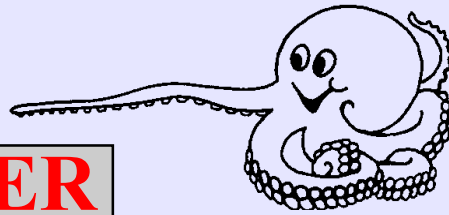


THE REEF SEEKER



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September - 2023



THE WHALE SHARKS OF ISLA MUJERES

(You can read the full trip report on our website but this is what it takes to go out and snorkel with the Whale Sharks.)

The main reason we come to Isla Mujeres is to snorkel with the Whale Sharks that gather in the waters every year roughly from May through September. We were told that this year seems to be a lean year in terms of numbers.

The Whale Shark excursions are not run directly by Aqua Adventures but through an affiliated company called Isla Mujeres Boats, run by Beto Aguayo and his son Jair. We've used them on every trip in the past and were quite happy to go searching for Whale Sharks with them again this year. They've got two boats, *La Nena* and *Parjito*, both of which can accommodate up to 10 snorkelers. (If you've got a choice, *Parjito's* a little longer, a little wider, and more comfortable.) We also book the entire boat so we have it to ourselves regardless of the number of people we end up with. The Whale Shark area is about 10 miles

north of Isla so it's about a one-hour ride to get out there. And it's usually fairly calm so we ride out in civvies and don't get into wetsuits until we're on-site.

There are a number of rules set by the Mexican government for swimming with the Whale Sharks:

- If you're not wearing a wetsuit, you must wear a life jacket in the water
- Stay with your guide
- No more than 2 people per boat with the guide at a time
- No wearing of sunscreen (washes off and affects the water quality)
- Don't touch the Whale Sharks
- No free-diving (so stay on the surface) and no scuba
- No flashes on still cameras and no video lights
- Only 2 jumps per team of 2 per boat for the day

Bear in mind that there can be 50 or more boats out in the Whale Shark area. In fact on our first day (Monday), I counted that many in our area alone. And there's certainly a little bit of bending of the rules here and there. But the thing to remember is that these rules are in place not only for the safety of the Whale Sharks, but of the snorkelers too. I joked with both Beto and Jair that their stress levels must be fairly high each day as they try to maneuver amongst all the boats and the snorkelers in the

water. There's a lot of traffic going on.

The other thing to understand is that this is generally a morning endeavor. We left around 8AM, and it takes about an hour to get out to the general Whale Shark area. The leviathans are usually feeding on the surface so they're relatively easy to spot but as they gorge themselves and as the morning wears on, they tend to descend back into the depths. So by Noon, there's little or no activity and everyone heads for home.

We had three days of Whale Sharking. As trip leader, my goal is to make sure that everyone in our group gets at least one face-to-face encounter with one of these gentle giants. And we got that in spades.

On Monday, our first day out, the seas were a bit high. This complicates things in the Whale Shark area because, with a "lumpy" sea, the animals can't just cruise right at the surface as they normally do. So on this day, they were a foot or two down and generally moving at a decent clip. What it meant was that whenever a group of ours jumped in, you needed to be on the move almost immediately and you had to keep moving to stay with the fish. And even though it looks like they're gently lolly-gagging along, they move faster than you'd

think. So a lot of times on the first day, you'd only get 30-60 seconds with the animal because you'd be wearing yourself out keeping up. But, I'm pleased to say, every single person in our group got a good look on every single jump as Captain Jair expertly maneuvered *Parjito* and got us in position.

Our second day out was Wednesday and the weather had turned a bit. On this day, we were on *La Nena* with Beto and, as we left the dock, I noticed that it seemed like we were the only boat going out. (Normally, there might be a dozen or more boats leaving from the various Isla docks, as well as boats that start out in Cancun and come over.) As we rounded the northern tip of Isla and headed out, it was easy to see why. Monday had a 2-4 foot swell with an occasional 5-footer. Wednesday it seemed like 3-5 feet with an occasional 6-footer. That meant for a bouncy ride with spray coming over the bow to the point that most of us put our wetsuits on since we were going to get drenched. (It also meant a couple of our folks added mal de mar to their Whale Shark experience.) Because of the swell, Beto ran at about half speed so it took us almost two hours to get out to the Whale Shark area.

When we arrived, there were only a couple of other boats in the area. Everyone was looking for Mr. Whale Shark. No one was finding him. Kudos to Beto for his patience and perseverance. We spent almost another hour and a half going at idle speed and looking. (At least it was a sunny day.) And just when we were about to give up and turn for home empty-handed (it would have been the first time I ever got skunked) . . . we heard

some excited radio chatter. Whale Shark spotted!!!

Now bear in mind that this is really the proverbial needle-in-a-haystack. The general Whale Shark area is a mile or two wide and a mile or two long. So there's a LOT of ocean to cover. Start with there aren't many animals in the area. Then throw in the idea that they're not skimming the surface making them harder to spot. That anyone sees anything is nothing short of a miracle.

But we were quite happy to take advantage of this miracle. It took us another ten minutes to reach the boat that has radioed and we found a single Whale Shark. But there were only two other boats there as well. So we plopped our first two divers in. Beto prides himself in putting you right on the nose of the animal he watches where the animal is heading, maneuvers the boat, and you jump when he says. Then you kick straight ahead and out of the haze emerges this magnificent beast, usually heading right towards you with mouth open. (You'll see some pictures of this in the SmugMug slide show.) Once again, we were able to get everybody in the water for the Whale

Shark experience. We "might" have even lost count as to how many jumps we all got to do so it "might" have exceeded two. But through patience and perseverance, we turned tragedy into triumph. It also made for a long day. Normally we got around 1PM. On Wednesday, we didn't get back until 3:15PM.

Friday was our final Whale Shark day and we were back on *Parjito* with Jair. The seas had calmed significantly so the ride out was MUCH more pleasant and when we got to the Whale Shark area, Jair told us there were 15 Whale Sharks feeding. This time, you could easily see their dorsals and their tail fins breaking the surface, surrounded by a gaggle of life-jacketed snorkelers in hot pursuit. On this day, we got in plenty of jumps for everyone, the animals were moving very slowly at the surface so it was easy to keep pace with them, and everyone got really good, long encounters with the animals. If you look at the video that I shot, that video was done on this dive. I think I had 10 minutes or more in the water and counted five different Whale Sharks over the course of my immersion. Not a bad way to end the trip.

2023-24 DIVING VACATIONS

November 15-29 • Maldives

March 18-22 • Bonaire

Where to in May???

Where to in July???



LOBSTER SEASON OPENER CHANGES

The California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife has announced a change to the opening time for lobster season for 2023-2024, and it's actually 12 hours earlier than usual.

The history of all of this is that the season used to open at 12:01AM on the first Saturday preceding the first Wednesday in October. But that raised some safety issues because now you had divers who had worked all day Friday, showed up at the boat Friday evening, went to their favorite spot, and then jumped in the water at 12:01AM and stayed up all night to make a couple of more dives before dawn.

The safety issue was that as the overnight wore on, people who were already hopped up by bug fever now were getting tired from having been up so long and were even less focused on the diving. So we definitely had issues of out-of-air and other diver errors over the years that resulted in fatalities.

In response to that concern, F&W moved the opening time to 6AM on the Saturday preceding the first Wednesday in October. Comprehensive stats about whether this worked or not in terms of lessening accidents are hard to come by. We've certainly still had our share of opening weekend fatalities, even with the opening time change.

So I don't know the rationale be-

| UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| DAY | DATE | BOAT/SITE | PLANNED DESTINATION | PRICE |
| Thu. | Sept. 7 | Redondo/Vets | ••• Night Dive ••• | 35 |
| Sat. | 16 | Redondo/Vets | Taming Surf Entries | 35 |
| Wed. | 20 | Catalina Express | Avalon Underwater Park | 175 |
| Wed. | 27 | --- CLASS --- | --- Secrets of Fish ID --- | 35 |
| Sat. | Oct. 14 | Redondo/Vets | Beach Diving | 35 |
| Wed. | 18 | Catalina Express | Avalon Underwater Park | 175 |
| Thu. | 26 | Redondo/Vets | ••• Night Dive ••• | 35 |
| Wed. | Nov. 1 | --- CLASS --- | --- Photo Workshop --- | 35 |

hind this new change but F&W had once again changed the opening time which will now be Friday night at 6:00PM on the Friday preceding the first Wednesday in October. (Why they don't just say "the last Friday in September" is beyond me but it is what it is.) And what this actually does is extend the lobster season overall, and opening day specifically, by 12 hours.

This means that in 2023, lobster season will open at 6:00PM on Friday, September 29. Will there be people who now decide to stay awake from 6PM-6AM to get in the full measure of the first nights hunt? Probably. Will it have any impact one way or the other? We shall see.

Make sure you have your 2023-2024 lobster card with you as well and follow all the various rules for capturing these crustaceans. The most often-violated and misunderstood one is that you CANNOT bring a lobster to the surface for measuring purposes UNLESS you are freediving. Any lobster that's short must be placed back in the hole from whence it came. You can't just toss it back into the ocean.

If you're a lobster aficionado, you've got a month to get ready. If you're going to be out bug hunting, we once again remind you to dive safely. No lobster is worth your life.



ZOOM SEEKERS SEPTEMBER 12

We've had a sked change. Chamber Director Karl Huggins will now be our guest, talking about "What You Don't Know About Your Dive Computer CAN Kill You."

You've heard the saying, "What you don't know can't hurt you." But that's NOT the case when it comes to dive computers. And few people know the intricacies of these digital information devices better than Karl. It turns out that there ARE ways in which you can use a computer that, while you may feel you're being safe, can actually put you in greater danger. In this talk, Karl will outline some of those issues as well as just give some general advice about how to safely use a dive computer.

This is a Zoom-based talk which starts at 7:30PM on Tuesday, September 12. It's open to anyone who wants to join, and we'll hope to see you there with us.

2024 TRIPS

I hope in the next few weeks to layout a sked for our trips for 2024. I've been a bit remiss in dealing with this because of our travel schedules lately. Our usual plan is to travel during the odd-numbered months.

As for January, I may be doing a private excursion that will preclude doing one of our group trips. However . . .

The one we have firmly on the books right now is a return to San Ignacio Lagoon March 18-22 to give another shot at Gray Whale hugging. We had a great time this year but had weather issues so we're delaying a month for 2024 in hopes of improving that. (And sometimes, as you know from our

Yap experience, weather happens when you least expect it.) We'll fly down on Monday, do the whales Tuesday-Friday, and be back in L.A. Friday early evening.

I'm contemplating maybe doing Tubbataha (Philippines) in May. It's a very short season there – mid-March to mid-June – so it's a combination of finding the right time to go as well as finding an acceptable boat. (You can only dive it from a liveaboard.) So we shall see.

For July, I'm giving thought to maybe going back to Murex in Manado, Indonesia. We were there in 2022 and, despite the COVID issues at the end of the trip, had some great dives and a good time. It's among our favorite places to go spend time. Good diving, lovely

resort, and wonderful staff that takes very good care of us.

I'm up in the air for September and November. I've given some thought returning to Roatan. We could also consider other Caribbean destinations as well. We just need to be wary of hurricane possibilities. I wouldn't mind putting together a Sea of Cortez trip and while Nautilus is doing those, I'm not sure which boat they're got positioned or which part of it they will be doing. If they're leaving out of Cabo, that involves a long run to get to the first dive sites. And if they're leaving out of La Paz, there aren't convenient flights in and out like there used to be.

So it's all a work-in-progress at the moment. Happy to take your suggestions and requests.

PICTURE PAGE - Isla Mujeres fish

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2023)



Batfish
resting on the bottom



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Conch
eye stalks



Schooling fish
at MUSA



Saucereye
Porgie



Townsend Angelfish
(hybrid of a Queen & a Blue)