About the Humpback Whales of Rurutu

Rurutu is most famous for the Humpback whales that come to the shallow waters between July and October. On their annual migration the Humpbacks come north from the Antarctic to Rurutu, where the waters are calmer and warmer. Here they can give birth and prepare their baby for the long journey south, back to Antarctica. The Humpbacks usually stay for about 4-6 weeks after calving. The mothers do not eat for the duration of their stay in Rurutu. They can be seen nursing their young and resting during the day conserving energy. The mothers "sleep" on the sand and coral covered seafloor, often in only 80 or 100ft of water. They sleep for perhaps 30 minutes, their eyes open, so they are aware of their surroundings and the whereabouts of their baby. The baby holds his breath for perhaps 5-8 minutes, and must then return to the surface to breath. While at the bottom with their mother they nestle under her body for protection and feeding. Being young, intelligent and inquisitive, they come up to snorkelers, looking at you with their warm brown eyes. Their interest and trust, fills your heart with love and gratitude. Sometimes you will see a mother asleep, floating above the coral seabed, just off shore and her baby hiding under her chin. These babies are 10-12 feet long at birth and weigh 2-3 tons. No one has ever filmed or witnessed a Humpback birth, but immediately after birth the babies are a pale grey color for about an hour before their skin turns a darker charcoal color like their Mom’s.

You will also see whales breaching - showing off to each other and prospective females. They launch themselves out of the water, turning and crashing back into the water with a mighty splash, the sound cracking loudly through the air. Often one active adult will cause other whales to display the same behavior. You will enjoy their surface activities of pectoral fin slapping, tail slapping, head lunges, peduncle slashes and spy hopping.

Adult Humpbacks are usually 45- 60ft in length and can weigh 50 tons and more. The largest Humpback ever recorded was a female found dead near a beach on the Atlantic coast. She measured 88 feet. The females are the larger of the species. After an 11-12 month gestation period, the babies are born and are suckled for about 5 months, gaining 6 pounds an hour. They are weaned before migrating south to the Antarctic where they will feast on krill and small fish.

Dolphin Connection, LLC ~ P O Box 102 ~ Captain Cook, Hawaii 96704 ~ 808-323-8000 ~ www.joanocean.com
Located at 22º26'S and 151º21'W, Rurutu is 572 kilometers southwest of the island of Tahiti, and is the northernmost of the Austral Islands. This beautiful island has an area of 32.3 square kilometers. The longest part of the island is 10 kilometers and the widest part is 3 kilometers. Its highest point is Mount Manureva (398 meters).

Rurutu's surfaces are what are left of a volcano 9-12 million years old that was last active two million years ago. That activity made Rurutu a high Limestone Island with steep cliffs rising dramatically from the sea. The coral reef that surrounded the islands ages ago has become raised bluffs several meters high. Its geological structure is unique in Polynesia as this island does not feature a lagoon, but it is surrounded by steep cliffs which include several chalky caves with stalactites and stalagmites. Those caves constitute one of the major points of interest and were still used until recently by the Royal family of Rurutu. You will find some vertical stones pointing to the sky – typical of Australs maraes.

Far removed from the distractions of civilization, these hard working fishermen and farmers live quiet, contented lives in their villages where houses and churches are often built of coral limestone. Coffee, arrowroot, tobacco, and copra are produced on the islands.

A special cultural event on Rurutu occurs twice a year when the young men and women of each village prove themselves in a show of strength. Following a custom called "amoraa ofai", unique to Rurutu, they attempt to lift huge volcanic stones to their shoulders. The village champions hoist one sacred stone that weighs 330 lbs. (150 kg.). This accomplishment is followed by exuberant feasting and dancing.

**Rurutu Island’s Humpback Whales**

Each year humpback whales can be seen hugging Rurutu’s dramatic coastline, making the long journey from the nutrient-rich waters of Antarctica, where they feed for several months during the Antarctic Summer. Swimming north to the warm and relatively sheltered waters of South Pacific islands, they rest, mate, give birth and rear their young. This is a time of great energy, playfulness and some spectacular displays of acrobatics that often includes full body breaches (jumping out of the water and splashing back down).

When the conditions are right, we shall enter the water to view the whales in their own environment. Entering the water in the presence of whales, tends to evoke a feeling of deep respect and awe in people. The mood is relaxed and appreciative as we watch the mother whales with their babies, as well as listening and feeling the sound vibrations when we come upon a Singing whale. So few tourists ever visit this magical island that human contact with the whales is absolutely minimal. They are genuinely interested in us because we are the ones who want to meet them and swim among them.