

Sweet Silence

By Dennis Knight

Where on earth can you go for sweet silence? First, you might try jumping in the ocean. That seems to be a natural choice because people don't hear well under water at all. It has something to do with our ear drums being unable to vibrate in the water, and the bones in our inner ear being 40% less effective in that environment.

But even with that advantage diving in, you'll likely be disappointed because the seas are not silent at all, and to a large extent it's our fault. There are noises made by freighters, cruise ships, fishing vessels, and recreational boating. There is drilling and other industrial work, and naval operations of many nations often use sonar, bouncing pings of sound through the briny.

There are natural sounds in the ocean as well, including surf and rain, underwater earthquakes, glaciers calving, marine mammals, fish and crustaceans. There is a channel, a specific layer of water deep in the ocean, in which low frequency sound waves may travel thousands of miles before weakening. Whales of different varieties, especially the baleen, emit strange, mysterious low frequency sounds in this area, and humpbacks seem to dive down to this channel specifically to communicate or 'sing' with other humpbacks at great distances.

Next you might try some spelunking. On the way into your chosen cavern you will hear only the sounds of your own footfall. Then you will get deep enough to stop to bask in the quiet. Your ears will be sharp in this environment, and they will begin to pick up the amplified echoes of dripping water, the scurrying of blind creatures, and the cacophony of batwings disturbing your peace. There are other bat noises, not the vaunted echo location of bats which is out of your frequency range, but you might hear them squawk at each other in conflict, sing bat songs to attract mates, or the scolding of mothers to their pups.

Mountain tops, desert islands and secluded valleys might offer a sense of deep peace away from humans, but like the environments we already tried, you won't find utter sweet silence in those places, either. To do that, it seems, you'll need to charter a flight to space. And when you get out there, to really find silence, you'll have to go for a walk outside your space ship. That's because the inside, which is a pressurized environment in which sounds can travel, tends to be a beehive of activity and chattering with mission control back on noisy earth.

And even your spacewalk will not be completely silent because there will be soft noises from air circulating through your spacesuit. But, except for that, the quiet will be absolute. The tasks you will be doing out in the void won't break your peace, and the tools you use to ratchet, drill, or pound on the mother ship will work in sweet silence. Just don't let that hammer find your thumb.