Bonin Islands, Japan

Story and Photos By Tim Rock and Yoko Higashide

They call it Bonin Blue. And there 60 feet under surrounded in sapphire I hovered. Below me large boulders littered the sea floor. In the distance, the ocean stretched to infinity. Some divers poured across the sea floor looking at colorful fish that made their refuge on the rocky bottom home. But I was interested in the blue and what it might bring.

Naho, our effervescent guide, told me that they sometimes did an exploratory dive mainly in the open water to see what came along. This remote place was known to have huge dogtooth tuna, wahoo and wild dolphins. So there I hung in neutral buoyancy staring to see what the blue would bring. Below me was a huge marble ray resting in the sand between some boulders. I was tempted to go deep and take a closer look when something caught the corner of my eye.

It was a lot of movement from something big. As it got closer I could see a pod of bottlenose dolphins and they were headed right to the divers. I adjusted my camera and strobe and prayed my big wide-angle lens dome would become an object of curiosity for these playful creatures.

I'm not sure if it was that or my beat up wetsuit, but to my great luck and glee, they came right for me. They slowed down, came in close and took a good look as I happily flashed away. One younger dolphin kept looking right at me. Some of the dolphins had small remoras, a suckerfish that rides along for free. One older one had a tail with odd barnacles attached. They moved with grace and ease. It was over almost as quickly as it started as they swam off into the Bonin Blue, tails swaying as they disappeared.

That episode was enough to make me very happy but when we drifted out to sea for our decompression stop, a huge wahoo came in to look. Divers rarely see these game fish. They do not frequent the coral reefs but are found in the current lines of the open sea. My diving partner Yoko Higashide had a trick. Small bubbles make them curious. So she made some bubble clouds and sure enough it kept circling and getting closer until it was but a few meters away.

This is the kind of thing you hope to see when you come to a place this remote and it didn't disappoint. This was just one excursion into the depths of Bonin Blue.



Snorkeling with wild bottlenose dolphins off of uninhabited Muko Jima in the Bonin Islands. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. F 6.3/Shutter 1/125.

These islands, the Bonin Islands, have become famous as a refuge for marine and bird wildlife. People come to see and interact with humpback whales, spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, sperm whales and occasionally spotted dolphins, short-finned pilot whales, whale sharks and other pelagics.



Yoko Higashide snorkels down about 30 feet to greet a wild pod of bottlenose at Ototo Jima's Eagle Bay. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. F 5.6/Shutter 1/60.



A sperm whale sounds at Ogasawara near sunset. Nikon D200 with Nikon 18-200 lens at 55mm. F 4.8/Shutter 1/750. ISO 250



Snorkeling in the protected cove at Tsurihama. This is the narrowest point in the passage and currents get over 5 knots outside the bay. Nikon 180200 VR at 18mm with circular polarizer. F 6.3 at 1/40.

They are better known around Japan as the Ogasawara Islands. Located in southeast Japanese waters, it is an archipelago of about 30 small rocky islands not really too far north of the Mariana Islands. Only two of the islands are actually inhabited: Chichi-jima, also called Ogasawara, which is about 1,000 kilometers south of Tokyo. The other small village is Haha-jima, 50 kilometers farther south of Chichi. The population is about 2,300 with most folks on Chichi-jima.

It isn't tropical bliss here. It can actually get to be a bit chilly. The climate is subtropical; the average temperature varies from 17.7C (Feb.) to 27.6C (Aug.).

You can't get there from here unless you're in Tokyo. There is no airport. Japan wants to try to keep the islands as pristine as possible by keeping visitor numbers low and human impact at a minimum. The only access to Chichi-jima is on the 131m, 6679 ton, Ogasawara-maru that is based from Tokyo. The 25-hour cruise from Tokyo departs 4-6 times per month and offers low cost group area sleeping and communal showers all the way up to private suites. This ship also has a nice restaurant and small lounge, upper deck outside sitting areas and entertainment centers. This overnight ride is part of the adventure and allows you to get to know a few people.

One man I met was Jessel Savory. This is a famous last name on Ogasawara as his great, great grandfather was part of the founding fathers of the islands back in the 1800s days of whaling. In 1830 Savory and 24 other Euro-Americans realized the potential of supplying



Divers approach a resting marble ray at 80 feet. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. F 4/Shutter 1/30. Natural light.



A sand tiger shark swims through the big boulders at Muko Jima. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. F 5.6/Shutter 1/30



Bottlenose stop to check out a snorkeler at Ototo Jima. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. F 5.6/Shutter 1/80.

whaling vessels. They moved to the island and raised animals and crops and sold meat, veggies and water to whalers. There is also an endemic tree called a savory palm after Jessel's family. He was raised in Ogasawara, went to high school in Guam and now lived in the States. He was coming back with his oldest son to visit his mother, who still operates a family inn on the island.

Before the settlers, the islands were virtually unused and uninhabited. Ancient settlers had been long gone. So the history here is relatively short but still colorful.

Aside from whaling, it is known as the place during WWII that U.S. president George Bush was shot down. He was rescued but his crew were taken captive and never made it.

The reason for this low volume tourism is to protect the delicate balance of wildlife that is found here. It is sometimes called the Galapagos of Japan. It doesn't really have the Galapagos' vast species diversity or history of isolation, but it is a very natural place with plenty to offer hikers, birders, WWII history buffs and those who love the sea.

The big draw is whale watching. This once 1800s whaling port full of whalers and pirates is now full of whale lovers. "I don't understand our government", one Japanese man told me referring to Japan's constant quest to resume whale hunting. "Most people don't want to see whale hunting anymore. We just like to watch them play."
For many years, the whale actually avoided the place. Whether it had to do with past hunting or the one time low numbers of whales worldwide, no one knows. But humpback whales and sperm whales have now been coming back in good numbers for quite a few decades.

In whale season, the humpback whale watch around Ogasawara boasts a daily 90% success rate for watching



The Work of Art angelifish is found only in the waters of the Bonin Islands... a beautiful endemic. Nikon D200 in Aquatica housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 14mm. F 6.3/Shutter 1/80.

humpback whales by boats. So if you wanna see a whale up close and personal, this is a pretty good place to go. The humpbacks can be an active lot when males fight for the attention of a female. There is breaching, fin slapping, tail splashes and lots of action to keep you intrigued while boxcar-sized mammals fly out of the sea, going through their mating routines. The season runs from February to April but they can be seen coming in early and leaving late as well.

Also, the islands have some nice vantage points with well-maintained trails in the west. There are good whale lookouts to see humpback whales by land. Just bring your power binoculars. The



Looking out to the shipwreck Hinko Maru from Sakai Ura beach. Nikon D200 with Tokina 12-24mm lens at 12mm. F 8/Shutter 1/60.

island also has some tougher trails that can take a couple of hours both ways through goat trails. But the reward is an isolated beach with sand like powdered sugar.

We combined dolphin searches and whale watching with diving. You get in two and even three dives in a full day and in-between you can eat a snack and lunch and the captain and crew will go out and look for whales and dolphins while you munch.

Like the savory palm, there are some unique and special things to see underwater as well. The Ogasawara butterflyfish (Chaetodon daedalma) is a stunning little fish found only in these waters. We saw them in pairs and small schools along the rocky undersea terrain of the islands. While most of the terrain is rocky and not all that colorful, there are also current fed passes with thick growths of very healthy corals. You can have a wild time in the passes doing a drift snorkel in three-to-five knot currents. The reef rushes by and you barely have to kick a fin.

The impressive underwater world features huge boulders tumbling down to the depths. These form small caves that hold seasonal visitors with an scary array of teeth. Sand tiger sharks prefer these refuges and can be seen at 20 to 35 meter depths in many of the known shelters. While their toothy grin is alarming, they are normally shy and not aggressive.

Some of the best diving is done farther up the chain at islands that are big, rocky and rough and have no one living there. Muko Jima holds some great marine surprises. And a couple of the natural arches are the haunts of hundreds of immense dogtooth tuna. You can swim in and stay off to the side of these stunning arches. Breathe lightly and the tuna will drift in close. Some are as large as the divers watching them. There are few places in the world where divers can approach congregations like this.

While we were enjoying the diving and the added bonus of seeing both humpbacks and sperm whales in between dives, our main reason for coming here was dolphins. All-day dolphin watching and swimming tours for bottlenose and spinner dolphin pods are offered and this can also be done in-between dives.

By far our best encounters took place up at remote Muko Jima. But there are some stunning white sand shallows to the south at Minami Jima that is also magic when the dolphins appear.

Dolphin snorkeling is a real adrenalin pumper. You hang off the back dive step of the boat and get up ahead of the pod. On the signal, you gently enter the water and head for the dolphins.



Wild goats still roam the ragged cliffs of the main islands. Nikon D200 Nikon 18-200mm lens at 200mm. F 5.6/Shutter 1/500.



Spinner dolphins play in the stern wake at Miko Jima. Nikon D200 Nikon 18-200mm lens at 200mm. F 7.1/Shutter 1/500.

Spinners normally dive down. Their ease and grace make them a pleasure to see beneath the waves.

But the bottlenose are a different story. Sometimes they also just swim right by. But usually they get curious, playful and downright acrobatic. It is for these moments you spend days at sea looking and jumping into the water. The encounters are normally brief and wild, with dolphins swimming at you, under you and circling around.

We spent a couple of days with some local divers who seemingly were part dolphin. They would swim down 10-15 meters and mimic the dolphin movements. Sometimes the dolphins would go for it and chaos ensued with lots of play and tricks.

Perhaps our best encounter came while the locals were off gathering some octopus after the full moon. When they went ashore to reef walk looking for fresh "taco", we went off in search of a pod. Sure enough a small group appeared and they were relaxed and curious. They would swim right with us, their tails coming within centimeters of actually touching my wide-angle lens. I could see odd barnacles on their tails and remoras attached to their sides. We were able to hang with this pod for a nice long swim. Bobbing down with them as they moved slowly along the sea floor and then playing at the surface when they came up for a breath.

The rays of the sun created shafts of light filtering up from the stunning clear blue of the sea. It was a bit of magic.

A day at sea is usually an 8 hour-trip and June-October is the best season, but they are around all year. Sperm whale watching is best spring to late autumn with August - October the best season. This is the place National Geographic sponsored scientists just recently took the first ever photos of giant squid, the favorite food of sperm whales.

War buffs can also visit here and see the many caves and old guns and artifacts still in the hills. Snorkelers and diver can go out to see the WWII wreck Hinko Maru. It was hit by an enemy submarine torpedo and hauled into the Sakai Ura bay area. Now crumpled but a great refuge for fish, shallow dives and snorkels can be done here. Best visibility is at high tide.



A sandwich shot of a Ogasawara sunset and a humpback taken in Ogasawara Bay. Both shot at 200mm with a D200 and Nikon 18-200mm VR.

The island's town has a nice selection of small eateries and pubs. The stores have some Ogasawara products like sea salt and amberjack sushi. There are museums and whale info centers. Gift shops offer souvenirs carved from whalebone. At night you can take a hike looking for fluorescent mushrooms and fruit bats.

It's a fascinating little place that few visit but those who do never forget the magic of Bonin Blue.

Tim Rock
www.doubleblue.com



Bonin Islands

Getting There:

There is only one way to get there unless you own your own ship or sailboat. That is the Ogasawara Maru.

Ogasawara Kaiun K.K.
Asahi Bldg., 5-29-19 Shiba, Minato-ku, Tokyo, 108-0014, Japan
Ph. +81(Japan)-3-3451-5171

Prices range from about 22,500 yen to 55,000 yen one way (not cheap).

There are 42 inns on Chichi-jima and 12 on Haha-jima, costing about 6,500 - 10,000 yen for a single with 2 meals. For general tourism information, contact:

Ogasawara Tourist Association
Chichi-jima, Ogasawara-mura, Tokyo, 100-2101, Japan
Ph. +81(Japan)-4998-2-2587 Fax. +81(Japan)-4998-2-3555

It is good to speak and read some Japanese here. Not much is in English, but you can get by if you need to.

Whale Watching

Ogasawara Whale Watching Association (OWA) was established in March 1989 to help manage and regulate whale watching, and to operate as an information center. OWA has members who have interest in whale watching, boat operators, owners of tourism businesses and simply fans of whales. There are 11 boats on Chichi-jima and four boats on Haha-jima, which are members of Ogasawara Whale Watching Association (OWA).

You can't swim with whales here. The OWA has established its own voluntary rules:

- A whale watching boat must slow down within 300m of whales.
- Do not violate the normal behavior of whales.
- A whale watching boat must not approach within 100m of humpback whales and 50m of sperm whales.

Larger boats are required more severe rules. And an aircraft is restricted not to approach within 300m of whales.

Contact:
Ogasawara Whale Watching Association
Chichi-jima, Ogasawara-mura, Tokyo, 100-2101, Japan
Ph. +81(Japan)-4998-2-3215 Fax. +81(Japan)-4998-2-3500

The Seasons

The best time to see a lot of the marine life here is late spring through early fall, although the humpbacks come in winter. August and September sees a lot of fish spawning as well.

Humpback whale: January - April.
Spinner dolphin & bottlenose dolphin: through the year but June through October is best.
Sperm whale: mainly summer – autumn
Sand tiger sharks and Spiny Lobster – May through September
Sea Turtles – March through September
Dogtooth Tuna – May through September