

Swimming with Whale Sharks in Cancun

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September 7, 2015



I sat on the edge of the boat, clinging to dear life as the waves tossed the “stationary” vessel about. Finally I heard Csaba yell, “GO!” and I did as I’d been instructed. I pushed off the side of the boat into the deep water below, just as the huge dorsal fin came near.

The [swim with whale sharks in Cancun](#) tour should be at the very top of your list of things to do in Cancun, a resort area that has no shortage of attractions. We began our quest at the marina, getting fitted for either a wetsuit or a life jacket and then given directions from Csaba Gocze, our guide from EcoColor Tours. The rules for the eco tour are very clear and intended to protect the sharks. You are not allowed to swim over them, free dive beneath them, or to touch them. While they are not on the endangered list, they are considered vulnerable.

It’s an hour’s boat ride from Cancun to the general area where they migrate, off the coast of Isla Mujeres. “It can sometimes take another five hours to actually find the whale sharks in the deep water,” said Csaba, preparing us for the worst. Fortunately, it took just another (bumpy) hour before a group of the gigantic sea creatures were spotted.



Recognized as the biggest fish in the sea, whale sharks can grow to a length of over 40 feet and live up to 100 years. These docile giants are not carnivores and are harmless to humans. They are classified as filter feeders and dine on plankton through their very large mouths. This feeding method is known as ram filtration in which the shark swims with its mouth open pushing water and food into it.

To prepare to swim along the sharks, we were instructed to don our masks, snorkels, and fins, perch on the wooden rail of the boat, and wait for the signal. The bobbing of the boat proved this to be more difficult than anticipated as each of our small group clasped the rail and tried to maintain our balance.

When we were at last directed to jump into the water, Csaba guided us to the closest shark and we glided along until it swam by. Although they are fast, they did not seem to be bothered at all by the swimmers nearby. What magnificent creatures they are! The first dive was somewhat intimidating, but we were allowed to do several, at each one I found myself more wonderstruck than the previous, as I was able to relax and really get a good look at their spots and the length and colors of their gills.



The last dive in was the best.... as soon as I was submerged, my eyes went wide as I saw the five-foot open mouth (catching the microscopic plankton) seemingly coming straight at me. Even though I knew I was not part of its meal plan, it was a terrifying sight, and I may or may not have screamed a little through my snorkel. The shark, however, was unconcerned and made a gentle turn to the left. There was never any danger whatsoever.

We could not have had a more enthusiastic guide. Csaba, an expat from Hungary, was like a child on Christmas every time we emerged from swimming beside the whales. "This is the best day ever!" He beamed. "There are at least 20 sharks here today, the most we've seen this year!"

Back on board, the crew made us a delicious snack of fresh shrimp ceviche, and then our tour continued to Ixlache Reef off Isla Contoy for more snorkeling. Even though the area was beautiful, all agreed it was a little anti-climactic after the whale shark experience.



The swimming with whale sharks tour is an experience of a lifetime. I've done a lot of snorkeling and scuba diving around the world with other sea animals like stingrays, turtles, sea lions, eels, nurse sharks, and black tip reef sharks. They were all fantastic experiences, but I can honestly say that they pale in comparison to swimming next to the mammoth whale sharks.