

Sunday, April 3 - Mark Martin

Arrived at the red planet, whales lived there

As I awoke in the sail the sky has lost its lights. It was now covered in a crisp orange hue that covered everything softly and in combination with the sky informed me right then and there that I was in another world. The water and coastline in the vermillion sea is different than any I have seen it inspires serenity, it looks solitary but its full of life. Last night I had written a story, today I would biopsy a whale.

We left our anchorage to the sounds of dozens of sea lions waking up and doing their stretches before their hunt for breakfast. We had Shannon, a wonderful Canadian vegan chef to prepare our food that was never hunted. It was hard to eat in the mornings; we were simply too pumped up. Last night we had told stories. The boys came up with a weird story of a baby hedgehog asking a cactus about its mother, Captain Oona told the story about the ghost in the ship (which inspired my story), and me and Johnny came up with a plan to lure a sea lion into the dingy with vegan food and train it to fetch arrows. Eventually she would have proved most useful. We spent hours sometimes looking for arrows. Stormy was our sea lion's name, named after a beer we couldn't have on the Martin Sheen as it was a dry boat.

Our chants of stormy became a quick smile bringer every time we saw a sea lion. This island was a nursery for sea lions and the captain drove us close to it. With the Wise labs Canon and the telephoto lens, we were able to get some good shots of stormy and her family. We never convinced her to come work with us.

Me and Johnny changed shifts, it meant that I would spot him by securing the Hilliard and he would come down. We wear harnesses and clip on once up in the crow's nest. Up there we have binoculars, radio, water, weird hats and polarized glasses. Music and singing are optional. Johnny said to me, you are going to find us some whales up there. I said yes of course. We had no idea how lucky our voyage would prove to be.

One of the most impressive places on the trip is the Crow's Nest, the spotting position. It was a place to find things. I have had this job before and I love it. Being up there helps the team find whales from a vantage point that is not only beautiful but peacefully lonely. The Captain and Dr. Wise had established a schedule for watches. There was the Nav watch which involved the helm and instruments, the wheelhouse which was meant for

looking back and the mast top or crow's nest. The day always started with Johnny and I followed. Everyone had their system up there and a certain variety of snacks and songs to pass the time. We communicated by radio with the captain and team leaders and use the clock points and meters to identify what we saw. Whale at 1 o'clock 400 meters! Trash at 5 o'clock 100 meters! And so on.

Stupid dolphins at 10 o'clock coming this way! We didn't think they were stupid at all they probably thought we were, and they are right, but we were not looking to biopsy dolphins on this trip and they created confusion. Still too cool to not smile and photograph.

Some people were better than others at this job. It requires not caring about heights, a military like systematic eye patrolling and good use of the binoculars. We are looking for blows and humps, splashes and breaches. Turn away to look at your phone 3 seconds, you missed one. The whale species dove in different intervals some 3 minutes, 7 minutes, 9 minutes, some even 20 minutes. So it was easy to miss them altogether if you were not attentive and there was a lot of sea out there. "Whale one o'clock 300 meters!" I was so happy to be able to yell into the radio. "Whales!"

"I told you" Johnny said. They were ready, bows in hand

We were establishing communication with the captain and her crew in terms of approaches and speed. Without sails the Martin Sheen is not exactly a rocket ship, so we inched our way towards the whale at the total opposite of light speed, 4.5 knots. When we reached them I saw the big, long and sleek fin whale turn slightly showing its markings, if I saw nothing else this made the trip worth it.

We got into position and Johnny and Ric did their jobs under rough conditions and bad positions like old gunslingers, they both hit true. The crew stood sort of in awe at the closeness of the whales and the biopsy we had taken.

"Arrows in the water, throw the ring!" We had a hard time retrieving the arrows and ring, the technique is to find the marker and start small circles around it with the ship and make them bigger and bigger until you can find the arrows, only then do you pick up the ring. The longer you take to get there the farther apart they get. A lost arrow means almost 200 dollars and a biopsy for nothing, not good. We found those. In the process we found more whales. Mar the second mate from Barcelona relive me at the mast, I was up at the bow, I had been waiting four years for this.

Dr. Wise smiled his encouraging happy smile and said you're up. Johnny and Ric were there the whales were getting closer, different whales, we try not to biopsy the same whales. Carlos the Mexican whale expert who was our local contact was very good at keeping track and photographs of the ones we had biopsied. Safeties Off, they came up within distance but we were patient, settled in. "they are coming up" Mar yelled, and they did. We are instructed to see a whale pick the one we are tracking, identify were the other ones are to make sure we don't hit them by mistake and to wait for the right shot. They come up a series of time and they are gone for a while maybe for good. Still we wait no foolish shots. They are coming up. We aimed trough the arrow, windy aim a little high, we assigned whales, turn to port!! Hard Port!! They were crossing us. The turn did not work, gone. 7 minutes later There they are dead ahead!!

Turn to Port!!! The turn worked. Faster!! I am at top speed!! The indisputable captain tone came over the radio. She was a strong captain, good. They went down once, twice then they came up big probably a final breath before diving. I saw the target, squeezed the trigger evenly.

It hit the whale and bounced off, sample. I heard Johnny's bow, sample. I felt proud and mentally thanked the whale, who knows if it heard my mind, I want to believe she did.

At some point in the late afternoon we ate.

Carlos and Mike kept seeing whales in this shoreline. Me and the Captain studied the GPS and the charts, Shallow, weird moving water in places maybe reef, not in the charts, many uncertainties except one. There were around 11 whales there. Fin Whale Bay it should have been called, we saw lines of spouts and got carefully closer and closer to our 20 meter friends. We decided to try a dinghy approach. A team of Wise guys and me went on the dinghy with Mike. And Rick and Carlos stayed on the Martin Sheen to get the deeper water ones. The excitement of being in the same water level was new to me and we were able to chase faster, but they heard us. Point to the slow old ship. They were also feeding and did not want flies around their food. We did not get a shot however we got videos and pictures from both vessels of these baleen whales turning and gulping in their prey. They looked like a creature form another world. But no they were from mine. Made me happy again to be from this planet that held such cool things. I was wondering how someone could want to kill this magnificent example or our great earth. From the dinghy I made a mental note to thank Sea Sheperd for putting their lives on the line for

them. Gracias guys. We would try our sampling and scientific proof as our contribution to their conservation. Not in the bay of the fins at dinner time though, here there would be no samples.

Back on the mothership I went back to the crow's nest, full, you see the crow's nest is not only a place to find whales, it's also a place to find yourself. You shed all the non-important chatter that has built into your neck and find the valuable things in life that have been hiding in your head. Sailing out of the bay the sky was already changing. I was not able to contain my excitement of the day and the incredible beauty of the Coastline of Mars that burned into my eyes. I told the captain over the radio how absolutely beautiful this world here was. She laughed and said "I agree" with her French accent, we all did. We were united in a humbling trance by a coastline, of the water planet, Earth.

Back at sea we slept well that night.

Mark







