

Blue heaven

Planet tells a whale of a tale

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THE Blue Planet — a startlingly beautiful documentary about the ocean that airs tonight and tomorrow on Discovery — is filled with extraordinary moments. Just the first sight of a blue whale is breathtaking.

Narrator Sir David Attenborough, hired by program creator Alastair Fothergill, builds up the wonder by quietly pointing out it has a heart the size of a car and veins so big a human could swim through them.

And that's just the start of this extraordinary series produced by the BBC and Discovery.

Four-hundred thousand Olive Ridley turtles converge on a Costa Rican beach one night a year to lay their eggs. (No one understands how they all know which night to arrive.)

A polar bear stands guard over a breathing hole where whales — trapped far from the ocean — must eventually surface to breathe — and be attacked.

Hundreds of hammerhead sharks surge through the water in search of food.

And a dramatic scene where killer whales stalk and kill a baby gray whale is more heartstopping than anything you'll see on "ER."

No surprise, this series is a blockbuster. It's the most expensive nature documentary ever made.



Sir David Attenborough: Host with the most penguins.

At \$10.5 million, it cost \$1.5 million more than the heavy hitter "Walking With Dinosaurs."

It took five years to film, with hundreds of crew members spread out over 200 locations around the globe, sometimes spending fruitless months just trying to get one shot.

There's even serious talk of creating a 90-minute film version for theatrical release.

The series aired as eight 50-minute programs on the BBC. Four of them will air this week on Discovery, followed by the final four in May.

Tonight's first episode, "Ocean World," is about the blue whale and tries to put into perspective the huge impact of the oceans on the rest of the planet.

"Frozen Seas," which follows at 10, looks at polar life where the sea is icy.

Monday's offerings are "Open Ocean" and "The Deep."

"The Blue Planet" was a resounding triumph for producer Fothergill, the 41-year-old head of the BBC nature documentary unit who stepped down from his day job to focus on this labor of love.

He was rewarded with some of the greatest reviews and ratings in years. One London newspaper called it "one of the most breathtaking documentary series ever produced."

Fothergill would happily go right back and work for another five years on a sequel. "We've only scratched the surface," he says.

"The Blue World" is filled with shots of creatures that have never been seen before, something Fothergill says happens almost every time they can go thousands of meters under the surface of the ocean. Just as thrilling for him was showing footage to scientists who saw creatures they'd studied all their lives doing things no one had ever imagined.

"The best example of that was a guy who works in the Azores, studying these wonderful albatross-like birds," says Fothergill, who shows the birds dive-bombing several yards below the surface to feed on a school of fish.

"The guy came to where we were editing that se-

quence. He'd spent 25 years studying those birds and he just sat there with his mouth open.

"He was quiet for about half an hour and I said, 'Don't you like this?' I was worried. He said, 'I just cannot believe my birds do this. I thought I understood my birds.'"

The stories about the making of the series are almost as engrossing as the show itself. Two crew members found themselves trapped on an iceberg that had broken away from the shore and promised to marry each other if they survived. (They did, of course, and are now happily married.)

Others faced numerous

close calls in tiny boats that got far too close to some of those massive sea creatures.

But the most common experience of all was failure. It took five years and so many millions to produce simply because most of the time cameramen couldn't find anything worth shooting.

"Most of the ocean is a blue desert," says Fothergill. "The budget [really paid for] failure. The amount of failure we had!

"But once you find that needle in a haystack, you get dramatic stuff.

The best was when the camera people got more

than they bargained for.

"We'd hoped [during one trip] to find marlin. That was exciting enough," he says.

"Then tuna turned up and finally to get that sei whale — I mean, nobody has filmed a sei whale in the wild under water.

"That particular sequence was shot on the very last day of our very last shoot of the whole series, after 300 days in the field. Oh gosh, was it a good way to end!"