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COCOS

HAMMERS



> VISIBILITY WAS GOOD, ABOUT 20 METRES, AND THE KICKED-UP SEDIMENTATION WAS GRADUALLY SETTLING. THEN THEY CAME. FIRST A HANDFUL, THEN DOZENS. THE GREYISH FORMS SEEN DURING OUR DESCENT NOW TOOK SHAPE. YES, THESE WERE THE HAMMERHEADS WHICH DIVERS WORLDWIDE COME TO SEE. UNMISTAKABLY. THE T-BARRED HEAD, SCHOOLING FORMATION AND SIDE-SWAYING SWIMMING POSTURES - THESE UNIQUE SHARKS WERE ABOUT 2.5 TO 3 METRES LONG AND RATHER GIRTHY.



*Clockwise from top:
Green turtle & horse-eyed jacks;
Scalloped hammerhead sharks;
Hammerhead flyby;
Schooling hammerheads.*

On that checkout dive in Cocos Island, even before we settled on the bottom of Manuelita's leeward side, those grey shapes dashed in and out of the limit of our visibility. Earlier during the brief our divemasters Mario and Peter casually stated we'd probably have more sharks here than on any other checkout dive anywhere.

All divers who travel 30-36 hours one way by boat to reach Cocos are presumably shark lovers, or 'shark freaks' (a phrase by renowned German photographer Ralf Kiefner). Understandably, all the passengers did this checkout dive. In fact, a lot of us were in their divesuits way before the brief. The 'shark freaks' eagerly wanted to experience the pounding sharks of this magical island.

The 18 guests were divided into two groups, each with their own divemaster on

separate 7 metre long tenders. Our group settled on the sandy substrate at 15 metres, a little past the fringing reef. Schools of blue-striped snappers and surgeonfish were milling around the gentle swells. About a dozen whitetip reef sharks kindly gave us their resting spots, moving onto the outer edge to resume their morning rest. Mario swam round us and everyone replied with OK signs.

Like most scalloped hammerhead sharks elsewhere, these at Cocos were equally shy and tended to veer off from our bubbles. We were advised the best way to see them up close would require slowing down our breathing, or learn to use another apparatus - the rebreather. A few of our diving colleagues in this group happened to be rebreather instructors, and they'd brought their own units. These silent and virtually bubble-free rebreathers allowed these stealthy hammerheads to be less skittish amongst us. The 50-60



LINK> www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cocos_Island

Apparently their skin was often covered with small patches of bacterial infection so the sharks sought out wrasses, barber butterflyfish, and angelfishes in the shallows to be cleansed, so we'd try to find their cleaning stations and wait. Some of the sharks would come within a couple of metres of us, slowly meandering and half dragging their wedged tails, behaviour used to invite cleaning fishes for their services. We could see the reddish parasites roaming over the bodies of the sharks; the hammers' eyes would roll at us as they passed by. A couple of times Takako waved her yellow-gloved hands at these hammers, and a few literally came to within arm's length to see this frogwoman. Usually this happened when she was out of film – but what an adrenaline rush.

Apart from the celebrated hammerheads, Cocos has so many other marine creatures to offer that possibly no other place on earth gives divers more pounds of fish-flesh. Big-eyed travellys that blacken the sky, cotton-mouth jacks engulfing a whole reef, over 60+ marbled rays performing their mating ballet, schooling rainbow runners diligently banging themselves on silky sharks (probably using the coarse skin of the sharks to get rid of parasites), mobula devil rays circling divers, squadrons of eagle rays dancing at the perimeter of a feeding manta ray, four-metre long silvertip sharks dwarfing the neighbouring hammerheads (never seen such large silvertips in our travels), Jordan and yellowtailed snappers in numbers so vast that I completely missed the entrance of an arch. Often whale shark and bottlenose dolphin visit Cocos, and if you are lucky, you might even get to swim with the majestic humpback whale as well. A friend just came back and showed us a video she shot – schooling silky sharks in blue water, numbering over a hundred. Then, she panned the video and a mom with a calf humpback came by.

schooling sharks casually banked their oddly-shaped heads left and right as they came to give us the curiosity check.

About 30 minutes into the dive, Mario signaled us to ascend. Those not on rebreathers (either on normal air or Nitrox) would be slightly low on air, due to the excitement from these swarming hammers. As the finale, four spotted eagle rays cruised the sand channel gliding with their beautifully polka-dotted wings, as if welcoming us. And this was only our first dive.

In the remaining days we dove many sites like Lobster Rock, Shark Point, Alcione and Dirty Rock where, besides the bigeyed jacks and creole fish, hammerhead sharks seemed to be the most abundant creature in the vicinity. However, Manulita's deeper side seemed to have the best encounters of hammerheads, where many times over 500 hammers per dive were 'logged by divemasters'. The two divemasters even agreed at odd times that we had over 800 hammers in one dive (don't ask me how they came up with this figure)!

HOW TO GET TO COCOS ISLAND?

Well, you need to get to San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. You could fly into Los Angeles, then either via Houston (Texas) or Miami (Florida) or through Mexico City. From San Jose, it takes about an hour by car to reach Puntarinas (the Pier), and then your liveaboard journeys 300 miles (about 420 kilometres) to Cocos Island on a 30-36 hour ride (depending on the surface current).

LOGISTICS:

Water temperature is about 23-28 degrees C. If water becomes warmer (as in El Nino), hammerhead sharks tend to stay deeper. I recommend to use a 5mm plus hood, since the thermocline at depths can become quite chilly. A dive trip of 10-11 days, usually has diveable days of 6-7 (after the 3 days cruising).

HAPPY SHARKING!

Left from top:

White-tip reef sharks; Spotted eagle rays; Marbled ray; Manta ray.

Right from top:

White-tip reef sharks & marbled ray; Yellow-tailed snapper; Scalloped hammerheads.

When you've had enough of sharks, rays and masses of fish, do pick up your macro lens and look into the nooks and crannies of the volcanic terrain – there are ample of beautiful critters waiting to pose for you.

Cocos Island is an underwater seamount rising from the deep. Mountaintops are usually clouded in mist. Waterfalls and bushy green vegetation are signatures here. The island is about 5-1/2 miles long times 2-1/2 miles wide, which peaks about 600 metres. Tales of buried treasures by pirates centuries ago have driven treasure hunters to visit here in past and present (with permit). It is now the undersea treasures, its incredible marine life, that divers from all over the world come to enjoy in this Mecca.

Do not only let the tale of Hammerhead Sharks 'blow' your mind. The wild marine life is so spectacular in Cocos that IMAX cinematographers spent 125 days logging 2000 dives here previously. The magic of this place has brought me here three times. Is it worth coming so far to Cocos? YES, it is luring me again for the fourth time. It is remote, wild and always an adventure!!

