



## A whale shark of a tour in Mexico

**BY DEBBIE OLSEN, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD**

I never imagined myself leaping out of a boat into shark infested waters and it was even harder to picture my cautious husband doing it with me, but we tried not to think about it too much when we signed up for a whale shark tour near Cancun, Mexico. Our guides seemed to know what they were doing - even if we didn't.

The air was warm and humid and the sky was slightly overcast as we pulled away from a dock near the Dreams Resort in the hotel zone area of Cancun and headed for open water. The 27-km boat ride was a little rough to say the least, but we finally came to a stop in a place our guide referred to as "The Blue." The excitement was almost tangible among our little group of snorkellers when we spotted the first whale shark. One of the well-travelled couples in the group with almost 300 dives to their credit had been to several locations around the globe attempting to see one of these elusive creatures and had never been successful - until that moment.

Whale sharks are the largest fish in the sea - reaching lengths of up to 12 metres and weighing more than 21 tonnes. Getting up close and personal with these behemoths is only possible because of the fact that they are not meat eaters. They are filter feeding sharks that suck up plankton and fish spawn like giant vacuum cleaners.

As we put on our snorkel masks and flippers, our guide Gabriel reassured us of the gentle nature of these creatures and offered one small warning, "Whale sharks are filter feeding sharks that feed on plankton, krill, and macro-algae, so they are not interested in eating you," he said. "Just steer clear of their powerful tail fins."

The warning was all well and good, but somebody should have informed the whale sharks. As I eased myself into the water and swam out towards the sharks, I heard my husband exclaiming excitedly. Quickly popping my face mask and snorkel on, I glanced into the water and saw what all the excitement was about. A massive whale shark was directly below me and its tail fin was coming my way. When something rivalling the size of one of the largest dinosaurs is coming directly toward you it's hard not to feel intimidated. In that moment, I felt like a mosquito about to be hit by a semi-truck.

Fortunately, whale sharks are very agile in the water and can sense the presence of other creatures around them. Though the creature appeared as if it was going to hit us, it glided right past.

After the initial sightings, I began to relax and enjoy the experience of snorkelling with these gentle giants. We snorkelled in the area for a couple of hours while the whale sharks swam all around us feasting on plankton and krill - their large mouths open as they skimmed the water's surface.



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Whale sharks are the gentle giants of the ocean and because they are not meat eaters humans can get up close to them.

**Photograph by:** Calgary Herald Archive, AFP, Getty Images, For The Calgary Herald

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Though I had some doubts as I jumped out of the boat, swimming with sharks was more fun than I anticipated. Being so close to these amazing creatures was an experience of a lifetime.

### **If You Go**

- Cancun sits along the migratory path of whale sharks and they can be found in the area in large numbers from mid-May through mid-September annually. The hurricane season falls between June and mid-October and weather tends to be hot and humid with occasional rain showers during this time.
- We experienced our whale shark tour with a company called Solo Buceo in early July. The tour costs \$165 per person, lasts about four hours and is suitable for ages 10 and up. For reservations or information visit: [solobuceo.com](http://solobuceo.com).
- It's a good idea to go early (7 a.m. or earlier) if possible for a whale shark tour. Ocean waters tend to be calmer in the morning and less tour boats are on the water making for a better experience.
- There are many hotels in the Cancun area. We stayed at the family-friendly all-inclusive Fiesta Americana Condesa resort. Rates start at \$325 US per night for two people. For reservations or information visit: [fiestaamericana.com](http://fiestaamericana.com).
- For more information on travelling to Cancun, visit the official website of Cancun Tourism at: [cancun.travel](http://cancun.travel).

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