

Isla Del Coco

by Alex Tyrell

The Hammerhead Shark has been high up on my 'hit-list' since I started diving, but has been one subject that had eluded me for quite some time. So with a portrait of a Hammerhead in mind I set off on the extensive journey from the Philippines to Costa Rica (via L.A. & Dallas) to dive the world famous Isla del Coco aboard the luxurious liveaboard, MV Argo, which is part of the Undersea Hunter Group. Cocos Island is very remote, requiring a crossing of over 300 miles taking between 32-36 hours from the port of Puntarenas. You will be navigating the open ocean of the Pacific, which can be a very rough ride when heading into swells that potentially originate near Antarctica! I timed my trip for the start of the dry season, so we only had to endure a mild swell on the outward journey making for a comfortable crossing. The thought of travelling for this duration to simply get to the dive site seems a little daunting, but it gives you plenty of time to sort out your dive gear, set up your camera system, and if travelling over numerous time zones on your journey to Costa Rica, sleep off the jet lag so you're fresh and ready to dive upon arrival at the island.

Seasons for Marine Life Encounters

Isla del Coco is by no means a new dive destination and many articles have been written and documentaries made about this stunning UNESCO World Heritage site. The dramatic island landscape, with waterfalls pouring off of the mountainous cliffs was even featured in the opening scene of



Hollywood blockbuster Jurassic Park! So the aim of this article is not so much as to give you a report on the diving, but to explain how I approached and photographed the different subjects I encountered during my trip in January 2012.

To begin with, however, it is worth noting that there are two seasons at Cocos that will influence some of the marine life that is to be encountered. From May through to November is the wet season



The MV Argo sitting on the mooring at Manualita Garden. Nikon D7000, Nikon 12-24mm at 24mm. Camera Settings: f/8 1/250th ISO 100.

(Left) A huge school of Bigeye Trevally with Divemaster Edwar at Shark Fin Rock. Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm. Camera Settings: f/11 1/125th ISO 500.

with a higher probability of rough seas making for a more arduous crossing, and more challenging diving conditions when you arrive at the island, especially surface conditions. You will be rewarded with a greater number of sharks during this period though, with large schools of Scalloped Hammerheads. So if you have the iconic 'Hammerhead Wallpaper' shot in mind, then think about planning your trip between June and October. Don't expect to return



(Far left) Hammerhead: The shot I had wanted for so long; portrait of a Scalloped Hammerhead approaching a cleaning station at Manualita Outside (while I turn blue)! Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Nikon 12-24mm at 17mm. Camera Settings: f/8 1/100th ISO 500.

(Left) A close encounter with a curious Galapagos Shark at Small Dos Amigos. Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Nikon 12-24mm at 24mm. Camera Settings: f/11 1/125th ISO 500.

with a 'Hawaiian Tropic' suntan if you visit then though, as they are not joking when they call it the rainy season; you can get up to 300mm (12 in) per month at this time of year! December through to May is the dry season bringing calmer seas and easier diving conditions, but expect a few less sharks. There is however the possibility, if you get really lucky, to encounter 'bait balls' during this time. The calmer sea conditions enable the population of sea birds to actually 'see' when a school of Green Trevally have been forced up to the surface by predators. So, flocks of birds all heading to the same spot is the telltale sign of a bait-ball, and then it's simply a matter of following them. If you strike gold and get in the water with a bait ball, expect to see Bottlenose Dolphins, Oceanic Blacktip Sharks & Yellowfin Tuna attacking from below and a barrage of birds striking from above – the video footage that Divemaster Edwar showed me looked awesome!

Lens Choice:

The majority of photographers will concentrate on wide-angle imagery whilst at Cocos, as it is renowned as a 'big-fish' destinations. But there are macro opportunities available if you so wish. I stuck to wide-angle for all but one dive, as I have more than my fair share of macro back in the Philippines. I found that the Nikon 12-24mm lens behind a Zen DP-200 dome was most effective for the majority of the dives. The Tokina 10-17mm got a few outings when I was hoping for that close encounter, but this turned out to be more of a rarity, so the 12-24mm became my lens of choice. The Tokina did prove valuable for shooting the huge schools of Trevally, when a fisheye lens simply lets you fit more of the school in. Plus the Tokina was great on the night dives when shooting the mass of hunting White-Tip Reef Sharks.

Subjects:

Scalloped Hammerhead (Sphyrna lewini):

This is probably the most famous photo subject at Isla del Coco and photos of these awesome

Elasmobranchs is what every photographer wants to capture, especially the 'Hammerhead Wallpaper' shot of the school silhouetted against a blue-water background. However, these sharks can be a little shy and are very much affected by the noise of your bubbles upon exhalation. The ideal solution would be to use a Closed-Circuit Rebreather (CCR) to get in amongst them without bubbles to frighten them off. But the majority of us will be diving on Open-Circuit Scuba that emit noisy bubbles, so what is the best way to get close? Well, you won't find this recommended in any dive agency's training manuals, but quite simply you have to hold your breath! The Divemasters of the Argo call it becoming a 'blue diver'. Simply put, upon seeing an approaching shark, you hide in the rocks and then hold your breath until you turn blue! Through a week of diving you will improve your breathe-hold ability, but do expect a few post-dive headaches from CO2 retention! One useful trick that was passed onto me at the start of the week was to make sure I was ready as soon as the skiff got to the dive site. This let me be the first in the water

and following a quick descent to the cleaning stations ahead of everyone else, gave me a valuable few minutes to be on my own with the sharks. This proved to be a short window of opportunity when I bagged some of the better shots of the trip. The best sightings of hammers during the trip came at Small Dos Amigos, Alcyon and Manualita. My preferred lens was definitely the Nikon 12-24mm, as we didn't see the huge schools that a fisheye lens would have been good for, so I ended up with the better portraits using this lens around the 18-24mm focal length.

Galapagos Shark (Carcharhinus galapagensis):

This is a fairly large shark, growing up to 3m/9ft in length and they have quite a curious nature. We saw three of these beautiful sharks cruising in and out of the cleaning station situated at around 25m/80ft at Punta Maria, but they stayed just on the edge of the ideal distance for photos. I had better luck with photographing these at Dirty Rock and particularly Small Dos Amigos. Here they stayed a bit shallower, so I managed some quality time with them towards the end of the dive when the others had run low on air and ascended, leaving only the Divemaster and me in the water. At the end of a

memorable dive at Small Dos Amigos, one individual got very curious, coming straight at me and did not veer off course until it was a meter away, letting me get a nice head-on shot.

White Tip Reef Shark (Triaenodon obesus)

These are seen on every single dive at Cocos and after a few dives you start to ignore the smallest of the shark species you will encounter. That is until you do a night dive at Manualita where they get together in large numbers to hunt by the light from divers torches. Here you will encounter a feeding-frenzy as they attack the reef fishes illuminated by the dive lights, leaving just a few shimmering scales in their wake. Instead of a simple portrait, I wanted to get some shots with the ambience of this dive, so opted to shoot with a high ISO so I could capture the beams of light from the dive lights in the background of the image. Setting the ISO to 1250 let me use an aperture of f9 to give the depth of field for the divers in the background and 1/100th shutter speed froze the action. Strokes were placed quite close to my Zen DP100 mini dome port, angled outwards and set to a low strobe power so as not to over expose the light coloured underside of the sharks. This dive was just too fast-



White-Tip Reef Sharks on my first action-packed night dive. Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Light & Motion Sola 1200, Inon Z240's, Nikon 12-24mm at 12mm. Camera Settings: f/6.3 1/125th ISO 100

paced to compose your shots through the viewfinder, plus this would mean getting right in amongst the feeding sharks, highly increasing the chances of an accidental nibble from one! So I set my camera up in a portrait format, pre-focused the camera a foot in front of the dome and then positioning myself so that the divers were facing towards the camera and I was just above the feeding sharks. It was then a

matter of quickly dropping the camera below me to the sharks level, taking one or two shots as they approached, and quickly pulling the camera out of the feeding action. Shooting 'blind' will mean a lot of images end up in the trash, but this really is the only way to work with the frantic pace of the action.



The very weird Rosy-Lipped Batfish at Lobster Rock. Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Tokina 35mm (Macro). Camera Settings: f/11 1/125th ISO 500

Rosy-Lipped Batfish (Ogcocephalus porrectus)

This is a very strange looking fish that appears to be wearing bright-red lipstick! It is endemic to Cocos Island and was my only planned macro subject of the week. It is similar in appearance and often mistaken for the Red-Lipped Batfish, which is found in the nearby Galapagos Islands. Before my trip I researched the size of this fish, and selected the Tokina 35mm macro lens as appropriate, but couldn't find much info on its behavior except that they are normally found at a depth in excess of 30m/100ft. When I went to photograph this fish, I didn't have a very long surface interval from my previous dive, and my guide Chipopa had to search the sandy bottom at 30m/100ft+ for quite a while before finding one. As I settled down to get the shot, I checked my dive computer and only 6 minutes NDLs left! To make matters worse, these fish turned



The DeepSee submersible at Manualita Garden with new pilot Philippe on his first training dive at the controls! Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm. Camera Settings: f/11 1/125th ISO 500.

out to be quite uncooperative, turning away from the camera when you approach them. My tactic for getting this shot had to be quickly adapted, whereby I let the fish settle on the bottom while staying about a meter away, then quickly swim in and grab a shot before it had a chance to turn it's back on me! In retrospect, a better choice of lens would have been the 105mm, but airline weight restrictions prompted me to leave this behind!

DeepSee Submersible

This is a subject that only the MV Argo and Undersea Hunter Group could possibly offer. Shmulik, the owner of the DeepSee, was in the process of training a new pilot, so was working in Manualita Garden in much shallower water than



A unique view from inside the DeepSee Submersible with a background of Scalloped Hammerheads. Nikon D200, Nikon 10.5mm, f/13 1/80th ISO 100 (Photo by Samuel 'Shmulik' Blum)

the 450m max operating depth. This gave me an opportunity to get a rare shot that not many people have, the DeepSee in action. The sub is 6m/18ft in length, 3m/9ft wide and 3m/9ft tall, so I opted to use the Tokina 10-17mm. I started shooting from the side and slightly below, but was then directed by Shmulik to go over the top of the sub. This gave me a downward angle that I wouldn't normally use, but in this instant it worked much better giving a view of the whole sub plus the pilots inside. For those with a bit more spare cash than me, dives were offered to depths of 300m/1000ft, which gave the opportunity for some very unique photos letting you get shots through the Perspex dome that becomes invisible once submerged. I guess that this would probably make this the most expensive camera housing out there, costing approx. \$4 million! According to Shmulik, people commonly try to



A Marble Ray swims overhead at Big Dos Amigos. Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240's, Nikon 12-24mm at 12mm. Camera Settings: f/8 1/125th ISO 500.

shoot straight through the dome to open water, but to capture the moment and the highlight the fact that you are actually in a submarine, try to incorporate the passengers and the illuminated control panels into the image.

Other subjects include Eagle Rays, that came closer than in areas where I had previously encountered them, Marble Rays that are present on most dive sites and are easy to approach, plus Manta & Mobula Rays also made appearances through the week. Huge schools of Big Eye Trevally can be found on a few different sites. If luck is on your side, you may get close enough to get shots of Tiger Sharks, Oceanic Black Tip Sharks, Yellow Fin Tuna and Bottlenose Dolphins, which I did encounter but just that bit too far off for decent images. Like a lot of marine life encounters, it a matter of right place, right time!

The trip to Isla del Cocos was a

memorable one and I would like to thank the crew of the MV Argo for all their hard work that made for a very slick dive operation. The vessel is luxurious by liveaboard standards, very comfortable and more than capable of handling the potentially adverse conditions of the Pacific Ocean. The set up for photographers is good with individual cubbyholes for camera storage on the dive deck and numerous sockets for charging purposes. Cabins are extremely spacious, so you won't be getting claustrophobia in your bunk! And the tasty food was plentiful and varied. When I return to Isla del Coco, it will definitely be on the MV Argo!

Alex Tyrell

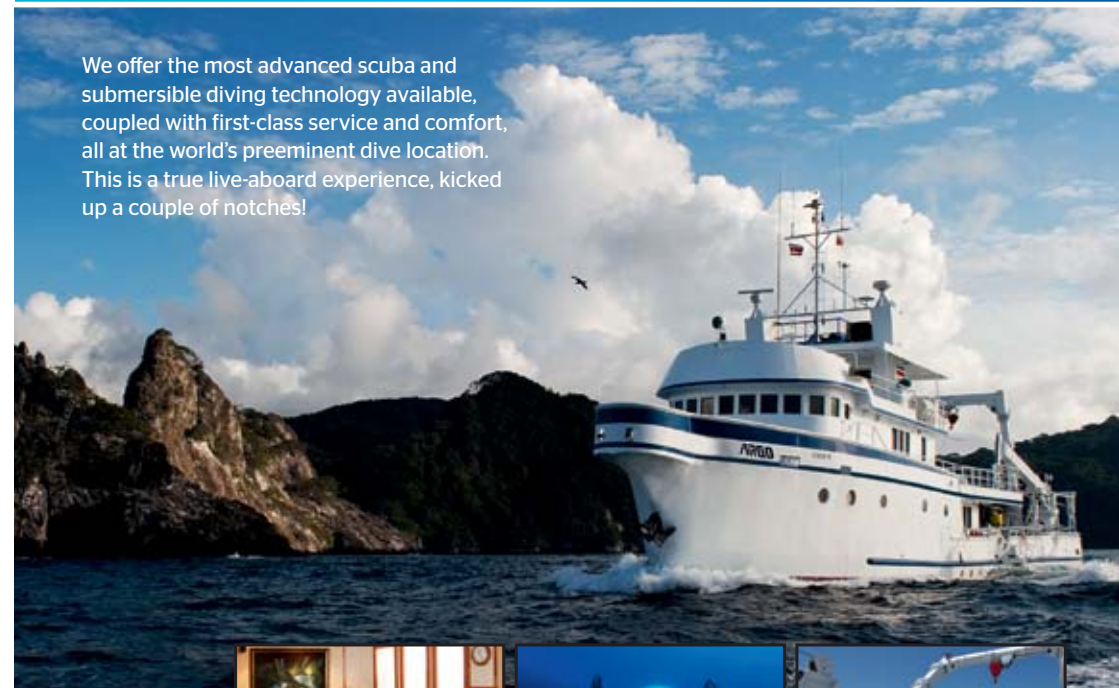
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