

Ogasawara Islands

— *Japan's Galapagos*

Text and photos by Don Silcock

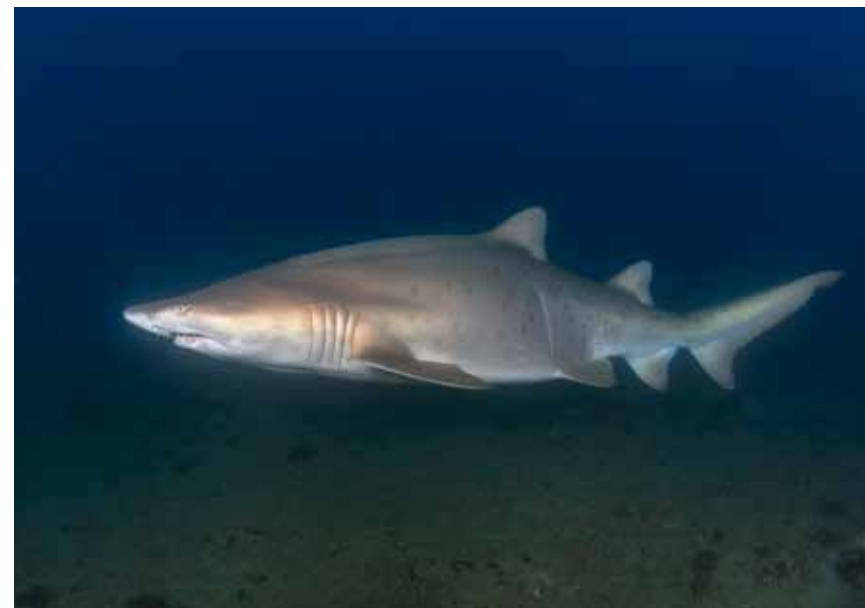




Often referred to as the **Oriental Galapagos**, the **Ogasawara Archipelago** is located in the north-west Pacific Ocean, about 1,000km south of Tokyo and is one of the most isolated and remote parts of Japan. The isolation of the archipelago, combined with the fact that the islands have never been connected to a continent, is said to have produced a “Galapagos effect” with flora and fauna that is unique to the islands. Plus, because they comprise some of the very few significant land masses in the north-west Pacific, they provide a much-needed safe refuge for many endangered species.

Volcanic in nature, visually the islands are quite remarkable and rise spectacularly out of the surrounding deep waters and oceanic trenches. The archipelago is on a similar geographical latitude to the more well-known Okinawa Islands and share the same subtropical climate, with warm temperatures all year-round.

Similarly, the reefs around the Ogasawara Islands are rich in coral and fish, but it is the larger creatures of the underwater world that convinced me to make that long journey. For every year the archipelago is visited by northern humpback whales and has a resident population of sperm whales.



Getting there

Despite their distance from Tokyo, the 30-plus Ogasawara Islands are administered from the Japanese capital, and the only way to get there is also from Tokyo—on the weekly ferry service, as there are no airports on any of the islands.

THE OGASAWARA ISLANDS

Also known as the Bonin Islands, the Ogasawara archipelago consists of over 30 subtropical and tropical islands, some 1,000km directly south of Tokyo. The only way to reach the islands is by a weekly 24-hour ferry ride from Tokyo.

The Bonin Islands name derives from the Japanese word “bunin” meaning uninhabited or “no people,” and still today, only two of the islands are inhabited—the main island of Chichijima (Father Island), which is also the seat of the municipal government and home to about 2,500 people; and the island of Hahajima (Mother Island), which includes Ogasawara Village, and has about 450 residents.

The Ogasawara Islands were discovered in 1593 by Ogasawara Sadayori, who claimed them for the Tokugawa Shogunate. But they remained largely uninhabited until 1830 when a small group of Westerners and Pacific Islanders established a colony on Chichijima.

The islands officially became Japanese territory in 1875, and later served as military bases during the Second World War—after which they were occupied by the United States until 1968 when they were returned to Japan.

Chichijima Island, the largest of the Ogasawara Islands, is mountainous and covered in rich subtropical forest with white sandy beaches and steep rocky cliffs. It is a popular destination for domestic Japanese tourists and is known for whale and dolphin watching.

Hahajima Island is 40km south of Chichijima but is smaller, less developed and is accessible only by the regular ferry between the two islands. ■

Wreck in Futami Port (above); Aerial view of the Ogasawara Islands (top); Sand tiger shark at wreck in Futami Port (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Mother humpback whale with her calf at the Ogasawara Islands



Futami Port (above) on the island of Chichijima (left); The *Ogasawaru Maru* departs (below)

Simply travelling to the Ogasawara Islands is an adventure—one that will quickly immerse you in an interesting mix of Japanese culture, protocol and the country's amazing infrastructure. My journey involved getting from Bali to Tokyo's Haneda Airport, which is built on reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay. So, it is effectively "downtown," as opposed

to Narita Airport, which is 40km outside of the city. The Ogasawara weekly ferry

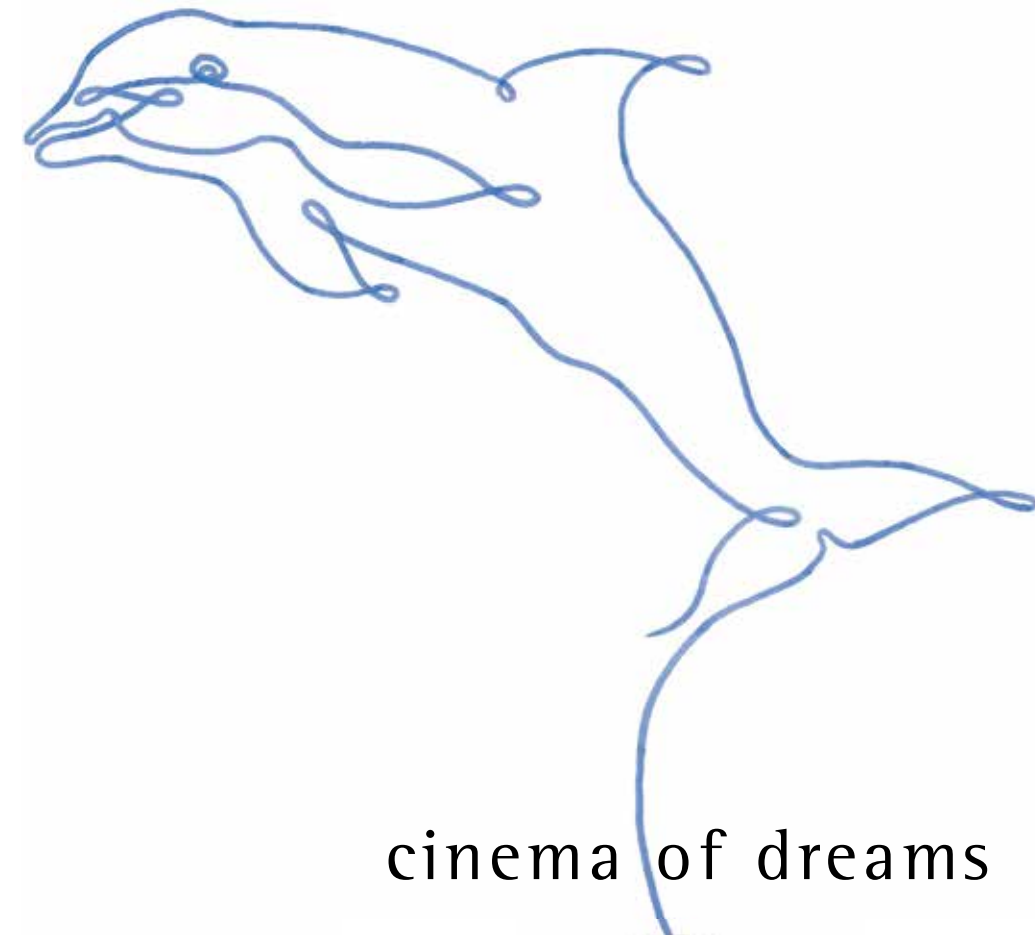


departs from Takeshiba Pier, in the harbour area close to Tokyo Bay, which means one can use the excellent, if initially mind-boggling, Tokyo rail system to get between the two. Boarding the actual ferry, the *Ogawasara Maru*, is done with true Japanese courtesy and efficiency, but you quickly realise that foreigners are few and far between on this journey.

The ship itself is excellent, with restaurants and vending machines for everything you might possibly require for the 24 hours it takes to get to Futami Port on the main island of Chichijima. Overall, it is an interesting and immersive journey with the hardest part being getting your diving and photographic equipment from Haneda to Takeshiba Pier.



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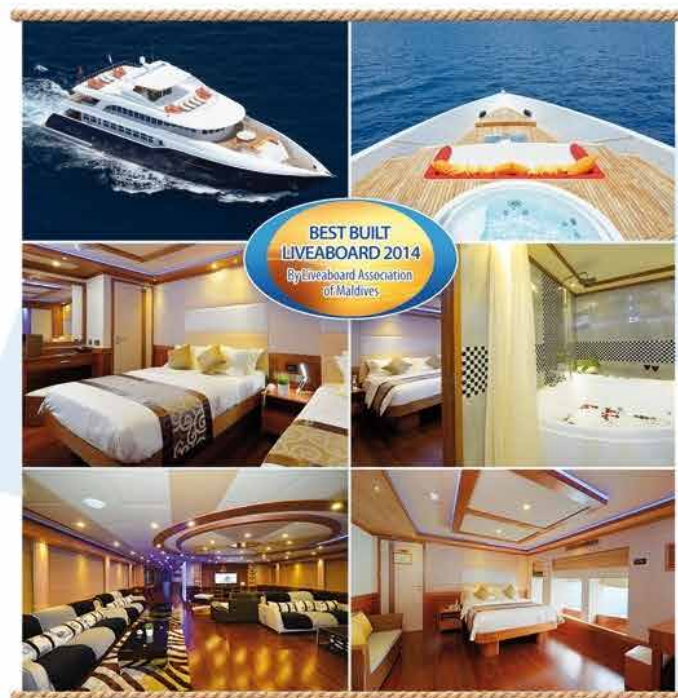
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Ogasawara



Bottlenose dolphins at Chichijima

Underwater

The reef systems around the main island of Chichijima are generally in excellent condition with healthy hard coral growth. There is a wide variety of tropical reef fish, including the wrought-iron butterflyfish (*Chaetodon daedalma*)—a species native to southern Japan and relatively common around the Ogasawara Islands.

There is also a healthy population of sand tiger sharks, which congregate in Futami Port around a wreck on the eastern side of the large bay at the entrance to the main harbour. Interestingly, the sand tigers enter the main harbour at night to hunt and can easily be seen in the lights from the pontoons.

Overall, the diving around Chichijima is very pleasant, but not spectac-



School of wrought-iron butterflyfish, which are native to southern Japan







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THIS PAGE: Northern humpback whales visit the Ogasawara Islands between February and April; Bottlenose dolphin at Chichijima (left)

ular—until the local stars of the show make an appearance. There is a significant population of both spinner and bottlenose dolphins in and around Chichijima, so there is a strong possibility of an underwater encounter with a pod of these wonderful creatures.

The whales

Northern hemisphere humpback whales visit the Ogasawara Islands between February and April each year. They are a common sight around Chichijima and a major tourist attraction. But in-water encounters are

not allowed as such, with a mandatory exclusion zone of 100m around any humpback whale. However, if you are in the water and the whale swims towards you, then the encounter happens on their terms and all is well in the world.

The archipelago has a resident population of sperm whales; however, they are typically only seen in August and September, when the weather is at its best and the seas are calm. They rarely come into the coastal waters around either Chichijima or Hahajima. Instead, they prefer the deep waters some



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Ogasawara



CLOCKWISE: Divers on reef at Chichijima; Guest house cuisine; Restaurant in Chichijima; Location of Ogasawara Islands on satellite map of Japan

10km off the coast of Tatsumizaki Island to the south east of Chichijima. In-water encounters with the sperm whales are also not allowed and a 50m exclusion zone applies. But again, if they swim towards you, that is also OK.

The general area around the archipelago was known as the "Japan grounds" during the early 19th century when whaling was at its peak. And because Japan was closed to foreigners at that time, the Ogasawara Islands were used as safe harbors to replenish supplies.

Immersion therapy

It is a long journey to get to the

Ogasawara Islands, one that typically will take at least two days each way—one day to get to Tokyo and another 24 hours on the ferry to Chichijima. The diving is good, but not fantastic, and the whale encounters are somewhat hit or miss. But as an overall experience, it is terrific!

Japan is one of my favorite countries and never ceases to amaze me with its incredible culture, history and possibly the nicest, most polite people in the world. The cities in Japan are truly amazing, but they are a completely different experience to what the small towns and vil-

lages offer. And the Ogasawara Islands take that even further, as there are simply no big hotels in which to stay and insulate yourself from the locals. Instead, you stay in pensions and guest houses, which means you are right in the thick of how the locals live, eat and socialize—the highlight of the overall experience! ■

Asia correspondent Don Silcock is based in Bali, Indonesia. For extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region, visit his website at: Indopacificimages.com.

