

Whale Sharks of Isla Mujeres

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Looking for an “add-on” to your next cave diving trip to Mexico? Consider a few days in Isla Mujeres.

At some point, every scuba diver dreams of diving with a whale shark (*Rhiodon Typus*). Like many divers, I traveled the globe for years searching for them but to no avail. I always seemed to hear the same old thing – “you should have been here last week”. In my mind, whale sharks were the “unicorns of the sea”. This all changed this past summer with a trip to Isla Mujeres, Mexico – a place recognized as having the world’s largest aggregation of whale sharks!

Isla Mujeres is a small island located due east of off the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. It is about 8 miles across the Bay of Women (Bahia Mujeres) and still within sight of its neighbor to the west, Cancun. The island is approximately five miles long and one half mile wide at its widest point. It is a very easy cab or shuttle ride from Playa del Carmen, Akumal, or Tulum. On our trip we had spent several days diving in Cozumel and then took the ferry from Cozumel to Playa del Carmen. From there it was only about an hour or so shuttle up to Puerto Juarez where we took the ferry to Isla Mujeres.

Legend has it that the island was used by the Mayan people as a sanctuary dedicated to Ixchel, the goddess of love and fertility. Supposedly, when the Spanish arrived they found a large number of women statues carved in stone in honor of the goddess, and it is from here that the island gets its name “Isla Mujeres”, the island of women.

Long famous for fishing, especially for sailfish in the winter months, the island is now promoting eco-tourism with whale shark trips each summer. These gentle giants grow to 50 feet (15 meters) in length and can weigh upwards of 27,000 pounds (12,500 kilograms). Local fishermen have known for many years about the whale shark aggregation but ignored them in favor of trying to catch other species of fish. The island’s whale shark eco-tourism began slowly around 2001 with a few local boats taking a handful of researchers and tourists to visit the animals. Within two years, the demand to see these beautiful creatures had increased to the point that the Mexican government, along with scientists and tour boat operators, had to put together a set of protocols. The current guidelines are basically that the experience is limited to snorkeling (no scuba), all boat operators must have a permit, only two guests and a guide are allowed in the water at a time, no touching of the animals is allowed, no flash photography, and only biodegradable sun block can be used.

Meanwhile, scientists from all over the world have also converged on the region to conduct various studies on the animals. There are lots of areas across the globe known for whale sharks such as western Australia, the Maldives, Galapagos, and Honduras, but none have the large predictable aggregation found in Isla Mujeres each summer. During the summer months (June through September) hundreds of whale sharks gather just north of Isla Mujeres in a seven mile radius to take advantage of the plankton rich waters created by the joining of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Additionally, in July and August there is a bonito spawning bringing in masses of whale sharks to feed on these eggs at the surface.

Bob Hueter, director of the Center for Shark Research at Sarasota Florida's Mote Marine Laboratory has been traveling to Isla Mujeres for several years and has implanted 28 whale sharks with satellite tags. These tags pinpoint the animal's movements for a preset period of time until the tags are released and float to the surface. The data is then downloaded via satellite. According to Hueter, tagging data shows the sharks disperse widely after leaving the area – some to the western Gulf of Mexico, others to the northern Gulf near the Deepwater Horizon oil spill site, others to the Florida Straits, and still others to Central America.

One female tagged in August of 2007 swam south to the Atlantic between Brazil and Africa, covering about 5000 miles, before the tag surfaced in January 2008. Another surprising finding was that some of these warm water animals dived as deep as a mile below the surface where temperatures hover just above freezing.

Tours leave from Isla Mujeres each morning between 7-8am and it is not uncommon to have fifty whale shark tour operators on the water. The shark aggregation moves around day by day, but usually the fleet will have located the whale sharks within an hour or two of leaving the dock. Nothing can match the thrill of coming upon hundreds of 30-40 foot whale sharks feeding at the surface in crystal blue 86 degree (30 degrees Celsius) water. According to regulations, tour boats have to leave for port at 2pm but until then the day is spent with these magnificent creatures.

Our trip was arranged to fall around the full moon in July in hopes of that resulting in the maximum bonito spawning, and thus, the greatest chance of whale shark encounters. With my past

disappointments, I was not greedy. I was simply hoping for the opportunity to get in the water and photograph a single whale shark. Thankfully, we were blessed with sunny skies, flat seas, warm crystal clear water, and HUNDREDS of whale sharks. These gentle giants seemed oblivious to the snorkelers sharing the water with them. They ignored us and simply swam around at the surface slowly feeding on the bonito eggs. From a photographer's perspective it was nirvana. You could have any shot you wanted – one whale shark, multiple whale sharks, shark with diver, silhouette, mouth open, head on shot – anything! The sharks were everywhere. All you had to do was sit in one spot and the action would come to you.

The logistics of a trip to Isla Mujeres is quite easy. Multiple carriers fly into Cancun, Mexico. From there you take a cab or shuttle service to Puerto Juarez where you catch the ferry to Isla Mujeres. We stayed at Playa la Luna Media (www.playalunamedia.com) which is a very nice beachfront hotel with a beautiful pool, air-conditioned rooms with refrigerators, and balconies with hammocks for relaxing after a long day of snorkeling with whale sharks. They can also arrange your whale shark tours, your transportation to and from the airport, and even golf cart rentals for your travels around the island. One phone call or email and your entire vacation is complete!

Our summer trip to Isla Mujeres was truly magical. I can't imagine a better place in the world to have your whale shark dreams come true. Unicorns really do exist!