

Malpelo Island • The “Mount Everest” of shark and large pelagic diving

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In March 2004, I visited for the very first time Malpelo Island. I was diving my SCR, along with a group of open circuit divers. After that trip, I knew that I would have to return to Malpelo with a CCR, and I did.

Fast-forward to July 2008, and I was on the way for yet another adventure to Malpelo, this time with a Sport Kiss in my carry-on luggage. I flew out of Seattle, via Houston to Panama City where I met up with Kent Backman from Hawaii, and my two Swiss friends Nic Megert and René Weber. We had booked the catamaran Inula, with homeport in Puerto Pedregal near David, Panama, close to the border of Costa Rica. The trip aboard the Inula was set for 11 days, with six days of diving in Malpelo and two days of diving Panama.

The following morning, we were picked-up at 7am by a mini-bus for our 430km transfer from Panama City to David. There is a quicker and more convenient way to do this domestic journey by plane, which takes all about 60 minutes, but since we all had a huge amount of gear, we opted to do the transfer by mini-bus. Kent had his MK 15.5 along with photography gear, booster etc. Nic and René both had their Inspirations with them, and me with my Sport Kiss. It took us about six hours for our journey from Panama City to the Port of Pedregal, just south of David. We arrived at 2pm, boarded the Inula and as soon as the tide came up, we left port and started our journey to Malpelo.

Malpelo is an island in the Pacific, 490 kilometers west of Buenaventura, Colombia's Pacific waters and about 500 km off the coast of Panama. Malpelo itself is a big rock; its size is about 3.5 square kilometers. The island which belongs to Colombia is uninhabited, except for a small military post which is manned by the Colombian Army and Navy. The island itself is a national park and a 20 mile zone around the island is declared as a no fishing zone. In 2006, the UNESCO declared Malpelo as a world heritage site. But the true beauty to Malpelo is beneath the waves. With many currents colliding with the island, it brings in a lot of marine life. There is a huge abundance of fish that can be found all around the island. What Malpelo is probably best known for are the schooling Hammerheads and other large pelagics that congregate there all year.

After settling in on the Inula and having a light meal, we all enjoyed the rest of the afternoon relaxing on deck and setting up our rebreathers. The first dive, our check-out dive, was planned for the following morning at Isla Montuosa. This island belongs to the Coiba Islands, and it is the furthest westerly island of the Coibas. After a night of travel, we made it the following morning fairly early to Isla Montuosa where we all geared up for our first dive of the trip. The dive site was Montuosa West, a wonderful dive site that bottoms out at 40 meters. The site contains several tall stacks that stick up from the bottom and go up to approximately 20 meters. The water was warm, 29 degrees Celsius, good visibility and with a run time of one hour we already encountered a hammerhead, some white tip reef sharks, a turtle and lots and lots of fish. During our safety stop, Kent and I came across a sea snake that swam along the surface. The first dive of the trip was history; everyone's gear was working great except René's VR3 had some issues. Late morning, we went over to Isla Montuosa for an exploratory walk on the island and hang out on the beach for a short while before our crossing to Malpelo.

We left Montuosa around lunch time and started our journey to Malpelo, this took the remainder of our first diving day, the coming day was at sea and the following morning we arrived in Malpelo. The crossing was a bit rough at times, but all-in-all not too bad. It sure helps being on a catamaran, it is more stable than a single hull boat.

The catamaran Inula is owned and operated by Arvid Martinkat, a German native, who has been running trips to Malpelo since 2001. The catamaran is 24 meters long, 8.5 meters wide, sleeps up to nine guests and contains a crew of four people. Capt. Arvid usually plans one to two trips per month which are open to individuals and/or groups and dive clubs. But the Inula can also be fully chartered for specific lengths and itineraries. Most of Arvid's guests aboard the catamaran are open circuit divers, but Arvid also offers full support for technical divers and rebreather divers. Plenty of oxygen is always on board along with a manual booster pump. Sorb and helium is also available upon request. We all had arranged for Sorb, and Arvid had plenty of Grace Sodasorb ready for us. Kent brought his Jetsam baby booster along, so Sam the deck-hand didn't have to manually boost all our oxygen tanks.

One great aspect about diving in Malpelo is that there is always only one live-aboard boat permitted at a time. So that meant we had Isla Malpelo to ourselves for six full days of diving and exploring. After a light early morning snack, we had a very thorough briefing by Capt. Arvid about the dive site and diving in Malpelo in general. This is a very remote diving destination and safety is top priority! There are

several currents that collide with the island and this can cause unpredictable conditions at times. Also, the closest decompression chamber is a two and a half day trip away in Panama City. We had winds blowing from the south; the south side of the island was exposed and very rough and choppy. The Inula was tied up on the north side of the island, where we were protected from the wind. Everyone prepared their gear and we were off for our first dive in Malpelo. Capt. Arvid also wears the “hat” of being the dive guide. Arvid knows all the dive sites around the entire island like one would know the layout of his home.

The decision was made that during the first three days of our stay in Malpelo we would explore as many different dive sites as possible, in order to stake out where the schooling hammerheads currently are hanging out. The remaining three days we allowed us to go back to the best spots, or pick other dive sites we would like to visit again. Our first dive site was the “Cast Away Coast” and it already turned out to be a spectacular dive with tons of schooling fish, schools of hammerheads and plenty of moray eels. Upon return to Inula from our first dive, Nic dropped a comment that went like this; “I saw more in this one dive than I saw during an entire two week live-aboard trip in the deep south of the Red Sea (Egypt).”

Our dives were mostly conducted from a RIB. Elvin or Sam were our drivers, and after we surfaced, they always had us in sight and we were picked up in no time. We mostly dove in buddy pairs; unless the situation was very rough or unpredictable then the dive was executed for safety reasons in a group. An inflatable sausage is an absolute must in Malpelo, and I have come to learn that a neon yellow color SMB can be seen much better than the orange. Arvid was very accommodating to the CCR divers, and we were able to do run times of 90 minutes and up to 120 minutes. In such a remote place, planning the dive, and sticking to your plan was absolutely essential.

Capt. Arvid is also a rebreather diver and he dives a modified Russian IDA-59; his BC and a tank on his back for buoyancy and bail out, and the IDA-59 around his neck and up front. This gave Arvid a “stealthy Russian look” underwater.

During our first three days of diving we visited nearly all the dive sites around the island except a few on the southern tip of the island, because the conditions were not ideal for diving due to the rough choppy waters and big swell.

The best action we found was at the dive site “La Nevera”. This was a fantastic dive where all the “big stuff” paraded by us all day long. Schooling hammerheads, Galapagos sharks, white tip reef sharks

showing mating behavior, eagle rays, manta ray, tunas, and during the last day and a half even a whale shark showed up and continued to come by. Not to forget the huge abundance of fish and all the moray eels one can imagine, out in the open, in every nook and cranny, and sometimes you can find 10 plus in a nice size crack.

We were not lucky in locating the Red Lipped Batfish. We did a dive at the site "Scuba" where this interesting looking guy can be usually found. But due to a not big enough temperature change at the thermo cline, they must have been in deeper waters.

But another stunning dive site is "Three Musketeers". During the first visit the current was so strong that it created visible underwater turbulences from currents colliding around the rocks. With these strong current brought lots of schooling fish, at times looking into the distance it seemed like a big grey cloud, and when the school of fish turned, the grey cloud turned into a nearly solid wall of fish. Very impressive. After the dive, Kent called this a "scrubber changing dive", and yes the color indicator worked very well on the Soda Sorb. We visited the "Three Musketeers" a second time, the current was less dramatic, but we dealt with a strong swell that made for some interesting diving. During this dive we swam through the tunnel of the middle Musketeer which had some nice marine life hiding in it.

At "Altar of the Virginia" there was a school of young barracudas that just hung out and it was very impressive to be completely surrounded by those juvenile barracudas. Also, with the superb visibility we had during our entire stay in Malpelo, those barracudas made for a nice photo-op on more than one occasion.

During our stay in this very remote place, we were always on the lookout for bait-balls. How do you see where the action goes on? If there is a gathering of birds on the water surface, and some of them "dive-bomb" in the water, you know there is something going on below. We saw on a few occasions where it looked like something was forming, but nothing really developed into a full blown bait-ball. During our RIB rides, we were accompanied a couple times by playful dolphins which enjoyed the fast moving company. And on our very last day, we were lucky enough to observe a Humpback whale with its calf. It swam by the Inula and dove shortly after passing by.

Arvid informed us that a sea lion had taken up residence right next to the tangon, (the landing bridge / ladder for getting on to the island). Arvid radioed the Commandant on the island and asked for permission so we could visit and take some pictures of the sea lion. Permission was granted and we were on the way to the tangon. One of the soldiers

lowered the rope ladder down to the water, and Arvid carefully maneuvered the RIB up to the ladder where one by one we got to climb this interesting device. Arvid drove the RIB right next to the ladder and I had to reach up as far as possible and held on to the rope ladder. I had to pull myself up on the rope as the boat would back away from the ladder. Arvid zipped off and here I was hanging about eight feet above the water. Now I had the pleasure of climbing up about 10 feet of the wobbly rope ladder before I was able to step foot on the rusty metal ladder and finally reaching some solid footing on top of the tangon. Eventually, we all were on the tangon. We were greeted by a friendly Colombian soldier who then pointed to the spot next to the tangon where the sea lion was napping. It seemed that this sea lion must have picked a wrong current from the Galapagos and it ended up on Malpelo. The animal looked exhausted and tired, but was not afraid of humans. After plenty of picture taking, it was time for our descent, down the rope ladder on to the RIB, one by one, before returning to Inula.

I went back on to the island the following morning. Everyone else went diving. After going back up the rope ladder, I headed up the steep rocky terrain to the soldiers' housing and living quarters. I went to a couple look out points and took pictures of the island and the animals. Plenty of masked booby birds everywhere, along with geckos, lizards and a crab species that only can be found on Malpelo. After my visit on the island, I headed back to the Inula and rejoined the divers for the two remaining dives before leaving Malpelo.

Our way back we were blessed with wind out of the right direction. Capt. Arvid put up the sails of the Inula and we were able to sail a good two-thirds of the way back to Panama. After the full day at sea, the following morning we were back in Panamanian waters where we decided to do one more dive, with another visit to a beach. Our last dive of the trip was conducted at La Drones, a Seamount that rises up to about 20 meters below the surface. Lots of schooling fish with hammerhead sightings that swam below us in the 40 plus meter range. All in all, a great final dive for such a spectacular trip.

Malpelo truly is the "Mount Everest" of shark and large pelagic diving. Panama is an undiscovered jewel that still holds many more spectacular dive sites yet to be discovered and explored.

For more information about the catamaran Inula and trips to Malpelo please check out: **www.inula-diving.com**

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