



## Whale Watching Made Easy!

**Hermanus – Heart Of The South African Whale Coast.** Where over 100 **Southern Right Whales** come to calve, mate and frolic each year. The best land-based whale watching spot in the world.

*An [international version](#) of this guide is also available.*

**Waiting for whales can be like waiting for a bus – you know they're coming, you just don't know when.**

***Amy Poffenbarger, writing in the Post Intelligencer***

### ***Why a guide on how to watch whales? What's complicated about it?***

Nothing at all, except that it's such a special experience you don't want a lack of preparedness to spoil the fun in any way. For example, concentrating more on staying warm on a boat than looking out for a telltale spout. Or, berating yourself because you forgot to charge your video camera batteries.

So that's what this guide hopes to provide – some basic tips to help you extract the most enjoyment from your whale watching trip – whether it's from land or from sea. Or from the air, for that matter.

Perhaps this is the best place to state the ultimate whale watching tip: PATIENCE! These are not trained creatures who perform on command or at a given point in time. I've lost track of the number of times I've seen people go to a whale watching spot, have a quick look around and see nothing, then turn and leave. A few minutes later there can be an entire pod delighting watchers. Likewise, I often get queries from my [website](#) such as: "Are the whales in?" or "What time do they feed the whales?" Sorry folks – it doesn't work that way.

## **What the whales are doing**

It helps to know what whales are "up to" out there:

**Breaching**: a most spectacular sight. A whale leaps out the water in an arching back flip and falls on its side or back with a resounding crash. It is thought this is a way of communication, exercise or possibly to scratch the parasites off. They usually breach a number of times in succession.

**Lobtailing**: slapping their tails or flukes on the surface of the water. When they're not too far offshore you can hear the sound. Sometimes they carry on for ages - a form of communication, perhaps?

**Blowing**: When a whale expels air from its lungs, it produces an echoing sound which can be heard from quite a distance. If one does it alongside your boat, you might get drenched in "whale snot"!

**Spyhopping**: when a whale raises its head and part of its body vertically from the water, giving it a view of what's happening above the surface. Watching the watchers, perhaps?

**Grunting**: a loud "bellow" which can be heard from very far. If your place of residence is not too far from the sea, or on high ground, the sound can even wake you at night!

**Sailing**: when a whale raises its tail from the water as though it will catch the wind and help it sail. That's all you see - just the tails. It has been observed that they turn their tails to make the most advantage of the wind.

**Other**: you'll also spot whales lying adjacent to kelp beds and even letting pieces of floating kelp drift over their heads and backs. It's thought that this helps to release dead skin and whale lice.

## Watching Whales from Shore

Hermanus is simply the easiest place from which to spot and watch whales from land. One can see them while at a restaurant or even from the comfort of your hotel or guest house room! The centre of town provides the focal point for whale watching, so one doesn't even have to walk far. On the other hand, strolling along sections of the 12km long stretch of cliff paths is highly recommended.

Hermanus also has the world's only Whale Crier. He alerts whale watchers to the presence of whales by blowing on his kelp horn.

Watching whales from the shore is extremely relaxing – at least until one breaches.

*Q. When do whales breach?*

*A. When you turn your back.*



How well you are able to plan for and how much time you can spend on a whale watching outing on shore depends on whether you are spending a day or two in Hermanus, or merely passing through on your way to another destination. Or, perhaps you are part of an organized day tour. Whatever option you're taking, some of these pointers will help:

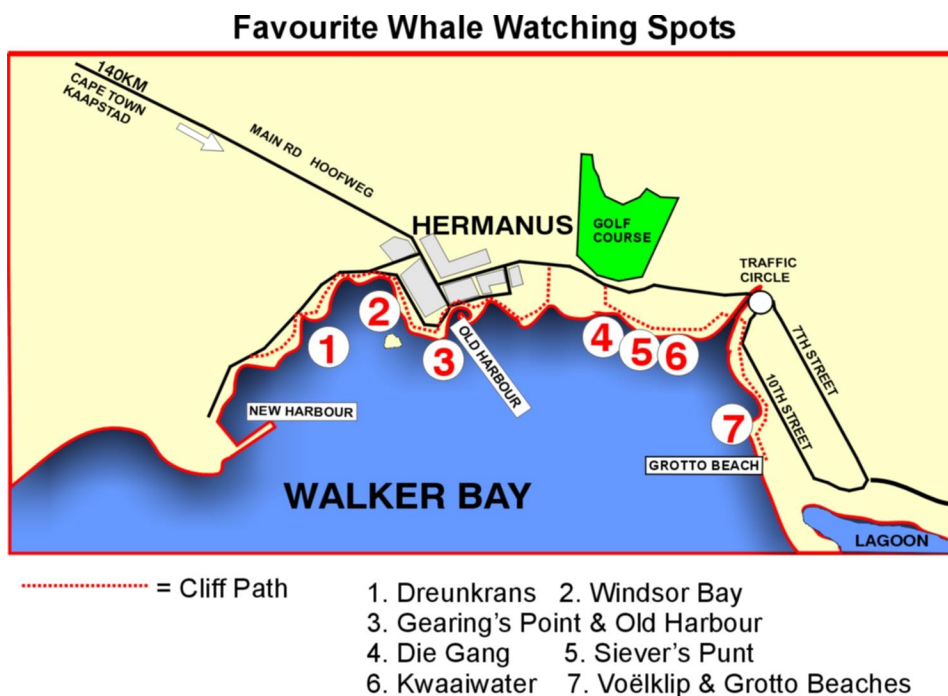
- Wear comfortable walking shoes with good support, as you might be clambering over rocks and uneven ground.
- Pick a high spot that provides a view down onto the sea. It's more difficult spotting whales from a level beach or shoreline. Most of the whale watching spots in Hermanus are elevated – even at the beaches.
- Keep the sun at your back, so an early morning viewing sojourn is preferable, or go around the middle of the day. Whales are often active in the late afternoon and early evening, but the angle of the sun and the glare coming off the sea can hamper viewing efforts if looking westwards
- Keep a lookout for spouts, so pick a time when there are fewer white caps on the sea. Move your gaze between the shoreline and the horizon.
- Because patience is a definite whale watching requirement, pack a picnic basket and a good book if you're planning to make a day of it – one that's not *too* engrossing or you'll forget to stare at the sea from time to time!

### Take along:

- Sunscreen or sunblock – even if the weather is on the chilly side.
- Water
- A hat. A wide brimmed hat provides the best overall protection.
- Sunglasses.
- Binoculars. A telescope also works well when watching from the shore, but make sure you select one that is meant for viewing on land – one designed for astronomical purposes just won't work. Experts suggest a telescope with a 20x magnification or one with a zoom lens.

### Other preparations you should consider:

- Make sure your camera batteries are fully charged. Take along a spare pack in case of heavy action.
- Make sure there's enough capacity on your memory stick.



## Watching Whales From A Boat

***This is a truly amazing experience.*** There are two licensed whale boat operators in Hermanus, both of them departing from the New Harbour (GPS: 34°26'02"S-19°13'08"E). Kayak trips operate from the Old Harbour in the centre of town.

Going on a boat takes one right into the whales' own domain, and it's possible to get really "up close and personal". But, one should consider some practical aspects such as:

- Budget. It can work out pretty expensive for a group.
- Are all those in your group physically capable of boarding a vessel? The young and the aged?
- Are you known to be prone to seasickness? This should not put you off, but must be catered for.
- Do you have enough time? Apart from the trip itself, allow enough time to get to the tour operator especially if you are coming from Cape Town or some other town.
- Are there very young children in the group? They often do not enjoy being confined on a boat for a long time.

The boats venture out a few times a day, especially during peak season. The skippers and guides are all highly experienced and will not venture out if the weather is unfavourable. Some folk advise that it's better to go on the second trip of the day, as the boat crew will have established where the whales are and will get their passengers there faster.

### **How does one arrange a boat trip?**

There are a few options:

- If you're staying in Hermanus for more than a day, you can book a trip at an operator's office or get your accommodation establishment to arrange it for you – most of them provide this service. Just bear in mind that space on the boats can be in huge demand during peak whale watching season.
- If you're staying in Cape Town and coming to Hermanus especially for a whale watching trip, these can be organized through your hotel – just establish how much

time is needed for the outing so that it does not clash with the rest of your itinerary. You might get here by means of a rented car or as part of an organised tour group. Most hotels have links to tour operators who offer whale watching tours.

The licensed boat based whale watching operators in Hermanus are:

### **Hermanus Whales Cruises**

Tel: 028 313 2722 International: 0027 28 313 2722

Cell: 082 369 8931 International: 0027 82 369 8931

[hermanuswhales@lantic.net](mailto:hermanuswhales@lantic.net)

[www.hermanus-whale-cruises.co.za](http://www.hermanus-whale-cruises.co.za)

### **Southern Right Charters**

Tel: 082 353 0550 International: 0027 83 353 0550

[seascapes@hermanus.co.za](mailto:seascapes@hermanus.co.za)

[www.southernrightcharters.co.za](http://www.southernrightcharters.co.za)

### **Preparing for the trip**

The biggest concern for many whale watchers is the prospect of becoming seasick. It's best to check with your doctor for recommended motion sickness medications. Most of them are freely available at pharmacies, but you could opt for a prescription. Medication must be taken some hours prior to departure – once you're at sea it's too late.

The best (and most natural) way to counter possible seasickness is a good breakfast – preferably one with carbohydrates like cereal and bagels. Avoid fatty foods. While out on the trip it also helps to munch on light snacks like crackers.

### **What to take along**

- Sunblock. Water reflects and magnifies the sun rays and sunburn is a real danger, even in cloudy conditions. Remember that you'll be exposed for a few hours.
- You'll definitely need sunglasses to protect your eyes from glare on the water which might cause headaches.
- A hat or visor to shade your eyes.
- Binoculars. Although useful, looking through binoculars on a moving boat is not that easy. The most suitable are 7x or 8x magnification – there is too much movement for anything stronger.
- Shoes with rubber soles. Apart from the movement of the vessel, the decks can get wet and slippery.

- Check with the operators whether they provide or sell snacks and liquid refreshments on board. Bearing in mind the length of the trip and the time of day you venture out, you might need them. Avoid dehydration by drinking water, sports drinks or tea – ginger ale is also highly recommended. Avoid those which have a high sugar content.
- Warm clothes, because it is always colder on the sea than on land. Even in summer it's wise to take along a warm jacket.
- Camera or Camcorder with plenty of film and spare batteries.

### General tips for the trip

Being on the upper deck provides a better viewpoint from a spotting perspective, but the lower deck is great if a whale comes close to the boat.

- Whales are curious and unpredictable, so you never know where exactly they will appear. Remember that your skipper must obey licensing regulations and cannot always position his boat exactly where you'd like it to be. If a whale ventures close, the engines must be put in neutral and the vessel must not be moved till the whale has gone a prescribed distance away.



- If you see a whale spout, you can expect it to spout again in the direction it's moving.
- Don't overdo the camera and binocular thing. You need to experience all the sights, smells and sounds around you ... it's the best way to create memories.

### Children and whale watching

- Control of children is essential for their own safety as well as being a necessary consideration for other passengers:
  - Do not let them run around on the boat
  - Don't let them stand on benches – boats are constantly moving and it is easy to lose one's balance. Similarly, avoid placing them on your shoulders or holding them in your arms.
  - Loud noises such as screaming are a no-no.

It can be a good idea for a family to build up excitement and anticipation in advance by watching [DVDs](#), reading [books](#), or buying whale [posters](#) or [whale clothing and gifts](#). It can also help to watch [videos](#) taken by other whale watchers.

## Seasickness

If you haven't taken any medication and find yourself becoming queasy, there are ways you can counter it if you react quickly enough:

- Breathe deeply of the fresh air.
- Move to the lower deck where the effect of motion is less.
- Focus on the horizon.
- Nibble something and have some ginger ale.
- Take deep breaths.
- Keep your mind occupied by staying on the lookout for whales. Start a conversation with someone in your group – or even a stranger.

## Recommended Internet Tour Operators

[Real Adventures](#) is a very comprehensive travel resource which helps travellers find whale watching trips that suit them – at a variety of destinations around the world.

Apart from a wide variety of tours to all kinds of destinations, [Viator](#) focus on hand-selected local travel providers offering environmentally-friendly activities.

Although they do not offer tours to Hermanus, [Responsible Travel](#) is worth investigation for other eco tours as they represent only those tour operators with an impeccable track record of environmental responsibility. Their packages are more tours than trips – they start from about 3 days up to 18 days for an Antarctic whale watching tour. This does not mean that all the time is spent watching whales from vessels ... the tours are generally an entire eco experience encompassing a variety of animals and terrain, with whale watching being merely one of the activities. Well worth researching! They also offer some fabulous " [gap year](#) " volunteer activities, including [marine conservation](#) opportunities in a number of countries – including South Africa.

**Information prepared by Neville Sherriff**

I live in Hermanus, South Africa, one of the world's prime whale watching regions. Hermanus itself is considered by experts to be the best land based whale watching spot in the world. Each year from July to November more than 100 Southern Right Whales reside in the bay where they give birth to their calves and mate. It is the most marvellous experience for locals and visitors alike.

The whales approach mere metres from the shore and can truly be watched from the comfort of one's bedroom or while enjoying a restaurant meal. The town also has the world's only Whale Crier who alerts everyone to the presence of whales by blowing on his kelp horn.

Apart from the excellent shore based whale watching, there are also two licenced boat trip operators. Just across the bay, an area world famous for its Great White Shark cage diving and viewing, there are also boat based whale watching trips.

I have a website on [Hermanus](#) and its whales (and sharks) and another providing information on where whales can be watched around the [world](#).

[info@hermanuswhales.com](mailto:info@hermanuswhales.com)

[info@whale-coast.com](mailto:info@whale-coast.com)