

Whale Sharks and Isla Mujeres

by Glenn Lawyer

Twenty five miles out to sea from Isla Mujeres (Yucatan, Mexico), the sea floor rises in a large bell-like hill whose top is at a relatively shallow 35 meters. And here, my friend, here awaits mystery and wonder. The hill is hollow. A cathedral lies hidden under the sea. Down the side of the hill, below 40 meters, you will find the main entrance fringed with sea fans.

A black-tip shark shoots out the far side as I approach. The usher, a bright yellow toadfish, watches all who enter and leave from his seat under a rock. The bishop is a bull shark. Small black coral bushes cover the floor. The ceiling rises several meters above me. Down to the left lies a side entrance. The cavern is light enough that I can just barely dispense with my torch. When I leave, my prayers complete, a school of angelfish follow. Notre Dame doesn't offer such spendor!

Two large groupers lurk at the top of the bell. I approach for a picture, but they are wary. Coming up the line I am joined by Kevin, Tanda, and Enrique. And five full-grown great barracuda.

The site is called "The Hills." Enrique was given the GPS location from a fisherman acquaintance. He had dived it three times previously. This was the 4th dive ever made at this location.

Normally divers in the Cancun region go to Cozumel. I had instead gone to Isla Mujeres, for



The fisherman's cooperative meeting hall.

two reasons. First, whale sharks. Second, all the divers go to Cozumel. On the island I discovered a third reason: Enrique's Unique Dives (www.divingislamujeres.com).

I knew on the first day that these dives would indeed be unique. A squall intercepted us on the way to No-Name Reef. The rain was thick enough to swim in. But it passed quickly, and when it passed, it blessed us with a horizon to horizon double rainbow. Rainbow dives are always special. On this one I discovered a dive guide with the same pioneering spirit as Guy Gilpatric or Hans Hass.

Enrique has been diving these waters since he was nine and working as a guide since age fourteen. After the recent breakup of Coral Divers he set up his own operation. He runs beginner courses in the afternoon, baptising new converts in the shallow waters of Manchones reef. But that is just for money, to keep the operation going. What Enrique wants to do is explore. Morning trips go to places where few other go, or where no-one has gone before.



Preparing for the whale shark festival.

Enrique relaxing at home f/13.0 (1/160) Tokina 10-17mm Manual exposure; ISO 200; Canon 20; Aquatica A20; dual Inon z240



The trips I made with Enrique had only two other passengers, Kevin and Tanda. They usually had their own dive agenda. I was free to explore on my own. This is how I love to dive, without the pressure or expectations of a group. Enrique joined half the dives. Otherwise he stayed topside watching our bubbles.

One cannot go to undiscovered sites every day, of course. Enrique also took us to outlying and rarely dived locations. Iglecias, for example, a collection of limestone outcrops permeated by

caves and arches, covered in luxuriant coral and purple sea fans. I found a beautiful swim-through, perhaps 8 meters from entrance to exit. The bottom was covered in seaweed swaying slowly with the surge. Coming out the other side, I saw Kevin and Tanda for the first time since we had entered the water. They waved and continued on their way.

My first reason for coming to Isla Mujeres was whale sharks. Summer is shark season. A blanket of plankton turns the water between 5 and 15 meters into a pea-green soup. This feast draws the sharks. Generally whale sharks are solitary creatures, but not here, not in summer. Between June and September, a school of 1-200 gathers. About two years ago, thanks in part to Enrique, this school was discovered by the tour operators. Now, instead of three boats circling one shark it is hundreds of sharks circling a few boats. The whale shark tours today put you in the middle of a giant, if gentle, feeding frenzy. To celebrate this discovery, and to preserve the sharks, the island has launched an annual whale shark festival (www.whalesharkfest.com).

Enrique suggested I take his brother-in-law's boat to snorkel with the whale sharks. Two German tourists rounded out the passenger list. With only three passengers in the boat, I had one and a half hours in the



Angelfish. f/10.0 (1/160) Tokina 10-17mm Manual exposure; ISO 200; Canon 20; Aquatica A20; dual Inon z240 strobes.

water. Whale sharks were everywhere. They swam past two, three at a time, coming from every direction. A pair of sharks swam past. The boat crew started shouting madly. I spun and saw a massive maw turn away at the last minute. I wanted a shot shooting with the sun (magic-filter style). I soon spotted a shark approaching from the right direction, but not the one swimming up behind me. Not until I glanced down, startled by the giant beast between my legs.

My Tokina 10-17mm was dialed to lucky 13 with the camera set to shutter-speed priority. A speed of 200 proved too slow. Bumping up to 250, I was able to capture sunbeams and sharks. Had I been thinking, I would have also tried 360. And auto-focus, instead of “star-button” focus



f/8.0 (1/200) Tokina 10-17mm Shutter-speed priority; ISO 200; Canon 20; Aquatica A20.





(too young).

Our favorite afternoon expedition was to the turtle farm (Tortugranja). Here they hatch sea turtle eggs in safety. Yearlings are released back into the wild.

The Cancun/Isla Mujeres ferry dock is about 1/2 hour from the airport. We arranged transfers via USA Transfers (www.usa-transfers.com/). We were very happy with the service and price. My wife had requested that the driver took us past a grocery store on the mainland on our way to the ferry. This proved a good idea, since the store on the island is limited. Once on the island, the taxi to the hotel was \$3.

Post-processing of the images was done using the beta version of Bibblepro 5 (www.bibblelabs.com). Bibble Labs, in addition to providing blazingly fast professional workflow software, strongly support open standards such as OpenRaw. I've been a fan for years.

Glenn Lawyer



Young sea turtles at the Tortugranja. f/4.0 (1/250) Canon 17-85mm Shutter-speed exposure; ISO 800; Canon 20d.

(I shoot a Canon 20D). Still, for shots of approaching sharks, of passing sharks, of sharks beneath me, and of sharks beside me, this formula worked reasonably well. It failed on silhouettes against the sun as sharks swam above me. A manual, pre-set exposure (and better focus) might have allowed some of these to work out.

Enrique's shop is minimal. It consists of a booth on the street side of a beachfront restaurant and a boat on the water side. The restaurant is not open in the morning, leaving plenty of table space to set up gear. Space on the boat is more limited. The boat typically departed at 8.30, and we returned shortly after noon. Fantastic diving in the morning, relaxed island afternoons and evenings with my lovely (non-diving) wife and children

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