

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

In Cocos with the *Okeanos Aggressor* Hammerhead Heaven in This Hemisphere?

In Depth started reporting on Cocos before it debuted as the hot dive spot for big-animal action in 1988. We followed up as its reputation became tarnished with the arrival of a prolonged El Niño in 1991-92 that warmed Southeast Pacific surface waters over 82 degrees and drove the famous schools of hammerheads down too deep for more than distant glimpses. Reports in early 1993 indicated that the water was cooling down and the large pelagics were returning. We had to check it out. Our In Depth correspondent sends us this update.

Cocos is like no other place I've ever been: a truly isolated and untamed 14-square-mile island, almost magical in appearance, carpeted with a steaming tropical jungle. Hundreds of waterfalls burst from the cliffs, some plunging directly into the ocean, following the frequent downpours that bring up to 300 inches of rain a year.

Historically documented tales of buried treasure almost

200 years old (none of which has ever been found) only add to the allure of Cocos. Carved in the rocks in a stream emptying into Chatham Bay are the names of ships that have stopped there since the 18th century for water, fruit, and just maybe to hide away a few tons of loot stolen from the Spanish colonies that once fringed South America. It's easy to believe. Robert Louis Stevenson used the island as a model for his *Treasure Island*. When I read this tale as a boy, it took me to a place I thought existed only in the author's mind. I know now I was wrong.

Cocos is one of Costa Rica's many national parks. A few simple buildings on the island house a permanent coast guard contingent. All fishing is prohibited within 10 miles of the island, but with only a small skiff, the rangers are unable to enforce the ban effectively. I often saw tiny Costa Rican fishing boats just

off the island, long-lining for sharks. In this appalling practice, the sharks are hauled on board, their fins are sliced off, and they are dumped back into the water to drown. Next time you order a bowl of shark-fin soup, picture that image, and get the egg noodle.

Cocos with a First-Timer

I was traveling with my new wife/dive buddy. She's an experienced diver, but she was

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nevertheless a little nervous because of stories she had heard about the unpredictable strong currents around the island. And, well, okay, maybe reports of hundreds of sharks on every dive had something to do with it, too. I managed to get her on the plane anyway.

We touched down in San José, the capital of the country, which is set in a beautiful inland valley at 4,000 feet. With daily highs in the 70s, yet delightfully cool evenings, the city offers hotels to fit every budget and a variety of things to do (see the final section).

The *Aggressor* staff run a comfortable shuttle bus that will pick you up at your hotel on the day of the boat's departure and take you for a pleasant, 2½-hour ride west to the Pacific coast town of Puntarenas, where the *Okeanos Aggressor* is docked.

Are We There Yet?

You don't make a 300-mile trip overnight in a 10-knot boat. We boarded at 7:30 in the evening and arrived at 8:30 in the morning, two days later. Fortunately, the 37-hour trip was on relatively smooth seas, but Transderm patches were the fashion accessory du jour.

This boat is completely different from the *Aggressors* that roam the Caribbean. It was built in Italy, used as a luxury yacht and then a scientific research vessel, and later converted for diving. One hundred twenty feet long, with three decks and a 40-foot sun deck on top, it feels spacious even when filled to its capacity of 21 divers.

I enjoyed the feeling of being isolated in the big blue, especially with someone else at the wheel and no waves breaking

over the bow. We had plenty of time to meet our shipmates, ready our gear, relax, and simply anticipate. But there can be moments of excitement out on the open ocean. We chanced across a pod of sperm whales and changed course slightly to try to get closer. My camera was already in its housing, and I left it there, thinking of other attempts to photograph whales that had produced

Picture tracking an 8-foot hammerhead from 20 feet away, turning left to pick up a 10-foot mobula ray, then glancing to the right to spot a big green turtle sedately swimming by.

only a brown spot in a sea of blue. Of course, this time four of them, one a 25-foot calf, swam unconcernedly within 50 feet of the bow after the captain cut the motor. As they passed us, one of the big adults rolled on its side and casually eyeballed the crowd of humans gaping open-mouthed at the sight.

Just Roll Off the Dinghy

Almost all the diving is done from two inflatable Zodiacs, for two reasons: there are only a few consistently calm, protected anchorages on the island, and there is almost nothing to see in the bays where the boat can anchor. Over the years the crew has learned that the good diving is limited to a handful of sites, so you will repeat some sites a number of times, depending on weather and water conditions

on the southwest side. If it's rough, you may end up diving at only two locations: Manuelita, a tiny island separated from Cocos on the north side by about 300 feet, and Dirty Rock, maybe 90 feet long above the surface with steeply sloping sides down to the bottom at 110 feet.

You gear up on board, hand down your fins, and take a big step down from the deck into the dinghy. The crew goes to great lengths to help anyone who needs assistance. We had one diver on board who, due to a stroke, had only partial use of one side of his body. The crew members helped him into his gear in the dinghy, and he had no problems.

A quick trip to the dive site, and it's an easy roll into the water. During the dive the dinghy drivers are tireless in tracking bubbles. You hand up your weight belt and slide out of your BC, and they haul your gear over the side. A few kicks and you're back in the dinghy, with help if necessary (encouragement provided by imitation seal barking) from your fellow divers.

When diving here, if you find that you have drifted off into blue water and lost your reference to land, surface as soon as practical before you drift too far. The currents can be swift, and I've heard firsthand accounts of divers who swam into the blue in pursuit of something big and exciting, only to surface over a mile offshore. With the boat not even in sight, they were convinced they had just experienced their final dive (all were picked up after an anxious one-hour search). Such a situation may be easy to avoid, but you will find yourself tempted. Bring a Safety Sausage, pocket strobe, and air horn.

Too Much to See

I had dives where I was in danger of going into sensory overload. Imagine tracking an 8-foot hammerhead from 20 feet away, turning left to pick up a 10-foot mobula ray (the giant manta's little cousin), then glancing to the right to spot a big green turtle sedately swimming by. As these creatures disappeared into the blue, I noticed a group of divers clustered around a cut in the rocks. Moving in, I realized they were watching a whitetip shark feeding frenzy enlivened by four brown moray eels. One of the sharks had cornered a reef fish in a crevice and torn it apart, providing some terrific video memories for the assembled audience.

This spectacle eventually played itself out, and at 70 feet with 800 psi left, I decided to head up. But wait, why were those divers over there kicking like maniacs, all headed in the same direction? The answer revealed itself in a moment; a 15-foot manta ray materialized and angled up toward the surface. I waited and watched as the ray glided through surging bubbles, turned, and swam down, right at me. It slowly veered off and disappeared, and I was now definitely out of film.

You are more than likely to see a number of mantas. On one dive a 12-footer stayed with the group the entire dive, circling within 50 feet of the surface and seemingly enjoying our bubbles and gentle hand contact (fortunately, the dive-masters discourage active manta riding). At a site called Dos Amigos, featuring a swim-through cave at 80 feet large enough to steer the *Okeanos* through, a few of us were treated to the astonishing sight of over a hundred schooling

mobula rays filling the watery distance. The divemasters said they had never seen anything like it.

Much more numerous are the 5-foot, dark, mottled-brown marble rays seen everywhere. I have also had encounters with eagle rays, bottle-nosed dolphins (first heard, then seen), 6-foot sailfish, frenetically swimming tuna — and huge schools of jacks. Numbering in the thousands, such a school appears so dense that at the limits of visibility it can cause your hyperactive brain to interpret the dark mass as that Holy Grail of diving, the whale shark. These are sighted throughout the year at Cocos, but I'm still a whale shark virgin.

Came for the Sharks, Eh?

Imagine becoming so accustomed to seeing countless numbers of whitetip reef sharks on every dive that they soon become just another big fish. They are harmless unless you foolishly grab their tail and pull (as a diver did once, having lost his perspective). Then they will turn and give you a bite requiring stitches. Sounds reasonable to me.

The famous scalloped hammerheads (*Sphyrna lewini*, up to 12 feet) are indeed back. At my favorite spot, Little Dirty Rock, a pinnacle topping out at 60 feet, I watched a school appear as if by magic, swarm the site, and then retreat. Many in the group had multiple close encounters with the big schools, but due to the normal limited visibility of 60–90 feet and their shy nature, scalloped hammerheads are difficult to get close to. One technique is to find a king angelfish cleaning station and wait in the rocks for the hammers to come in for a quick wash and wax.

This approach can produce some stunningly close encounters, since the sharks sometimes seem to go into a trance while being cleaned. I was once within six feet of a big hammer while the angelfish gave it the once-over. At that point some primitive reflex deep in my brain took over; I involuntarily stopped kicking and exhaled, and it took off (they hate bubbles).

You may also see the beautiful Galapagos shark (my personal favorite), with the classic shark shape of the requiem family, as well as the occasional silvertip or blacktip reef shark. On an earlier trip, a group of us watched in awe as a majestic oceanic whitetip shark, with pilot fish in attendance, swam slowly by. This is the guy credited with turning up at shipwrecks in the open ocean to make lunch out of the survivors. I think we all forgot to breathe until it was out of sight.

Yes, There Are Pretty Little Fish

With all this action, most divers at Cocos tend to ignore what is actually an interesting community of reef fish. But then, there really isn't a reef here. Only a single species of coral, a *Tubastraea*, is present in scattered small clumps, and it is apparent only after dusk. The bottom is either volcanic rocks or sand, so divers all set for big-animal activity usually don't look down. They should, as they would find Guinea-fowl puffers, blue boxfish, yellow trumpets, convict surgeons, several species of parrots, a variety of morays, snappers, even the bizarre frogfish. The tricky part is avoiding the incredible numbers of long-spined black urchins, which makes night diving an exercise in buoyancy control. Anyone

who gets through a trip to Cocos without getting spined probably missed the neat small stuff. I do recommend at least one night dive, though oddly enough, you may not even see a shark.

It's a Wet Landing

You will have several opportunities to go ashore; don't pass them up. At Wafer Bay, it's a short hike to a spectacular 300-foot waterfall with a beautiful natural swimming pool at the base. The landing can be rough; you have to swim in to a rocky beach. Some in our party were tossed around when they mis-timed the swells coming in. The walk to the falls over slippery boulders presents the biggest danger on this trip, not the undersea predators.

At Chatham Bay, the beach slopes gently, making for an easy walk to the freshwater stream, which features stones carved with the names of past visitors.

We'll Be Back

Everybody on board reported having a great trip. Two of the other couples, who were repeat guests, said they were glad they had come back. Even though it was my third trip, I felt as much excitement as the first time, and my wife had the thrill of her life swimming with the mantas, though she skipped a few dives at sites where the currents were a little wild.

Details at a Glance

Cost: Both the *Aggressor* and the *Undersea Hunter* (the other boat that goes to Cocos — 90 feet long, 10 divers) are \$2,495 for a 10-day trip with 7 days of diving. Contact *Aggressor* Fleet (800-348-2628) or a dive wholesaler.

Rooms: There is adequate space in the nine double cabins and one triple, served by four

heads, each with shower. If you are prone to seasickness, request one of the lower-deck cabins; for couples, numbers 1 and 2 are the largest, though nearest the engine room and generator noise. If you get your sea legs in a hurry, go for cabin 8, 9, or 10 on the top deck; these have the best view and are quieter.

Strong Points: The sharks are definitely back, and you never know what other big pelagics you might see. The *Okeanos* is a very comfortable residence for 10 days, and the crew is outstanding.

Weak Points: If the weather is rough, it's a long, painful journey to the island. The underwater terrain can seem bleak if you are expecting a coral reef, but that's not the point here. Strong currents mandate an inflatable Safety Sausage and air horn. The dive deck has plenty of room, with individual lockers and a hose for a quick rinse. My complaint is the camera table; this trip typically draws a mountain of camera gear, and there isn't enough space on the two long, narrow tabletops, though there are several shelves below for storage. I am convinced that the entire dive-deck area could be redesigned so that the main camera table could be accessible from all sides. Anybody listening?

Dining: Tasty food, and plentiful. William, the wonderful cook, always tries to accommodate special requests.

Who Should Go: Experienced divers, sharkophiles, photo junkies looking for that shot of Mr. Big, and those who want a truly different experience while still on Central Standard Time.

Who Should Not Go: Beginners, sharkophobes (well, they might get over it), and anyone

who could have trouble with strenuous diving.

Rental Gear: Yes, and a selection of Nikonos camera equipment.

Dives: Three day dives at 8:00, 10:30, and 3:00, with an optional night dive always available.

Visibility: From 90 feet midday, when the sun's out, down to 50 feet under afternoon clouds.

Water Temp: 77–78°F at the surface. There is usually a 68–72° thermocline anywhere from 50 to 120 feet.

Film Developing: E-6 on board for \$10/roll.

Season: In San José and on the west coast, the dry season is December–April. At Cocos we had beautiful, dry, calm weather in late December. My experience in August and September was rain every afternoon.

Land Activities: If you can, reserve at least three days to do some touring, and get away from the city. We took six and were thankful. A politically stable democracy, Costa Rica has three big industries — coffee, bananas, and tourism. The country offers incredible rain forests, active volcanos, whitewater rafting, and beautiful beaches on the Pacific shore. I've not been to Limon on the Caribbean side, having been advised that it's not worth the trip. Be sure and make the trip to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, but rent a four-wheel-drive; in the "dry" season our front-wheel-drive Toyota almost got stuck in the mud on a steep road. Most of the paved roads are good, though there can be long stretches that show remarkable simulations of multiple meteorite impact craters.

