

THE REEF SEEKER



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

September - 2016



THAR BE WHALE SHARKS!!

(Excerpted from the full trip report.)

Let's face it, THIS is what the main attraction is. And while we had very good encounters in 2013 and 2014, this year put those to shame. It was astounding. In fact, they say 2016 is the best Whale Shark season they've had in the five years he's been on the island.

Of the two weeks, despite the weather issues that forced us to juggle the Whale Shark days, I think Week 1 had the better overall experience with Thursday of the first week (we dove them Wed/Thu/Fri) being absolutely amazingly mind-blowing. The Whale Sharks were EVERYWHERE. Every boat, and there are generally a hundred or more boats out there, had two or three Whale Sharks around it. You almost couldn't jump in the water without landing on one. And while you were in the water, one would pass you, another would come up behind you and pass you, and then there would be another one coming in from the side. And while we

had two very good days the second week, Thursday of Week 1 still took home the prize.

The annual Whale Shark congregation around Isla is considered to be the largest in the world. It runs from mid-May to mid-September and estimates are that there are anywhere from 400-800 animals in the area. I'm not sure if that's all at once or over the course of the time period, but there definitely were 200 or more each of our two weeks.

Most of the Whale Sharks are males although there are females too. They've sub-adults and range in size from probably 15-25 feet. (Full-grown adults can be close to 40-50 feet. Think of a city bus that swims.) All they want to do is feed on the clear fish eggs found at the surface so they're usually skimming, mouths open, right along the top. This is why the restriction of snorkel-only is not an issue at all because they're right there. The government has set up other regulations too and while there was a Park boat out monitoring things with a drone, it seems that the individual operators are pretty good about self-policing as it's in their economic interest to do so.

No one knows how long this congregation has been going on. It's only been a tourist attraction for the last ten years or so and is now heavily regulated and monitored

by the Mexican government. And it's one of those things that happen often in diving where this experience that we consider so magical was known for years by the fishermen who considered the Whales Sharks a nuisance as they interfered with their ability to catch fish. But now, the Whale Sharks are a huge boost to the tourism economy of Mexico.

We dove with Ceviche Tours (also arranged through Jim Silver) and we liked them a lot. Now there's a caveat in this because we had two boats, both booked as "private" boats for our group only. If you go on one of the public/open boats, they can take up to 10 people with a guide, and then you're limited to 2 people in the water at a time with the guide. So you rotate people in and out the whole time you're there.

I prefer not only to have a boat to ourselves but I also don't want to book 10 people on the boat. So we reserve two entire boats but only put 5-7 people on each boat. It allows for more space for us on each boat, more water time once we get there, and - as the captains become more familiar with us - there's sometimes a bending of the two-at-a-time rule so we get more water time overall.

The caveat is that our two boats quickly became known amongst our groups as the fast boat and the

slow boat (although I'm sure some people thought of the second boat as the half-fast boat). The Whale Shark area is about 18-20 miles NE of Isla and the fast boat got us out there in a little over an hour. The slow boat took closer to 75 minutes or more. To make matters worse, on Wednesday of the second week - the day we got banged around so much - the slow boat actually broke down and had to return to the dock for engine repairs, then left an hour or so later, making for a REALLY long day.

But diving with the Whale Sharks is a truly magical experience, especially when you can see two, three, or even four or more at a time. It's really amazing how aware they are of your presence (as well as that of the boats), diverting their path slightly to avoid a collision, or diving underneath you or a boat, or simply turning away.

And one thing you learn early on is: Don't chase the Whale Sharks. They can swim a lot faster than you and all you'll do is wear yourself out. In fact, after his first jump as we were getting back on the boat, John Morgan turned to me and said, "This is a lot more work than I thought it would be."

While the boat will try to maneuver and drop you in front of an approaching Whale Shark, the real trick once you're there is to pretty much stay in place and let them come to you. That certainly wasn't a problem on five of our six total days out there. And sometimes you'd get lucky and find one that was almost vertical in the water, with his mouth right at the surface gulping seawater and straining it through his gills. Those animals barely moved so you could get

pictures and encounters as much as you wanted.

And sometimes, even though it seemed everyone had a camera of some sort, it's nice to stop shooting and just admire the gracefulness of these huge animals. This is, after all, the largest fish in the world. And there's still a lot we don't know about them because they're generally solitary and elusive. So this annual congregation is not only a tourism boon, but can also be a boon to researchers trying to discover some of the secrets of the Whale Sharks (like where they go to give birth).

For the most part, we'd spend 90 minutes or so actually in the Whale Shark area and then head back towards Isla. It would have been nice to stay a bit longer perhaps, but the reality is that everyone always got in multiple jumps and had multiple encounters, and as you get later and later in the morning, the Whales Sharks slow their feeding down and many of them simply disappear into the depths. So there isn't necessary a compelling reason to stay out much longer.

And did I mention the Manta Rays????

Since they feed on the same stuff that the Whale Sharks do, it's not a surprise to have them in the area as well. And on Wednesday & Thursday Week 1, we did have them. Dozens of them. Really fun to watch. Interestingly, we didn't get any mantas in Week 2. Go figure. But a nice bonus for the first week folks.

And one nice touch, and their signature move, from Ceviche Tours is that they literally live up to their name in that as you approach Isla, they (along with a hundred other boats) tuck into the protected shallow area off of North Beach - right across from our hotel actually - drop anchor and make fresh ceviche for everyone on board. I'm not a big fish-eater, but it was pretty good and a nice way to end the day. They've also got on-board a cooler of soft drinks and water and they hand out little sandwiches after your final Whale Shark snorkel. All of this is included in the price of the trip so it's a nice touch. And generally we'd stay in the ceviche area for 45-60 minutes and then arrive back at the dock around 1-1:30PM which left the afternoon free for relaxing, exploring, napping, or whatever you chose to do.

2016-17 DIVING VACATIONS

November 5-14 • Maldives

March 2017 • Bonaire (???)

July 7-19 • Yap Immersion #1

July 21-Aug 2 • Yap Immer. #2

LA NINA???

Some forecasters are speculating that the weather patterns in the Western Pacific are setting up for a La Nina this year which could be good news for our kelp beds. If it develops, a La Nina usually results in cooler temps which means cooler water and that's good for the kelp.

Generally, kelp has a temp range of mid-50s to high-60s. When you get water temps that are starting to hit 70, the kelp either weakens or simply dies. This then allows for invasive species, like the Sargassum, to take over as they can survive in the warmer water. And once they start occupying rock space, it becomes that much harder for the kelp to make a comeback.

So if the La Nina develops, you might find that there's a much healthier ecosystem in the water come next spring.

2017 TRIPS

Now that I've got the bulk of our travel out of the way for this year (quick reminder - we still have ONE female-share spot available on our November Maldives trip), I've got to sit down and plan out 2017. Some of you have already asked about a few destinations and now it's a question of seeing what fits into the schedule and then if there are enough people interested to make a go of it.

We're already committed to back-to-back Yap Immersion trips in July. July is also a time when we would normally do Indonesia, so I'm thinking of moving that to the fall and trying to do what I've termed "Ultimate Indonesia"

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES

Sat., Sept. 17 - Vets Park - Daytime dive - FREE!!!

Wed., Sept. 28 - Vets Park - Night dive - FREE!!!

Sat., Oct. 22 - Avalon - Underwater Park - \$150-ish

Wed., Oct. 26 - Vets Park - Night dive - FREE!!!

which would include a week in Manado at Murex, 10 days in Raja Ampat on a liveboard, and then three days (or so) on the back end in the Lembah Straits. You could do one, two, or all three segments.

I've also gotten some inquiries about Bonaire and realized that we haven't been back to Buddy Dive since 2014. That's simply too long. We normally do Bonaire in May but I may have another commitment for then. We also normally do Yap in March so my thought is that we look to do a week in Bonaire in March. For those of you who have expressed Bonaire interest, let me know what you think.

We had a great time with the Great Whites this year and - as you likely know - we had a phenomenal time with the Whale Sharks in Isla Mujeres. Those are both normally August trips (although the Whale Sharks could possibly be June and the sharks could possibly be pushed back to September or even October). My issue with August of next year lies with August 21, when there will be a total solar eclipse that's visible across many parts of the United States and I plan to be in Nashville for that. But since I'm spending three weeks in Yap in July, I'm not sure I want to fly home and then either head to Guadalupe or to Isla Mujeres.

So one question is whether there's interest in a mid-June Isla Mujeres

trip? And the second question is to see if there's interest in a September or October Great White trip, but it can't be so late as to interfere with Indonesia.

So let me know what you think and what your preferences are. My hope would be to nail all of this down no later than the end of this month (September) so we all can start making plans. Either shoot me an e-mail or give me a call (310/652-4990) and let me know what interests you.

GREAT WHITE NURSERY???

Among the great mysteries of the sea (and there are many) is this one: Where do Great Whites Sharks go to give birth? Researchers think they may have stumbled upon the North Atlantic version of the Great White Popping Ground and they think it's just off of Montauk, New York. They followed nine juvy Great Whites and were able to track them back to their birthplace. Interestingly, they won't stray too far from the area where they're born and hang around until they reach adulthood at the age of 20 (they can live as long as 70). I'll provide some links in TWARS this Sunday that can give you more info. But it seems like an interesting discovery.



LOCAL DIVING WITH REEF SEEKERS IS BACK

I've been woefully neglectful this year in scheduling local trips due to eyeball surgery, travel sked, Chamber Day, and perhaps even a bit of laziness on my part. But I'm going to make it up to you in September and October (especially since I'll be gone most of November).

As you'll notice in the box on page 3, I'm scheduling four trips in these

two months. Two of them are night dives at Vets Park (on Wednesdays) and there's also a Vets Park daytime dive (Sept. 17) and a day trip over to Avalon to dive the Underwater Park (Oct. 22).

Through a combination of guilt and generosity, all the Vets Park dives will be freebies. (You need to supply gear, though.) All are 1-tank dives. It's probably too early in the season to hope for squid so these will just be your standard run-of-the-mill night dives at Vets. For the daytime dive on the 17th, if anyone needs a little navigation training, we can throw that in as well.

For the Avalon trip on October 22, I'll freely give of my time but I'm charging you for that one. \$150 will cover the ferry, tanks rentals

in Avalon (so you don't have to schlep), and taxi to and from the Park. We'll most likely go over on the 9AM out of San Pedro and return on the 5:45 out of Avalon.

For all of these trips, you've got to remember to sign up. You can do that through e-mail or a phone call but if there's no one signed up, I don't show up either. So don't just show up at Vets or the Catalina Express Terminal unless you've confirmed your participation with me.

But we always have a good time on these dives and even I confess that it's been far too long since we did the last one.



PICTURE PAGE - Isla Mujeres 2016

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2016)



**John Morgan
passing through the ring**



P.O. Box 634
Beverly Hills, CA 90213

WWW.REEFSEEKERS.COM



**Colorful Spanish Hogfish
on the C58 wreck**



**Sargeant Major
guarding a nest**



**Lots of angels
like this Gray**



**Elkhorn coral
with sea fans**