

## **Humpback Whales**

### **Quick Guide to the Humpback Whales of the Keramas**

#### **From Russia with Love**

Humpback whales travel to the Keramas to breed and to rear their young from the end of December to April. To get here, they swim 6,000 kilometers from the Bering Strait, the channel separating Russia and Alaska which is located just below the Arctic Ocean.

Typically, humpback whales only eat for half the year, feeding while in polar waters, then living off their fat reserves after migrating to tropical or subtropical waters. Humpbacks are baleen whales, meaning they filter their food through baleen plates, fringed brushes that grow from the upper jaw.

#### **Mighty Marine Mammals**

Adult humpbacks are 13 to 15 meters long (about half the size of the blue whale) and weigh from 25 to 30 tons, while the calves measure around five or six meters. The adult females tend to be a meter or so longer than the males. The most distinct features of humpbacks are their pectoral fins (which at around one-third of their total body length are the longest fins of any cetacean in proportional terms), the knobs on their heads, and the eponymous hump immediately in front of their small dorsal fin.

#### **The Greatest Showman**

Since humpbacks can live as long as 80 years, the same whales often return to the Keramas year after year. Individual whales can be identified by the distinct patterns on the underside of their tail flukes. Meanwhile, their acrobatic courtship rituals have made them a worldwide favorite with whale watchers. Striking surfacing behaviors include breaching (jumping out of the water), spyhopping (holding the body in a vertical position part way out of the water), tail-slapping, and pectoral fin-slapping.

#### **Respect the Rules**

A playful and friendly species, humpbacks' good nature extends to protecting seals from killer whales and even humans from sharks. In the Keramas, we want to repay this friendliness in kind, so our whale-watching practices follow a strict code. Boats decrease speed when within a 300-meter radius from a whale and must not get within 100 meters or interfere with them in any way.

In spite of these constraints, our whale-watching vessels have a 90-percent success rate when it comes to sightings. Why? Veteran whale spotters look for the whales' blow from various viewing points around Zamami and direct the boats to where the whales are in real time.

### **Whale of a Fact**

In Japanese, the humpback whale is called *zatokujira*. While *kujira* means whale, the *zato* part is a reference to a kind of lute-playing priest. The crooked neck of these priests' lutes supposedly resembled the shape of the humpback whale when diving, hence the name.

### **Best (Land-based) Places for Whale Spotting**

**Tokashiki:** Mt. Nishiyama, Teruyama Viewpoint

**Zamami:** Inazaki Viewpoint

#### **SUGGESTED PHOTO(S)**

1. Breaching whale (Hero image)
2. Bering strait map
3. Mother and Calf
4. Whale acrobatics
5. Whale and whale-watching boat/watchers onland
6. Picture of a lute