

Whale Watchers Set Sail

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Showcase Editor

For most of us, the sea is a place of many great unknowns. Sure, we may have seen schools of fish swim by in an aquarium exhibit or caught sight of a distant pod of dolphins — or were they porpoises? — swimming far off in the distance during a beach trip, but that's typically where the ocean knowledge stops.

But there's a whole world teeming with life right under the surface just waiting to be discovered, if only you know where to look. Get in touch with nature and be prepared to be floored by some of the animal kingdom's largest, most awe-inspiring residents at the 44th annual Dana Point Festival of Whales, running consecutive weekends beginning March 7.

Jump right into your own aquatic adventure and observe one of the longest migrations of any mammal on the planet as the gray whale makes its way north from Mexico after giving birth in the warm waters of the Baja Peninsula.

Considered a coastal creature, gray whales typically follow the coastline during migration, making large pods of the creatures easy to spot both from sea and land. This also makes the southern Orange County area of Dana Point, with its 200-foot cliffs, open vistas and accessible harbor, one of the best places to see this annual spectacle.

First thing's first, it wouldn't be a Festival of Whales without a trip out to sea to observe some of the enormous creatures up close. And Dana Point wouldn't be called the 'Whale Capital of the West' if it didn't offer a number of seaside excursions perfect for spotting a pod of whales, a frolicking bunch of dolphins or any manner of aquatic life.

The most popular excursion option is Dana Wharf's Whale Watching trips. While getting an up-close look at the traveling sea life, passengers are also treated to some enlightening and educational facts from certified naturalists on board.

Over the course of the roughly two-hour trip passengers will learn about the gray whale's natural migration route while also being treated to some stunning sights of the Pacific Ocean. Guests will have ample opportunity to ship out with excursions departing every hour from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. during the festival.

Other catamaran options are available and the Ocean Institute offers a Gray Whale Adventure Cruise that introduces participants to different research equipment and tools as well as explains gray whale feeding habits and behavior patterns. Excursion times and costs are available on the Festival of Whales website.

If you don't quite have your sea legs, worry not. You can catch a glimpse of the nomadic cetaceans from land with a visit to the Head-

WHEN: 9:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday, March 7; 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, March 8; 3-10 p.m. Friday, March 13; 9 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday, March 14; 6:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday, March 15.

WHERE: Dana Point Harbor, 34675 Golden Lantern St., Dana Point.

DETAILS: (888) 440-4309, www.festivalofwhales.com.

PARKING: Free parking is available for up to four hours in most harbor lots. All-day parking is available at Doheny State Beach for \$8; \$2, per hour. Festival offers a free shuttle that runs all day throughout the festival with stops at every event location.

lands Conservation Park

Featuring a number of public trails numbering roughly three miles in length, the park offers the perfect opportunity to get in a slight workout while observing the stunning natural beauty of Dana Point. Also situated on the park grounds is the Nature Interpretive Center. Guests may stop in and brush up on some history with exhibits that explain some of the changes the Headlands has experienced throughout the years with the aid of original paintings and historical photographs of the area. Other exhibits point out the park's important flora and fauna, giving hikers a clue as to what to look out for when walking the trails.

The Nature Interpretive Center is open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily, except Mondays and the park's trails are open from 7 a.m. to sunset daily. The festival's free shuttle service runs from the Dana Point Harbor to the Ocean Institute and from there, it's a short walk to the center.

Here are some other activities on tap throughout the festival:

► **Polynesian Connection** — 10 a.m.-4 p.m., March 7.

The Hula Connection will thrill guests with a day of Polynesian culture, music, dance and educational events perfect for all ages. Some activities include workshops on lei design, fire knife and Tahitian dance performances, poi-ball twirling, air-brush tattoos and coconut husking.

The group will also host an authentic luau from 5:30-9 p.m. with proceeds going to the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders and ALOHA. Tickets cost \$50; \$25, children. For more details, call (949) 973-7281.

► **Diamond Dig** — 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m., March 8.

Monarch Beach Sunrise Rotary Club's fourth annual Diamond Dig invites pirates to search for buried treasure on Baby Beach. Last year, toys, bicycles and even a diamond necklace were discovered beneath the sand, so who knows what may turn up this year!

Admission costs \$10 for a special Diamond Dig shovel. All proceeds benefit local children's charities. For more details, call (949) 842-0594.

► **Whale of a Beach Clean-up — Festival of Whales: Toast to the Coast** — 9 a.m.-noon, March 14.

Give Mother Nature a helping hand and clean up Doheny State Beach. Ranger Vicki will be on hand at the Lifeguard Headquarters to help volunteers learn how to protect coastal resources. Guests looking to pitch in should bring gloves and a recyclable bag or bucket.

► **Whale of a Clam Chowder Cook Off** — 10 a.m.-2 p.m., March 14.

Local restaurants and organizations will put their best Clam Chowder dishes up to the voting booth at this fourth annual competition. Sample tickets cost \$10 and all proceeds benefit Fish for Life. For more details, visit www.fishforlife.org.

Other food offerings include Whale of a Pancake Breakfast and Whale of a BBQ on March 8 and Whale of a Concert BBQ on March 15.

► **Grunion Run** — 6:45 a.m., March 15.

Run off all of that chowder with this flat and scenic 10K and 5K run around Doheny State Beach. Registration costs \$15-\$40 and shirts will be provided to all pre-registered racers. Proceeds of the event benefit the Doheny State Beach Interpretive Association.

► **Concert on the Water** — Noon-5 p.m., March 15.

Bands, including a Tom Petty Tribute band, United States Air Force Rock Band and rock group the Tijuana Dogs, will take the music to the ocean, performing right on the water on a specially designed stage. Guests should bring their beach chairs and blankets and enjoy the free outdoor concert on Dana Point's beautiful Baby Beach.

The Harbor Music series which will feature a variety of musical styles to suit all listeners will take place from noon to 3 p.m. throughout the festival. For more details, call (949) 923-2255.

The jam-packed festival will also feature classic car displays that feature everything from the iconic Woodie cars to the Batmobile; sailing and paddling clinics; sand sculpture competitions; a Rubber Ducky Derby; an art fair and sale; a parade and street fair; a screening of "Little Mermaid" in the park; educational workshops sponsored by the Ocean Institute and an inaugural Dolphin and Whale Film Festival sure to show these magnificent sea creatures in a whole new light. All together, it's sure to make for one whale of a good time.

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Festival of Whales



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Festival of Whales



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