dry prose of expedition reports, and described exotic cultures in the style of the somewhat racially-biased adventure literature of the day in order to fit right into the prevailing tone of the establishment. Whoever is interested in whales (and great literature) must read *Moby Dick*. This extraordinary novel has been brought to the big screen at least seven times in several faithful (or not so faithful) versions, notably in *Moby Dick*, directed in 1956 by John Huston from a screenplay by Ray Bradbury and starring Gregory Peck as the obsessed captain Ahab.



A contemporary photographic portrait of author Herman Melville (inset) and two artistic interpretations of its legendary creation Moby Dick, the White Whale.

