

THE REEF SEEKER



REEF SEEKERS DIVE CO.
P.O. Box 634
Beverly Hills, CA 90213
Phone & text: (310) 652-4990
web: www.reefseekers.com
e-mail: kenkurtis@aol.com

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SOCORRO 2021 TRIP REPORT

Third time's the charm? This was our third Reef Seekers trip to Socorro and while the other two (2008 and 2010) were good, they didn't quite live up to the hype of the place. Would this one be better/different? (Spoiler alert: Yes.) But before we talk about the details, let's get some of the basics out of the way first.

Socorro is more correctly called the Revillagigedo Islands. But because that's really hard on the gringo tongue, most people refer to the entire area as Socorro. The islands lie roughly 250 miles south/southwest of Cabo San Lucas and it takes about 24 to make the transit. The area is comprised of: San Benedicto and Socorro (the two main large islands), Roca Partida (which is really just a rock 80 miles to the west), and Clarion (which is almost 200 miles further west and is too far away to be easily accessible).

Our group was 13 strong and came from different areas of the country: John Lumb & Jan Larson, Tamar Toister, Shirley Parry, Marilyn Lawrence, Eric Ernest, Tom Turney & Jill Boivin, and I (Ken Kurtis) all came from Los Angeles. Britt Evans came from San Francisco. Audrey Anderson came in from Colorado. And George & Jeannie Schneider came from Florida.

The COVID pandemic factored heavily into this trip. For a while, Socorro was totally closed to everyone and we didn't know if we'd be able to go at all. And

even after it opened up in November, not everyone on for our trip was comfortable going. In fact, we had seven people, all paid in full, who opted not to go because of COVID concerns. But I don't want to give the impression that those who went were in some sort of a COVID-denial state of mind. That wasn't the case at all.

We were diving the Nautilus Under Sea and Nautilus has instituted many COVID procedures. These included requiring divers to conduct a pre-trip 7-day temperature check, produce a negative COVID test taken a few days before departure, submit to a short medical exam (blood pressure, temperature, symptom questionnaire) performed by a paramedic just before boarding the boat, mask-wearing while on-board, observation of social distancing as best as possible during the trip (thankfully it's a good-sized boat), split-shift dining to minimize the number of people in the salon at any one time, small groups of 4-6 on the dive skiffs, daily temperature-monitoring on the boat, and just an overall awareness if anything for you personally was out of whack symptomatically. These same procedures applied to the crew as well, and everyone did a very good job of adhering to these protocols.

For me personally, I was a bit nervous about doing the trip both from a diver and a trip leader standpoint. I debated long and hard about this. I think a lot of this really comes down to whether or not you feel that the COVID mitigation measures (mask, social distance, wash/sanitize hands) are effective and whether they can be done over time on this type of a trip to keep you safe.

The other thing that factored in heavily in my thinking was that we were on a boat, not land-based. If we were at a land-based resort, there might be another hundred divers and staff there and you simply don't know who else they're

associating with over the course of your stay that might increase their chances of being infected and passing it on to you.

But once we set foot on that boat, we were effectively in a bubble and if the relatively limited number of people within that bubble (16 divers and 9 crew) came on-board COVID-negative, all would be good. And since there are no guarantees with this pandemic, continuing to follow mitigation protocols on-board should lessen the chance that if someone was unwittingly COVID-positive, they would infect others.

The highest risk in all of this was at the airport and on the plane, as well as the 24 hours we spent in Cabo before boarding. But most of us double-masked on the plane (some also added face shields), we limited the number of people in the vans from the airport to Cabo proper, and we could generally avoid contact with others while in Cabo before we got on the boat. So, as a group, we were probably as comfortable as could be under the circumstances. And as best I can tell now 9 days post-trip, no one got infected. Whether that's through luck or that the protocols really work, the fact of the matter is that everyone came through this healthy and had a good trip to boot.

Enough of COVID for now. Let's talk about the trip.

We flew down to Cabo on Wednesday and stayed at the Tesoro Los Cabos Resort overnight. It's right on the harbor, rooms have a lovely view, and it's also where the Nautilus dive shop – See Creatures – is located. So quite convenient.

One nice bonus Nautilus offers for those who come in early is a Noon complimentary warm-up checkout dive the afternoon before you board the boat. We had horrible conditions with less than five feet of very green visibility on the first of

our two dives. But given that most people, due to COVID, had not been diving in almost a year, it was nice to get a dive under your belt and work out some of the kinks. We actually did two warm-up dives (there was some confusion as to whether we were entitled to one or two – if you’re doing a Nautilus trip clear this up before you go because they generally want to charge \$40 for the second dive) with both being at the Lands End area of Cabo, a five-minute boat ride away. We were back at See Creatures around 4PM.

We boarded the Under Sea that evening around 8PM, settled in, and also covered things like escape hatches and evacuation procedures prior to departure. This is one of the consequences – and a good one – from the Conception and Red Sea Aggressor fires of 2019. Around 10PM we were off on our adventure.

Although this is billed by Nautilus as a 9-day trip, it’s more like seven since Day 1 doesn’t start until you board at 8PM and Day 9 ends around 8:30AM when you get off the boat. It’s a full day (#2) to get down to Socorro, you’ve got five full days of diving (#3-7), and then a full day journey to get back to Cabo (#8), and then you depart after breakfast (#9).

We had really nice crossings both ways. Because you’re traversing open ocean – there is absolutely no land in sight for most of the journey – you can certainly run into rough seas and there are plenty of tales of entire boats of seasick divers. But we had sunshine and a gentle long-period roll in both directions.

The general plan each day was to start with a continental breakfast around 6:30AM, first dive around 7:45AM, hot breakfast after that, second dive around 11AM, lunch following, third dive at 2PM, snack, fourth dive at 4:30PM, and dinner around 7PM. For all of these, we tried to keep to smaller groups as part of the on-board COVID protocols.

For meals, we divided into two groups of 8. At first, Group 1 ate in the galley followed by Group 2 half an hour later. But on the following day, it was suggested that we could eat up on the top deck as well so we basically had Group 1 in the galley and Group 2 upstairs, all eating at the same time. It made it a bit easier for chef Antonio on food prep, but was a lot more work for food servers Osa and Jenny because they were constantly

making trips up and down between the upper deck and the main deck. And because the rule was that no one but Osa and Jenny served food or drink, they got a pretty good workout from us throughout the entire trip. Hats off to them because it was a lot more work than they’d normally have to do.

For dives, except for the very first dive, everything was done via Zodiac (aka skiff). We generally tried to limit skiff loads to no more than 6 divers, so the two skiffs usually made three trips to the dive site – never more than 5 minutes from where the boat was anchored – to get everyone underwater. And there were always two DMs in the water so you could choose to dive with them or go off on your own.

I also want to take a moment to comment on what an excellent job all of the crew did in all aspects of this trip. They followed the COVID protocols, they were always happy to help with any problems or issues (and we had a few), they had a great attitude, and they absolutely contributed to making this a memorable trip. This is very typical of all the experiences I’ve had with Nautilus crews over the years. Sometimes it’s easy to overlook the contribution the crew makes to your enjoyment of a trip so I wanted to take a moment to shine a spotlight on the crew of the Nautilus Under Sea.

The diving ranged from good to great, with most of the dives on the great end of the scale. Water temp on my gauge was a pretty steady 75°. I wore my 5mm with a 1mm hood. Others wore 3mm, some wore 7mm, and a few dove in just a skin. Visibility varied from 30 feet to well over 100 feet (Roca Partida). Some spots had a fair amount of particulate in the water – you’ll notice it in my pictures as little red circles and dots – but some sites were fairly clear.

These are rocky reefs. Although there some sea fans and corynactus and the like, these aren’t exactly “pretty” reefs. You come here for the animal activity, not the scenery. But the animal activity can be spectacular, which is what attracts divers to the area.

One personal favorite of mine is the proliferation of Redtail Triggerfish. I think there are among the most gorgeous fish in the sea. Their body is an intricate cross-hatch yellow/black pattern with a

blue dot in the middle of each section, with thin blue stripes on their yellow-ish face, and colorful dorsal and anal fins. If they’ve got a red tailfin, they’re male. If they’ve got a yellow tailfin, they’re female. And when you see ones that are almost all white and usually hovering over a rock with their heads up, those are ones trying to get cleaned and they blanch themselves so the cleaner fish can more easily spot what areas need work. You’ll see pix of male and female as well as ones getting cleaned on the SmugMug page for this trip.

Our first full day of diving was at San Benedicto. We started out at Fondadero, which is used as a checkout site since it’s somewhat shallow and protected. This was also the only time we dove from the boat instead of the skiffs. Nothing special here although we did run into a nice Longtail Stingray and a small Electric Ray. This was also where we first saw the lobsters who are quite bold as they’re generally walking around out in the open. They’re not hunted here and they know that, so you’d see them everywhere and on pretty much every dive.

After this dive, we moved to The Canyon for the other three dives. The interesting thing about Socorro is that there really aren’t that many dive sites. At San Benedicto, it’s pretty much The Boiler and The Canyon. At Socorro proper, it’s Cabo Pearce and a couple of other “lesser” sites (one of which provided us with a spectacular Manta experience – so much for “lesser”). And Roca Partida is only about 100 yards wide and can easily be circumnavigated on a single dive so it’s a dive site unto itself.

The Canyon is known as a cleaning station frequented by sharks and mantas. We certainly got our fill. There were Silvertips everywhere, numerous Galapagos, a lone Hammerhead who kept his distance, a few Whitetips, schools of Bigeye Trevally, Cottonmouth Jacks, Black Jacks, and Bluefin Trevally darted about. The Canyon is also where we had a Whale Shark cruise by a few days later.

Although Socorro overall can be known for currents, we didn’t have a lot of current in general. There was definitely surge though, and a few times, it was quite strong. But we didn’t encounter any hang-on-for-your-life currents or anything strong enough where we needed

reef hooks to hold our position. However, the diving could definitely be challenging and some of our people felt like it was a workout from time to time.

On any trip to Socorro, usually one of the highlights are the dives at Roca Partida. This rock juts out of the water 80 miles to the west of San Benedicto and Socorro Island. It's a pretty sheer drop on all sides into about 250 feet of water. But because it's the only thing around, it's a magnet for all kinds of mega-fauna. In the past we've had Mantas, all kinds of sharks, schooling Hammerheads, and even whales in the area. The isolation of Roca also means it's very vulnerable to weather. But it looked like we had a good weather window for both Sunday (our second dive day) and Monday so I asked Captain Ramon if we could spend two days at Roca and he agreed.

I was very excited when we pulled in and found fairly good conditions for Roca. But when we descended, even though we had great visibility – well over 100 feet – for a Roca dive, it was fairly benign. There were a couple of large schools of jacks off of the south end of the rock but no Mantas, no Hammerheads, no whales, and while it was pleasant, especially if you'd never been there before, there wasn't a lot of activity for Roca Partida.

But one thing Roca always has, and in my mind, this alone makes the trip out there worthwhile, is Whitetip Sharks. Lots of them. Not dozens. But hundreds. Maybe even a thousand. And what's unique to Roca Partida are what are called the "Shark Balconies." These are flat shelves in the sheer rock and the Whitetips pile in there to take naps and rest by the dozens. And they'll tolerate a pretty close approach from divers. But if you get too close, they simply take off and circle around out in the blue until you've backed off, and then they glide back in and resume their respite. There are probably a dozen or more of these balconies. So even if there's nothing else going on at Roca, you can count on those.

Overall, it was OK, but sort of quiet. So I conferred with our lead DM Juan, and he and I both thought we could do better by only spending one day at Roca. On top of that, Juan told me that if we stayed for a second day, there were two other boats coming out to Roca and we'd have

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Wed.	Feb. 3	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$160
Thu.	11	Redondo (Vets)	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE
Wed.	24	--- CLASS ---	PHOTO WORKSHOP	\$25
Wed.	Mar. 17	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$160
Thu.	25	Redondo (Vets)	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE
Sat.	27	Redondo (Vets)	Navigation (single dive)	\$25

to share with them. Under Mexican National Park rules – similar to what we experienced in Cabo Pulmo in 2019 – the number of divers at a site at any one time is limited. So when multiple boats are there, you have to co-ordinate as to who gets to dive when. Park rules also limit you to a one hour dive. You can finagle a bit when you're the only boat on a site, but not when there are 30 other divers waiting to jump in and you're encroaching on their time.

And that brings up another thing that's changed since we were there 10 years ago. Not only is Socorro now an official marine National Park, but ten years ago there were only three or four boats visiting the area. Now there are about a dozen. So part of the trick is to see if you can dive in areas where there are no other boats. Our crew was pretty good about that as we only had one day when we had to share a dive site with another vessel.

We decided to leave Roca at the end of the day and would spend the extra day at Socorro Island instead. And boy, did THAT ever pay off.

We pulled into one of the lesser dive spots, Roca O'Neill, and were immediately treated to a Manta who adopted us and pretty much hung with us throughout the entire dive. Really nice.

We then moved a short distance to another lesser-dive spot, Punta Tosca. The dive site has three "fingers" that come out. My group chose to dive the far finger and the other group dove the close finger. (No one dove, or gave, the middle finger.) As the Knight Templar said in the third Indiana Jones film, "You have chosen wisely."

Oh my. As we descended, we could see three mantas in the area, including a Black Manta, which is jet black on the top, and mostly black on the bottom. Very striking. But the best part was that all three mantas decided they would stay with us, and for the next hour, they glided

back and forth and visited every diver multiple times. You could certainly see them checking us out as much as we were checking them out.

And this dive was also a good example of experience over conditions. The dive conditions themselves were not great: 30-40 viz, some surge, and a lot of particulate in the water. But how can you beat the experience of these graceful creatures with wingspans I'd estimate at around 15 feet, cruising in and out of the group like winged ballerinas.

This dive also underscored the random nature of nature. Ours was one of the best dives of the trip. The other group didn't see any mantas and described their dive as "A workout." Location, location, location (and a bit of luck).

So we now had three dive days under our belt and each day was better than the previous. Luckily – and a lot of times "good" dive trips are the result of a lot of luck – that "getting better all the time" trend would continue as we moved to Cabo Pearce (still on Socorro Island) for our fourth dive day.

For the first dive, my photo note says "Mantas all the time." We had five mantas cruising around us the entire dive, and sometimes we could even see all five at once. The other thing that interesting about almost all the mantas that we saw, is that they all seemed to have HUGE Remoras with them. According to the Paul Humann book, the max size for a Remora is two feet and these were all in that range. And it pretty much seems that the Remoras stayed with whatever Manta they came with. No Manta swapping as far as I could see.

And just when you thought it couldn't get any better, on the second dive we had the Whale Shark cruise by. Now I have to confess that while I got a decent look at him, I was too far away to get even a crappy photo. He was definitely on the move as if he was late for a meeting. But

everybody saw him and for many people, this was their first Whale Shark.

So we started the third dive figuring we'd seen it all. But we hadn't.

Sure, we had another Manta on the third dive. But we also had a small pod of dolphins who came by and visited with us for a few minutes. They took a look at all the divers, you could hear them clicking and echo-locating, and then they were off in the blue, leaving behind ear-to-ear grins on our faces.

For our final dive day, we moved back to San Benedicto to dive The Boiler. That's the spot that's legendary for the Manta encounters. They ask you to no longer touch the Mantas but if you've seen old pictures of Mantas getting belly rubs, it likely happened at The Boiler.

That's also why the crew was astounded when I told them that on my previous two trips and perhaps eight dives at The Boiler, I had seen exactly ZERO Mantas. They promised me that today, that skunking would end. And they were right.

I sort of tooted off and did my own thing. Sure enough, eight minutes into my dive, here came the first Manta to break my

manta-less Boiler streak. But it was only going to get better.

On the next dive, we had four mantas cruising in and out of the group. On the dive after that, my photo note says "Endless mantas." AND we had another pod of dolphins come by to spend a few minutes with us. Pretty magical and a great way to end the diving.

No matter where you are in the world, mantas are ID'd by their belly patterns, which are as unique as fingerprints. So I tried to make sure that each time we saw a manta, I could get underneath to get the ID shot. (I also send these off to the Pacific Manta Research Group in Bodega Bay for their data collection.) From my photos, over the three days we saw mantas, it seems like we saw 16 different ones, and sometimes we'd see the same one multiple times over the course of a day or a dive site. Really nice.

We topped off our final dives with a fabulous special steak dinner, went to bed exhausted, pulled anchor around 3AM, and then began the 24-hour trip north to Cabo. I like having that final full day at sea because it gives everyone plenty of time to hang gear out to dry, I

can go through some pictures, and you don't feel rushed in having to pack.

We got off the boat at 8:30 the next morning, spent a little time at See Creatures before our transfer vans arrived, got to a fairly empty Cabo airport in plenty of time, flew home, and made it through a nearly-deserted Tom Bradley International Terminal in record time. We were at the gate at 3:00PM and I was home in Westwood by 3:45PM.

So all in all, even with all the concern about COVID, a very good and successful trip. Will we go back again? Yes we will. In fact, I've already booked the Nautilus Under Sea for March 12-20, 2022. (And hopefully by then we'll have this COVID thing under much better control.) I've already got 12 people interested in going. Want to add your name to the list? Just call or send me an e-mail and we'll work out the details down the road.

But whether you've never been or you've been before, the Revillagigedo Islands are a destination that should definitely be on your list. And at Reef Seekers, we're happy to have you join us for our next adventure there.

PICTURE PAGE - Socorro 2021

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2021 - many more on our SmugMug page)



**Manta,
remoras, and a Black Jack**



P.O. Box 634
Beverly Hills, CA 90213

WWW.REEFSEEKERS.COM



**Sharks piled in
at Roca Partida**



**Clarion
Angelfish**



**Galapagos Shark
taking aim**



**Redtail Triggerfish
(male)**