
The Monsters of Oz

Diving with the whale sharks of Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia

When I finally see a whale shark, I want it to appear mystically, naturally, out of the blue. On the other hand, I can't wait forever — I might just have to break down and work with a spotter plane.

J. Q.

Dear Fellow Diver,

At the shout of "Go! Go! Go!" I flipped over the side of the boat, looked down, and -- OH MY GOD -- a whale shark, the biggest animal I had ever seen underwater, was headed straight at me, its mouth wide open!

In an instant I discovered how difficult it is to go backwards underwater. I moved to the right; the shark moved with me. I went a few feet left; the monster turned left! Suddenly it was under me. There was nothing I could do but draw my legs up into the fetal position to avoid walking on its back. New problem: the giant dorsal fin was about to impact me in a part of my anatomy that I was particularly fond of. Frantically I rolled to the side. Hang on, here comes the tail, sweeping powerfully from side to side in a 15-foot arc -- just missed me.

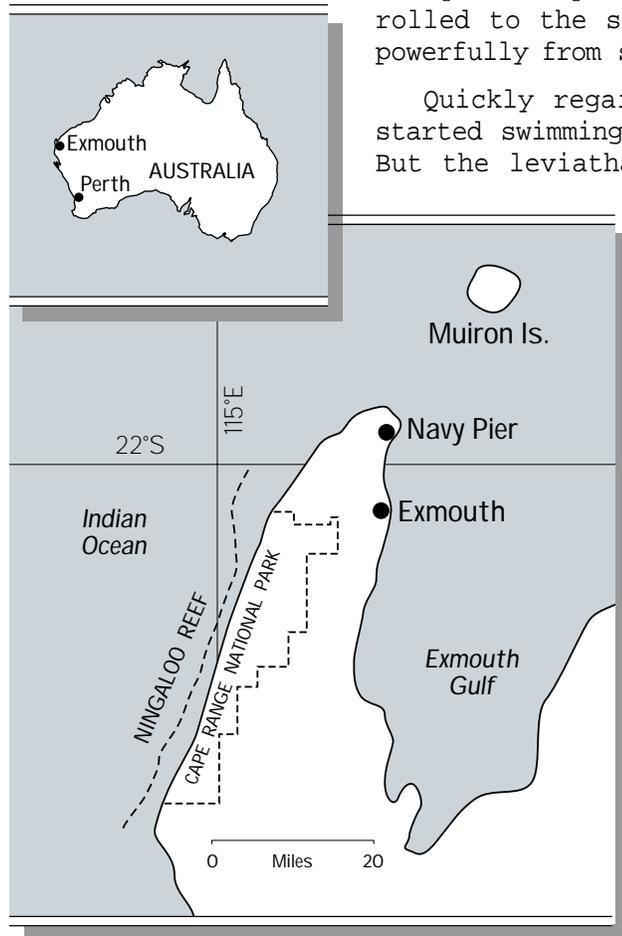
Quickly regaining my dignity, I realized that unless I started swimming fast, this shark was going to be out of sight. But the leviathan's stately progress proved too fast for me, and it soon left me behind.

Not to worry; it was circling back toward me. This time I angled to get ahead of it and slightly to the side. I was astonished to see that it was feeding, raising its enormous head up to the surface, gills expanded, gulping down krill (tiny crustaceans) by the bucketful, then shaking its head vigorously, as if trying to swallow too big a mouthful.

A Day without Whale Sharks is a Dugong Day

My time here at Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia had not always been this exciting. I booked my trip with Kevin Deacon, a genial, fiftyish Aussie who is a senior member of a small group of world-renowned Australian underwater photographers. Kevin had chartered the *Nor Don*, a 60-foot fishing boat -- not a boat designed for diving, but with plenty of covered space to get out of the sun, and well maintained. Whale shark watching is mainly a snorkel sport, anyway.

Since our spotter plane would not be in the air until 10:30 a.m., we decided to dive first on the reef. My buddy and I descended through a drifting cloud of randomly pulsating moon jellies in dark green water full of plankton. Visibility was no more than 30 feet. The reef had a healthy



**North West Cape,
Australia**

growth of compact, branching, hard corals, and plenty of fish, but nothing special. Anyway, my mind was on whale sharks.

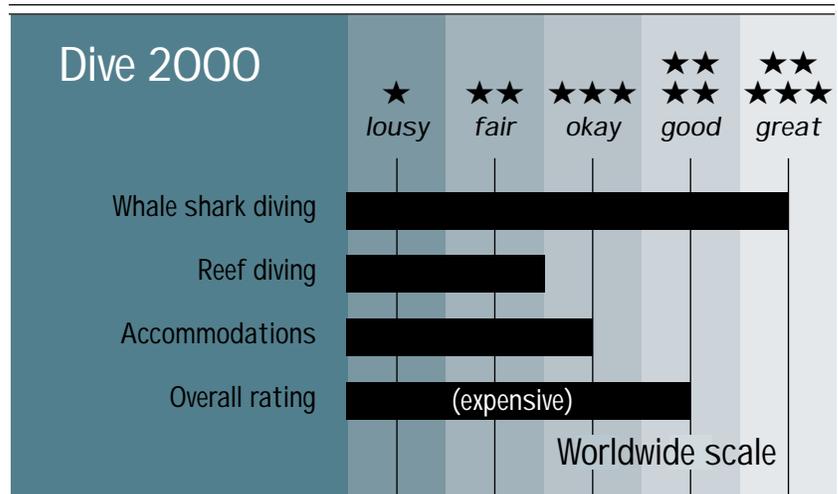
After the dive, we moved south down the reef front, all eyes focused on the ocean surface. Now our plane was airborne, in radio communication with the captain. The plane is key to finding the sharks; the reef is over 150 miles long, and the animals are not easy to spot from a boat. For the next 4½ hours we ranged up and down the reef. As the wind picked up, I began to see whale sharks everywhere -- here in this whitecap, there in that foam-flecked swell. We spotted a green sea turtle and a large manta, real ones, but only imaginary whale sharks. At one point the plane's pilot sighted something and directed us to it, but we found nothing. Kevin said it might have been a tiger shark; they are often seen in these waters but don't stick around long on the surface. How comforting!

George King, *Nor Don's* captain and owner, has been chasing whale sharks for over six years, and has escorted the likes of David Doubilet, Eugenie Clark, Stan Waterman, and the late Marjorie Banks. Kevin had made seven trips to Ningaloo. If there were sharks out there, we'd find them!

But the first day passed without whale sharks. Heading for home at high speed, we startled a resting dugong (cousin of the Florida manatee). Dugongs are a protected species, rarely seen -- but we were unimpressed. It was not a whale shark.

Two-Inch Vis, Five-Foot Jaws

The next morning we motored out to the reef, determined to find whale sharks. The weather was congenial -- clear sky and moderate swells -- but



More than a few dive operators claim to offer whale-shark trips, but not all of them hire spotter planes. Some simply cruise out to the reef, follow any boat on the trail of a shark, wait until the snorkelers tire, then take up the chase themselves. By then the shark may have tired of the attention and disappeared.

The operators who pay for their own planes naturally resent this approach. Kevin teamed up with Diving Ventures, a professional operation out of Perth, and contracted for a plane from 10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. daily. The boat crew was excellent, working hard to put us in the right place at the right time, with the spotter plane vectoring us in.

Because the sharks concentrate along 10 miles of reef only a 90-minute boat ride from Exmouth, I thought a live-aboard would be overkill. Now that I've dived Ningaloo, I've modified my views. Travel time from the Potshot Hotel to the reef, including two round trips by inflatable dinghy to transfer everyone from shore to boat, was 2½ to 3 hours, depending on how far south we had to go to find sharks. That's 5 hours a day wasted. After our one night dive, we got back to the hotel at 9:30 p.m., totally beat. A live-aboard anchoring inside the reef every night could reduce travel time to less than an hour; it could offer more night dives, along with more diving during the day.

Earlier in the month the live-aboard *North Star*, which normally operates out of Broome, far to the north, had been down for a charter. Unfortunately, it was gone when we arrived, so I didn't get to see it. Kevin told me it's a comfortable, well-run boat, but he wasn't sure whether there's enough demand at Ningaloo for its level of service. (North Star Charters, 61-91-935-599, fax 61-91-922-072.)

Choosing a Shark Operator

hours went by without a sighting. At one point, an enormous jellyfish drifted by. I casually remarked to Kevin, "I'd sure

like to photograph that." Five minutes later I was in the water. The bell was almost two feet across, and the body rippled like layers of lace. Hundreds of tiny fish huddled against it, including several beautiful juvenile threadfin trevally. Interesting, but not a whale shark. My spirits were sagging.

Whale Sharks on the Cheap

Last month I heard from a diver who said he and others had been down in Mexico's Sea of Cortez looking for whale sharks. Working with Amigos del Mar, they offered Baja fishermen a \$50 reward for spotting whale sharks and radioing their positions to them. With 50 fishing boats in the area, it worked like a charm.

Not only did they jump into the water with whale sharks, they got a bonus: a pod of orcas. If it works, it's sure cheaper than traveling to Western Australia. The best season is May and June. Call Amigos del Mar at 800-344-3349.

J. Q.

Suddenly the radio came to life. The plane had sighted at least four sharks, bunched together, possibly feeding!

It took us 45 minutes to get there; two other boats had already arrived and had snorkelers in the water.

By all reports, feeding in the daytime is unusual behavior for whale sharks, but here were six feeding within a small area. I hopped in and out of the water, sometimes dropping right on them, other times missing them completely in the low visibility. The object of their attention was krill, numerous reddish balls of it. I swam into one krill ball so dense I couldn't see beyond a few inches -- and suddenly came face-to-face with a mouth five feet wide. I found the krill-ball exit in a hurry.

I swam with four more sharks that day, each distinguished by nicks and scars on its fins and a unique pattern of lines across the top of its broad head. These were mostly immature males, ranging in length from 18 to over 30 feet. A bonus treat was a battalion of feeding six-foot mobula rays (the big manta's junior cousin), as many as seven at a time flying in formation through the plankton.

Environmental Holocaust

Two longtime reviewers called me when the *Fantasea*, a live-aboard that usually dives the Similan Islands and Burma Banks off Thailand, announced that it would be diving the waters of western Sumatra during Thailand's off season. They told me they were signing up.

The *Fantasea* was billing the Mentawai Island group, off the southern coast of Sumatra,

Indonesia, as unspoiled and unvisited — some of the best virgin diving in the Indian Ocean. Scientists from Padang's Bung Hatta University had visited the islands two years ago and found pristine coral reefs teeming with fish in areas that had never been dived.

There would be no other tourists, no other boats, just superb diving on steep walls that dropped down 12,000 feet among islands that straddled the equator — undeveloped islands without large, modern fishing fleets. The heck with my reviewers; I wanted to go.

But a lot can happen in two years. When the *Fantasea's* crew and guests sailed out of Padang on its first charter to the area, they were in for a horrible shock. After cruising more than 800 miles through the islands, they found nothing but wholesale destruction from dynamite and cyanide fishing and sediment runoff due to logging on even small, uninhabited islands.

The proposed marine national park, east of Pulau Siberut, had been destroyed. There was not a single live coral left in the entire 20-mile stretch of reef.

Several large factory fishing boats from foreign countries that have been seen in the area are suspected of having used dynamite and cyanide on the reefs. According to the Nature Conservancy, cyanide fishing is an absolutely unsustainable kind of fishing — worse than clear-cutting a forest.

Here at *In Depth* we are no longer fighting over who gets to dive the waters of western Sumatra. The *Fantasea* has canceled all further trips to the region.

J. Q.

Getting in the Groove

On the third day the clear, sunny weather held, and I swam with four different sharks. The next day skies clouded over, making spotting difficult, but we still found sharks. That evening on the way back we stopped for a night dive inside the reef in less than 15 feet of water. Kevin was hoping we might catch the coral spawning. It's this annual fall phenomenon and subsequent plankton bloom that attracts the whale sharks to this remote part of the Western Australian coastline, 700 miles north of Perth.

I had no luck finding spawning coral, but the hard corals were prolific and healthy; in fact, trying to swim clear of them without bouncing to the surface was tricky business in such shallow water. The boat's lights attracted a swarm of krill, which in turn drew a school of tiny fish, to which five small, hungry reef squid came for a feast.

The last day yielded a single whale shark, swimming purposefully in a straight line to, well, wherever it wanted to go. By now we were an experienced, disciplined group of shark chasers. In teams of three to five, we would drop into the water ahead of the shark and swim with it until we couldn't keep up the pace. Those who fell behind would be picked up, the boat would race ahead of the shark, and the next team would jump in. This would go on for over 90 minutes on a single shark, who didn't seem to mind at all; everyone kept the required one-meter minimum distance. It was a satisfying finish to the week.

C. B.

Ditty Bag

You can connect to tiny Exmouth only from the lovely, sprawling city of Perth. Though it's a long haul from the U.S., Australia (Oz, as the locals call it) is fascinating, with no shortage of additional destinations to visit. . . . Sharks are found only from mid-March to mid-May; recent research shows that their numbers peak just after coral spawning, which occurs 7-9 days after the March-April full moon. November through March is the cyclone season; this year and last, a cyclone produced huge swells in late March, making shark spotting almost impossible. I had 2- to 4-foot swells the whole week, and several in my group were more than a bit queasy. Take your own precautions. . . . Water temperatures were 79-81°F, visibility about as bad as it ever gets -- 30 feet. At times the Leeuwin Current pushes south along the coast, bringing 100-foot visibility and warmer water; it's unpredictable, and conditions can change daily. . . . To keep pace with a whale shark, you have to kick hard. Streamlining gear is critical; I started in a neoprene suit and weight belt and ended up weightless with a diveskin and hood. . . . Kevin Deacon's establishment is called Dive 2000 Pty Ltd, at 2 Military Road, Neutral Bay, Sydney, NSW 2089 Australia, telephone 61-2-953-7783, fax 61-2-953-5942. He organizes everything, including air and 6-day stay at the Potshot Hotel in Exmouth, the only decent-looking hotel available. It's a relatively modern establishment with rooms ranging up to large 2-bedroom kitchenettes. Cost per person (double room) for 5 days' diving, accommodations, lunch on the boat, and round-trip airfare from Perth, is about \$2,200. You have to buy your own breakfast and dinners. Eating out (not at the hotel) is reasonable; try the only Chinese restaurant in town. . . . You can also see the sharks through George King's own operation, King Dive, P.O. Box 249, Exmouth, WA 6707, Australia, telephone 61-99-491-094, fax 61-99-491-818. George has several boats and seems to be a good bloke. . . . The other local operator is Exmouth Diving Centre, P.O. Box 573, Exmouth, WA 6707, phone 61-99-491-201, fax 61-99-491-680. There's a nice diving/fishing shop next to the Potshot with a great T-shirt selection; that's about all I know about it. . . . Try to read *Whale Sharks: The Giants of Ningaloo Reef*, by Geoff Taylor, a physician who has spent more than a decade living and working in Exmouth trying to understand more about whale sharks. It's published by Angus & Robertson, part of the Harper Collins group (ISBN 0 207 18498 4).
