

Close Encounters in the Oceans of Mexico

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Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl have been trying to see massive, but elusive, whale sharks for years. When the fates finally aligned off the coast of Cancun, Mexico, they couldn't believe they were swimming with sharks the size of buses!



STORY BY:

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"Holy \$%#!" Luckily our reaction to our first face-to-face encounter with the biggest fish in the sea, during a day trip to the open ocean between Isla Mujeres and Isla Holbox off the coast of Cancun, was muffled by the snorkels in our mouths. Whale sharks are members of the shark family. The "whale" part of their name comes from their size.

Whale sharks have been measured at 14 metres long and more than 21,000 kilos, though scientists believe they get much, much bigger.

As you'd expect, an animal that size has a massive appetite and a massive mouth, but their food is practically microscopic. These giants live on krill and plankton and fish spawn which they filter out of enormous gulps of nutrient-rich sea water (footage does exist of them eating small fish too).

Eric and I are avid scuba divers and we've been trying to dive, snorkel or swim with whales sharks for years. The problem is, despite their size, whale sharks are shy and they're seasonal—only showing up in certain places at certain times of the year when their tiny food source is plentiful.

Whale sharks are nomadic giants in the world's largest swimming pool.

However, every year between June and August hundreds show up in the waters around Isla Mujeres and Isla Holbox near Cancun, Mexico. Isla Mujeres even hosts an annual **Whale Shark Festival**. A handful of tour operators have licenses to take small groups of snorkelers out to the open ocean where whale sharks congregate during this period, drawn to high concentrations of food in the warm Caribbean water.



After a choppy one-hour boat ride we arrived at the feeding grounds. How did we know? The surface of the water was cross-crossed and broken by dozens — no, hundreds — of fins. We were surrounded by whale sharks, each cruising slowly near the surface with their giant mouths wide open to maximize water and, therefore, food intake. Every once in a while a massive whale shark mouth would break the surface of the water. The gaping maw was big enough to take in a compact car. Thank goodness they're filter-feeders.

We scrambled to get our masks and fins on so we could jump into the water and join these gentle giants. Once in the water it hit us: we were surrounded by hungry animals the size of buses and we were in their watery world. Hence the expletives as whale sharks surrounded us, floating slowly toward us, mouths open, coming close enough to feel the swoosh of their meter-long tail fins as they passed. Our captain, Anselmo, estimated there were nearly 200 whale sharks in the vicinity. Being among them was everything we'd dreamt it was, and plenty we could never even imagine.

Look for **Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl's Just Add Adventure!** series every Wednesday and Friday all summer long on Travel and Escape!

KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS JOURNEY



In April of 2006, journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their jobs and apartment in New York City and embarked on the **Trans-Americas Journey**, a 200,000-mile working road trip through all 23 countries in North, Central and South America. After many years on the road they are still nowhere near their goal of Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America where the road literally ends. Until then, their slow and steady overland exploration of The Americas continues.

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