

Chinchorro Crocodiles

by Steve Taylor

I was looking for something new. Having done my share of trips from live-aboard boats and dive lodges, I was looking something off the beaten path. The trip to the remote Chinchorro atoll, to dive with and photograph saltwater crocodiles, seemed perfect. The American saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) is one of the largest species of crocodile, growing to over 6 meters and weighing up to 900 kilograms. Despite their enormous size and potential dangerousness, they rarely attack large animals (or humans), preferring to eat fish, reptiles, birds, or small mammals. Such large creatures can move remarkably fast over short distances.

I was looking forward to the unique opportunity of having close encounters with these large apex predators. I flew into Cancun where six of us, plus our guide, boarded a van for a four-hour drive south to Xcalak (pronounced Ish-kalak), a small fishing village on the Caribbean coast of Mexico, on the southern end of the Costa Maya, near the border with Belize.

Entering the village, barking dogs chased our van as we drove down the rough dirt road in the humid

tropical heat. The dive lodge at Xcalak was modest but well-equipped. Disembarking, we were overwhelmed by the sulfurous stink of rotting Sargassum seaweed, which had drifted north from South America. Thick swathes of Sargassum covered the beaches, but that was not a problem because soon we would be escaping to the clear waters of Chinchorro, far off the coast. Insects hummed in the hot sun as we assembled our dive kits and stowed our gear on the boat.

Although it was summer, which is the best season for diving Chinchorro, the ever-changing sea conditions meant that there was no guarantee that the sea would be sufficiently calm to take the journey in the small open boat. Fortunately, we were in luck; the sea was not too rough and the trip was on. Captain Ernesto gave a briefing and we were on our way.

A fishing shack served as our home during our stay at Banco Chinchorro.

Crocodile lunging at lionfish bait dangled from the boat.

Nikon D810 camera, Nauticam housing, Sea & Sea YS-D2 strobes, F16, 1/90, ISO 160, Sigma 15mm





***Diver spearing lionfish to use as crocodile bait..
Nikon D810 camera , Nauticam housing, Sigma 15mm . Sea & Sea YS-D2
strobes, F9.5, 1/90, ISO 64***

From Xcalak we rode the open boat over choppy seas for almost three hours until we reached Banco Chinchorro, located 35km off the Mexican coast. The atoll is a marine sanctuary covering an area of 800 square kilometers, where diving is allowed only if special permits are obtained from the Mexican Federal Government.

Chinchorro is known for many things; its pristine coral reefs, numerous ship wrecks and, of course, its American saltwater crocodiles,

which inhabit the mangrove swamps and lagoons. There are no permanent settlements on the islands, although there is a ranger station on Cayo Centro, one of Chinchorro's three small islands. At the southwestern end of Cayo Centro there was a collection of rickety wooden fishing shacks, perched on stilts in the shallows, near the mangrove swamps. The fishing shacks provided short-term lodging for the fishermen, who came out from the mainland.

When we arrived at our



***Crocodile lunging at lionfish bait dangled from the boat.
Nikon D810 camera , Nauticam housing, Sigma 15mm . Sea & Sea YS-D2
strobes, F16, 1/90, ISO 160***

designated shack, several crocs lazily swam about, waiting for the fishermen to clean their catch. We spent the next few days staying in one of the fishing shacks, sleeping in hammocks. Accommodation was spartan; no running water or bathing

facilities, a crude toilet, and limited electricity, available only when the small generator was operated during the evenings. And there was no alcohol. There is an agreement in the Chinchorro fishing community that alcohol is not permitted, presumably



The mangrove swamps were home to numerous large crocodiles. F5.6, 1/750, ISO 80, Nikkor 70-300mm @ 250mm

to prevent inebriated shack-dwellers from toppling overboard into croc infested waters. As our dive guide had warned us, there would be no lattes or Wifi. Spartan indeed. However, the food was fresh and plentiful, including fish caught by the fishermen.

In addition to our group of six divers and guide, there were three of our crew and a number of fishermen in the shack. Staying in such a crowded rustic shack was an interesting experience. Fortunately, I brought ear plugs; at night the little

shack was filled with loud snoring, which seemed to emanate from every hammock.

Each morning, before snorkeling with crocs, we departed our shack in the boat to scuba dive the coral reefs, hunting for lionfish, an invasive species, which were speared to use as croc bait. The coral reefs were lush and healthy, and the marine life was plentiful. Several nurse sharks followed us, hoping to snatch our speared fish.

Returning by boat to the shack, a lionfish fish was skinned and tied to a long nylon line. One of



Iguana on the lookout for a meal on one of the small islands of Chinchorro. F5.6, 1/750, ISO 2000, Nikkor 70-300mm @ 300mm

West Indian manatees can be found in the shallows of Xcalak. Nikon D810 camera ,Nauticam housing, Sea & Sea YS-D2 strobes, F19, 1/90, ISO 250, Sigma 15mm





A crocodile flashes its teeth as a photographer lines up her shot. F5.6, 1/500, ISO 560, Nikkor 70-300mm @ 180mm, circular polarizing filter

the crew would repeatedly cast the line out into the water, toward the mangroves. The slapping sound of the fish striking the water attracted the crocs. Large black frigate birds, with their long slender wings and forked tails, wheeled overhead as we waited for a croc to appear.

Eventually, a large male was lured out of the mangroves. Being highly territorial, it chased away the smaller crocs and pursued the bait. Once the croc reached our boat moored at the shack, we donned our snorkel gear and, taking turns in pairs, slipped into the bright green water to take photographs. We were in the shallows, with the bottom consisting

of sea grass. As the croc swam over the shallows toward us, we readied our cameras.

To ensure our safety, one of the crew was also in the water, using a large wooden pole to push away the croc if it came too close. The pole looked rather pitiful as a means of protecting us from the croc, which was over 3 meters long, with massive jaws full of big white teeth, and likely weighed more than 200 kilograms. However, the croc was more interested in the bait than in divers. On one occasion the croc lurched for the bait and missed, slamming into my camera. Even then the croc was interested only in the bait. My dome



Nurse sharks followed the divers, hoping to snap up the speared lionfish. Nikon D810 camera, Nauticam housing, Sigma 15mm, Sea & Sea YS-D2 strobes, F13, 1/90, ISO 200

port sustained a few minor scratches from the encounter but there was no camera chomping.

The croc snapped as one of the crew members dangled the lionfish bait just out of reach of its jaws. Until that time, I'd never been underwater with a croc right in my face. As I stared down its throat, I was impressed by the size of the teeth. Eventually, the croc was allowed to devour the bait. Lifting its head high in the air, the croc gulped down the lionfish. To keep balance as it ate, the croc reared its tail in the air as its head tilted up. In this pose the crocodile looked something like a sea serpent.

On one hot afternoon we failed to lure any crocs with our bait. Leaving the sleepy crocs in their

mangrove swamp, we took our boat to the ranger station. Walking down the sandy beach by a small, shallow lagoon we saw several crocs lazing in the shallows. These crocs, along with numerous endemic giant iguanas, provided further photo opportunities.

After three days in the fishing shack we were ready to return to the mainland, where we spent a day diving the reefs around Xcalak. We came across schools of large majestic tarpon, swirling past in flashes of silver. The highlight of the day was an encounter with large West Indian manatee. This magnificent creature spent some time with us before swimming off, surprisingly swift and agile in its movements. The following day we were back in the van, heading back to Cancun and then, for me, back to Vancouver, where I looked forward to planning my next big animal adventure.

Steve Taylor

