

Plankton Party at Punta Maria

—> By Scott Johnson

Cocos Island, Costa Rica is a remote, uninhabited, volcanic island located 480 kilometres off the Costa Rican mainland in the eastern Pacific Ocean. It was birthed from the seafloor thousands of years ago and now supports high-altitude rainforests on land and an intoxicating variety of large marine animals underwater. Cocos, a World Heritage Site and the crown jewel of the country's park system, is the epitome of raw, wilderness diving. No other place on the planet offers the same electrifying, heart-pounding opportunities to dive with pelagics, such as numerous species of sharks, rays, mammals and billfish, year-round.

You must expect the unexpected during each and every dive at the island. Blooms of plankton and plentiful cleaning stations

opposite page: The icing on the cake – a visit from a whale shark – marks the dive of a lifetime for photographer Scott Johnson
this page: A huge school of hammerheads, just one of the highlights on an exploratory dive that dreams are made of

attract creatures of all shapes and sizes. Edwar Herrero, a divemaster for the Undersea Hunter group, has developed the perfect response to offer when someone asks him if they will see a particular animal on the next dive. He simply smiles, shakes his head and says, "50/50". You could ask

him if you will see sand or a mermaid and receive the same reply. There is a tremendous amount of wisdom and understanding in that short answer.





For example, Alberto Muñoz (the current captain of the *Okeanos Aggressor*) and I were the last two people left in the panga at the start of a dive at Dirty Rock, a famous rock formation favoured by shark aficionados around the world. Just as we were about to execute backward rolls to enter the way, an enormous humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) breached 18 metres to starboard. Alberto and I merely stared at one another with open mouths and waited to see if the whale would breach again. It did and as soon as the humpback crashed by into the water, the two of us followed suit. Not only did we not see the whale during the dive, but no one else, except the panga driver, had any idea a humpback was ever present.

I have made seven voyages to Cocos on the *Okeanos Aggressor*, *Sea Hunter* or *Undersea Hunter*. One of my most memorable trips occurred in the mid-'90s when I was invited to join Guy Harvey (a renowned painter and marine conservation advocate) and Wayne Hasson, president of both the *Aggressor* fleet, at the island. Park rangers gave us special permission to explore four newly discovered undersea mounts to assess their potential for diving.

Guy was on a private yacht featuring a state-of-the-art fish finder, among other niceties, so we used his vessel to make sweeps across the area. A large blip quickly appeared on the radar and seemed to be circling the pinnacles. We decided to investigate further, so we donned scuba gear, grabbed cameras and jumped in.

The water was thick with plankton, which limited our visibility to 15 metres (50 feet). We had only been in the water for a few minutes, when an enormous 14-metre whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) the size of a school bus materialised from the greenish haze. We tried keeping up with the shark after it passed, but it was moving too quickly. Fortunately, Mr. Big was intent on staying put, so all we had to do was wait for him to make another pass along his route as if waiting at a bus stop.

In addition to the whale shark, we encountered two spotted eagle rays (*Aetobatus narinari*), a pod of bottle-nosed dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), silky sharks (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) and a massive school of scalloped hammerheads (*Sphyrna lewini*) during that same tank of air. It was, and still is, the most amazing dive of my career. The site was later named Punta Maria.

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