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Words and Images by JULIA NANCE

In the warm waters of Tonga in October 2016 my world changed forever. It's not every day you have the opportunity to look a humpback whale in the eye, let alone to have a young calf swim up to you and gently brush its pectoral fin against your side. As a young emerging photographer I never knew that this would change my outlook on life.

Vava'u is a group of islands in the Kingdom of Tonga and is one of the few places in the world that allows people to swim with humpback whales. There are strict regulations to monitor these experiences, ensuring the safety of the adults and newborns. While whale swims might draw tourists to these remote islands, visitors are also overwhelmed with remote cave diving, amazing hikes, culinary delights and Tongan culture. It is a holiday destination to delight the soul.

I found it difficult to put into words how special my experience was, but as a photographer, I aimed to capture moments that I could share with a wide audience. My underwater images of humpback whales capture their curiosity, tenderness and poise. I caught not only the wonder of the natural world below but connected them with the human emotions we experience in the world above. I related to the love and devotion between mother and calf. Young whales left their comfort zone to watch us and dance in the water - often only an arm's length away. Then they would return to their mothers, nuzzling into her and showing the strongest love I have seen in the underwater world.


I've always loved the ferocity of the ocean - how it is so unforgiving and relentless. On the surface it can be dangerous and destructive but back down below it gives a feeling of calm. Maybe it is the silence, or the pressure building with the need to breathe. Perhaps it is the absence of gravity. When a 12 metre whale looked me in the eye, my whole world changed. I felt insignificant, small in an unknown environment next to a creature that could kill me with a swipe of her tail, yet confident she would not.

The Vava'au journey was a three week trip of a lifetime and it pushed me to want to change my life, escape the mundane and follow my dreams: to photograph the ocean and capture the mystique of its inhabitants; to make art and to inspire people to be respectful of our environment and wildlife.

I was given a gentle warning when I booked my trip and can only pass on the same message to anyone considering visiting Vava'u: "Tonga can be life-changing, so be careful".

Julia Nance is a photographer based in Melbourne, Australia

To follow her adventures visit www.julianance.com.au and www.instagram.com/julianancephotos

 *Fiji Airways flies direct to Vava'u from Nadi twice weekly on Mondays and Saturdays.*