

Whale sharks & ecotourism in Isla Mujeres



Traditional folk dances on Isla Mujeres.



The island's eco-activities include turtle farm tours.

BY MARIA GALLUCCI
The News

Even as this year's Whale Shark Festival wraps up this week in the Caribbean's Isla Mujeres, alternatives to the typical beach vacation still abound, with ecotourism packages offering year-round explorations of the island's natural beauty and culture.

The shark festival kicked off on Tuesday and runs through Sunday with a series of reef tours, snorkeling, film and artisan exhibitions and academic seminars all dedicated to raising awareness for the endangered whale shark and promoting the island as a premiere destination for sustainable tourism.

John Vater, an event sponsor and co-founder of Ceviche Tours, said the weeklong festival aims to attract international audiences and showcase the importance of protecting and preserving marine wildlife.

The island's tourism department initially approached Vater last year about developing a whale shark event, which took place on a smaller scale. This year, the tour company has launched a much larger celebration with help from the Mexican government; ECOCEAN, a non-profit organization for marine conservation; and Amigos de Isla Contoy, which promotes conservation efforts on the nearby island of the same name.

Isla Mujeres, just off the coast of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, is mostly populated by impoverished fishing communities. Fishing, its principle tourism attraction, has contributed to the depletion of the island's barrier reef – the second

largest on the planet, said Vater, who started his ecotourism company with his wife, Adriana, and his longtime friend and island native Luis "Coco" Refugio.

He said that amidst an increasing demand among travelers for environmentally conscious options, his tour company is working to help the island's fishing communities find new ways to drive the local economy while protecting the surrounding fragile marine ecosystem.

Whale shark tours provide all this, he said, adding that the experience can give a fresh perspective on protecting the environment.

Whale sharks, now classified as "vulnerable to extinction," are particularly prized targets among commercial fisheries in South and Southeast Asian countries, although the fishing, selling, importing and exporting whale shark products have been recently banned in countries like the Philippines, India and Taiwan.

The mammoth gray-and-white speckled whale shark can grow up to 18 meters (or 42 feet) in length and weigh more than 15 tons. The sharks feed mostly on plankton, microscopic plants and schools of fish, and they're generally considered to be gentle giants when interacting with humans.

Vater said he witnessed the migration of 180 whale sharks this month off the waters of Isla Mujeres, a migration that happens about once each season. The sharks often migrate around 13,000 kilometers (nearly 8,100 miles) across ocean basins.

President Felipe Calderon on July 5 announced the creation of a Whale Shark Bioreserve, which portions off 146,000 hectares in

the waters around Isla Mujeres to protect one of the biggest concentrations of whale sharks worldwide.

Mexico's government in March also said it would sponsor Project Domino, an initiative helping marine biologists study whale sharks by using photo I.D. and sighting reports to form a worldwide tracking database.

But even as the shark festival comes to a close, opportunities to swim with Isla Mujeres' whale sharks still remain. The sharks will hang around the Caribbean waters until mid-September.

Ceviche Tours coordinates chaperoned swims with whale sharks for US\$125 per person. With a private tour, a group of 10 can swim with the sharks in the Caribbean waters for US\$1,100.

The island also provides other sustainable alternatives that involve more than simply sunbathing with piña colada in hand.

Turtle farm tours, which run through September, give tourists a chance to interact with giant sea turtles and take part in preserving the fragile eggs laid in the sand. The farm is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. To contact, e-mail turtfarm@can-cun.com.mx. At the island's Garrafón natural park, visitors can snorkel in the coral reefs or stay dry at the indoor aquarium; for more info, visit www.garrafon.com.

Ceviche Tours also provides sport-fishing tours through the end of July. A half-day tour with four passengers and a local fisherman costs US\$550, while full day snorkeling and in-shore fishing trips cost US\$600 for a group of ten. Full-day offshore fishing costs US\$700 for a group of four.

Across the ocean waters at the nearby Isla Contoy, visitors can stop by the island's national park, which hosts more than 150 species of local and migratory birds, nearly 15 reptile species, more than 230 fish species and 98 species of plants. To read up on the government-protected park, visit www.islacontoy.org.

With the Whale Shark Festival nearly over, Vater said he hopes the event can show the world that sustainable ecotourism works.

"It has a significant, positive impact on the community," he said. "If it can be done here, it can be done anywhere."

For more information on Whale Shark Festival, visit www.whalesharkfest.com.

Building an eco-business

The story of starting the ecotourism company Ceviche Tours is twenty years in the making.

It began with the friendship between U.S. native John Vater, his Colombia-born wife Adriana and Luis "Coco" Refugio, an Isla Mujeres fisherman. Vater and Refugio met by chance during Vater's first sport-fishing excursion to the Yucatan island in 1988 – a trip abruptly halted by Hurricane Gilberto.

The families fished together over the next few years, and when Hurricane Wilma struck in 2005, Vater helped Refugio design a fiberglass hull to replace the boat he'd lost in aftermath. Two years later, the Vaters returned to Isla Mujeres to launch the craft.

Ceviche Tours opened for business in early 2008, retraining local fishermen to serve as expert fishing guides and working with marine biologists to provide swimming with whale sharks.



Whale Shark Festival, which runs through Sunday, aims to create awareness and promote ecotourism among international travelers.