

Diving Malpelo

with Massimo Franzese

Malpelo island is a small rocky island off the coast of Colombia and is not inhabited if we exclude the thousands of birds that live on it and the few soldiers that manage the outpost.

It is situated around 500 km away from mainland and is 1.5 km long by 640 meters wide at the best. The island is volcanic in nature and despite being a Sanctuary of Flora and Fauna has no vegetation on it.

Malpelo has two weather seasons and dive conditions change considerably:

- January to April – Dry season
- May to December – Wet season

The main difference in addition to the fact that it rains is the water temperature and the depth of the thermocline.

Most people go to Malpelo to see hammerheads and as the weather gets warmer the thermocline goes deeper and so do the hammerheads.

On the other hand visibility improves during the wet season so if you are into video or photo you can get 20+ meters visibility compared to 10-15 in the dry season.

I went in June and this meant schooling hammerheads in the blue and thermocline at depth. I knew

about it but other guests didn't so they were either disappointed or pushing the dive guide out into the blue to see them which frankly was not ideal.

Liveaboard Options

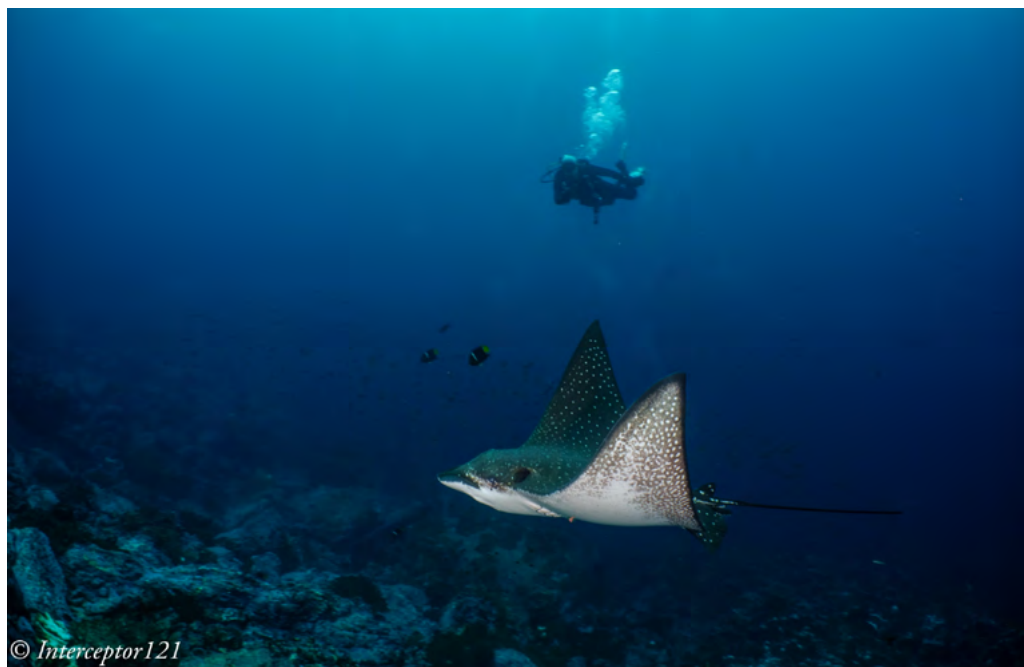
There are only two boats that visit Malpelo regularly the MV Ferox which is what I used and the Sea Wolf. The Ferox caters to more international travellers is entirely made of steel being a former Swedish minesweeper. The Sea Wolf hull is made of aluminium it is more comfortable in terms of living area but suffers the sea conditions much more. The clientele is more local or South American. The two boats have a set number of permits and at one time there is only one boat except on arrival and departure day when you may cross the other one.

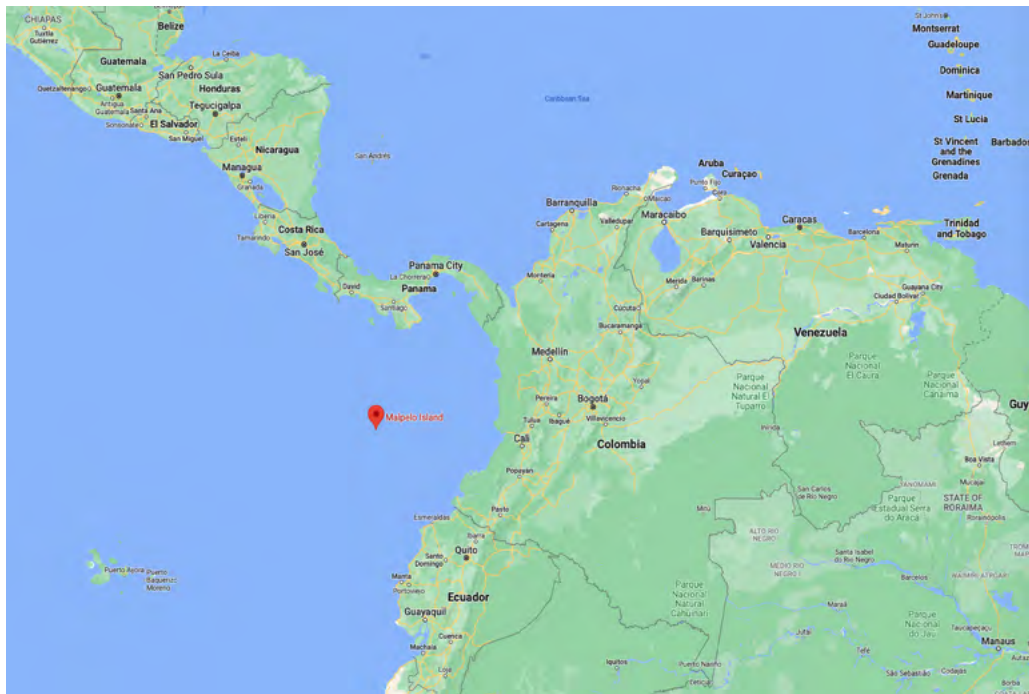
The trip starts from the Intercontinental hotel in Cali and you get to Buenaventura after a 3+ hours coach ride in extremely bendy roads with many tunnels. You embark the MV Ferox ribs directly from the touristic port of Buenaventura. Due to the level of crime in this location you stay there the absolute minimum



Boarding MV Ferox

Eagle and Riccardo. Sony A1, Nauticam housing, Sony 28mm +WWL-1. f/11, 1/60, 500 ISO





amount of time. The destination was not flagged as safe by my travel insurance as of June 2023.

The Ferox leaves after dinner on day 1 and then travels non stop until arrival. Conditions were pretty calm during my crossing and the boat arrived in Malpelo at night.

Once arrived the boat stayed on a mooring point on the north east of the island in front of “la cara del fantasma” dive site and close to the military outpost.

If you are prone to sea sickness please note that the boat is only attached to a single mooring point and therefore will move with the wind and the waves. In addition the

generator providing light is quite noisy and goes on non stop. My earplugs were not good enough for a quiet night, I recommend you invest in heavy duty ones for shooting.

Dive Operation

The dive operation is absolutely superb in terms of logistics and organisation.

The two RIBs travel on the deck of the boat during the crossing and are dropped in using cranes upon arrival. The scuba gear that was set up during the crossing is loaded on the RIB by the crew and stays there for the duration of the trip until unloaded and

Getting closer.

Sony A1, Nauticam housing, Canon 8-15mm+TC. f/8, 1/30, 500 ISO





© Interceptor121
Sony A1, Nauticam housing, Sony 28-60mm + WWL-1. f/11. 1/200. 500 ISO



© Interceptor121
Sony A1, Nauticam housing, Sony 28mm + WWL-1. f/8. 1/60. 500 ISO

then the RIB are lifted back on board.

Tanks are filled directly on the RIB, this set up is fantastic as you only have to make it to the boat while your camera gets passed to you.

Special mention to the dive guides of the Ferox, I was with a spanish speaking group with Richi Valens who did an awesome job. The other guide Sten is also very well known and long time guide in Malpelo having worked with previous operator departing from Panama.

The whole boat crew were very helpful and the food was light for once: not the usual fatty foods

that you experience on some other liveaboards. Beers were \$2 per can but a whole bucket was served free after the last dive.

The skippers of the two RIBs are just incredible for the mix of agility, seamanship, strength pulling up BCD with one hand from the tank neck.

While there we met Camilo Abella a park ranger with a degree in biology.

A catamaran from Biodiversity Colombia patrols the island at all times to stop illegal fishing oh sharks. They stay on the boats in 3 months shifts to keep things as they are.

I left a donation when I was there and I hope you will do the same after reading this article.

I was expecting absolutely barren rocks with no coral after reading several sources however this proved to be wrong. There are hard and soft corals, not as you would expect in Egypt, but plenty to have macro life which of course was not the main objective of anyone on the trip.

One of the most attractive features of Malpelo in the wet season are the huge aggregations of fish. And here comes the elephant in the room. Did we see hammerheads? Yes

however the largest school was circa 12 and far away in the blue. Other subjects that are easier to capture are eagle rays saw up to six together. By no means a large aggregation but quite easy to track.

White tip sharks were quite common as well. We also saw tiger sharks which is one of the reason we did not see many silky sharks (they can eat them) on the same sites. Humpback whale were seen in the distance and a whale shark came under our rib after a dive at El Monstruo.

Underwater Photography

Malpelo is not the easiest destination for underwater photography due to the diving and surface conditions and the unpredictable weather that can make certain dives pretty dark. As you are trying to squeeze any juice left out of your camera it becomes apparent that larger sensors are a benefit in Malpelo as certain shots (schools in the blue for example) are only allowed without strobes.

I had examined several videos of Malpelo at various times of the year and after experiencing myself I have to say that I was a bit misguided however I did have all the equipment required with me but in some cases I did not have the opportunity to repeat a dive as I was also taking video or simply the situation has changed.

I used a Sony A1 in Nauticam housing and two Sea and Sea YS-D2J strobes, with which I am fully satisfied, with 8" and 12" segments for every dive. I brought with me a Canon 8-15mm fisheye with a metabones adapter for e-mount and also a Kenko 1.4 HDX Pro teleconverter as the widest lens option and the Sony 28-60mm and 28mm prime to use with the Nauticam WWL-1.

Due to strong current and rough surface conditions I recommend using the lightest optics you can in

Malpelo. During the trip I realised that smaller domes are really to be preferred I had a difference of 20 bars air consumption when switching from WWL-1 with its 5.5" dome to a larger 180mm wide angle port. Super heavy rigs are not ideal for the rollback negative entries required on each site. Going in and waiting for the skipper to pass the camera is not a good idea either as the group could have drifted.

Guides discourage using strobes or video lights when those point to the blue (why would you do that anyway?) but it is ok to beam the sharks with light when you shoot against the reef.

I shot my Canon 8-15mm with TC predominantly at f/8, the Sony 28mm with WWL-1 between f/8 and f.11 and the 28-60mm with WWL-1 mostly at f/11 to achieve a good compromise between depth of field and sharpness. In dark conditions my shutter speed went all the way down to 1/30, I relied on my strobes to freeze subject motion. The Sony A1 has a max sync speed of 1/200 with electronic shutter and 1/400 with mechanical shutter. For this trip I shot only electronic shutter. This had the extra benefit of not producing a shutter sound. Sharks tend to turn back as they hear your shutter or your strobes fire hence the reason some of those in the images look like turning back on themselves.

Zoom lenses are ideal for sharks that tend not to come close however



The school. Sony A1, Nauticam housing, Sony 28mm +WWL-1. f/14. 1/200. 500 ISO

I found the field of view of my WWL-1 to be insufficient for the fish schools in some of the sites. Based on my experience in Egypt the WWL-1 or the WACP variations are ideal for fish schools so this was one of the reasons for my choice. The fish schools in Malpelo however are on another level in terms of size, so I found myself having to step back in order to cover the school and also part of the reef behind. Shooting strobes at full power I managed to get decent colours in the images thanks to the dual gain sensor of the A1 allowing me to shoot at higher ISO while preserving dynamic

range and colour depth. As you would expect, while I had a lens too narrow when I went for the fish schools, the closest shark encounters happened when I had the fisheye lens, thankfully I had the teleconverter on so I zoomed in full to fill the frame as much as possible. Due to the always changing dive plan it was not possible to plan carefully the right lens for each day or dive, so it is ideal to have options that allow a certain flexibility.

The level of diving skill required to pull the shots in Malpelo is quite high as the guides do not allow any contact with the reef and there is

current and surge together with rough surface conditions.

Final Thoughts

I guess many people will be thinking is Malpelo for me or not? And the answer does change a lot depending on your preferences and priorities.

If you need a luxury liveaboard and mind rough surface conditions Malpelo is generally not for you. I would also add that for photographers wanting to take pictures of hammerhead sharks there are places where this is considerably easier. Cocos Island where you can sit on the bottom waiting for sharks is definitely a safer option than Malpelo where contact with the bottom is broadly not allowed unless with a few fingers if there is ripping current.

Even Galapagos, despite the reputation, has considerably easier diving conditions. To understand how tough it is in Malpelo you need to look at the entry and exit on the tenders. In Galapagos you will still get in and out the tender with your gear in Malpelo that is very risky business. Many dives require short crossings from one pinnacle to another with strong currents and most people are forced to dive with 15 litres tank. If your air

consumption is too bad and you are on 12 litres you are told you need to change by the guides to avoid cutting it short for the group. You are also asked to go higher and dive with the bubble of the group if you are running low but this is not a great idea.

In terms of safety you need a surface marker buoy, a flashlight; a beacon to find you in case you are lost is provided. I also carried a knife and a reel which I had to use in one occasion.

Would I go back? Immediately and next time in the dry season.

This article is a condensed version of my travel blog to Malpelo if you wish to read more details and watch the video I took both underwater and topside click on this link that will direct you to my blog.

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<https://interceptor121.com/2023/07/30/diving-malpelo-sanctuary-of-flora-and-fauna/>



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