

Whale Watching with Wheelchairs

BY LEONIE PETERSEN COMMUNITY RELATIONS ASSISTANT

Whale watching has been a major industry in Hervey Bay for almost fifteen years, but it is an experience that may be a challenge for some people who use mobility devices. Split decks and narrow passageways on viewing vessels may be impossible to navigate. A passenger who uses a wheelchair may be restricted in their movement around the vessel. Safety can be a concern, and pre-planning and extensive checking of the fittings and fitment of the vessel are necessary before booking.

But with innovative design and a thought for all passengers, boats can be accessible and comfortable, as Hervey Bay's Quick Cat II shows. The Quick Cat II is run by Brian and Jill Perry and operates whale watching trips as well as charters. Not only does the Quick Cat II offer accessibility and safety, it also ensures passengers with a variety of abilities can all enjoy the same experience of communing closely with whales.

The Quick Cat II features ramps running from the main deck to the fore deck allows both able-bodied passengers and passengers with a mobility impairment freedom to move right around the main decks. A full-sized accessible toilet is also provided on the rear deck. Obstructions such

as anchors and ropes that are commonly found on boat decks are stowed safely beneath the deck and safety and accessibility are of number one importance. The Quick Cat II also has special features catering to children's enjoyment of the whale watching experience.

With the emphasis on passenger safety and comfort, the upper deck gives a 360 degrees view with both the upper and lower rear deck, offering large curved balconies that have passengers out over the water for a birds eye view. The vessel also features a hydrophone for passengers to listen underwater to the whale song.

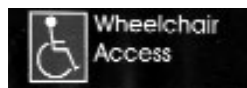
One unique feature of the custom-built whale watching vessel is the bow viewing point (see large picture below) - an extension of the main deck that juts out over the bow of the boat, allowing the passenger of any ability the amazing experience of seeing whales just a few metres away. On the bow is also an excellent vantage point to watch the dolphins that converge at the bow as the boat is moving.

The Quick Cat II has been so successful since its introduction in 2003, that six more catamarans have been ordered by other businesses, which could make whale watching one of the easier experiences for the tourist who uses a mobility device.

For contact details and more information about the company, phone Marion Webb at the Association's Information Service on 3391 2044 or toll free 1800 810 513.



Left: The Quick Cat II



Right: The viewing platform on the bow of the vessel allows passengers to come within metres of the marine mammals. The platform is large enough for a wheelchair and safety rails at appropriate heights ensure the viewing position is a safe one.

