

Parting Shot

In the small group of islands that are situated 14 nautical miles south of the Island of Madeira, called “Desertas” (Desert Islands), there is one of the last colonies of monk-seal (*Monachus monachus*), with around 30-40 specimens. The monk seal is considered one of the rarest seals. There are less than 500 in the world.

Sometimes, males undertake the trip all the way to Madeira, for the delight of skin divers (not for spear fishers, however). Although they look friendly, they are wild animals, and all precautions should be taken...

One of the places, in the Madeira Island, that sometimes we are able to see monk-seals is a cave inside the “Garajau” Reserve area, where animals have been known to rest, away from human eyes.

Well, on the last diving day in Madeira, this August 2015, with my junior son (13 years old), the dive was in the cave.

Everyone was dully briefed beforehand; if a monk-seal appeared, no sudden movements and don't try to touch the animal... my son only kept saying that it would be so cool if we saw one... but it had been some time since someone last saw one there.

Jumping into the water, that was at 23° Celsius, and around 15 meters

visibility, we started swimming towards the entrance of the cave (5 divers, plus 2 guides). Into the cave we went, looking all around to try to see a seal, or just the small fauna that inhabits the place.

Reaching the bottom, with all of us trying not to kick up the sand, there was no trace of a monk-seal, just the regular fauna. Suddenly, someone pulled my fin... I looked back and there it was, a 2 metre monk-seal, looking back at the 7 divers...

Go-Pros started rolling, strobes started flashing and divers started positioning to get the best view or to get the best images... I just took a quick glance at my son, and I could see the huge smile behind the regulator...

Well, the monk-seal played with us for almost 20 minutes, moving around the cave and the divers, spinning, moving in and out of the cave. Sand started to be almost everywhere, as divers tried to stay put, but kept kicking up the sand as they tried to position themselves. At one



Nikon D7100, Hugyphot housing, 2 Inon Z-240, Tokina 10-17 mm, at 12 mm, 1/60, f9, iso 200

point, the animal started to follow my son, and we kept moving away, trying to keep a rock between them...

When the animal went again to the end of the cave, we decided to leave it be. Looking back, we all left the cave.

We swam for another 20 minutes, but I don't think anyone really remembers what we saw afterwards... Our minds were still inside the cave and enjoying that amazing experience.

Needless to say, my son, well, all of us, were more than happy...

Augusto Salgado

**Do you have a shot which has a story within a story?
If so e mail it with up to 500 words of text and yours could be the next Parting Shot.
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