

WHALE HO! - Pawel Ahtel dives Tonga for Sony Bravia

In July I was commissioned to shoot underwater vision for a new Sony Bravia 4K TV Commercial. The shoot was on Vava'u Island in the Kingdom of Tonga and the subject was humpback whales. I was really excited about Tonga because it's not too far from Australia. It offers breath-taking scenery, friendly people, crystal clear warm water and, of course, an abundance of humpback whales which visit the islands every year to give birth and mate.

The schedule was extremely tight with only a week on the water and a long shot-list of breath-taking shots that can sometimes take years to get! It was a big ask and we'd need lots of luck.



Enjoying the warm surrounds

The Commercial will be mastered in 4K, 60p and most shots were shot over-cranked at 120 fps. The idea to over-crank was to make the whales feel epic: associating Sony Bravia's brand image with something that is big, majestic, friendly and beautiful... something that demands respect, inspires awe and something that will be an eye candy at the point of sale. I can't think of a better subject than humpback whales!



Looking down the flank of a humpback whale

It was my first 2D shoot for 5 years! Not having to worry about things like "volume", "card-boarding", "parallax" or "depth budget" gave me a fair bit of extra freedom in framing. I especially wanted to get some unusual, previously unseen, angles of the whales

that would catch the eye and also convey their enormity, elegance and grace.

I chose my DeepX housing, RED Dragon camera, TrueBlue OLPF filter and the Nikonos 15mm submersible lens. It's still the only underwater lens system capable of resolving full UHD from corner to corner. The client loved the crisp, detailed and vibrant look it produced. It's also the only underwater lens that produces absolutely no distortions and flat image plane – a recipe for immersive images which has been my passion when filming for IMAX and Giant Screen. The small size of the DeepX allowed me to get all of the shots on breath hold – no more cumbersome tank or a rebreather and more time in the water before exhaustion sets in. Some days I would jump in 30 to 40 times.

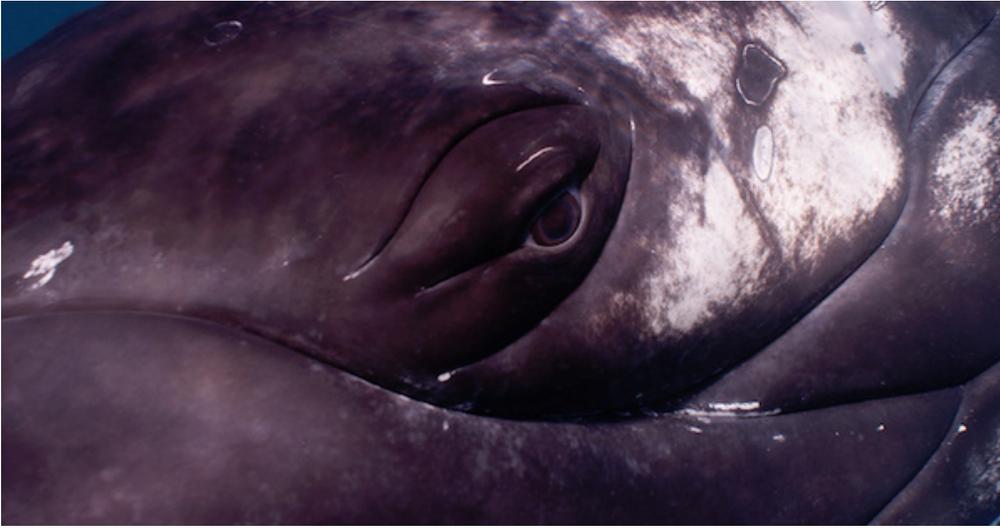


Feeling small next to my new friend

The highlight of the shoot was a young adult female whale, which exhibited a very unusual behaviour that I haven't seen from any whale before: she sought physical contact! When a 25-ton animal comes in for a cuddle, it can be tricky. Luckily for me, she was very gentle (for a whale)! I spent a total of 4 hours with her in the water and escaped with only minor cuts and bruises, mostly attained while trying to keep enough space between us to fit the camera.



Swimming away was completely useless. She would just come underneath and pick me up on her head like raising an island... about 30 times. After that, I would just slide down her nose and slip back into the water and try to line up a shot again.



Seeing eye to eye

At the end of the shoot I was greatly relieved. The Sony team was extremely happy with the footage, both in terms of the technical quality as well as the coverage. We not only ticked off every single shot from the very ambitious shot-list, but we perfected every take and we managed to get enough material for one-hour network special! We only needed one and a half minutes! Good luck to the editor choosing the best shots.

I can't wait to see the final edit to be screened on new Sony 4K TVs at retail outlets by Christmas.