

Diving Cocos

With Michael Gallagher

We were a real mixed bag - an Israeli, 4 Americans, 4 Brits, 4 French, 2 Japanese, 2 Russians, a Turk plus a token Aussie - all lured from our respective homelands thousands of miles away to the isolated sea mount that is Cocos Island in the Eastern Pacific. Our collective interest was not to search for buried pirate treasure, for which the island is famed, but which has yet to be found, nor to admire the scenery, which not too long ago featured in one of the spectacular opening scenes of Jurassic Park. Instead our quest was to experience some of the most exhilarating and unspoilt diving on the planet. Expectations amongst us ran high - this is real “dive trip of a lifetime” stuff.

Actually to refer to Cocos Island as “isolated” is somewhat of an understatement - it lies a good 400 miles off the west coast of Costa Rica in Central America, which meant that our 10 day liveaboard trip comprised of a rough 36 hour crossing, 7 days of actual diving, then another long 36 hours ploughing relentlessly back to the mainland. Not to forget that getting yourself to Costa Rica in the

first place is hardly a walk in the park either, unless that is you're an American.

Such is its remoteness that at present only two operators offer trips to Cocos Island - the Undersea Hunter Group and the Aggressor Fleet. The reputation that Cocos Island enjoys amongst keen divers, combined with the limited number of liveaboard trips which visit the island, usually ensures that punters need to be booking

All underwater shots taken with Canon 50D in Hugyfot housing with dual Ikelite DS125 strobes and focusing light. Lens used for all wide angle shots was a Tokina 10-17mm FE lens, with the camera set to shutter priority 1/160s and -1 exposure compensation. Lens used for all macro shots was a Canon 60mm macro lens with camera set to manual mode, 1/200s and f22. All topside shots taken with Canon Ixus 75 compact camera set to auto.





months if not years in advance to avoid disappointment. I was lucky enough to snag a last minute spot on Sea Hunter (a big thanks to Mark at Divequest for this).

Despite its unpromising name, “Dirty Rock” quickly became my favourite dive site. It didn’t look too promising from the panga either - just a small lump of rock barely breaking the surface, 10 bumpy spray-splashed minutes away from the sheltered bay where the mothership had anchored. Underwater was a completely different story though - its charms were irresistible. Strong surface currents demanded negatively

buoyant backward rolls off the panga, after which we would descend swiftly to a flat open area in about 30 metres of water, a well established cleaning station for hammerhead sharks.

It surprised many of us to learn that hammerhead sharks are extremely skittish creatures - they may grow up to 3 metres long, look truly fearsome, but I’ve met clownfish before who’d be more than capable of scaring them away. So it is vital that divers hide from view as much as possible, and otherwise make every effort to appear submissive to the sharks, if close encounters are to be had. Otherwise, as our group learnt by painful



experience, a quick flick of their tail and they’ve disappeared into the inky depths quicker than you can press your shutter release. Hiding ourselves behind rocks and wedging ourselves into gullies around the cleaning station, we would wait for the stars of the show to arrive. Normally it didn’t take too long for the unmistakable outline of a hammerhead shark to appear, twitching in open invitation to the resident barberfish and angelfish to get to work. It’s a fair deal for all concerned - the sharks rid themselves of their parasites, the cleaner fish get a free meal, and the divers get treated to a remarkable show.

Once our appetite for hammerhead voyeurism was sated, it would then be time to slowly ascend up the rocky wall, past turtles, Mexican hogfish, marbled rays, moray eels and a myriad of other denizens of the deep, to drift out into the blue. The anticipation was thrilling

- in the middle of the Pacific Ocean anything could turn up. For most of the time it was nothing, but all the waiting was worthwhile when big pelagics such as silky sharks, barracuda, wahoo, bottlenose dolphins and a jumbo shoal of horse-eye jacks made their respective appearances. Some of the other divers on our trip, who were diving from a different panga, even saw whale sharks and mating hammerheads.

Other memorable dive sites around Cocos Island included Weston Bay for its bold and inquisitive silvertip sharks, Punta Maria for its schooling Galapagos sharks, and Alcyone (named after Jacques Cousteau’s boat which visited Cocos Island in the eighties) for its abundance of swirling hammerheads and whitetip reef sharks.

Observant readers will have noticed that sharks are a real feature of diving at Cocos Island. Yet despite the presence of such a large number and variety of sharks, the setting sun does not signal the end of the diving day. On the contrary, it’s time to kit up once more for a truly astonishing night dive at Isla Manuelita coral gardens, where hundreds of whitetip reef sharks congregate to hunt anything unfortunate enough to be caught in the torch beams of divers.



The dive brief is clear - stay off the bottom and out of the way of the swirling masses of sharks for an experience guaranteed to pump the adrenaline of even the most jaded of divers.

For all these dives I found the Tokina 10-17mm FE zoom lens and twin strobe combination to be just right. A focusing light helped too, particularly on the early morning dives when the visibility tended to be a little gloomy. I switched to a macro set-up just twice, both times for night dives which followed the more traditional formula of searching for small critters on the reef, to be

rewarded with intimate portraits of parrotfish, lobsters, crabs, boxfish, shrimp and other weird and wonderful creatures of the night.

Happily for me, the facilities for photographers on board Sea Hunter were superb - dedicated rinse tanks, big worktops with compressed air hoses, and spacious individual storage units with built-in charging stations. It's a high calibre liveaboard in all other respects also - great food, fantastic staff (hi guys if you're reading this!) and comfortable cabins.

The 36 hour boat ride across to Cocos Island gave me plenty of time to dwell on how extraordinary the diving would need to be to justify all the time, expense and effort involved in making the trip. All I could think about on the way back was why hadn't I done this sooner, and when could I do it all over again!

Michael Gallagher



HARVEST REFUGIA – *SAFE HAVEN BENEATH THE SEA*



By Joseph C Dovala

The concept of Harvest Refugia originated with the ancient Greeks. They realized that if they hunted all the available animals in a province there would soon be nothing left. Therefore, they set aside a parcel of land protected from all hunting so as to be a source of shelter and safety for game animals where they could reproduce without harassment. They were serious about this because the penalty for violating it was death!

It would seem that “modern man” has been unable to grasp this concept. Why? The reasons are many: ignorance, greed, unable to accept facts, lack of information, and apathy. Without going into laborious detail here I’ll just leave you with this.....**YOU DO THE MATH!**

Human Over-Population.....	6,800,000,000 (and counting)
Fishing within 200 miles of land.....	98% (most open ocean is desert)
Commercial take of fish per year.....	90,000,000 metric tons
Sport and poaching take of fish per year.....	Unknown (millions of anglers)
Costs incurred for \$70 billion worth of fish.....	\$124 billion (\$54B subsidies)
For every 1 pound of shrimp taken.....	6 pounds of other sea life dies
Avg. population densities in reserves.....	90% higher (than unprotected)
Current amount of ocean protected.....	< 1/10 of 1% (not sustainable)

*Please support Marine Protected Areas
(MPA’s) in your backyard and around the world.*



Before it really is too late.