

Photographing the shark of Darwin Island

by Jonathan Bird

The first time I went to the Galapagos, I had pretty high expectations. Every diver has seen the ads and the photographs in magazines, read the stories and talked to people who have been there. The images of hundreds of hammerheads swimming overhead, whale sharks the size of school buses, colonies of playful seal lions and pods of dolphins all paint a picture of the Galapagos as a diver's dream. Could the experience possibly live up to my expectations? No. In fact, it surpassed them by a mile.

My first trip to the Galapagos was as a photographer documenting an expedition to put satellite tags on whale sharks and we spent the entire week on the Galapagos Aggressor up in the pristine underwater wilderness of Darwin Island, separated from the rest of the Galapagos by 150 miles. Darwin and its nearby sister island Wolf look a lot like the rest of the Galapagos but underwater, they have their own personality. The main group of islands in the south have cool, somewhat green, water—hardly tropical. In fact, the diving there reminds me of diving at home in the north Atlantic (except of course for the huge colonies of sea lions, sea horses, sea turtles, penguins...) But up in the north, Darwin and Wolf enjoy warm currents and clear blue water that looks a lot more like the tropical destinations most of us yearn for. Unlike the typical Caribbean getaway, however, Darwin and Wolf are the stomping grounds



Silhouette of a huge school of hammerheads swimming overhead. Sometimes the hammerheads are in the distance and sometimes they are close. When they are too far away to light with a strobe, but slightly above, silhouettes make a striking composition. Few animals have as distinctive a silhouette as a hammerhead! (Nikonos V, 15 mm, ambient light, f/5.6, 1/250, Ektachrome 100)

of untold numbers of sharks, dolphins, sea turtles and fish.

As a World Heritage site, the Galapagos are mostly completely off-limits for fishing. A few locals fish the waters, as do a small industry of illegal rogue fishing vessels from other

countries. The local law enforcement does all they can to keep the rogue fishermen at bay. In general, the ecosystem of the Galapagos comes about as close to unspoiled as you are likely to find anywhere in the world.

As a seasoned professional

underwater photographer, I have been to many of the world's best dive sites and I've seen a lot of very good diving. I'm not bragging, but putting into perspective that I'm not all that easy to impress. My very first dive at Darwin overwhelmed my senses in a way that I cannot completely describe. We jumped into the Zodiac from the "mother ship" and sped over towards Darwin's Arch (the only dive site at Darwin). On cue, we rolled off the Zodiac together, feeling a little bit like the Cousteau dive team. Because of the moderate to strong currents at Darwin, everyone rolls off the boat together and heads to the bottom as fast as possible. Due to a sparsity of coral, the bottom consists mostly of boulders covered in barnacles. You sink down and find something to grab hold of quickly.

Our entire group had brought rebreathers so we could get really close to the hammerheads. Hammerhead sharks can be sensitive to bubbles, so the rebreathers would allow us to hide in the rocks quietly. I hoped this would allow me to get some good close-up hammerhead shots. As soon as we hit the bottom at about 60 feet, I settled into a spot behind a large boulder where I could tuck out of the strong current. I could already see a huge group of Scalloped hammerheads in the distance through the hazy blue water. The current at Darwin can be both a blessing and a curse. It's annoying at times, but then again, the current allows the sharks to "hold still" by swimming at just the right speed into the current. This allows them to maintain a position in the water hovering over a



Due to the strong currents diving at Darwin, I elected to use a small camera system. Rather than the usual housed SLR and dual strobes, I found the Nikonos with a single fill-flash to work very well for hammerheads. The reflective underside will fool TTL however, and best results are obtained the old fashioned way! (Nikonos V, 15 mm, SB-105, f/8, 1/90, full power, Ektachrome 100).



cleaning station. Keep in mind that sharks have no swim bladder and sink if they stop swimming. Therefore a shark cannot hover to be cleaned without a current. When the current picks up, the hammerheads make their way over to the wall for cleaning by the King Angelfish that patiently wait for them. Hiding in the rocks, I remained still and watched the shadows of the

sharks coming closer. They looked just like the pictures I had seen! There were hundreds of them! The only problem was that my view of the sharks was obscured by the thousands of fish swarming in the water near the wall.

Soon the fish parted and the hammerheads cruised right over my head. I started shooting pictures and found that the strobe



This 35 foot-long whale shark has a mouth that is six feet wide. When I plucked a remora out of its mouth, it opened wide for a cleaning! (Nikonos V, 15 mm, ambient light, f/4, 1/60, Ektachrome 100)

frightened them a little, but not as much as trying to swim out into the current to get closer. The sharks would tolerate me quite well as long as I stayed in my little hiding spot and waited for them to come to me. I went through an entire roll in five minutes. I really tried to make the film last, but there were just too many sharks. Now the advantages of the Zodiac were obvious. I let go of the rock and drifted away from the wall as I ascended. As I popped my head above the surface, our boatman Rufino saw me and came over. The boatman's job is to watch all the bubbles and pick up divers when they surface. Unfortunately, with everyone wearing rebreathers, there were no bubbles to watch, so he had to use his experience to predict where we would be. He pulled his boat up to me and asked if I

was okay, surprised to see me so soon. I just confessed that I was already out of film and asked for the next camera. He passed it to me and I dropped right back down to the wall. Just as I emptied my BC and started down, a whale shark passed right under me! I howled with delight—on the first dive I had already seen a whale shark, and a hundred or so hammerheads!

When I landed on the bottom again (not very gracefully I might add) I found myself quite a distance downstream from the rest of the group as my trip to the surface had allowed me to drift backwards in the current significantly. Being alone on the wall only made my encounters with the hammerheads even closer. My second roll was even better than the first. Can you believe it? I ran out of film—

again! (Yes, I know what you're thinking. I really do need a digital camera.) So, up I went to the surface for a second time. This time I had drifted too far to get back to the wall, so Rufino helped me into the Zodiac and motored me back up to the spot where we dropped in the first time. I grabbed my last camera (a video camera this time) and dropped back into the water. With 60 minutes of tape, I wouldn't run out of film again. I hadn't been on the wall for more than five minutes before a pod of bottlenosed dolphins swam by and checked us out. I thought at the time that if that didn't rack up to the best single dive in my life, I'm not sure what would. (Keep reading...)

Since we were using rebreathers, we were able to dive much longer than people normally do on open circuit.

Swimming as close as possible to a whale shark's dorsal side, you can get a little lift from the slipstream. Looking out over the front of the shark reminds me of driving a big '70's Cadillac! Holding on for a free ride is irritating to the shark and often drives it away. The slipstream technique is much better. (Nikonos V, 15 mm, ambient



Rather than doing 4 dives a day at 45 minutes to an hour each, our group had decided to do 3 dives a day of about 90 minutes each. Even with a 5mm suit in the 77 degree water, I was a little chilled by the time I got out from such a long dive. Nonetheless, there was a lot of hooting, hollering and tale-telling at the end of the first dive. I honestly couldn't believe how much stuff we saw. I never thought I would be so excited to dive the same dive site for an entire week.

After we warmed up and filled our tanks again, we headed out for the second dive. How do you follow up a dive like the first one? As we rolled into the water, I realized that the current had slowed down. We went to the wall and found that the hammerheads weren't coming that close, so we headed out into the blue to look for whale sharks.

I know what you're thinking. How does one find a whale shark by swimming around out in the blue? It wouldn't work anyplace else, I assure you. But at Darwin Island during the whale shark season, they seem to just circle the island. If you just hang around right out off the wall in the blue, the whale sharks find you. It took us ten minutes to find our first whale shark. It appeared

out of the hazy distance above us, unmistakable for its unique silhouette. We all raced skyward to meet the shark, breaking every rule on ascent rate ever published. The cacophony from the beeping dive computers was deafening, but unheard by any of us as we swam alongside the world's largest fish in complete awe. There is nothing that compares to swimming with a whale shark. To say it's a big fish is to grossly understate the experience. It's one of those things that you can only appreciate by doing it.

Normally, whale sharks just keep going when divers show up. They don't seem to be particularly bothered by the divers (as long as the divers don't try to ride them) but they just keep going in the direction they were headed. The slow and graceful swishes of that tremendous caudal fin move the whale shark at an amazing clip. Most people can only keep up for a few minutes, even though the shark looks like it's barely moving at all. We soon lost sight of the shark, hanging motionlessly in the open water

trying to catch our breath. But soon another shark showed up. In fact, nobody saw it coming. We all were swimming along looking ahead, while a massive whale shark, at least 35 feet long, swam up behind us. We heard one member of the group yell into his rebreather. We all turned around to see the whale shark that had literally swam up behind him and bumped into him. It's hard to imagine that a group of divers could all miss a 35 foot long fish in 80 feet of visibility, but we did.

Unlike the first whale shark, this one seemed bored and looking for something to do. It slowed to a snail's pace as we swam alongside. We weren't supposed to touch the whale sharks, but this one seemed to want to be touched. We all started petting the shark, and it slowed to a stop. Once it stopped, it started sinking. We sank with it. Fortunately, the lower lobe of the shark's tail touched bottom at about 90 feet and the shark started to swim upwards, almost completely vertically, towards the surface. We followed. As if the shark



A large school of Scalloped Hammerheads passes directly overhead. Because I'm using a rebreather, they don't notice me hiding in the rocks! (Nikonos V, 15 mm lens, SB-105 strobe, 1/90, f/8, full power, Ektachrome 100)

understood that we couldn't race to the surface, it kept the pace slow.

I had a 35 mm camera and blasted all 36 frames within the first 5 minutes, expecting the interaction to last only as long as I could swim at top speed. Now, I was playing with a docile whale shark that had no plans to go anywhere. Then the strangest thing happened. I looked up and another whale shark was bearing down on us. Five of the seven of us decided to go and play with the other shark. I figured I would just stay put, so for another 25 minutes, two of us played with the world's friendliest whale shark. I plucked remoras from around her eyes and mouth, massaged her lips (she liked that) and swore to myself over and over that I had no film.

At last, my dive computer told me to get up and do a safety stop. We were way out in the blue. Who knows how far we had drifted from land? I suddenly realized that we really needed to surface. Reluctantly, the two of us left the shark and headed up for a stop at 15 feet. Incredibly, the shark followed like a puppy dog. We did our stop with the shark and then surfaced. We were a long way from where we started the dive, but Rufino was not far away. I popped up my safety flag and he saw me right away.

After we were all safely on the Zodiac and about to head back, the whale shark came up and rubbed right along the Zodiac. We actually felt guilty about leaving her, so we threw on our masks and snorkelled with her for another 20 minutes. At last, the sun went down and we needed to get back. After nearly an hour with a playful whale shark, we set off towards the liveaboard.

I have now been back to Darwin several times on special itineraries that I have put together for divers interested in whale sharks. The place never ceases to amaze me. On my most recent trip, we had nine whale shark encounters on a single dive! There is no doubt in my mind that Darwin Island is the whale shark capital of the world.

Jonathan Bird

Jonathan Bird is a professional underwater cinematographer and photographer. He has shot and produced over 20 films for broadcast and education. His films have appeared all over the world, on networks such as PBS, ABC, USA Network, Discovery and even the SciFi Channel.

He has won two Emmy Awards and two Cine Golden Eagles for his work. Jonathan is the author of three books and has published articles and images in hundreds of magazines, calendars and books. He leads dive expeditions around the world and teaches underwater photography courses. More information is available at www.jonathanbird.net

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