

Coco Island

Home of Neptune's Superstars



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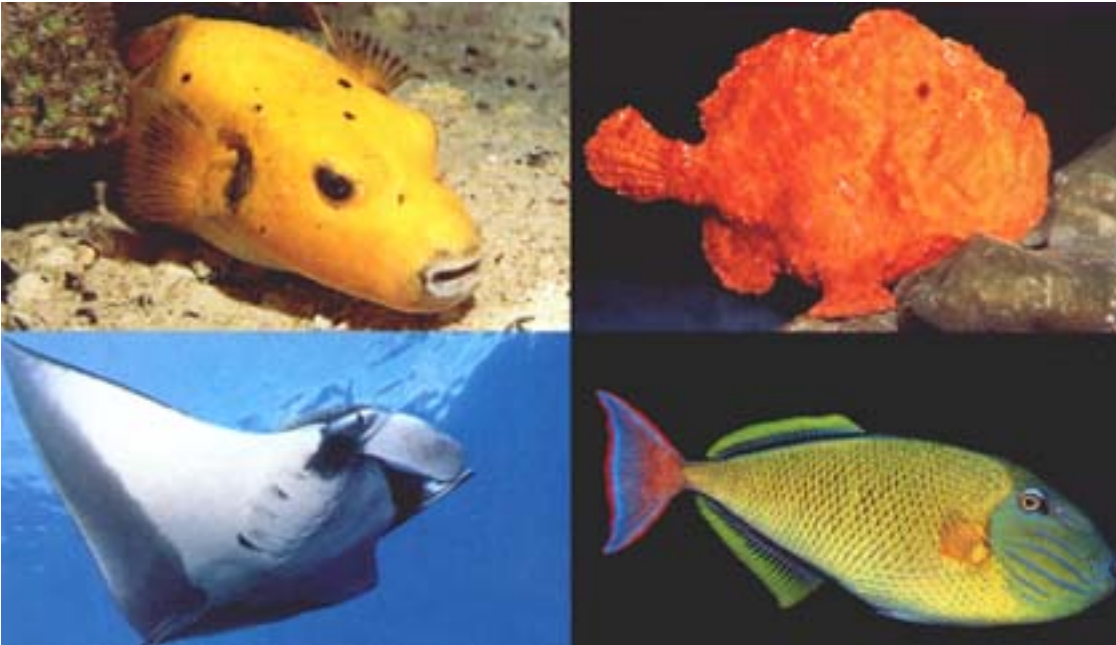
Nestled in a rocky outcropping in roughly 65 feet of water, we stared out into the distance hoping to see the shadowy figures turn toward us. No doubt about it, those shadows were the faint outlines of Scalloped Hammerhead Sharks. They were cruising along the edge of visibility about 100 feet away.

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time diving Coco Island in the Pacific waters off Costa Rica. Experience has taught me that when the current is running toward us our opportunity for a close encounter is very good. During previous trips, I had found myself in the middle of schools of several hundred Hammerheads. It is truly a staggering sight. It seems only natural to think you would feel some fear, but odds are you won't. The scene is humbling, awe inspiring and unforgettable, but it is not frightening. On a number of occasions I have watched from a few feet away as the sharks were cleaned by King Angelfish, Barberfish and Hogfish. I was hoping for more of the same.

Despite my eagerness to swim toward the school, I knew it was best to wait, remain still and let the sharks come to me. High in the water column the school turned and headed our way. Soon I was able to make out some details on several of the closer sharks. I could see the outline of hammer shaped heads and towering dorsal fins. I looked down momentarily to check my camera settings and, when I looked up again, a huge silhouette blocked my view of the Hammerheads. The new arrival turned toward us and in an instant it was less than 40 feet away. It was the world's largest fish—a Whale Shark. These behemoths can be 40 feet long and weigh in excess of 30,000 pounds.

Seconds later this huge Whale Shark was in front of us. I got a great shot of its face and a few of my buddy, Madison Quartiano, swimming next to the four foot tall dorsal fin, before the shark slipped away into the distance. Moments later the shark reappeared. We swam with this docile giant for the next four or five minutes before losing contact, only to have it circle back for one last pass.

I knew our excited swimming and the explosion of exhaust bubbles had spooked the Hammerheads, but no one was complaining.



Three hours later we swam along the drop-off at Dirty Rock to try again. This time we found ourselves in the company of a large Manta Ray. Handsome, powerful and incredibly graceful, Mantas are stunning animals. The curious ray stayed with us for 20 minutes or so and, once again, if there were any Hammerheads around, our efforts had sent them in search of quieter water. We spent the rest of our dive admiring a squadron of Marble Rays and a handful of Whitetip Reef Sharks before ascending into a swirl of schooling jacks.

We still hadn't gotten close to the Hammerheads, but the diving had been phenomenal. It typically is at Coco.

Clearly, it is the opportunity to dive with a gathering of Neptune's superstars, adrenaline producing animals such as Scalloped Hammerheads, Whale Sharks, Silky Sharks, Whitetip Reef Sharks, dolphins, Manta Rays, turtles, billfish and whales that has put Coco on the diving map. Very few places in the world offer the chance to regularly dive with such a variety of big animals. Of course, there are no guarantees that you will see all, or any, of these creatures in any single trip, but all are commonly encountered at Coco.

If there aren't any Hammerheads or Whitetips around, the mix of reef fishes, invertebrates and residents of the sand community provide plenty of entertainment. The reefs are loaded with Moray Eels, colorful schools of snapper, Soldierfish, Leatherbass, octopi, lobster, Hawkfish, puffers, Trumpetfish and so much more. Observant divers frequently discover oddities such as frogfish and Redlip Batfish.



Isolated and remote, Coco is in the eastern tropical Pacific approximately 290 miles south of the port city of Puntarenas. If you look at Coco on a map, you might think it belongs to Colombia, which it did at one time. Today, however, Coco is part of the proud tradition of Costa Rican national parks.

Occupying only 15 or so square miles, the main island is tiny compared to the vastness of the surrounding sea. With deep water on all sides, Coco is a spire that rises dramatically out of the ocean depths; for all practical purposes it is the only reef area for hundreds of miles. While the waters teem with a diversity of marine creatures, the land is species poor as few animals took up residence here.

The weather at Coco is not the sort of thing the local Chamber of Commerce would boast about, if there was such a thing. The only people who live on the island are four Costa Rican National Park Service guards. From the water, the island is lush, sheer and stunning, with more than 200 cascading waterfalls. Of course, all that water has to come from somewhere. The average annual rainfall is in excess of 24 feet per year. In a lot of places that much rain would severely reduce visibility underwater owing to runoff, but that is not usually the case at Coco. The small island is surrounded by deep, current filled water that tends to carry away the mud and debris. The water temperature usually ranges from the mid 80s (°F) down into the mid 70s, but thermoclines where temperatures dip into the high 60s do occur.

Coco is the only island in the eastern tropical Pacific that supports a tropical rain forest. Not only is the island lush as a result, but fresh water played an important role in the island's storied past. It made Coco an excellent landfall for pirates and privateers who flourished along the Pacific Coast of the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries. Estimates of the treasures buried by William Davies, Benito "Bloody Sword" Bonito and William Thompson between 1684 and 1821 approach \$300 million and include the famed Treasure of Lima. Despite numerous expeditions, the island has given up only a handful of golden doubloons. For divers, however, there is no question the true treasure of Coco is the marine life found beneath the waves.

Coco isn't a destination for the newly certified; there are usually some currents and other factors to contend with. But for anyone who has some experience under his/her weightbelt and who has a sense of adventure, Coco has to be at the top of the list.

Getting to Coco requires a bit of travel. For most Americans the trip involves a flight to the capital city of San Jose, an overnight at an hotel, a two hour bus ride to the port city of Puntarenas and a 30 plus hour boat ride to the island. But the reward for your travels is true wilderness diving.

I love that feeling of being in the wild. I don't know exactly what I will see, but I have a feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me to pay attention and be ready for big animals. Coco is not the most drop dead gorgeous place I have ever dived but if you want big and exciting, if you want to feel alive, to feel your heart race and your adrenaline flow, if you want to feel the raw power of wild animals and to witness the magnificence of nature, then Coco is the place to go.