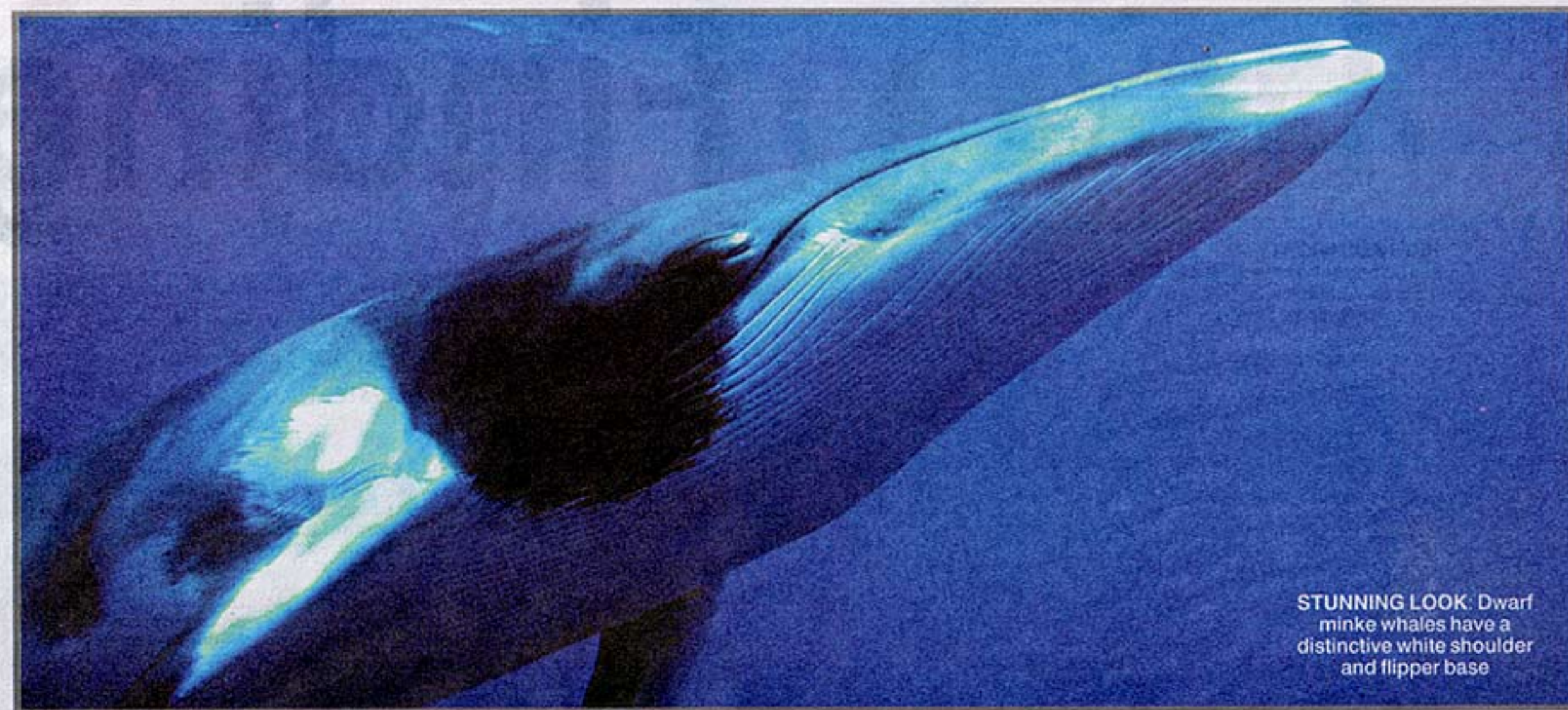




**CURIOUS:** A minke approaches a snorkeler for a closer look



**STUNNING LOOK:** Dwarf minke whales have a distinctive white shoulder and flipper base

# In at the deep end with giants

Queensland

**S**ETTING off in the face of a strong wind warning was not what I had envisaged back when the sun was shining, seas were calm and I had persuaded four friends to join me in this week-long adventure on the Undersea Explorer. I was therefore a trifle nervous as we left Port Douglas, in far north Queensland, on that Saturday night in June. The following morning as I hauled myself along the rope behind the boat, waves slapping me in the face, I found my friend Gary already in position.

He popped his head out of the water, beaming from ear to ear. "I've just lost my breakfast," he chortled, "but it's fantastic. There are nine of them at the moment." I instantly forgot about the weather when I stuck my head in the water. A large, grey shape came towards me, smooth and pointed like a slow-moving torpedo.

It dipped and glided below, almost close enough to touch. As I

**Bridget Martin braves harsh conditions on the Great Barrier Reef to go swimming with a very curious bunch of cetaceans.**

looked down, I realised I too was being watched. An enormous, unblinking eye was staring up at me, checking out this latest addition in the whales' realm. I noticed two more shapes heading towards us. They glided beneath us and momentarily disappeared, only to be replaced by others which were circling.

Sometimes nine or 10 could be seen — dwarf minke whales are intensely inquisitive and they will outlast the most entranced snorkelers. Whale-watching is strictly controlled throughout the world and swimming with whales is banned in many places.

Dwarf minke whales, however, seem to love the attention. They take initiative, approaching boats and divers in the northern part of the Great Barrier Reef. A special code of practice has



**TOP UP:** Minkes need to surface periodically for air

been drawn up which aims to satisfy the curiosity of both whales and people.

The key seems to be to allow the whales to approach on their own terms.

If snorkelers or divers swim towards the whales, or touch them, the whales vote with their flippers and take off.

However, if humans remain in a predictable position in the water — attached to a rope behind a boat, or holding on to the anchor chain — the whales invariably come closer for a better look. The code has been developed co-operatively between local tour operators and two Townsville-based researchers: Dr Alastair

Birtles, from James Cook University, and Dr Peter Arnold, from the Museum of Tropical Queensland, financed by the Co-operative Research Centre for Reef Research.

The two researchers regularly join Undersea Explorer and other boats visiting the Ribbon Reefs.

As soon as the whales appear, the two take up their positions. Alastair in the water at the end of a rope attached to the boat, waterproof notebook in hand, and Peter up top, making notes about incoming whales, numbers and behaviour.

No one knows where the whales go when they disappear from the Great Barrier Reef after their winter visits, although they have been sighted around the Antarctic, south of Australia and New Zealand.

They may be dwarfs in the world of whales, but these animals grow to an impressive 8m in length.

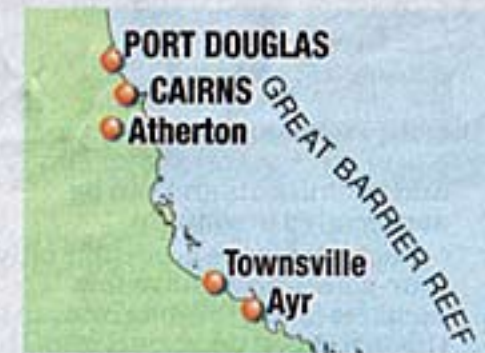
First recognised as a distinct form in the 1980s, they are different from the Antarctic minke targeted by the Japanese "scientific" whaling ships.

Smaller by an average of 2m, they sport a brilliant white shoulder patch and flipper base which positively glows in the water.

These complex patterns are distinctive in each whale and, along with scar patterns, help the researchers to identify individuals.

Bobbing at the end of the rope, Alastair spontaneously names them — Old Pucker, Wiggly Nape Streak and Multi MM Scar C are among his repeat sightings — they are photographed, noted and added to his growing pictorial data base.

Invariably, passengers ask the same question: Why, when most wild animals sensibly remove themselves from the presence of humans as quickly as they can, do



the dwarf minke continue to seek us out? Sandra, one of the passengers on this trip, had a novel theory.

Having watched Alastair turn upside-down to view the undersides of passing whales and thus determine their sex, she suggested that the whales had a similar quest.



- The peak season for dwarf minke whale sightings is June-July. Eighty percent of sightings are in these months.
- A limited number of tour operators conduct swim-with-dwarf-minke trips. Undersea Explorer minke-watching trips leave Port Douglas every Saturday from mid-June to mid-July.
- Researchers on board, along with the boat's marine biologist, provide regular lectures in the well-stocked library.
- Contact Undersea Explorer, Ph: 4099 5911; website: [www.undersea.com.au/](http://www.undersea.com.au/)

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