



SHELLEY GARE

Whale of a dream

Humans are endearing. We insist we're all so different; then we discover matching frailties. Micheline and Curt Jenner are pioneering marine biologists who have lived on boats for almost 20 years as they follow their passion, tracking whales, dolphins and porpoises off Australia's coastline and helping protect one of the world's most valuable resources, the ocean.

And here am I, a journalist who lives safely, cautiously and drily on land, and I mostly track human-beings.

But one recent afternoon we discover a mutual foible. All three of us buy tickets in those monster multimillion-dollar lotteries. Then we don't look up the results for days, preferring to live on in our fantasies. "Dreamers!" says Curt, laughing.

There is still a big difference between us. A win for me might bring respite from the demands of daily life. For the Jenners, a winning ticket could end forever constant worries about funding their research – and their new boat.

Let me tell you about this boat, Whale Song. It is 28m long, weighs 200 tons, is steel-hulled and purpose-built for whale research. It looks like a tug-boat but it has specially sound-dampened machinery which means it can slip through the water like a sylph. The whales are oblivious. There's no other boat like it.

"We almost wet ourselves when we first saw it," says Micheline as she took me on a quick tour. That's not surprising given their research vessel back in 1990 was an inflatable rubber duckie. When I saw the staterooms below deck, with their ensuite bathrooms, the Jenners almost got themselves a stowaway.

In fact, given the massive monthly payments on the boat and what the global financial crisis has done to paid research work, they're looking for paying volunteers – rich paying volunteers

– for trips far out to sea that offer an experience so unique the next closest thing might be space travel.

Right now, the Jenners and Whale Song are steaming back to WA under Australia's belly, and looking longingly towards the deep waters of the Great Australian Bight Marine Park, where southern right whales go to breed. Last year, the Federal Government gave BP a permit to look for oil and gas in the Bight and in parts of the park. The area, southwest of Ceduna, may become one of Australia's major gas and oil reserves.

What will this mean for the whales?

The Jenners, who discovered the main humpback whale breeding ground on the Kimberley coast and run the Centre for Whale Research (WA), work regularly with the big energy companies. They hope they may get involved in BP's research too. "Whales are the window to the health of the oceans," says Curt. Healthy whales, healthy seas. Healthy us.

Already, internationally, there's a program – Seakeepers – aimed at the world's wealthy who own huge yachts. If you're a Steven Spielberg, you can install sensors on board your mega-boat and help marine scientists capture essential data.

Recently, I heard a BBC interview with American oceanographer Sylvia Earle. Now 76, she is dubbed "Her Deepness" by *The New Yorker*. Earle is stunned by what humans have done to the oceans, "the great blue engine that keeps us alive".

My biggest regret is that I don't have Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates's number, as he holidays in Australia, to let him know about the berths going on Whale Song.

That might beat a lottery ticket.

The Centre for Whale Research is at cwr.org.au



FIRST PERSON

JUAN DE DALMAU
SPACE EXPERT

When I look up I think ... there are many solutions up there to problems down here.

My favourite planet is ... Earth, or a planet like Earth!

When I was young I wanted to be ... an automat, so I told my aunts when I was seven. I meant a diplomat.

The question I'd most like answered is ... how to make human ambition more ethical.

My course in life was set ... in 1989 when I attended the International Space University and met my wife.

The person I admire most is ... anyone who listens before speaking, who helps before asking, and makes a difference without saying it out loud.

My most treasured possession is ... being able to be happy with almost no material possessions.

Right now I'm reading ... *Paths to Progress - Space and the Southern Hemisphere*, written in Adelaide by 43 graduate students from six countries.

De Dalmau, the communications director at the European Space Agency, is in Adelaide for the International Space University summer program at UniSA.



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