

GENTLE GIANTS

Swimming with whale sharks has to be on a diver's Top Ten must-do list. **Tony Baskeyfield** had an experience of a lifetime swimming alongside marine biologists as they documented the migration of the world's biggest fish in the Seychelles

The radio crackled, 'It's 20m on the starboard bow at 30 degrees... 10m at 45 degrees. It's right on you.' The voice came in from the microlite above: 'Go, go, go!'

I slipped into the water, descended to 10m and swam towards the large approaching shadow. Out of the inky blue waters, the head and mouth of a whale shark appeared. Swimming majestically towards me, the whale shark was 8.5m long with a mouth almost 2m wide.

Wow! I gasped into my mask. This was my first ever sighting of a whale shark. It could

have swallowed me up in one mouthful as it glided past, but this toothless shark was content with gulping great mouthfuls of plankton close to the surface. These docile creatures are immensely powerful. This one had a 2.5m tail and massive body. We swam alongside it for five minutes until our legs tired and the shark finally dived out of sight towards the deep.

Not a lot is known about these giant sharks. I was joining the whale shark monitoring programme run by the Marine Conservation Society Seychelles (MCSS) which was formed to find out what exactly

whale sharks do throughout the year. Headed by chairman David Rowat, the MCSS team aims to help conserve and protect the whale shark population.

Back on board the boat there were equally enthusiastic outbursts from the other divers as they recalled their own experiences. We all bubbled with excitement, before being interrupted by a voice over the radio, 'There's another one 50m away at 60 degrees'.

The second team entered the water. We watched from the boat as another whale shark swam by, closely followed by a small group of snorkellers. A dorsal fin broke the

All photographs Tony Baskeyfield

Wide angle: a snorkeller captures a whale shark on camera, complete with an accompanying school of remora



1 a group of three whale sharks is clearly visible from the air 2 the microlite provides the perfect spotting opportunity



surface and the top of a tail fin could be seen as the shark swam up to our boat for a look. I could see the topside of the whale shark, with its unique markings, a combination of spots and stripes, and its wide, open mouth.

Every encounter was different. Sometimes the whale shark would swim down quickly and out of sight. On other occasions the shark would loll along slowly and swim straight at us before veering away at the last moment. For such big animals – they can weigh up to 15 tonnes – these gentle giants make precise movements. At times, while I swam with them, their massive tails came very close, but always in a slow, predictable manner that was easy to avoid. While we swam alongside the whale sharks, marine biologists were collecting valuable information.

In October every year there is an upwelling of currents that brings plankton up from the deep and close to the surface over the Seychelles plateau. At the same time, whale sharks can be seen close to the surface, feeding on the plankton. The migrating sharks then head north and circulate the Indian Ocean, past Thailand before eventually re-appearing in the Seychelles. For these reasons, during October, the Seychelles has to be the best place in the world during the whale shark migration, for the sheer quantity of sightings.

So what can the average diver do to help the whale-shark programme? Well, you can adopt one of the monitored animals through the MCSS – for US\$50 you can foster a whale shark. You can also join in and assist

TRACKING THE GIANTS



Satellite tracking tags such as the pair shown above cost US\$2,000 each. Their signal is picked up by orbiting satellites, and they record light, temperature and depth, as well providing information about how often the sharks return to the Seychelles, migration patterns and the diving habits and environment of the sharks. The information cannot be sent or received unless the tag breaks the surface and the satellite is visible.

with the identification work by noting scars or take digital photographs for use by the MCSS. The proceeds raised by going on trips to see these sharks creates financial support for the programme.

At the end of four afternoons we had seen 46 whale sharks, with one in-water encounter lasting for nearly 20 minutes. I'll be going back next October to make it a twice in a lifetime experience. ■ For more information about the MCSS and to offer support, go to www.mcss.sc

SWIM WITH GIANTS
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