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Sailfish and Sardines

by Gregory Sweeney

Each year during the winter season, nutrient rich currents flow from South America pushing their way north up onto the shallow shelf off Isla Mujeres, Mexico. This phenomenon draws in large shoals of sardines and needle fish. Following these baitfish are great numbers of hungry Atlantic sailfish (*Istiophorus albicans*). It is here in these shallow waters that marine life and predators collide in havoc.

Isla Mujeres is a small island east of Cancun Mexico. A short ferry ride gets you to this long and narrow island: it is about 8 km long and about 1 km wide. It has a casual and fun atmosphere with many places to eat and drink, beaches, shops, and private residences. The beaches are busy during the day, but at night it feels like a small town where you are among friends. Walking is an effective way to get around as everything is close, but golf carts get you further afield and you can even complete a circumnavigation of the island.

Long a destination for sport fishing, Isla Mujeres is gaining a reputation for ecotourism with the tourism industry surrounding the

whale shark aggregations occurring each summer. I have lead several groups on whale shark charters and find that the regulations are designed for the good of the whale sharks while allowing for excellent encounters.

The ecotourism spirit has spilled over to the sailfish and sardine run. Boats that once only hosted sport and sailfish fishing charters are now using their expertise to host groups of photographers and snorkelers who want to encounter this fascinating event face to face.

Sailfish and whale sharks are not the only treasures to visit while in the Cancun region. A dive in the cenotes or on the Cancun reefs is a treat. A snorkel at the Underwater Museum to see the lifelike statues of people turned into an artificial reef are all great ideas for an extended trip after your sailfish and whale shark encounters.

It is early January on a bright sunny day just a few degrees warmer than usual for the season. Our adventure begins at the dock in early morning. We board our 13 meter custom-built deep sea fishing boat; both comfortable and spacious. Captain Anthony fired up the engine



A team of Atlantic sailfish working as a team to keep the bait ball together. Canon 5D MK3 in a Nauticam housing and a 15mm f2.8 fisheye lens. ISO 1000 1/500 at f5





and departed the dock heading out into the Mexican Caribbean.

Locating the sailfish and sardines can take a combination of a few ingredients: lots of patience, persistence, years of experience, and one last ingredient: frigate birds. Captain Anthony, with years of fishing knowledge under his belt, knows how to locate the sailfish. Soon we spot frigate birds (*Fregata Magnificens*) swirling in a funnel cloud formation. Approaching their location the water surface looks like it's boiling from all the sardines breaking the surface, then we notice the backs of large bluish gray fish. Our excitement level rises; we don our fins, mask, and tightly clutch underwater cameras as we slip into the water. Once underwater we see a large bait ball of sardines moving in unison shifting in many different directions. Twenty to thirty sailfish are orbiting around this bait ball.

The sailfish cooperate as a team to hold the bait ball together. Every time the bait ball changes direction it encounters another sailfish: that sailfish will throw up its sail-like dorsal fin to scare the bait ball into diverting in another direction. The sailfish herd the bait ball near the surface and try not to let it sink down deep or disperse. When the



A sailfish passes close.

***Canon 5D MK2 in an Nexus housing EF16 -35mm
f2.8 ISO 640 1/400 at f5.0***

***The sailfish use their sails for communication and
herding the bait ball***

***Canon 5D MK2 in an Nexus housing EF16 -35mm
f2.8 ISO 800 1/400 at f4.5***

bait ball gets close to the surface the frigate birds dive down grabbing and gulping sardines, which pushes the mass down into a tighter bait ball. This team of sailfish is not all feeding at the same time. Their method is to take turns individually going after the bait ball with astounding speed and precision maneuverability slashing the dense bait ball blindly with their bills knocking hapless individuals unconscious or wounding them enough to separate them from the safety of the bait ball. The isolated sardines are consumed within seconds on an incredibly fast return pass by the sailfish. The next sailfish with a good position has its turn and



the cycle starts again. The whole process continues unless the sardines perform enough evasive maneuvers to evade the sailfish or the predators are satiated and loose interest. Dolphins compete with the sailfish for a sardine meal in this chaos on the open seas. It was truly an amazing experience watching the sailfish work together as a team using precision, accuracy, and teamwork to control the



A photographer capturing a shot misses a sardine
Canon 5D MK2 in an Nexus housing 15mm f2.8 fisheye ISO 400 1/400 at f5.0

bait ball, then demolish it. Sometimes we were swimming with 30 to 40 sailfish. Occasionally the sardines would use us as a human shield for protection from the sailfish.

As photographers we have to try to keep up with the moving stage while anticipating which sailfish will make a run next. Sometimes it is one coming from behind you and other times the bait ball and swords are heading straight toward you! This is great for video with fast action and constant movement. The action is

often right at the surface, perfect for catching the opal colors of the sailfish as they signal to one another.

The action was very fast paced; it felt like I was in a giant pinball game so I keep my equipment streamlined. I use a Canon 5D MK3 Nauticam housing with a 15mm fisheye lens that is not too bulky to carry. There is no time for strobes and the bulk would slow me down too much.

The episodes in the water with sailfish were definitely an adrenaline rush. We relaxed and enjoyed the

ride back to shore then each night as the sunset we reflected over the days experiences with ceviche and cerveza. I am tired, but the hard work paid off with exciting images and video.

I will be back in a few months enjoying the slower pace of the whale sharks, but I am looking forward to next January when we will be back to capture more dramatic images of sailfish and this intense and exhilarating experience.

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Swim with Whale Sharks

Isla Mujeres, Mexico



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