

W.W.W.W.W.W. Whaleshark!

By Mike Veitch

In the dive industry, it seems there's a new "hot destination" every couple of years that everyone is chomping at the bit to visit. The Mantas of Baa Atoll or the Sailfish of Isla Mujeres are two recent examples of this trend. Although I work in diving, I always seem to be on the opposite side of the earth from the latest and greatest new locations and have yet to be one of the first to scout out the "hot spot". And when I finally do get to that location it's years after the fact and the location no longer lives up to the hype. In March of 2011 though, I was involved in a trip that had the potential to put me in the right place at the right time. Yes, that's right, the newest hotspot in diving is right in my own backyard.

Close to the town of Nabire in Cendrawasih Bay, West Papua, Indonesia, a very special phenomenon occurs between local fishermen and the largest fish in the sea; the Whale shark. In an interesting twist, fishermen have built a series of fishing platforms called "bagans" that have nets strung underneath them to catch baitfish. It is the presence of these "bagans" that have created the consistent presence of the whale



sharks year-round. As the story goes, the fishermen believe the whale sharks are good luck and have nurtured a relationship with these giant fish that come to the "bagans" in search of a free meal. The fishermen have a set of powerful lights they illuminate at night in order to attract small fish into their nets. The whale sharks have



All the underwater shots were taken with a Nikon D90 in an Aquatica housing with a Tokina 10-17 lens nearly always at 10mm. Manual exposure mode at 200 ISO.

learned that the bottom of the nets house a layer of dead fish mush that they can suck out of the bottom, a regular fast food takeout for hungry predators! The fishermen will also scoop out handfuls of small fish literally straight into the whale shark's mouths as they come to the surface. For about a year this phenomenon has been known to a select group of people around Nabire and a few insiders to their program and word has been slowly leaking out to different parts of the world. And it was for this exact reason we planned a trip of over 800 miles to get there; to see if the whale shark hype was real. Could we dive with gentle giants of the deep who had fostered a relationship with fishermen and were there just waiting for divers to jump in the water? Or were we destined to be disappointed with yet another story that proved to be a disappointment when experienced in real life?

As with any fairly new location, there is always a touch of trepidation that upon arrival it won't live up to the pre-billing, this trip proved to be no different. I was joined on the extravagant Dive Damai live aboard by 8 folks from Austin, Texas who were on a trip of a lifetime from Kaimana in south Papua all the way around the western end of the province and scheduled for departure in Nabire 15 days later.

This ambitious schedule took us through Triton Bay, Raja Ampat, and the World War Two wrecks of Manokwari, before arriving at the whale shark area for two days of whale shark encounters. We had some great diving on the way with blue ring octopus in Triton and beautiful soft corals and schooling fish in Raja Ampat. However, all the talk for 12 days kept coming back to the whale sharks and what were the chances we would see them? None of the guests or crew had ever been there before so we were relying on second hand information given to us by folks who had been there in September. How would things be six months later? Would the weather be all right? Would the whale sharks be there in March? Would we only get a fleeting glimpse of them like they do in Donsol? Of course I said: "don't worry, there will be lots of whale sharks and we will have brilliant encounters!" However, as I hadn't been there either, I wasn't 100% sure if that would prove true or not, but don't tell them that.

Once we reached Cendrawasih Bay, a ranger for the national park joined us for the remainder of our trip. He was there to smooth the way with the local villages as unlike many of the popular areas of Indonesia, Cendrawasih only has one or two vessels visit per year so the locals



are not used to divers in the area. Once we arrived at the whale shark area, the ranger went over for a brief consultation with the fishermen and came back to inform us that two whale sharks were currently swimming under the platform and that he convinced the fishermen to give them more fish in order to keep them around for our arrival. Enough said! It sure didn't take us long to suit up and get on the dive skiffs for the short trip over to the "bogon". Not entirely sure what we were supposed to be doing when we arrived, it didn't really matter as all we had to do was look into the water and there they were!

Two giant sharks cruising just under the surface at a leisurely pace right under our boat. As could be expected the boats were empty within seconds and we were soon cavorting with not just two but rather three 18-foot whale sharks.

The fishing platform has a large net suspended underneath it and the sharks never strayed too far from it so it was easy for us to remain close to them at all times. The best place for interaction was to the side of the net where the ranger sat on the platform and continually poured a bucket of water into the ocean. For some reason, the sharks have decided they

really like this stream of water and perform a type of “tail-stand” with their mouth protruding from the surface and drinking the seawater. As soon as he started scooping and pouring the water into the ocean the whale sharks made a beeline to the spot. Talk about a Pavlovian experiment come to life in a non-scientific setting!

The sharks were certainly not shy amongst divers or snorkelers either. For a full two hours we dived and swam with these gentle giants and they showed no fear or nervousness around us. In fact, they were well aware of our presence, as they would veer at the last second to avoid colliding with a diver in their path. Although the fishermen stopped throwing fish into the water within 30 minutes of us getting in, the whale sharks stuck around for hours. I have encountered whale sharks in the Galapagos and French Polynesia and have heard stories of encounters with them in places such as Ningaloo and the Philippines but never anything to rival this. Not only did we not have to chase a photographic opportunity with the sharks, all we had to do was remain in place close to the net and the sharks would continually swim within arms length. At one point, I placed myself a little too close to the pouring water and not one but two sharks bowled me over trying to get to the stream. As dwindling air supplies forced us to surface after two hours of continual whale shark interaction, nary a soul had a frown on his or her face. In fact, it was the easiest group to convince of doing the same thing a second time!

The following day we decided to try the same dive again and were greeted with four whale sharks from the first moment that we entered the water. If anything, the second day proved even more incredible than the first. The four sharks remained



close to one another and gave us a constant show with close passes and eager feeding at the surface. One of the sharks spent a good ten minutes sucking on the net trying to get to the dead fish that had pooled to the bottom. We even had two unexpected visitors below us as both a blue marlin and a sailfish appeared and took advantage of the free meal of baitfish that the fishermen were dropping over the side. Although these fascinating fish proved more fleet than the sharks, several members of the group



were able to capture good photo and video as well.

On this second day, we spent a total of over four hours underwater intermingling with the sharks and never tired of the encounters. We knew more of what to expect than on the first day so our experience was much better planned. We also think that three of the four sharks were different from the previous day; meaning we had a total of six different sharks swim with us varying in size from approximately 14 to 20 feet long. At this stage,



no one knows how many sharks live in the region or if it's a nursery or perhaps even mating area. All of the sharks we encountered were what I would call "teenage" individuals, as they were not fully-grown but were larger than juveniles. It's definitely a phenomenon that needs more study and I think it's safe to say that the sharks are there all year long as that is what the fishermen told us first hand.

As we departed the whale shark area and headed to Nabire for departure from the boat, all anyone could talk about was the whale sharks. No one mentioned the first 10 days of the journey through Triton Bay or

Raja Ampat! It was like the rest of the charter was something that happened years in the past. For a group of divers with over 10,000 dives between them, it's not often that a dive experience can be so jaw dropping that everyone reacts like a kid in a candy store. I too was flabbergasted by our two days of fun, to the tune of over 1000 photos! Finally, I had arrived at a new dive location and found that not only did it live up to the hype; it exceeded it by a nautical mile.

Mike Veitch



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