

Juvenile Giants of Djibouti

by Morris Gregory

I jumped out of the boat and finned furiously to maintain pace with the 6m long, white spotted object next to me. After a minute or so I had to give up and let it continue on its leisurely journey sifting plankton in the warm waters of the Gulf of Tadjourah. It was only my second sighting of a whale shark in 15 years of diving, the previous one being a brief encounter at Ras Nas Rani after surfacing from a macro dive with no frames left on my film camera. This time I was much better prepared with a 12mm -24mm Sigma lens in my Subal ND70 housing and plenty of space on my compact flash card. Like Ras Nas Rani this encounter was also short but it whetted the appetite and there were still several diving/snorkelling days to go. For some others on board it had been their first meeting with a whale shark and there was a great buzz of excitement over the breakfast table at the prospect of further encounters to come.

Djibouti has recently become known in the diving community for the concentration of juvenile whale sharks to be found in the Gulf of Tadjourah (sometimes called the Devil's Cauldron) roughly between

the months of October and January. It was the high possibility of seeing these magnificent beasts close up and taking photos of them that persuaded me to book on Djibouti Divers1 for the mid November trip through Tony Backhurst. The flight to Djibouti, via Paris, takes about 9 hours on Daallo Airlines, currently the only operator that services Djibouti. The reports of Daallo I had read on line left me a bit apprehensive about the flight but, while it wasn't the most comfortable journey with poor food and no in flight entertainment except for the musical chairs when more passengers got on at Paris, it was a lot better than I had expected.

The first couple of days on board Djibouti Divers 1 were spent diving the coral reefs of the Gulf. I had hoped that as dive tourism has yet to have significant impact on Djibouti, the reefs would be in near pristine condition with a large variety and density of marine life similar to that found further up the coast in Sudan. Unfortunately that was not quite the case. The reefs were certainly in very good condition but mostly covered in various shades of dull beige coral with none of the brightly coloured



A snorkelling photographer tries to keep pace with the whale shark, 1/20th, f6.3

All underwater shots were taken on a Nikon D70 in a Subal housing with a Sigma 12-24 lens at the 12mm end of the range, using aperture priority mode, iso 200, available light only.

soft corals found further north in the Red Sea. Having said that the reefs were patrolled by a number of rather camera shy humphead wrasse and some sites had huge numbers of juvenile blue trigger fish on them and large shoals of rainbow runners. A few of the group also saw a lone turtle and a shoal of barracuda.

On one dive we came across a group of divers from another boat that were in a circle holding hands and peering into a crevice in the reef.

I took a closer look to see what was attracting their attention but came to the conclusion that they weren't looking at anything in particular but taking part in some kind of ceremony. Perhaps they were praying for whale shark sightings. If so it certainly worked for our party of divers.

On our third day we split into two groups and went whale shark spotting in the small fibre boats that are towed behind the main boat. Our dive guides and crew scanned the



A fleeting glimpse of a whale shark as it passes by the boat



One of the two fibreglass boats used to take us to the diving/snorkelling sites.



Our well appointed liveaboard boat.

waves for the tell tale sign of a dorsal or tail fin breaking the surface. The water was quite choppy making this a difficult task and after half an hour or so we had seen no sight of a whale shark. The sun was beating down on us relentlessly so the divers in the other boat decided to go for a snorkel to cool off. It turned out to be a fortunate and brilliant decision. After only a couple of minutes in the water we could see from our boat that leisurely and aimless snorkelling had suddenly become a much more purposeful activity. Arms were raised in the air to signal a whale shark had been sighted and legs propelled fins as quickly as possible to get to the scene of the action. Our boat chugged slowly over to join the others and we were also treated to our first Djibouti encounter with a whale shark. It may only have been about 6m long but was a very impressive sight as witnessed by the beaming faces of everybody as they clambered back on to the boat to manoeuvre into position for another meeting.

During that first encounter the whale sharks swam along at what looked like a pedestrian pace but it was deceptively fast. After I'd snorkelled hard to keep up with them to take some photos and hauled myself into the fibre boat a few times I was exhausted but nevertheless elated.

The following day proved to be even better as we found not one but at least six whale sharks close to shore. So close in fact that after snorkelling with one of them I was able to stand up in the water and watch through my mask for the next one to come drifting by. During this encounter they often stopped and took several gulps of plankton rich water before carrying on again, great for taking photos. At one point I had snorkelled out to one of them and was concentrating hard on getting the composition I wanted, with the fish opening its huge mouth, when suddenly I felt a bump against the inside of my thigh. I quickly looked down to see a whale shark right beneath me and realised it had made

contact with its dorsal fin. Almost immediately I felt a second bump as this time its tail gently swept against the outside of my leg. Our dive guides, Lionel and Emily, had briefed us to look at but not to touch these gentle giants and we had all obeyed these instructions religiously. However, when one of them decides to purposely nudge you out of the way, there is nothing that can be done to avoid it so I just relaxed and accepted the experience.

Over the several days of snorkelling our group gave up trying to count the number of individual whale sharks we saw, probably a dozen or more, and ran out of fingers and toes to assess the total number of encounters. We just enjoyed every moment of it, especially when the sharks slowed down a little allowing for photos to be taken from a variety of angles and at very close range. At times I was no more than a foot or so away from the mouth of them, only realising just how near I was when taking my housing away from my eye.



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The whale sharks weren't the only creatures that got up close and personal. There were also large numbers of orange coloured free swimming crabs that adopted the 'attack is the best method of defence' strategy. The nip they gave with their claws was more of an irritation than anything but at one point I did find myself adorned with a crab earring. Similar crab related stories were shared by other members of the group over the evening meals which were always excellent. The whale sharks had their own way of dealing

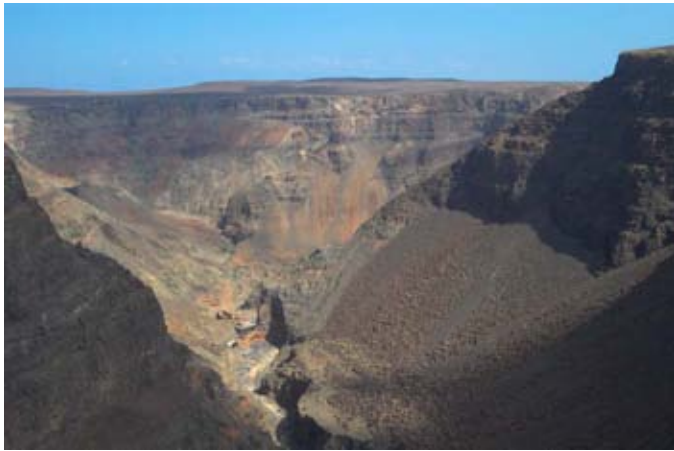
with these creatures, on occasion they would gulp down a few with the plankton and realizing they had something crunchy and inedible in their mouths would cough them back up again with some force, the crabs spinning around uncontrollably in the water.

I had taken some 'magic filters' with me for the trip and debated with a couple of the other photographers on board whether to use them with the whale sharks. Opinion was divided on whether they would be helpful at the shallow depths we would be taking

photos. I decided to go without to start with, preferring the extra stop of exposure I would get by doing so in the fairly murky water, only changing my mind if the results had too much of a colour cast. I was pleased with the first download of pictures to the laptop so continued without them. Others who had opted for the magic filter also got good but slightly warmer results so it was really just a question of personal taste.

Our encounters during the day were fantastic but we were also treated to the sight of a whale shark





The 750 metre deep gorge and surrounding area on the way to Lake Assal.



A wide angle view of the salt flats of lake Assal

at night right next to our moored up boat. The lights from the boat attracted the plankton and the whale shark took advantage of the easy meal. We were told that shining torches at the whale shark or setting off our camera strobes would frighten it away so any underwater photography would have to be using the available light from the boat only. However, flash photography was allowed from the boat, so while a few people snorkelled with the shark and some managed to get good video footage of it, I stayed on board and, from the deck, took a few shots of it swallowing vast quantities of water, expelling most of it through its gills and consuming the plankton that was left behind.

The final highlight of our Djibouti trip was on land rather than underwater, an excursion to Lake Assal. It's one of the saltiest lakes in the world and also one of the lowest at 155m below sea level. Reputedly it is also the hottest place on

Earth with temperatures reaching up to 60c in the summer months. Fortunately we were there in winter and the temperature was an almost bearable 35c. On the way to the Lake we stopped off at the Djiboutian equivalent of the Grand Canyon, a 750m gorge carved through the rocks that provided a magnificent spectacle, particularly for those without a fear of heights. Just before reaching the lake we were shown a geothermal area of hot bubbling waters that provided a reminder of the volcanic nature of the surrounding landscape. There were even some small fish in the waters that seemed to thrive in temperatures of 80c or so. The lake itself is bordered by a vast shoreline of white salt and gypsum that contrasts with the blues, greens and pinks of the water and the hazy blue of the distant mountains. Salt is still harvested commercially at the lake but the locals have also turned their attention to the tourist trade, selling a variety of salt

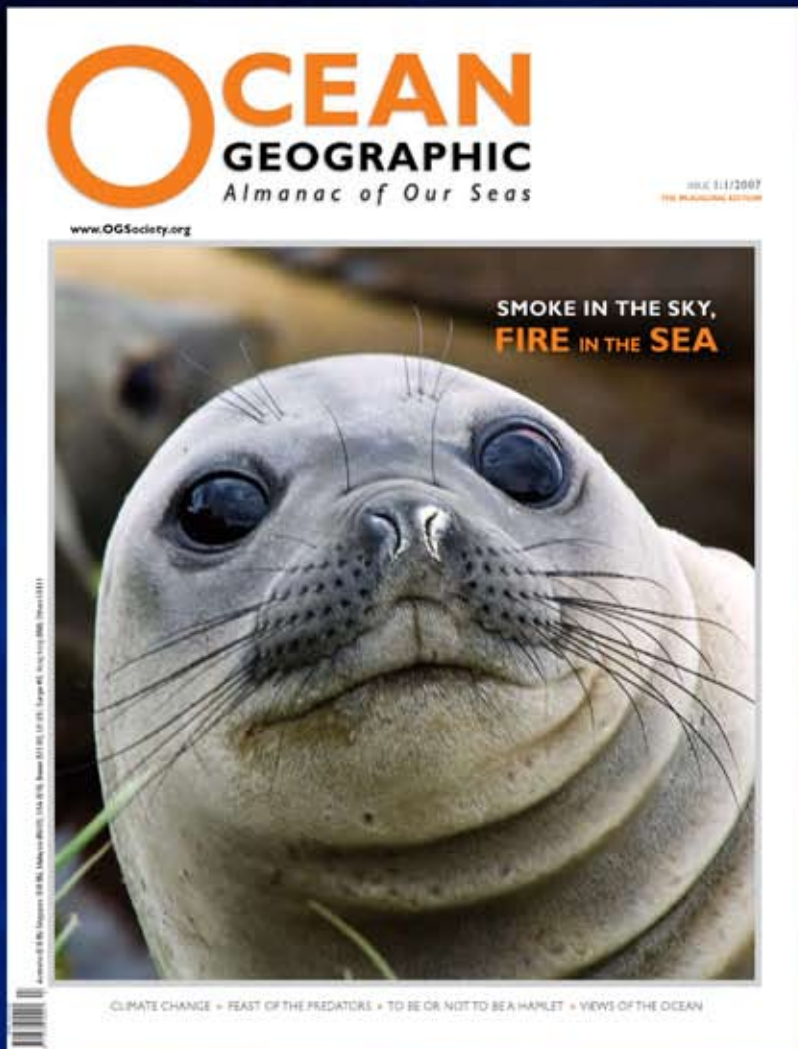
sculptures and crystalline rocks, a pleasant change from the mass produced trinkets at most tourist destinations.

I suspect that Djibouti is unlikely to become a place of mass diver tourism in the same way that Sharm El Sheik and other parts of the northern Red Sea have but the almost guaranteed presence of whale sharks will undoubtedly tempt a few more liveaboard operators to the area. My advice would be to go now while the only other divers you are likely to see underwater are ones from the same boat as yourself.

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