



Bull Shark Dive

Playa Del Carmen, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico.

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“Hi there, I’d like to dive with the bull sharks tomorrow. Is that possible?” I asked hopefully.

“I’m sorry, we can’t do that,” came the disappointing reply.

“.....but we can do Wednesday.”

As an instructor and guide, I have spent my working life telling divers that, try as I might, I simply can’t place an order with Mother Nature for creatures to show up as soon as we hit the water.

Yet, here I was, in the heart of Mexico’s Riviera Maya tourist trap, booking to share some time with one of the top ocean-going predators. Such was the seemingly routine nature of the exchange, I half expected to be asked: “Would you like fries with that?”

But it is off the coast of Playa Del Carmen that, for a few months every year, such a unique diving opportunity presents itself with clockwork precision. The Bull Shark Dive has become the region’s fastest growing scuba diving adventure - and that is in an area that already well serves people with probably the world’s best underwater cavern and cave system and some of the most exciting drift dives around.

Two days later, I found myself with a small group of divers some 15 metres beneath the surface settling on a sandy plateau known as The Arena, hoping I hadn’t been taken in by a clever sales pitch.

Then, from the blue, a bull shark emerged and glided effortlessly towards us. She was soon joined by seven other inquisitive sharks and for the next 35 minutes we were captivated by their presence.

Located about 400 metres off the long golden tourist beach, the sandy shelf that slopes towards the deep water channel between the mainland and the island of Cozumel has become a key playground for the sharks.

Klaus Bosbach, owner of Playa Scuba Dive Center (*NOTE local spelling*), one of a small number of shops offering the shark dive experience, said the bull sharks had been coming to the warm, nutrient-rich waters of the Caribbean Sea for an annual stop-over for generations.

The only known bull shark aggregation along the Yucatan peninsula, they are thought to follow an in-built genetic migration route, running from the south. Klaus said most of the visiting sharks were female and the latest theory was that they spent three months in the calm waters to relax during the final months of pregnancy before continuing their journey north to the Gulf of Mexico to give birth.

Back when Playa Del Carmen was a small fishing hamlet, they would have feasted on off-cuts tossed overboard by the fishermen gutting their catch before it was landed. With the fishing industry now somewhat diminished, there is now a new breed of human interaction.

The small group of divers met Klaus and business partner, Luis Rivera, at their Playa Scuba shop, a few streets back from the beach, at 8am that Wednesday morning. After a few days diving the picturesque reefs full of shoaling fish, the sea grass gardens popular with the turtles and the wreck of fishing vessel Mama Viña, we were all craving something fresh.

Originally from Germany, Klaus moved to Mexico with his family as a teenager. There he developed a love of the ocean and set up his own diving business. For more than 20 years he has been running tours to some of the best diving spots on Mexico's east and west coasts. If ever there was someone to show us the sharks, it was him.

The six of us changed into our wetsuits and scuba gear and we were each handed a 'shark stick'. Designed to ward off any overly excited animal, the sharpened plastic tubes were perhaps not as high-tech as we had anticipated. Then we set off for the five minute walk to the beach, passing the restaurants serving early morning breakfast to the tourists who looked at us, bemused. At the beach, Klaus briefed us on the safety procedures and offered a fascinating insight into the behaviour of the often misunderstood predator.

"It won't take us long to get to the dive site," said business partner, Luis, encouraging us to kit up the moment we boarded the boat. He wasn't wrong. As the skipper stopped the engines after a quick race across the waves, I looked back and could still see holidaymakers settling down for some early sun.

With safety a key, the six of us rolled backwards off the boat simultaneously and, joined by Klaus and Luis, headed to the sandy bottom. On the bottom, Klaus lined us up. And it was here that we discovered a better use for the shark sticks. By digging the point into the sand, I found it gave a bit of stability against the current that moved by us.

"We make it safe so the sharks have respect for us," said Klaus, afterwards. "If we don't do it right it can be dangerous. If people stray from the group, that is when accidents can happen."

Settled, we looked towards the blue horizon. It was the emerging shoal of reef fish that heralded the arrival of what we had been so excited to see.

The silhouette was unmistakable. The excitement rippled through our group as vertical hands were touched to foreheads in animated communication as we spotted the tell-tale outline of a three

metre long shark. There was no mistaking the shape of the snout, the sharp dorsal fin and powerful barbed tail, a few rhythmic flicks of which brought her towards the group.

A couple of feet from us, she turned and paraded the length of the group with the poise of a model on a Paris catwalk. Her mouth opened slightly, as if in a half smile, to reveal the rows of razor sharp teeth inside. Yet I felt no threat. And it appeared that neither did she. Beneath her dark blue eyes, there was no hint of shyness at our presence.

This was the encounter that many people go diving for, the increased rate of exhaled air bubbling from our regulators a perfect reflection of our exhilaration.

Within minutes, she was joined by more sharks – I eventually counted eight – with each taking it in turns to sweep past, remora fish flanking them like tiny bodyguards called on to protect the ‘celebrities’ push through the ranks of fans.

The sharks eyed us intently, some sneakily swimming behind us as they lined up for another pass, hoovering up fish lying dead on the sea bed as they went. After slurping up the morsels, their undulating gills squirted the sand clear like a coloured smoke from an acrobatic aircraft, tiny fish darting into the clouds looking for the slightest scrap of a meal for themselves.

Okay the elephant in the room - or in this case, the sardines in the perforated tube – was the use of food to bring the sharks close to the divers.

Shark feeding is a controversial and divisive subject hotly debated on diving forums. At one end of the spectrum are those prepared to do anything and dump anything in the water to bring sharks in close. At the other, there are the conservationists who argue such practices are tipping the balance of nature.

Critics claim that long-term deliberate feeding of sharks alters their natural behaviour patterns, conditioning them to associate humans with food. The result, they claim, is an increased possibility of aggression towards humans.

Klaus acknowledged the controversy, but countered that he used close feeding methods involving small fish packed into a perforated tube. As such, sharks got nothing more than a small snack similar to their fishy diet. Such a small amount of food, he said, was unlikely to change their behaviour.

“We are not changing their behaviour by feeding them,” he said.

“We only close feed them with sardines and small pieces of fish in a perforated tube. We don’t use mammal blood or mammal products so they are only getting a small bit of fish.

“The sharks continue on their natural cycle. If we were changing their behaviour they would stay here all year round. But every year after being in Playa for a few months they go to deeper water and migrate north to the Gulf of Mexico where they follow large schools of tuna.”

Klaus added that the experience was a perfect means to spread awareness and promote among locals and visitors alike the conservation of sharks being hunted in such large numbers that they were facing the ever-increasing threat of extinction.

“Throughout our trips we focus on education and we try to reverse the bad names that sharks have gotten through time,” said Klaus.

“Every diver that dives with sharks becomes an activist against their killing. They see them in a whole new light and this goes to help protect the sharks as people are prepared to fight for them.”

For the diving industry in the area, such a change in attitude can't come soon enough. In November 2010 it was reported that a fisherman from the nearby town of Puerto Morelos killed nine of the bull sharks. Sadly seven were pregnant females with a total of 50 pups.

At the time, a campaign was launched by the diving community calling for better protection of sharks and the establishment of a marine reserve in the area. While little has changed in the past 18 months, the value of the sharks in eco-tourism dollars means there is a major incentive for them to be protected, even if that is only by unofficial agreement between locals in the absence of more formal regulations from the Mexican Government.

Eventually, it was time for us to leave the bottom. Gathered together, the group slowly ascended, as the dark shadow of a lone bull shark cruised over the rippled sand below as a reminder of the majestic sight we had just witnessed. Klaus was right, there were six people on the boat wanting to protect the Bull Sharks of Playa Del Carmen.

Mark dived with Playa Scuba dive Center (www.playascuba.com)

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Playa Del Carmen,
Mexico

Where is it?

The Yucatan peninsula is on the east coast of Mexico, fringing the Caribbean Sea.

How to get there

Direct flights to Cancun run from regional airports including Birmingham, Manchester, Gatwick, East Midlands, Bristol and Edinburgh. Playa Del Carmen is about a 45-minute drive south. Most tour operators offer holidays to the region

When to go

The Yucatan peninsula is fast becoming an all-year holiday destination. To dive with the bull sharks, travel between late November and early March. It is Mexico's winter time but daytime temperatures still reach up to 28C.

Entry requirements

A passport valid for a minimum six months from date of entry. You do not need a visa, but you do need a tourist card, which can be obtained by completing an immigration form available at border crossings or onboard flights to Mexico.

Currency

The Mexican peso (£1 = 20 pesos). Some businesses will accept payment in US dollars (£1 = 1.59 US dollars).

Where to eat

Playa's main street is full of restaurants offering everything from seafood to American fast food. For tasty Mexican food try BRO Chetas or Luna Maya Mexican Cuisine.

Where to meet

Many tourists rave about Coco Bongos but it remains an acquired taste. Kitxen offers an authentic Mexican experience with live music.

Sport Diver Verdict

Bull sharks, up close and personal. The experience will make any dive holiday a great one. The coral reefs of Playa Del Carmen are not as developed as nearby Cozumel, but large shoals of fish, turtles and rays are regular sights.