

Whale Shark Diving in Belize

with Martin Spragg

Whale sharks, the biggest fish in the sea, we all want to see one! In recent years many diving destinations have started to promote whale shark diving and Belize is one of them.

Belize is a small country on The Caribbean coast of Central American bounded by Mexico and Guatemala. It has more than 180 miles of barrier reef and three of the four atolls of The Caribbean Sea. Whale sharks are present in Belizean waters all year around but during the months of March, April, May and June they travel to Gladden Spit on the Belize Barrier Reef.

History

Gladden Spit is in the southern section of The Belize Barrier Reef and during the Spring full moons several species of snapper aggregate there to spawn. Fishermen have known about this event for centuries. Occasionally the fishermen would encounter a whale shark swimming along the surface. The first sighting was more than 100 years ago by a fisherman from The Sapodilla Cays called Tom Owen which led to the creole name for them, “Sapodilla Tom”.

Until recently the fishermen feared the whale sharks and they would cut their lines rather than stay fishing when they sighted one. They later discovered that the whale sharks were harmless and



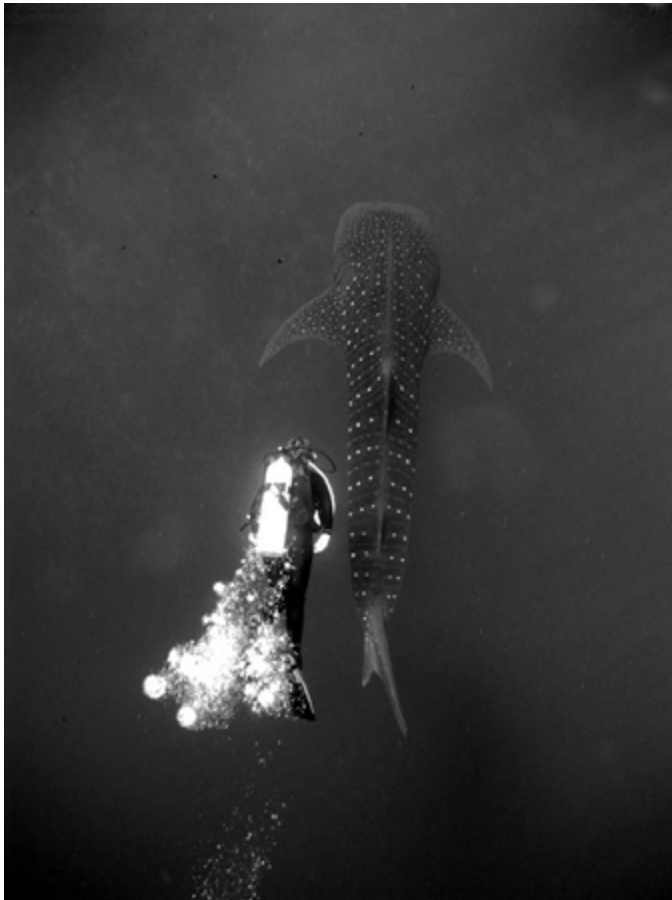
were visiting the area to feed in the milky, spawn filled waters. Local dive guides started taking divers to the area in the late 1990's and as interest grew it became apparent that the area required some management.

An organization called Friends of Nature was formed to work with Belize Fisheries Department. Friends of Nature provides training, education, research and monitoring of the whale sharks and

other sensitive areas of the reef. Their head office is in Placencia Village which is a small fishing village in southern Belize and they have several research stations on the cays.

Dive Site

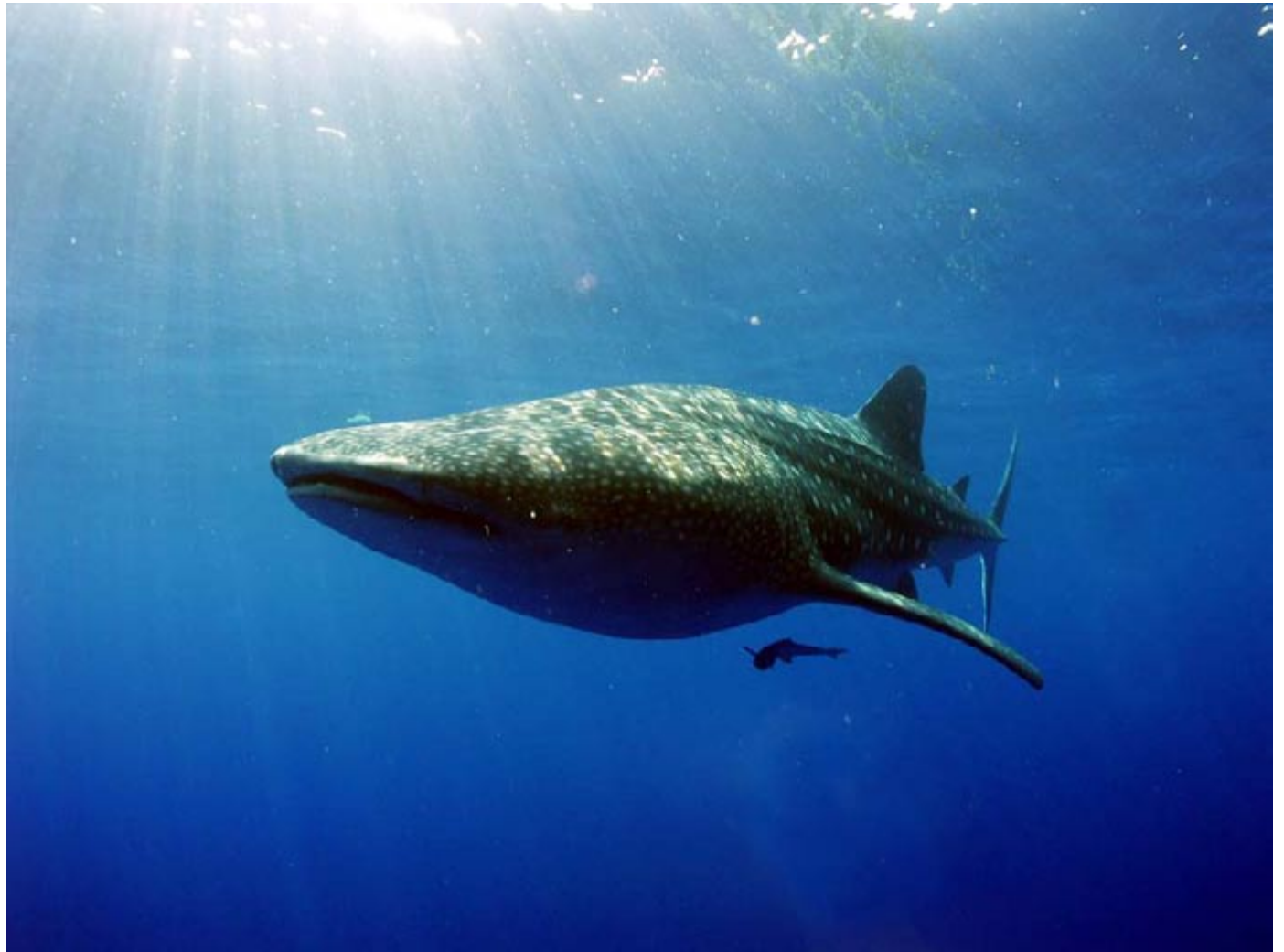
The reef at Gladden spit is a sloping bank rather than the steep walls that characterize this



area. During most of the day the snappers stay down deep but later in the day they start to form larger and larger schools often numbering in the thousands. These schools rise to shallower water and spawn as the sun starts to set.

Diving

Friends of Nature have a set of guidelines for visiting the zone and to avoid interfering with the snapper schools they restrict the dives to a max depth of 80ft (24m). All dives are drift dives and



most of the time is spent floating in mid water looking hopefully into the blue.

The dives are outside the reef but visibility is influenced by a large break in the reef at Gladden Spit. Generally expect 60ft (18m) but in the evening when the sun is low in the sky the visibility is less.

The local guides have developed a technique whereby all the divers link arms and make a large

plume of bubbles. These bubbles simulate a ball of snapper rising up and spawning. I have never seen this attract a whale shark but once we did have a juvenile which repeatedly swam through our exhaust bubbles.



Location

Placencia or Hopkins are the departure points for whale shark diving. Both destinations are about the same distance from Gladden Spit (approximately 22nm) and the boat journey generally takes about 60 to 90 minutes.

The best time to dive is at the sunset but only four dive boats are allowed in the zone at a time and it is closed at 5pm. In the interest of fair play there is a roster system whereby all operators get at least one chance

each month when they can dive the zone late in the day.

Many operators only visit in the afternoon, this year we made several early morning trips to avoid the crowds. On these occasions we were usually the only boat there and we had a reasonable success rate sighting whale sharks on six out of nine visits. On one other occasion we encountered six or seven silky sharks in a tuna school which was very high energy. Dolphins, turtles and large schools of jacks are also often seen at this dive site.



Equipment

To photograph Whale sharks keep two things in mind:

1) Despite the appearance of lazily flapping its tail a whale shark is usually moving much faster than you can swim.

2) There is no way a strobe is going to light up a whole whale shark, not even a small one!

With this in mind I prefer a small maneuverable set up. I use an Olympus C5050 in the PT 015 housing with a wide angle adapter.

I disable the flash to eliminate the chance of back scatter and I set the ISO to 64 or 100.

A Magic Filter would bring back the color on the deeper shots and might be worth trying. But on several occasions I was taking pictures just below the surface and the Magic Filter would have given the shots a magenta cast, so it is a tough choice to make.

The slow write time of my set up is a handicap especially as I am shooting in raw format. My technique is to shoot and then move whilst the camera is busy. Once the camera is



Conclusion

The snapper spawning lasts about 10 days, the closer you are to the full moon day the better your chances are of sighting one. The best month is not predictable, for example last year May was best month but this year it was June.

The tedium of hanging in the blue for up to two hours is more than made up for by the thrill of a whale shark encounter. Make sure your batteries are charged in both your camera and your legs, once one is sighted you have to grab as many shots as you can. Good luck, I hope you enjoy my pictures.

Martin Spragg

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ready, you should be in position for the next shot. Physically this can be very demanding, be prepared to barrel roll, dive and swim backwards in order to get in position. I usually end up with more than one cramped leg muscle.

From a lighting perspective the surface shots are best. We have had several close encounters with the whale sharks on the surface. Once whilst I was on my own in the boat a whale shark rubbed up against it and gave me a shock, my first reaction was "What the <expletive deleted> is that!!".

Trying to get other divers in the

picture can also be challenging. Some times they are in front of the whale shark and give the wrong perspective, the shot can look like a mini whale shark meets the giant diver. There is no time to direct people you just have to keep your eyes open and try to anticipate where the best angle will be.

We have found the whale sharks to be inquisitive and will generally hang around for a few minutes or longer if you are lucky. It is forbidden to touch or ride the sharks and it is frowned upon to chase them.



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