

Tour Report Fjords, Orcas & Aurora Photography Exhibition 7 – 13 November 2024

Orca



Northern Lights in Alta



Humpback whales



Orcas



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1:**Thursday 7 November 2024**

Heathrow to Oslo

After a very early departure from Heathrow we landed in Oslo and swiftly transferred to catch our flight to Alta, a small town known as the City of Northern Lights, located in the northern part of Norway, known for its stunning natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. The excitement in the air from us all was high as we boarded the plane, eager to embark on our adventure in the Arctic circle.

Once we reached Alta, we were greeted by our transport to the hotel. We were only spending one night here before embarking on our boat tomorrow.

The crisp, cool air of Alta was invigorating, and as we stepped outside, we could feel the anticipation building for the experiences that lay ahead over the coming days. I'm not sure about the guests but I know I certainly couldn't wait for our adventure. After checking into our rooms, we took a moment to settle in and freshen up from our journey.

With a few hours of free time before dinner, some of us decided to explore the nearby area. The sun had already set, this time of year the days are short with only four to five hours of daylight.

We wandered over to the mall next door, a modern structure that contrasted with the rugged beauty of the surrounding nature. Inside, we browsed through various shops, including lots of outdoor clothing stores, enjoying the local products and unique souvenirs on display.

As the evening approached, our stomachs began to rumble, prompting us to search for a spot for dinner. After a bit of wandering and laughter, we stumbled upon a cosy pizza place tucked away in a corner of the mall. The inviting aroma of freshly baked dough and melting cheese wafted through the air, drawing us in. We all gathered around a large table that I had booked a little time before and were excited to share a meal together.

As we enjoyed our delicious pizzas, the conversation flowed. We bonded over our shared interests in wildlife and photography, exchanging stories of our favourite encounters with nature and discussing the best techniques for capturing that perfect shot.

The atmosphere was filled with laughter and everyone was enjoying each other's company, which would only deepen as our journey continued. With our bellies full and spirits high, we left the pizza place, ready to embrace the adventures that awaited us. For now, it was time to get some rest and we retired to our rooms. I knew that this was just the beginning of an unforgettable experience in the heart of Northern Norway!

Day 2:**Friday 8 November 2024**

Boarding the MS Stockholm

We spent the day in Alta, eagerly awaiting our afternoon departure at 1600hrs for the MS Stockholm, our vessel for the upcoming adventure. The anticipation was palpable as we explored the charming town, soaking in its unique blend of history and culture. Our day began with a visit to the Alta Church, a striking architectural marvel that stands as the first ever largest building in the town. Its old wooden design, with a steeple and small glass windows, captivated us. The weather was not great so we didn't hang around for too long before moving on.



We took a moment to reflect and appreciate the craftsmanship that went into creating such a beautiful building for its age. Next, we made our way to the Alta Rock Museum around a 20 minute drive away. Where we were transported back in time as we marvelled at ancient Nordic rock art dating back 6,000 years. The petroglyphs, etched into the stone by early inhabitants, depicted scenes of daily life, hunting, and rituals. Each carving told a story, and the museum shared fascinating insights into the significance of these artworks, deepening our understanding of the region's rich ancient history. As the afternoon wore on, the excitement of boarding the MS Stockholm grew.

However, just as we were ready to embark, the weather took a turn for the worse. Gusts of wind reached up to 148 kilometres per hour in speed, creating a challenging environment for our departure. Despite the blustery conditions, our spirits remained high as we made our way to the port. Once aboard the MS Stockholm, we were greeted by the friendly crew and the comforts of the ship.

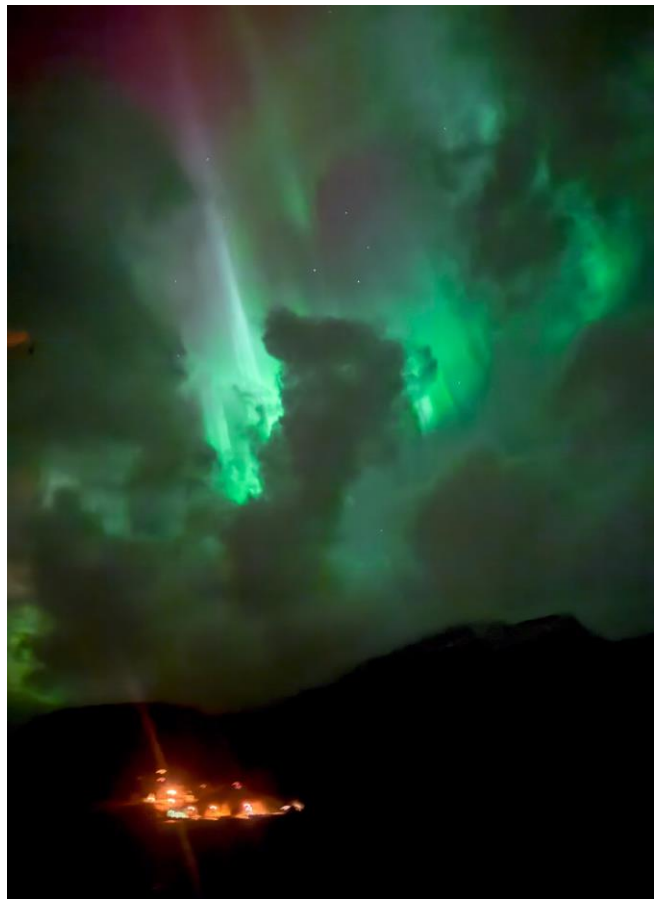


The captain, assessing the weather, made the decision to navigate further north to a sheltered bay for the night, away from the strong winds at the pier. The journey took about two hours, during which we settled into our cabins and took in the stunning views of the rugged coastline silhouetted in the darkness. During this time, our expedition guides, Christian and Beau, provided a comprehensive briefing that covered everything from onboard safety protocols to the thrilling adventures that we could likely have over the coming days ahead on our expedition.

Their enthusiasm was infectious, and they painted a vivid picture of the experiences we could expect, from wildlife encounters to breathtaking landscapes. After the briefing, we gathered in the dining area for a delicious dinner. The aroma of freshly prepared dishes homemade by the ship's chef in a tiny galley filled the air, and we savoured every bite as we shared stories with our fellow travellers and guides. Despite the weather, it felt like we were already forming bonds that would last throughout our journey on board.

Later that night the northern lights graced us on our first evening! Although cloudy we got some short breaks in the clouds.

However, capturing this magical moment on camera proved to be more challenging than we had anticipated. The boat, while securely anchored in the bay, swayed a lot due to the severe winds, making it difficult to keep our cameras steady. Each time we tried to frame the perfect shot, the movement would blur the image, leaving us frustrated yet determined to preserve the memory of this enchanting night. In light of the circumstances, we decided to simplify our approach and opted to use our phones for a few quick shots. The convenience of our smartphones allowed us to snap a few candid photos without the hassle of adjusting settings or worrying about stability. We captured a few nice record shots of the moment—our faces illuminated by the glow of the aurora borealis, the shimmering lights reflecting in the water, and the sheer joy of being surrounded by our first Northern Light encounter.



Day 3:

Saturday 9 November 2024

Breakfast was served promptly at 7:30 a.m., the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingling with the scent of warm pastries filling the air. The crew and guests gathered around the dining area, sharing stories and laughter as they fueled up for the day ahead. By 9 a.m., as the first rays of sunlight began to pierce through the horizon, we cast off from our anchorage, eager to embark on our journey.

Our destination was a picturesque spot just north of a fjord headland known as Klubbene. This area was renowned for its tranquil waters and an abundance of herring, which typically drew in the majestic fishing orcas. However, as we set out, the weather forecast took a dramatic turn.

The calm morning was overshadowed by an extreme high wind alert, with gusts predicted to reach a staggering 70 knots (approximately 140 kilometres per hour). The sudden shift in conditions was alarming, and as we navigated the choppy waters, we experienced the raw power of near-hurricane winds. Despite the formidable gusts, the Stockholm, our sturdy vessel, handled the turbulent seas with remarkable grace. However, the safety of our crew and guests was paramount, and it quickly became clear that continuing our journey would be too perilous. With a collective decision made, we turned back, seeking refuge in the safety of our anchorage in a quiet bay, where we could wait for the winds to subside.

To make the most of our unexpected downtime, we gathered in the lounge for an insightful lecture on whales. The presentation was not only engaging but also enriched our understanding of these magnificent creatures, making it a valuable and educational experience for everyone on board. The discussion sparked curiosity and excitement, as we learned about the behaviours and habitats of various whale species. After the lecture, I took the opportunity to conduct some post-production and editing training with a few eager group members. We delved into the intricacies of editing techniques, sharing tips and tricks that would enhance their skills.

Once we finished our lunch, which was filled with hearty dishes that filled us up, we noticed that the winds had begun to calm. With about an hour of daylight remaining, we decided to seize the moment and revisit our morning plans. As we ventured back out, we were met with a stroke of luck.

We were incredibly fortunate to witness a breathtaking spectacle of nature as we encountered numerous orca pods, each varying in size and composition, actively hunting for herring in the chilly waters. The orcas, with their striking black and white markings, moved gracefully through the waves, their powerful bodies cutting through the water with ease. Although the lighting conditions were far from ideal for photography, with the overcast sky casting a dull hue over the scene, we stood on deck, completely captivated by the drama of our first Orca sightings.



A particularly remarkable moment occurred when we spotted a solitary humpback whale feeding alongside one of the orca pods. The sight of this majestic creature, with its distinctive long pectoral fins and enormous fluke, was a highlight of our day.

We watched in awe as it surfaced briefly, revealing its iconic dorsal fin before diving back into the depths, the massive fluke disappearing beneath the surface in a graceful arc.

As darkness began to fall, we reluctantly retreated inside the boat, our hearts still racing from the excitement of the day. We continued our journey northward to a secluded area known as Store Kvalfjord, a trip that took about two hours.

Upon our arrival at Store Kvalfjord, we were greeted again by another northern lights display with a sense of eagerness, ready to capture the elusive aurora borealis we got outside on the pier. Unfortunately, our hopes were dashed as the display turned out to be brief and quickly obscured by thick clouds and rain.

Despite our disappointment, we remained hopeful for better aurora sightings the following night. After returning to the boat, we gathered for dinner, sharing our thoughts on the day's events and the wonders we had witnessed. We discussed today's sightings from the orcas' playful antics to the majestic

humpback whale. As we prepared for an early departure at 6:30 am, we felt a sense of excitement for what tomorrow might bring, but soon we retired to bed.

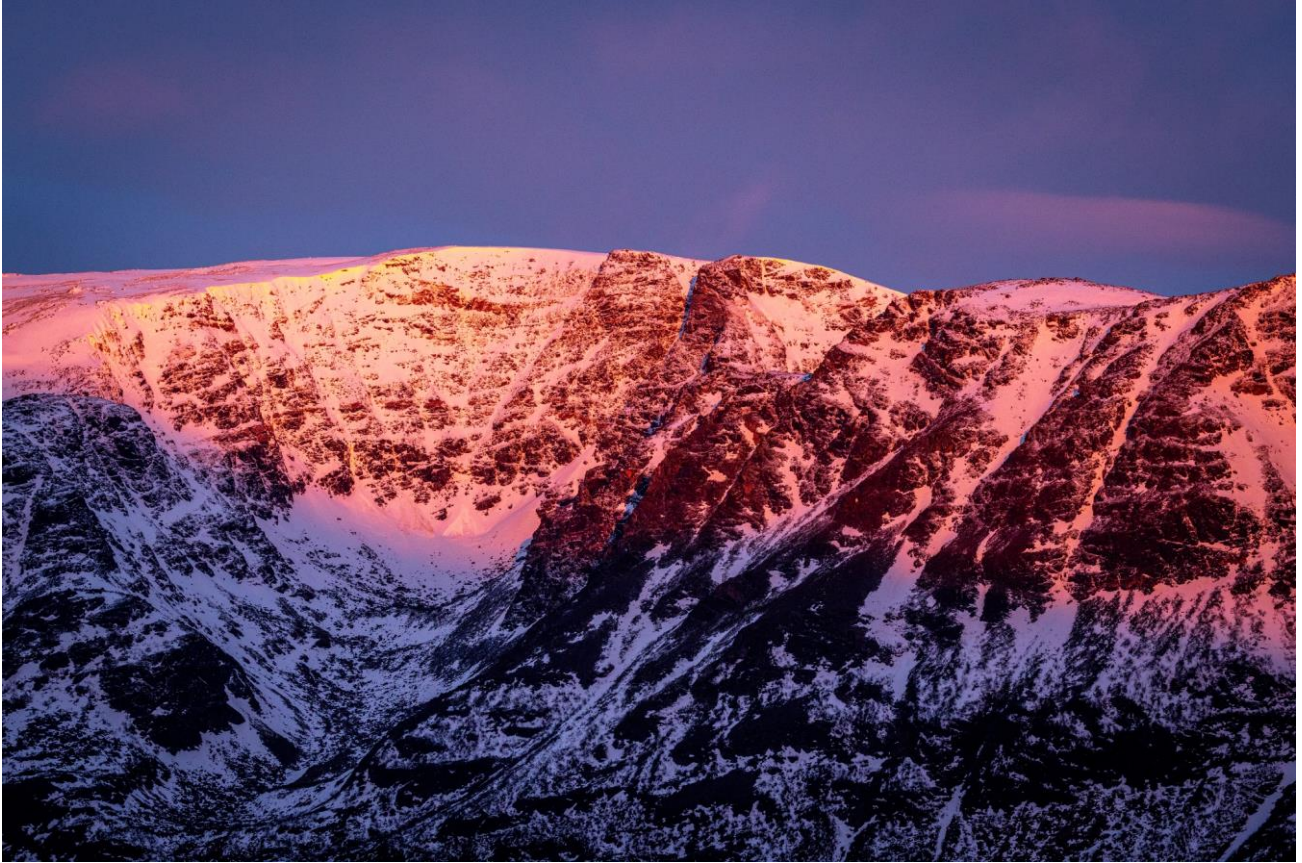
Day 4:

Sunday 10 November 2024

Store Kvalfjord to Langfjordhamn and zodiac cruise.

This morning, we set off from our anchorage around 6:30 am, heading briefly south before turning northwest along Stiersund. Just before the turn, we spotted several Orca pods feeding. We paused to watch them for a while, but they soon started moving in the direction we had planned to take, likely following or searching for herring. The morning sun was beautifully lighting up the mountaintops to our right as the Orcas swam alongside us, providing a fantastic photographic opportunity.





Seeing a good chance to get closer, we decided to launch the zodiacs to better track and observe the Orcas. We turned into the sheltered Indre Lokkarfjorden bay to safely board the smaller boats. Once on the water, it didn't take long to relocate the pod, which included a large male, a female, and her young calf. The males are easier to photograph as they tend to stay surfaced longer than the females and calves.



In addition to the Orcas, we also spotted distant Humpback Whales and, to our delight, a couple of Fin Whales near the shore, their massive six metre tall blows clearly visible. Being so close to the water in the zodiacs allowed us to position ourselves directly in front of the swimming Orcas - an incredible experience, though the challenging light and swell made photography tricky at times.

We were fortunate to witness some fascinating spy-hopping behaviour from the orca. This action resembles humans treading water, as whales, dolphins, and even sharks position themselves vertically using their pectoral fins to survey their environment above the water's surface. During spy-hopping, a cetacean slowly raises its head out of the water, keeping its eyes just above or below the surface, and this can continue for several minutes. To our excitement, the orca and humpback whale, both common in the fjords, are among the most frequent spy-hoppers. Researchers have noted that this behaviour often occurs when dolphins or whales encounter tourist boats, indicating their curiosity and interest in observing us, much like we enjoy watching them.





Reluctantly, it was eventually time to head back to the ship for a late lunch. As the daylight faded, we were astonished to spot a Sperm Whale logging in the distance, and then two more - the first Sperm Whales our expedition guides had ever seen in this area. In total, we had encountered four different whale species in just one day, an incredible wildlife sighting!

After an informative lecture on whale migration and behaviour, we arrived at Langfjordhamn as darkness fell. Though the cloudy conditions prevented clear views of the Aurora Borealis, we went ashore to practice long-exposure night photography, making the most of the poor weather. Despite staying up until midnight, the Aurora never materialized, but the day's abundant wildlife encounters had already made it an unforgettable experience. We still however managed to get ashore and practice some long exposure night photography.



Day 5:
Cruise to Olderfjoren

Monday 11 November 2024

We set off early again at 6:30 am, the crisp morning air invigorating as we embarked on another adventure. A few hours later the sun was just beginning to rise, casting a golden hue over the tranquil waters and surrounding waters as we navigated through an open stretch near Loppa Island, a region renowned for its orca sightings. The excitement was high among our group, each of us eager to catch a glimpse of these magnificent creatures again. However, as we made our way through the choppy waters, the swell made our journey a bit bumpy, and despite our hopes, we did not spot any orcas initially. As we rounded the headland, our spirits lifted when we caught sight of orcas in the distance. Their sleek forms cut through the water, and we could see the occasional blow from humpback and fin whales nearby, adding to the thrill of the moment.

Yet, the orcas were elusive, and their unpredictable movements kept us on our toes. In search of calmer waters that would allow for a better viewing experience, we decided to deploy the zodiacs that would enable us to get closer to the action if we happened to get close. Venturing further into the open water, we focused our efforts on tracking the orcas we had glimpsed earlier. The anticipation built as we

scanned the horizon, our eyes darting back and forth, hoping for another sighting.

After some time, our patience paid off; we managed to get a few close encounters with the orcas. However, their erratic movements soon led us to realize that we would need to keep moving to stay in the game. Just as we were about to change our course, a sudden flurry of activity caught our attention in a bay to the east, prompting us to investigate further. What an incredible experience awaited us in that bay! For three and a half hours, we were treated to a breathtaking display of nature's wonders. We observed and photographed not only humpback whales but also several pods of orcas and a couple of fin whales, all engaged in a feeding frenzy. The scene was nothing short of spectacular as the whales worked together to herd herring into tight bait balls, driving them into the shallow fjord waters. The zodiacs bobbed gently on the surface as we enjoyed remarkably close encounters with these majestic animals. We watched in awe as they surfaced and breathed near our boats, their powerful bodies glistening in the sunlight. The highlight of our day came when we witnessed multiple humpbacks lunge feeding around us, their massive mouths opening wide to consume vast amounts of herring.











Day 6:
Fishing vessels at Altafjorden

Tuesday 12 November 2024

We meticulously planned our morning to coincide with the fishing boats as they wrapped up their overnight endeavours. The herring, known for their nocturnal activity, rise to the surface under the cover of darkness, making them an ideal target for fishermen. By the time dawn broke, the fishermen were busy transferring their impressive haul to a larger vessel, employing a powerful vacuum system designed to efficiently draw the herring onboard. This method, while effective, often resulted in an overflow of fish spilling back into the water, a phenomenon that the local orcas have astutely learned to capitalize on for an effortless meal.

Our decision to visit this particular location for whale watching, in tandem with the fishing boats, proved to be a stroke of luck; upon our arrival, we were greeted by the sight of several large pods of orcas actively feeding in close proximity to the boats. The scene was further animated by the presence of numerous gulls, which flocked to the area, eager to take advantage of the fish that were escaping into the water. It was truly captivating to witness the orcas' remarkable adaptation to this behaviour. They possess an uncanny ability to detect the fishing boats from a distance, their instincts honed to recognize the signals that indicate a feast is at hand.

The lighting that morning was nothing short of exceptional. Soft hues painted the surrounding mountains, creating a breathtaking backdrop that enhanced our photographs. The interplay of light and shadow added depth to the scene, making it even more memorable. After soaking in this extraordinary spectacle, we observed as the fishing boats concluded their morning operations, signalling the perfect moment for us to embark on our zodiacs and make the most of the remaining daylight. Our objective was clear: we aimed to locate orca pods that might still be lingering in the area.

After a hearty meal, these magnificent creatures often take the time to socialize and relax, providing us with a unique opportunity to observe their behaviour. It didn't take long before our keen eyes spotted a large pod engaged in independent hunting. The orcas displayed their remarkable teamwork, skillfully herding the herring into a tight bait ball, making it easier for them to feed. The sight was a testament to

their intelligence and social structure, leaving us in awe of these majestic marine mammals and their intricate relationship with the environment.

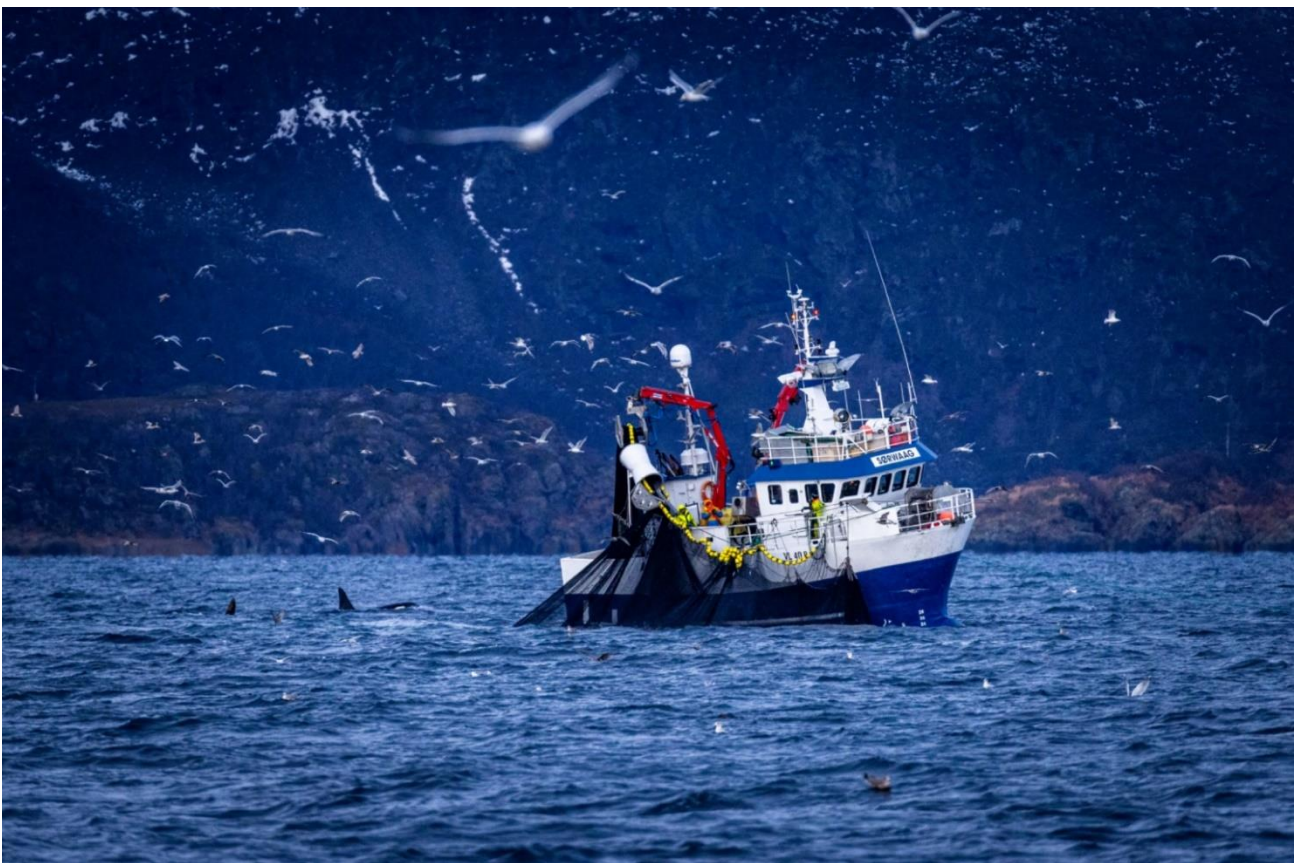
It was time to return to the Stockholm and a bittersweet feeling settled over us as we reflected on our incredible journey. That evening, we made our way back to Alta, the small town that had become our temporary home, to prepare for our final night in this enchanting part of the world.

The snow-covered peaks, and the twinkling lights of the town seemed to bid us farewell, and we couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia for the experiences we had shared. Around midnight, as we gathered outside, we were treated to a stunning display of the northern lights illuminating the skies over Alta. Alta truly lives up to its name of the City of the Northern Lights.

The vibrant greens danced across the horizon, casting an ethereal glow over the snow-draped landscape. It was a breathtaking sight, particularly on our last night, and we all stood in awe, our breath visible in the cold air, as we captured some photos to preserve the moment. Each snap of the camera felt like a small attempt to hold onto the magic of the night, but we knew that no photograph could truly capture the wonder we were witnessing. As the spectacle began to fade, we felt a mix of gratitude and sadness, knowing that this beautiful experience was coming to an end, yet cherishing the memories we had created together.









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