

Out In The Blue At “Mexico’s Galapagos”

by Jeremy Cuff

The Socorro Islands are also known as the tongue twisting Revillagigedo Islands and are sometimes referred to as “Mexico’s Galapagos”. They’re located on Mexico’s Pacific side, some 250 miles due south of the tip of the Baja California peninsula. It’s a great destination for photographers looking for a different challenge, where you’ll often find yourself out in the blue...

The remote Socorro Archipelago is made up of four islands; San Benedicto, Socorro, Roca Partida and Clarion, of which the first three are possible to visit. They’re volcanic in origin, with last recorded activity at San Benedicto dating back to the 1950’s, and on the larger Socorro Island, as recently as the early 90’s.

It’s a full 24 hour voyage south to the nearest island of San Benedicto from the departure point of Cabo San Lucas at the tip of the Baja California peninsula. To get there, I travelled on the excellent Solmar V liveaboard, which has a long track record of

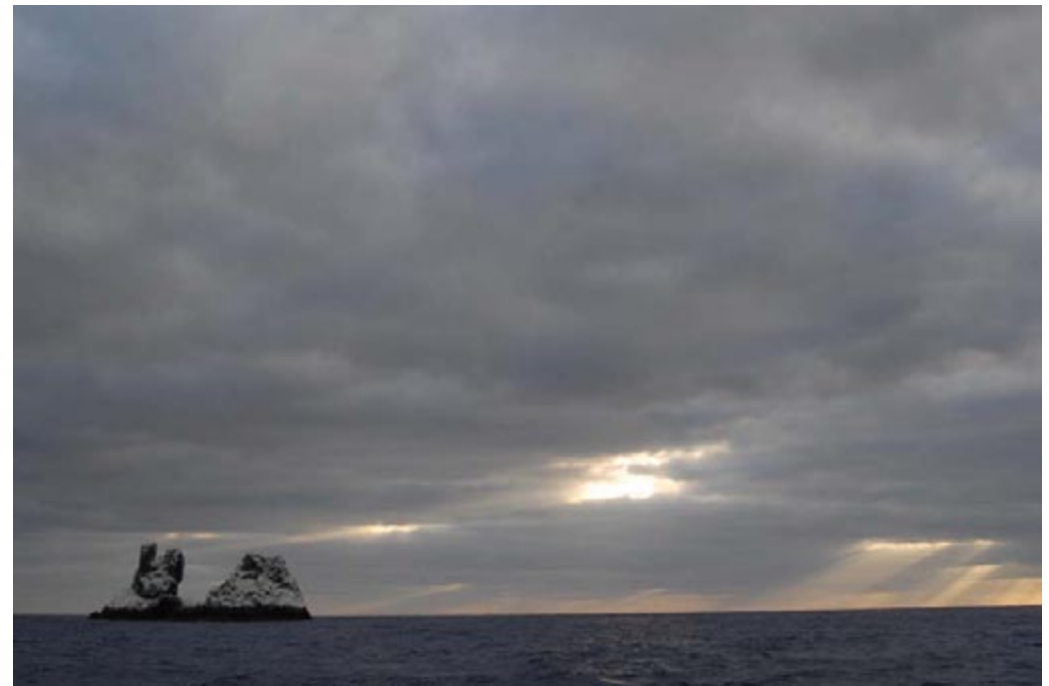
visiting the area. It’s only possible to go there during the “Socorro season” which lasts from the end of October through to the end of May.

Though the prevailing conditions dictate the exact itinerary, the general plan is to start at San Benedicto for a late afternoon “try dive” followed by a full day, then moving to Socorro Island for a day before moving off to the Roca Partida seamount for two days. After Roca Partida, it’s a return to San Benedicto for another full days diving before the long return journey north.

The Socorros are a great destination for pelagic action. Whilst nothing can be “guaranteed” in diving, you can expect some great additions to your logbook (and hopefully

***Roca Partida At First Light f9 160th
sec ISO 400 Nkon D200***

***Divers At The Spectacular Roca
Partida - f8 50th sec ISO 100 Nikon
D200, Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye***





Manta Ray Close Encounter, Socorro Island f8 250th sec ISO 100 Nikon D200, Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye Subtronic Strobe



Silky Shark Wallpaper at Roca Partida f8 125th sec ISO 400 Nikon D200, Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye

your portfolio) such as Giant Pacific Mantas (familiar with divers), the seldom seen Mobula Ray (related to Mantas, but smaller and with a different mouth) and a spectacular selection of sharks that include Hammerheads, White Tips, Silver Tips, Silky Sharks, Galapagos Sharks, Dusky and the possibility of Tiger Sharks and even Whale Sharks.

The area is also known for Wahoo, schools of Jacks and Tuna, Bonitos and even Marlin. Bottlenose Dolphins are common and sometimes check out divers, with whales being

represented by Humpbacks in season. Sporadic encounters are possible with other cetaceans, most often in the open ocean crossings between islands or en route to and from Cabo San Lucas.

You soon learn that the Socorro is full of photographic opportunities and challenges in equal measure, with divers tending to spend a lot of time hovering in the blue, waiting for the “big things”. But seeing is one thing, getting close enough for good photography is another, especially if you plan on using a fish eye which is

my lens of choice.

A good example of this occurred on the very first dive at San Benedicto, when we saw a manta ray that wasn’t prepared to come in close, so all we could do was watch from a distance. As the trip progressed, I found that the fish eye lens was perfect for the subjects as I enjoyed enough close encounters to justify its use, but if you find that you really can’t get close enough on a consistent basis, it might be worth switching to a wide angle set up (like a 12-24mm lens) so that close proximity isn’t

quite so vital.

Mantas always make great subjects and it’s likely that any photographer visiting the Socorro will get some good encounters. I quickly learned the importance of anticipating the trajectory of the mantas in order to give myself the best photographic chances, although you mustn’t allow it to disintegrate into chasing which is futile and counter productive, and may result in the manta departing the dive site. What you’re trying to do is to place yourself in its path.



White Tip Reef Sharks At Roca Partida f8 125th sec ISO 200 Nikon D200, Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye Subtronic Strobe

Although it's possible to see some striking black specimens in the Socorros, the majority of the mantas I encountered were predominantly white on the underside, so there's always a concern about overexposure. As a result, I'm still working on my tendency to back off the strobe power too much. I call it "strobe conservatism". Sometimes I got it right, and other times I wasn't using enough light but at least I didn't overexpose any images.

There were opportunities to photograph the mantas from above

and below, with a couple of nice chances of hiding the sun behind the animal. I also attempted a self portrait with a manta cruising the surface in the background – I'm not really sure if I got the image I wanted, but it's given me a theme to develop further during future dive trips. It's also worth considering that mantas attract divers like moths to light so you rarely get one to yourself; the challenge is to eliminate the divers from the shot, or at least place them in aesthetically pleasing positions.

I also found that I took fewer



The Solmar V liveaboard is based out of Cabo San Lucas at the tip of Baja California peninsula in Mexico from October/November through to the end of May which constitutes the "Socorro season".



Ready To Dive At San Benedicto Island f16 180th sec ISO 250 Nikon D200 12-24mm Wide Angle Nikon SB800 Speedlight



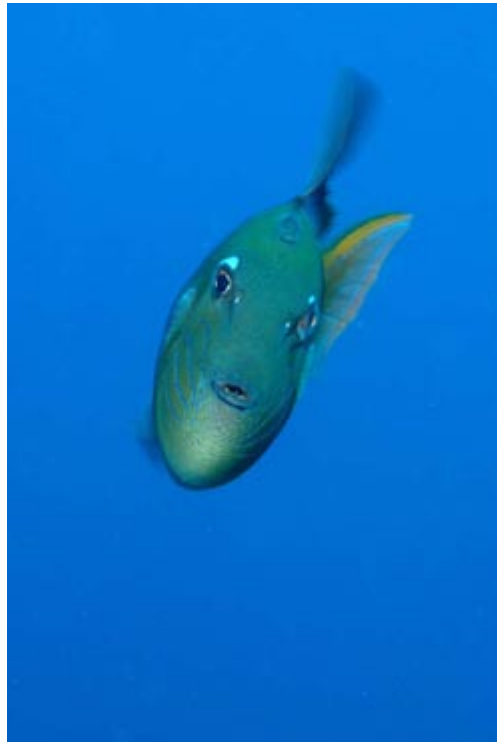
Dolphin and Diver at Cabo Pearce, Socorro Island f8 60th sec ISO 200 Nikon D200 ,Subal housing, 10.5mm fisheye Subtronic Strobe



Manta Ray at Cabo Pearce, Socorro Island f8 100th sec ISO 200 Nikon D200 ,Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye Subtronic Strobe 2

pictures than I would normally do, but I had to be ready when an opportunity presented itself, as the chance may not happen again. You might only get one or two close encounters on each dive. This “ready for action” mode was put to the test at the excellent Roca Partida seamount.

On the first dive at “the rock”, as I scrambled to get my camera from the boatman (or “Pangero”) after a backwards roll into the water, Rey



Redtailed Triggerfish, Socorro Island f16 30th sec ISO200 Nikon D200, Subal housing 60mm Macro Subtronic Strobe

blurted excitedly “Jeremy, quick get the camera, sharks!”

This dive was a real stroke of luck; we’d been dropped into the path of huge school of Silky Sharks, possibly numbering a thousand individuals. The school moved quickly, forming and reforming in a swirling vortex as divers kicked hard into the blue to get as close to the action as possible. We also noticed that a few dolphins joined the fray too.



Flounder & Flag Cabrilla, San Benedicto f8 100th sec ISO 100 Nikon D200, Subal housing, 10.5mm Fisheye Subtronic Strobe

It was an incredible sight, the classic “shark wallpaper”.

This early morning dive offered little light underwater, so it was vitally important to be ready – in this case I’d set my ISO to 400. It was overcast with the morning sun occasionally peeking through the gaps. The “wall of sharks” was encountered upon entry into the water, and upon the descent through blue water with no visual reference, so it was crucial to think quickly and intuitively about the settings, taking into consideration the brightness at the surface and the darkness below. As with any

schooling fish it was a case of trying to make sense (photographically) of what you’re seeing before the opportunity was passed. In essence, you’re looking for order amongst chaos, shapes amid randomness, and being prepared to kick hard for it in the current. In reviewing my images of the schooling sharks, I sometimes found that there were “pictures within pictures” by selective cropping.

Roca Partida is also a fantastic place to observe and photograph White Tip Reef Sharks, which can often be found snuggling together on the numerous ledges at around 15



Octopus At The Aquarium, Socorro Island f16 30th sec ISO 100 Nikon D200, Subal housing, 60mm Macro Subtronic Strobe

metres. I found that if I edged towards them slowly, they would sometimes tolerate a close approach which was a real opportunity for me. I've never managed to get good images of white tips until this trip – usually you can get “so near, but so far”.

But that isn't it around the Socorros; on other dives Scalloped Hammerheads and Galapagos Sharks plied in the deep below us, well out of range of safe diving and photography, but possible to see. I was told that on some occasions, they can sometimes be seen at shallower depths.

For fans of the macro lens,

there's also plenty of subject matter, though I'll confess that I only used a macro lens (my 60mm) on one dive! The dilemma is to miss the “chance” of a pelagic encounter or go for the smaller stuff. Mexican Hogfish, Flag Cabrilla (a kind of grouper), Red Tailed Triggerfish and the endemic Clarion Angelfish are good subjects, and common throughout the Socorros. Other macro subjects include lobsters, octopus, pufferfish, flounders and an incredible amount of moray eels.

For me, the style of diving was different on this trip made a refreshing change. Instead of staying

close to the reef or wall like I often do, I spent a lot of time hanging out in the blue, watching and waiting for pelagic action. The visibility was generally good although it can vary considerably, often from dive to dive, with currents changeable as well. None of the dive sites are what you would call “pretty” in a Red Sea kind of way as it's mostly rubble strewn and rocky with scattered hard corals, and similar in some respects to Hawaii. It's what swims past that makes it so worthwhile.

The Socorros are an excellent if challenging photographic destination that rewards photographers who anticipate, forward plan, and think

about the best way of capturing images given the prevailing water, light conditions and the subjects encountered. And, I suppose a little bit of luck is always a good thing too, as it is with most diving. Our trip was considered to be one of the best of the season, where we were offered a glimpse into a bygone era, of seas teeming with life in all its brutal beauty. It must be said, there's some great opportunities here, fellow photographers!

Jeremy Cuff

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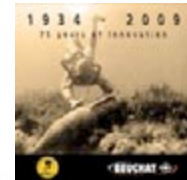




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