

Expedition Story: Whale Watching Me

The kayak bucked up and over the waves ricocheting off Cape Caution. It rolled under the heave of the ocean swells. I didn't mind any of it. I knew that capes tend to concentrate swell and wave energy because of reflection and refraction. Without thinking, when the chop intensified, I loosened hips, leaned forward, and stroked faster. I danced with the kayak, following its lead. On the starboard side, a blast shot up. I lurched in the seat. Beside the cockpit, the water boiled white. A dark form sank from sight. I wanted to cry. I wanted to laugh. A gray whale was accompanying me in the choppy tidal current around Cape Caution!

A voluminous cloud of mist rocketed off the bow. A barnacled forehead rose out of the sea ahead of me – big as an upturned wheelbarrow. Water poured off the whale's immense throat, and a beautiful, knobby snout appeared. The whale was spy-hopping to get a look at me. Nose pointed skyward, it gyrated slowly with

its head above water while its flukes beat back and forth to keep it upright. The whale's mottled skin reminded me of one of those curious images of the night sky taken through an astronomer's telescope. Bursts of white nebulas, sprays of starry barnacles, and shooting asteroids – the marks of scrapes – patterned the hide. But the eye – oh that gentle eye! Just above its down-curved grin, set inside a cowl shell of folds, I met the whale's dark orb staring

out from a universe of stars. Though only visible for seconds, the eye looked out wide as all curiosity. When it sank into the waves and disappeared, I felt like I'd been looked at by the eye of God.

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Seasons on the water shaped Jennifer Hahn into founding her own kayak touring company. Elakah! Expeditions (Ee-lah-ka means "sea otter"). Hahn guided natural history trips in Baja, Southeast Alaska, and Washington. "Every winter we'd chug 36 hours straight from Bellingham to Mexico... the van, a fleet of Tofinos, three months of food, and a couple mountain bikes." Guiding year-round also furthered her longing to journey the Inside Passage alone. Being a full-time guide didn't allow her to do it in one fell swoop, so Hahn did it in three sections. Between 1992 and 1996, over two springs and summers, Hahn covered 750 miles in 75 days.

When Hahn paddles for long lengths, she wild harvests to supplement her dry food stores. For appetizers she makes up "Sea Cheetos" – toasted popweed (fucus) tossed with



powdered cheddar cheese, grilled chiton (they taste like oysters) or “sea eggs” – giant red urchin roe mixed with cream cheese. For main courses, there’s limpet snail marinara, kelp chowder, and grilled salmon wrapped in kelp leaves. For dessert, it’s Chocolate Ocean Pudding – carageen-rich Turkish Towel sea algae boiled in milk, strained, then flavored with a dark chocolate bar. In the photo above, Jennifer handles sea lettuce for rice pilaf.