

Mexico Whale Sharks 2022

by Dr Clare Preeble

I was very pleased to be part of the triumphant return of Aqua-Firma to Mexico this year to see the Yucatan Peninsula whale shark aggregation. Post plague, the logistics of the trip had changed slightly, and this was also the first time that both Charlotte Caffrey of Aqua-Firma and I had hosted the Mexico trip. What could go wrong!?

Spoiler alert – not much – it was actually amazing!

Team 2022 assembled at the Playa Mujeres beachfront, north of Cancún, at the decadent all-inclusive hotel that was to be our base for the next week. We were a Goldilocks-sized group of ten, with a diverse range of backgrounds and ages. Some had been trying for a decade to see whale sharks. Others were seasoned hands, having travelled to multiple aggregation sites worldwide. So, no pressure then...

Day one on the water was preceded by an introduction to our fearless boat captain and whale shark researcher extraordinaire, Rafael de la Parra. Rafael has been working in the Mexican Caribbean since 1988, and has been studying whale sharks there since 2004. So of course he's been captaining the Aqua-Firma trips to

Mexico since they started in 2013.

Our first day was a scorcher, but the waves and the wind were in our favor and we reached the whale sharks after about an hour. All the sharks were frantically feeding at the surface, some at quite a pace. Everyone managed to get several swims with the sharks, along with a bit of a workout (helpfully counteracting the hotel meals). There was also a brief sighting of a dark melanistic 'ninja' manta, and a striped marlin. An excellent start!

By day two, everyone had their sea legs and whale shark spotting eyes tuned. We were greeted by wonderful chaos as we arrived at the aggregation. Tens of whale sharks were clustered together surface feeding. We were even treated to some vertical feeding behavior as well. Once in the water, there was no need to swim anywhere. Whale sharks swooshed past us left and right, quite often at the same moment. This day was hence known as 'whale shark soup' day. Rafael was like a giddy child, exclaiming that it was the best day of the sea-season so far. He also told us that the world's most famous whale shark, Rio Lady, was amongst the throngs of sharks in the water. Rio Lady is a large ~7.5m female shark that has been tagged



multiple times, most recently off Isla Mujeres in 2018, traveling a record-breaking 19,000+ miles since then. She has been far out to sea in the western Atlantic and all the way south towards the coast of Columbia. Rafael informed us that her tag had transmitted a few days earlier in the Gulf of Mexico, and that she had now returned home to the Isla Mujeres Afuera aggregation.

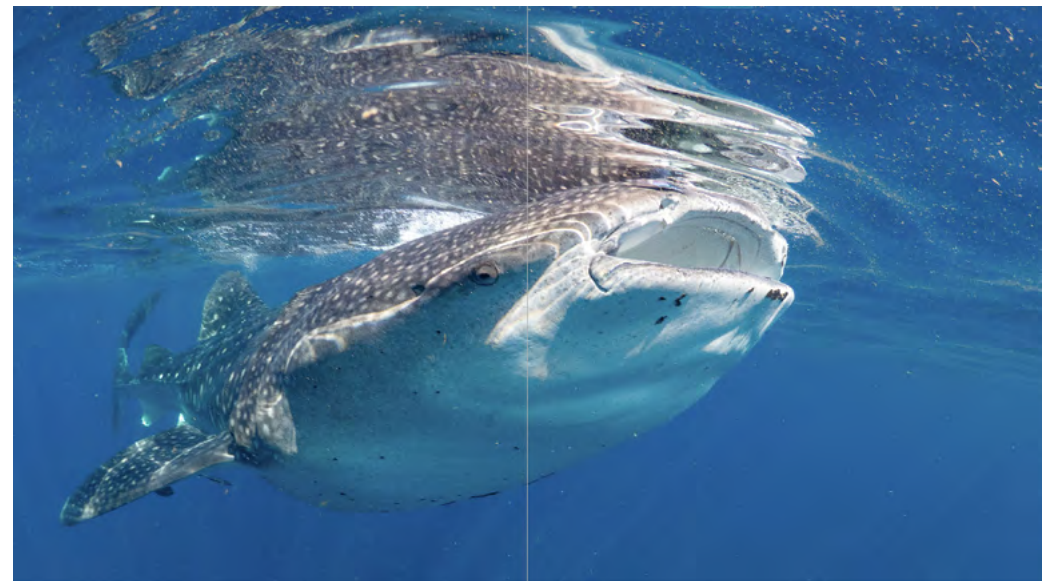
After a well-timed rest day, the group set out on the calmest day yet. With the lake-like conditions, we spotted two whale sharks early in our journey toward the aggregation, and kept them both to ourselves! Clear water, relaxed whale sharks, and early morning light made for excellent photography opportunities and relaxed snorkeling sessions for everyone.

With everyone (almost) sated with whale shark encounters, our final day on the water started strong with several loggerhead turtles spotted on the surface and almost 45 minutes of a spotted dolphin pod activity in the wake of the boat.

On arrival at the feeding aggregation, it was clear that the whale sharks were very spread out and generally staying sub surface. Not wanting to add to the boat/shark ratio, and with the previous days'



experiences in mind, the decision was made to head out towards Isla Contoy. Here, due to the upwelling and currents, the waters are cooler and murkier, but it's often the best place to spot manta rays. We did manage to spot some eagle rays, bottlenose dolphins, and got a quick glimpse of



a manta ray. The leisurely journey around the island was stunning, but the slightly quieter marine life sightings reminded us all that the ocean can be unpredictable and highlighted how special our experiences were earlier in the week.

With smug faces and Vitamin D-enriched skin, the group all had a final dinner together to toast our luck and plan where to go with Aqua-Firma next – except one couple, who were smugly heading off on a magical whirlwind tour of the peninsula to see monkeys, flamingos, and magical forested Mayan temples. (I'm not jealous, you're jealous). Charlotte and I bade farewell and agreed that we were so lucky to have had such an

easygoing group that marveled at the sea just as we do. Bring on Mexico, 22–28 Jul 2023!

Dr Clare Preeble



<https://www.aqua-firma.com/experiences/mexico-whale-shark-research-snorkel-freediving-cancun-isla-mujeres>