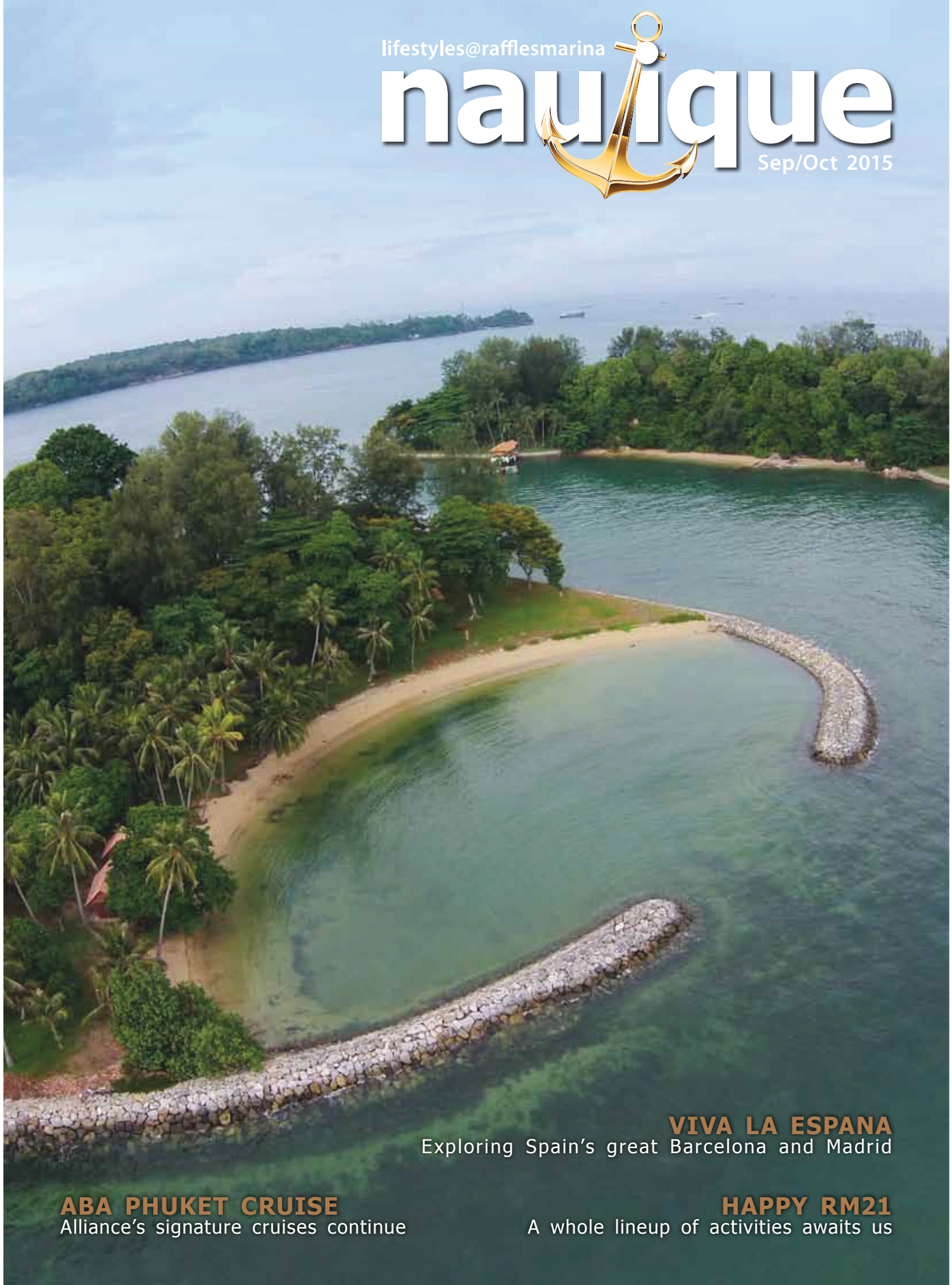


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Raja & the Whales vessel with sailing vessel Mir

Dangers and fatalities to whales abound in Sri Lanka's shipping lanes. **Abigail Alling** reports.

In January this year, sailing ship *Mir* departed Raffles Marina for Sri Lanka for Year 3 of our marine mammal field research programme. Working with the University of Ruhuna, the team onboard conducted surveys on the east coast to learn where whales were distributed along the coastal drop-off areas that they are known to inhabit. Additionally, we joined *Raja & the Whales* whale-watching boat and the International Fund for Animal Welfare to learn about the distribution of ships and whales in the Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) along both westbound and eastbound shipping lanes located on the southern coast.

Each of these 28nm transects traversed the TSS as well as an area 15nm south of the shipping lanes into the Indian Ocean. Blue whales were routinely observed around the 200m, 1,000m and 2,000m contour lines, which provide a sloping bathymetry conducive to

upwelling and productivity. Unfortunately the shipping lanes were laid along these drop-offs and thus ships and whales are found in the exact same area.

Based on our data, the International Whaling Commission considers that the numbers of blue whale deaths by ship-strikes is likely affecting the population detrimentally. Results of the study suggest that upwards of 1,000 interactions between whales and ships occur annually. Fortunately there may be a solution, as our data shows that if we move the lanes 15nm south, the collisions will be reduced by 95 percent. Our intent in the coming year is to work with our partners in Sri Lanka to encourage this relocation of the lanes by the Government with cooperation by international organisations, such as the International Maritime Organization.

Of particular interest during this season was a sighting of 50 or more sperm whales that seemed to be migrating through the same area in April. These whales were also frequenting the 1,000 and 2,000m drop-off areas with ships on all sides. It was chaotic to see so many whales amongst the commercial ships during these days. Unfortunately the commercial ships are bound by international maritime law to follow the artificial man-made shipping lanes; they have no choice but to motor through the numerous blue and sperm whale aggregations.



Sperm whales in the shipping lane



Sperm whale calves and blue whales

By April we began to see blue and sperm whale calves as well. A notably sorry moment was our witness to a very small sperm whale calf that was observed in the shipping lane. Its head was seen out of the water as it swam along so it could see what was on the surface – perhaps looking to see if ships were ahead.

These whales also have to maneuver around a daily entourage of whale-watching boats that bring tourists out to the shipping lanes to view the whales. Some of these vessels like *Raja & the Whales*, adhere strictly to the international guidelines for approaching whales; but many others bundle around the whales jostling for the closest position. This interrupts their movements and often tires the whales because they are unable to breath normally at the surface.

Perhaps one of the most striking observations highlighting this activity was a dive boat, that raced ahead of about three sperm whales in the shipping lane. Abruptly, the small boat stopped just ahead of the whales and a diver was seen getting into the water. Breathlessly, we waited in disbelief as we also saw two huge cargo ships steadily motor towards the whales, the small boat and the diver in the water. Just before an estimated 75m shy of the cargo ships, the dive boat retrieved its diver and speedily motored away from them, leaving the confused sperm whales directly in the ships' path. We watched and waited, straining to see the outcome, but we neither saw them at the surface nor sighted their blows again.

While we don't know what was the outcome for any of these whales, it left us with a startling bird's eye view of the whale/ship crisis that is happening off the southern coast of Sri Lanka, as well as the dangers of dive boats and whale watching harassment. It's all 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' unless you experience at sea, like we did.

The present situation is dire: Whales are being run over by these boats and soon, divers and/or dive boats may be too. It is urgent for all involved that the lanes be moved offshore and away from the bathymetry that supports a wealth of food for these whales, which in turn attracts tourists.

Please pass the word along – this is a problem that is occurring around the world in many different oceans, but it has reached unacceptable levels in Sri Lanka. It is all our responsibility to help bring awareness to the challenges that threaten the future well-being of these great whales.🙏

Our project partners include University of Ruhuna, Raja & the Whales and the International Fund for Animal Welfare. With great appreciation to our donors – Swire Pacific Offshore, The Kopcho Family Foundation and The Ward Family Foundation.

Please follow our progress at biospherefoundation.org and on Biosphere Foundation Facebook.