

DIVE LOG



A whale shark comes up to feed in Holbox, Mexico.

Where the Whale Sharks Are

Follow our lead to five corners of the world for one of diving's most coveted experiences ■ BY TERRY WARD

Whale shark run-ins rank near the top of any diving bucket list. With a head like the hood of a Ford, dizzying dots and tiny eyes incongruous with its sheer mass, this gentle animal is the largest fish in the oceans. The irony for divers, of course, is that you're most likely to encounter whale

sharks near the water's surface with a snorkel clenched between your molars instead of a regulator. But it doesn't make the experience any less sensational. Read on for some of the planet's most fascinating destinations for swimming (and diving) alongside these docile beauties.

Encounters

1 **Holbox, Mexico** Local fishermen in Holbox, an island off the Yucatán Peninsula, paid no attention to the whale sharks that frequented their waters every summer, since they didn't consider the animals a food source. But when tourists who'd been swimming with the creatures in Africa started spreading the word that whale sharks were to be found in Holbox, tourism quickly grew. In the old days, "People rode [the

JONATHAN BIRD; OPPOSITE: ART DIRECTORS & TRIP/ALAMY

whale sharks] like horses," according to Roddrigo Sidney of Holbox Whale Shark Tours. Thankfully, regulations are in effect today to ensure the experience is a snorkeling-only affair with a maximum of two people in the water with the animals at the same time.

» **When to Go** Mid-July through the end of August for the best encounters.

» **Operators** Holbox Whale Shark Tours (holboxwhalesharktours.com). Stay at Tropical Casa Blanca (tropicalcasablanca.com) in Playa del Carmen. Holbox is a couple of hours away by car, but you can't beat the boutique resort's location near hopping 5th Avenue.

» **Price Tag** Holbox Whale Shark Tours arranges tours from Holbox for \$110 per person. Tropical Casa Blanca has also teamed up with the Abyss Dive Center to offer a Stay and Play package: seven nights' accommodations at TCB and five two-tank ocean dives for \$825 per person.

2 **Gladden Spit, Belize** The spawning of cubera snappers draws the whale sharks to Gladden Spit, near Placencia, Belize (about 100 miles south of Belize City); and three days either side of the full moon gives you the best chance at seeing the mammoth fish. Boats have a 90-minute window in which to catch the whale sharks, and divers and snorkelers are required to maintain a 10-foot distance. Flash photography isn't permitted, and while you might think the regulations are harsh, they're in place to protect the animals. Of course, diving with the whale sharks is still a mind-blowing encounter worth every bit of stringent-rule-following.

» **When to Go** Plan your visit between April and May, when the snapper spawning lures the whale sharks to Gladden Spit.

» **Operators** The Isla Marisol Resort (islamarisolresort.com) is situated on a private island and has individual, air-conditioned cabanas and a family-style reef house, all with views of the water.

» **Price Tag** Isla Marisol has seven-night packages during whale shark season starting from \$1,795 per person, which include airport transfers, lodging, meals, three dives per day, one night dive, air tanks, weights and belts.



In Belize, spawning snappers attract the sharks (then divers).

3 Honda Bay, Palawan, Philippines

Everyone already knows about Donsol, to the north, but for a different kind of whale shark encounter head to Palawan's Puerto Princesa. Guides look for skipjack tuna swimming past like an "explosion of spears" to spot the feeding whale sharks near Honda Bay, says photographer Duncan Murrell. Dive boats scout for whale sharks between dives or on custom trips to see the animals, and hustle you into the water with a snorkel and mask to take in the spectacle. You can go through a dive shop to "schedule" an encounter, and local guides — often fishermen — also take visitors out in traditional outrigger *bangkas* to spot the whale sharks. (The fishermen stay in touch with other fishermen by cell phone to learn where the sharks are being seen.)

» **When to Go** The calmest sea conditions occur April through November.

» **Operators** Toto Cayabo, one of the first local guides to start taking people out with the whale sharks, comes highly recommended (totodolphin@yahoo.com). Near the Puerto Princesa Airport, Moana Hotel Palawan (moanahotelpalawan.com) has basic rooms with air conditioning and hot showers, and an on-site restaurant and dive shop.

» **Price Tag** About \$70 per person for two dives, including all gear and a dive guide. Room rates start from \$19.



Most whale shark encounters in Mozambique occur near the surface; (left) Honda Bay's clear waters make whale shark photography a snap.

» **4 Cabo San Sebastian, Mozambique** Home to one of the greatest concentrations of whale sharks in Africa and pristine coral reefs unpressured by mass tourism, Mozambique is one of those swoon-worthy, off-the-beaten-path destinations that wins you serious bragging rights among your buddies. Most encounters with the whale sharks here happen when the animals are feeding on plankton and krill near the surface. The reefs of Cabo San Sebastian (66 to 131 feet deep) are where they're often seen,

with most animals around 30 feet long. Guides look for a long tail breaking the surface to spot the whale sharks, then the pool's open and you dive in for an amazingly close encounter.

» **When to Go** November through February offers the best conditions.

» **Operators** Marlin Lodge (marlinlodge.co.za) is a five-star dive facility and resort in the Bazaruto Archipelago. It features 17 luxury beach suites that sit just a few steps from Flamingo Bay.

FROM LEFT: STEVE BLOOM/IMAGES/ALAMY; TIM ROCK/ALAMY



» **Price Tag** Two-tank dives are \$185 per person. Suite rates start at \$580 per night per person, and the price includes meals and drinks.

» **5 Utila, Honduras** Impromptu snorkel sessions between dives are when nearly all whale shark encounters occur in Utila — one of the few places in the world where the animals can be spotted year-round. The deeper waters off the north side of the island are where the animals are most often seen, and

guides look for the cues of water boiling with jumping tuna and flocking seabirds. You won't dive with the whale sharks, but don mask and snorkel and hop in the water. Seeing them feeding near the surface offers the most impressive vantage point anyway, but be sure to sneak a few glances out into the blue too, where manta rays, sailfish and other sharks (mostly blacktips and grays) often cruise by.

» **When to Go** Year-round.

» **Operators** Deep Blue Resort Utila

(deepblueutila.com) has 10 rooms overlooking a private beach. Rooms at the Mango Inn (mango-inn.com) are set on lush tropical grounds full of lime, coconut and mango trees.

» **Price Tag** The Deep Blue Resort dive package (\$850) gets you seven nights, three dives per day, two night dives and meals. Packages including seven nights at the Mango Inn, breakfast, dinner, airport transfers, two dives per day, a night dive and all gear start at \$599 per person.