

## A VERY SPECIAL DIVE IN GALAPAGOS WATERS

by

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Scuba diving is done all over Galapagos. This is the story of a very special dive on the 28th of October, 1985. Close to the N.E. side of James (Santiago) Island is a small islet known as Cousins. It is a beautiful site for scuba diving, with lots of fish, sharks, black coral and other invertebrates, sometimes turtles and an occasional sea horse.

Towards the end of this particular dive, I saw a school of half-beaks near the surface. After having a closer look at them, I swam to my buddies Carolina (guide) and Alfonso (passenger). Alfonso had to end the dive because his air supply was running out, so I went over to Carolina to tell her this. She was at that moment observing some large hammerhead sharks (2.5 metres) that came cruising by. Together we started to swim slowly up to the surface. On our way we followed a pair of spotted eagle rays which swam away from the reef. We were at that time at 15 m. depth. Looking up I saw a huge dark "cloud". I was in front and started swimming towards it, thinking it was a big school of small fish, such as we had seen before at Roca Redonda. Quickly I swam up towards the middle of this shape, which was moving to the right. It was big and dark and did not change in form, so I realized it was probably not a school of fish after all. I thought of the *Encantada*, the yacht we were diving from, since in this dive, being the first to jump in, I had looked up to see her dark, sleek hull and the divers following me. But it could not be this 21 meter schooner because the big "cloud" was at some 5 meters depth. Only when I reached the left part of this gigantic form did I see the huge shark tail. It was a whale shark!

Although we did have a good visibility of almost 20 meters, the whole monster was not visible from head to tail. Behind this largest fish in the world swam four or five hammerhead sharks. On their own, hammerheads are not small, but compared to this member of the same family they seemed insignificant. Their length was the same as the upper lobe of the whale shark's tail.

With hardly any movement the whale shark glided through the water. Carolina and I followed with a lot of kicking and finning and were just able to gain a little on it. Slowly we came to its middle and from here we were able to appreciate the whole fish. It was beautiful: a moving wall of fishmeat, approximately 20 meters (65 feet) long, light grey on the underside, dark grey to black above. It had round white spots like tennis balls, and the slightly curved white lateral line stood out gracefully against the dark background. The dorsal fin was small, only one meter high.

As we reached its head, the animal veered slightly to the right and downward, so we came above it. The eye was relatively small but the head tremendously broad, almost as wide as I am long. Very close above and below the head, almost touching it, were a few amberjacks. Naturally very curious, these fish often circle divers. These are large fish, between 1 and 1.5 meters in length, but by the side of this giant they looked rather like small pilotfish cruising with an ordinary shark.

Whale sharks feed on plankton, as do the baleen whales, which are not fish but mammals. The gullet is very small but the mouth can be opened extremely wide. Along the interior front part of the gill arches they have a kind of sieving device with which they can filter the water. Unlike the real whales, a whale shark can leave its mouth agape because the gill slits permit a constant flow of water. The very mobile lower jaw and gill arches make it possible for the mouth to open wider than the full width of the body (transverse section). In this immense space a diver, even with air tanks, could fit without any difficulty.

This gentle giant was not feeding and it slowly headed for deeper waters. Looking down we saw over the bottom a magnificent formation of seven spotted eagle rays sailing by. In the meantime we had used up our air fairly quickly, excited as we were and swimming too fast. Alfonso had had to give up early, and I could not follow the shark deeper than 15 meters. At this point Carolina, who had stayed at 10 meters, saw me alongside this giant. She later described me as a small puppet next to a strange large fish.

It was at least the second time a whale shark had been seen by divers in the waters around Galapagos. A miraculous meeting, it does not fit any framework I have known; there is simply no comparison for such a gigantic animal.