

Yucatan Peninsula Playa del Carmen

July 13-20, 2013

Anacortes Diving Adventure Team



Brad, Marle, Dale, Kathy, Hope, Hal, Linda, Penny, Allison, Molly
Kelley, Lisa, Dana, Phil, Bob, Peggy, Richard, Skip

American Airlines: Seattle—Dallas—Cancun

DAY 1: Travel Day

Everyone was on their own for flights so we decided to take the red eye out of Seattle to Dallas and then land in Cancun by 11:30 am. Bob, Marle, Penny, Hal and I were flying together and Molly and Richard actually arrived a day earlier than all the group and enjoyed a full day of bone fishing before we got there. When you arrive in Cancun you fill out all the required paperwork and go through immigration which was super easy. Off to the baggage claim to gather up our luggage and then you pass through customs before you exit. This is where the fun part is because as you hand the agent the paperwork they then ask you to push a red button sitting on the counter. If you get the green light you are free to pass, if the red light appears you have to put your bags through another scanner then put them on a table as 2 agents rifle through all your belongings. Out of the 5 of us we had 3 green lights and 2 red, fortunately they are not that interested in looking that so it doesn't take very long. Once you are out the door be prepared for the onslaught of the beige shirt people, and believe hard and me there are a lot of them. It is all about transportation and tours. We had prearranged transfers so as you are trying to bypass them, they are running you down and sending you to a counter pretending that they are part of your transfer when indeed they are not. We finally make it outside and there is yet another gauntlet of beige shirts and in the far back across the driveway I see a sign with our names on it. Finally, we load into the van and head to Playa del Carmen which is about a 45-60 minute drive. Our driver spoke good English and told us all about the sights along the way, the vans were in great shape and had air conditioning. The weather however



was black clouds and threatening to rain. We arrive at Hotel Casa de Gopala which is a quaint little hotel in the heart of Playa del Carmen just a couple of blocks from the beach. The rooms are all good size with large beds and the suites are bigger with kitchenettes, and all of the rooms have a refrigerator. Our priorities right now are money then food as we are all starving! Bob and I walk around the corner to the Yucatek Dive Center and meet with Jean-Yves who gives us the directions to the good bank to use for money exchange and a great little local restaurant called Las Barisas. Do not exchange your money at the airport unless it is absolutely necessary. The best rate is to change money inside a Scotia Bank or use the ATM outside the

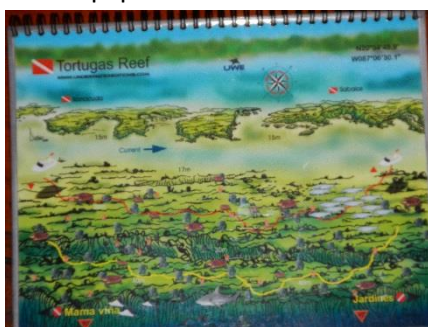
bank. Only use the ATM's that are attached to the banks! After lunch we took a stroll to the grocery store to stock up on necessities like beer and snacks, of course the only grocery store is Walmart, which is ridiculous but what are you going to do? We then have a meeting up on the pool deck with Jean-Yves and Clemants who give us the low down on our diving schedule, breakfast in the morning, and a full weather report. There is still remnants of Hurricane Chantel weather that is affecting us so they are calling for more wind and rain for the next two days. We will try and aim for Tuesday and Wednesday as Whale Shark days, but that can change if the weather isn't cooperating. Phil, Dana and Lisa all just arrived so we quickly get them up to speed and of course the two most important things on their list; money and food. So here we go again. On the way out the door, Linda arrives so we grab her too and off we go. We used our Trip Advisor City App and it pointed us to a nice restaurant called La Mission where we all had the lime soup which was wonderful and I had grilled Grouper, several



had the mixed Mexican platter, the mixed seafood platter was great as well as the surf and turf. The portions were way more than we could eat as they had also brought us chips, Pico de Gallo and guacamole to start it all off with. I am losing steam as we have only had about 3 hours of sleep if we're lucky. Back at the hotel we start to get ready for tomorrow as the rest of our group finally arrives. Now everyone is here in one piece as we quickly get them to their rooms and catch them up on the happenings in the morning. Their priority: Money and then bed. Ok, already 10:00 pm time for bed, can't wait to see what tomorrow will bring us.

Day 2

We awake to the sound of running water and you think it's someone showering when you realize that it is raining buckets this morning! The sky is black and the streets are flooding. Huh, this isn't the way the day was supposed to start. We gather up our equipment and leave it at the desk for the dive crew to pick up as we head around the block for breakfast. The first two groups eat at 7:00 am and the second 2 groups come at 7:30 so we don't overwhelm the small restaurant. They have 3 choices for breakfast, eggs, pancakes or fruit. They did a great job and we were just leaving as the second team was showing up. We then went to the dive center to cover all paperwork and pack up our dive equipment. Since it is the first dive day there is a lot of running around



and people forgetting things etc. So half the group is doing reef diving and the other half is going to the Cenote's. Those of us reef diving put on our wetsuits ½ way and then we all walk two blocks down to the beach where there are 2 boats waiting to take us out. This is back to basics as you have to carry your personal stuff, cameras etc with you. They put your equipment on the boat and then you waded up to your waist in the water to climb the ladder to get on the boat. You then set your gear up as we make our way to the dive site. It was a bit rough this morning so setting up was a bit challenging as we hit all the waves. The boats are good with a cover over the top for shade, plenty of room as there were only 5 of us on the boat. The dive sites are pretty close so the boat rides were maybe 10-15 minutes away. The reef diving is similar to Cozumel where you drift along the



flat shelf at about 50-60 feet. You just get neutral and go with the flow. The surface intervals are short as the 2nd dive was only to 35 feet. However, when we jumped in on the second dive a Manta Ray came swimming by in about 20 ft of water! I couldn't believe my eyes! I certainly wasn't expecting that! More current but you just hide behind the fingers of coral to get out of it. There were some great schools of Pork Fish and Blue striped Grunts, and a few people saw Morays and small macro critters. If



Then you rinse all your gear, for the next day and you are for food. We decide to head the skies are so black and the beach. We try and out before all hell breaks loose.

down in sheets! It is an awesome sight and clears the beach faster than you can yell "Free Beer!" Just as we were trying to get a table the restaurant is now full of all the people off the beach. It is crazy! The good part is that it doesn't last very long and pretty soon everyone is back outside doing what they were doing before. The

you are doing the reef diving you return to the dive shop at about noon or 1:00 pm. hang it up properly, test your nitrox tanks done. A quick shower and we need to forage down to the beach and as we are walking we see the wall of water making its way to run it as we barely duck into the restaurant The wind is howling and the rain is coming



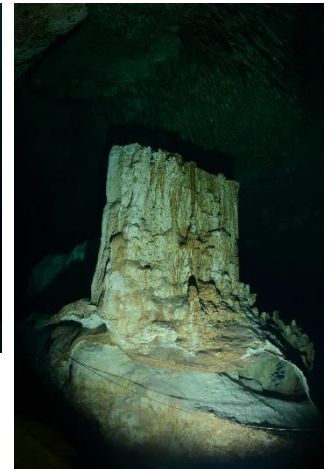
restaurant was on the beach called La Tarraya, and we enjoyed good margaritas and some fresh seafood. After that we took a long walk down the white sandy beach and then walked 5th Avenue back to check out the shopping and do a little people watching. Before we return to the hotel we pick up a few beers and head up to the pool deck to enjoy the view and chat with everyone about the day. Later on we are meeting with Jean-Yves as he is taking us to the local Hyperbaric Chamber to chat with the doctor and see the chamber. It is a

very nice facility and one we hope never to have to use! It's getting late and tomorrow starts early so back to the hotel and get some sleep.



Day 3

Off to the cenotes this morning. We are very excited as we had never done this before and have heard great things about it. They decide to take our group to Ponderosa (El Eden) for the first dive and then load up the van and go to Tajma-ha for the second. The first dive the cavern was quite big with several sky lights or openings which let light in along the way. It was very interesting and I did see an eel while we were deep inside. It is amazing how crystal clear the water is, but then you have these very strange halo clines where the salt water and fresh water are in separate layers and when you swim thru them becomes very blurry. Did I say that Sola lights rock?! These lights are so bright in here it is amazing! Gearing up was the worst part as the mosquitos wanted to eat you alive and they don't want you using bug spray since the cenotes are really the drinking water for the peninsula. The second cenote was really unique as the visibility was even better and it seemed more



extensive than the first. The Stalagmites were really cool and then we would come up into these air caves and see the bats and one of the air caves was open to the jungle and we had Mot Mot birds flying overhead. Each dive was about 45-50 minutes long and the temp in the cenotes was about 76 degrees so by the second dive it was getting pretty cold.



Afterwards we had a quick bite to eat as we packed up and then headed back to town. We had a group meeting at the pool to plan out the rest of the week and it looks like a big part of the group are planning on doing Chichen Itza on our last day and the rest of us are going to go to Tulum and Coba. It was another rainy day today so we are really hoping for sunshine tomorrow and we have our fingers crossed that there are Whale Sharks. Time for dinner as the majority of us make our way to La Mission where I think everyone has eaten but we decide it's time for Lobster and they really do a great job grilling it to perfection. Afterwards we take a stroll along 5th ave and hit the gelato store for dessert and then take a nice stroll along the beach to top off the evening. Tomorrow is Marle's birthday and Dana's is on Thursday so we go back to the hotel to make a couple of birthday cards since

none of Mexico sells them! Of course ours are better because they are handmade and tequila always helps the creative side come out! Meeting time is 7:00 am tomorrow morning at the front reception and we will be ready come hell or high water!

Day 4

Today is the day we have been waiting for; Whale Sharks. Today and tomorrow are supposed to be the best 2 days for the wind to lay down. It is an early morning as we meet in the lobby at 7:00 am for the 1 hr. drive towards Cancun. We arrive at the dock and there are people and boats everywhere. The wind is still blowing pretty good and we are about to head 30 miles off shore with no protection from any island so I think it's going to be a bit rough. Most of us are well medicated for the trip and away we go. The ride out was indeed very rough and we had a few folks turn green before we even got to the sharks. You couldn't miss them as I think there had to be 100 boats out here. It was insane! I figured they must run over 20 snorkelers a day with the



amount of people in the water and boats everywhere. So the rules are that only 2 snorkelers can be in the water with 1 guide. We had 2 guides so we could have 4 people in the water at one time, and we had 10 people on the boat total. At first you think that you're never going to be able to get in, but this isn't just basic snorkeling, this was advanced combat snorkeling! It was high seas and lots of people. It was amazing how our guide and our boat driver knew where you were. You had to swim fast as they put you by the Shark but it is constantly moving as it is feeding on all the plankton in the water. So in order to stay with it you

were a human motor boat. In a very short time you were huffing like a freight train and ready to go back to the boat and rest. We just kept doing a in and out of the boat exhausted you just here! As time went on there were about 6



constant rotation until you were so

couldn't swim anymore. There were a lot of seasick people out the boats started to thin out and head back and at the very end boats with us as we enjoyed the Whale Shark and Manta Ray

show. What a day! Absolutely spectacular to see these Whale Sharks. On the way back we stopped at Isla Murejes to get off the boat and meet up with our other ½ of the group and exchange stories. The crew then made us shrimp ceviche which was really good. Our day is finally done as we take the hour van ride back to the hotel and I think most everyone slept all the way. We still have Marle's birthday to celebrate so we go to Impanenas Brazilian Steak house which was perfect as we were all starving after that workout. After dinner they brought out cheesecake for Marle and we surprised



Dana also for her birthday which is on Thursday. Time to hit the pillow as we have another marathon swim tomorrow. We are having sweet dreams of Whale Sharks tonight.

Day 5

It looks pretty calm out today as we make our way back up to Isla Mujeres for another try at the Whale Sharks. When we arrive at the dock you can tell it's going to be a much better day. Apparently they already know where the sharks are located and we do not have to travel as far as yesterday and we should be there faster. Once we arrive there is literally sharks all over the place and the boats are really spread out so each boat has its own



grouping of sharks. We are so excited we are jumping around like little school kids waiting to jump in! This time we are not just looking to see 1 Whale Shark we are looking for many in the picture along with Manta's. Are we asking too much? I don't think so, since it delivered all of the above! You had to do a bit more swimming as the sharks were really moving when they were feeding. Apparently there was a Manta that leaped completely out of the water right next to the boat, flipped over someone's head and landed right behind them. Hope spotted 2 Sail fish underneath us, I tried for a picture, but didn't get anything good. But hey, at least I saw them! Finally Louis says it's time to go, we beg like school kids and he lets us go one more round. There are only about 5 boats left so we head back towards the beach for Ceviche and cold beer. Part way back one of the engines starts miss firing so we slow down and the engine died and that was the end of that. Luckily there were 2 engines and the



rest of our group was behind us as we limped into Isla Mujeres. After a nice break we all load into the other boat and get to the dock while they limp the other boat home. Another great day with the Whale Sharks! Just an hour back to the hotel and we head up to the pool for a quick beer and a plan for dinner. Part of the group stopped to eat at Casa de Aqua and a few of us went to Carboncitos. It had great Mexican food and Mojitos, and the staff delivers your drink on the waiters head. Some were so good, they would balance two on top of each other. I might have to go back just to get a picture of this! Afterwards we did a little wandering around town and then headed back to the hotel. Pretty tired again tonight after all that swimming, so we will all be dreaming about Whale Sharks tonight.

Day 6

Light blue skies this morning and it looks like a great day for diving. Six of us are headed back to the Cenotes



while the rest of the group goes out for a 2 tank reef dive. The Cenotes we did today were Car Wash and Gran Cenote. Carwash was a smaller cavern that had an algae layer on the top which gave the water a really cool green color. The algae layer was about 6 feet deep and then it was just crystal clear underneath. Apparently there is a small crocodile that lives here, so we searched high and low but did not have any luck finding it. There



were also more fish here obviously feeding off this algae, which made for some great photos. The second cenote was just about 5 minutes down the road and extremely popular with the snorkelers, as they actually came by the busloads. This cenote was what we had been waiting for with the beautiful stalagmites and columns, it was incredible the way the light shone down from above. The water is so clear you can see forever, it doesn't even seem like you're underwater. This was the perfect way to spend our last two dives of the trip. The rest of the group made a mad dash for Coba, an ancient Mayan village, after their two tank dive. Upon their return they just did not have enough time to do Tulum before it closed. We all meet up at the pool deck to make a plan for



dinner and watch the DVD that Clements had filmed in the Cenote. We all had a good laugh about everyone's



cave form and whether you were frog kicking or not! Time for dinner so we all decide that we are going to go to Carboncitos for dinner and the drink show. Here the waiters deliver your drink on their head which is pretty talented and of course we drank them out of mint so no more Mojitos. Time to wrap it up as everyone has some sort of tour tomorrow with most of the group



going to Chichen Itza, Hal & Linda are doing the Whale Sharks again and the rest of us are going to Coba and Tulum. Time for bed and a whole lot of packing in the morning.

Day 7

Beautiful blue skies and it's going to be a hot one. Everyone is up and ready to head to their tours for the day. Bob, Phil, Dana and I all climb into a taxi and drive the 75 minute drive to Coba to see the Mayan ruins. Coba was actually one of the first cities to be built and is also the only ruin left that you can climb to the top. When we



arrive we wander around and check out the ball courts where they had the games and the winner was then sacrificed to the gods. As I heard it explained the sacrifice to the gods had to be the best team, not the losing team as then they would be laughing at the gods. The Mayans

believed life begins after death so it was a high honor to sacrifice yourself. We all climb to the top of the ruin and the view is spectacular, you can see across the top of the jungle forever. The climb down looked a bit more daunting than the climb up, but we had no problems unlike the other folks who were coming down step by step on their butts. At the bottom there are bike taxis to take you back to the exit for a small fee, which was worth it as we still had another ruin to conquer. We climb back in our taxi and he whisks us off to Tulum, which is the only Mayan temple built by the sea. It is beautiful and more manicured than Coba and a whole lot more commercialized. Tons of vendors outside, and I think I even saw a Subway sandwich shop. The temperature is sweltering as we wrap it up and make our way back to the exit, with all of us dripping with sweat from head to toe! Now it is only about a 40 minute ride back to the hotel where we drop our stuff and get some food at La Barisis. Time to get some packing done and then try our luck at buying a mask for the wall. Hal and Linda return from their Whale shark tour and report that there were even more Whales and better visibility, but 6 out of the 10 people on the boat were seasick and one person demanded that they leave and come back. They still got some great photos and had a good time snorkeling with the whales. The rest of the crew gets back around 6:00 pm from Chichen Itza and say they had a great time, but that it seemed a bit overwhelming as it is so big and so hot today! The vendors have taken over and are not just on the outside of the ruins but inside as well and it just got really old, really quick. All in all they said it was worth the trip. We decide to enjoy a little time down on the beach and an ice cold beer before we have to get serious about finishing up our packing. We wrap up the day with a walk down 5th avenue for the last Gelato run and some last minute shopping. My feet are screaming so it's time to put them up and call it a night. Off to the airport at 8:00 am so we better get some sleep.

Day 8

Travel day, time to pack up and head home. The majority of the group is all leaving at the same time so we have an 8:00 am departure from the hotel. It always seems that they underestimate the amount of luggage we have and it barely fits in two vans along with 14 people. We make it to the airport in about 45 minutes as the traffic is light in the morning and of course you have to have the right van driver. Everyone gets checked in regardless of which airline they are flying and security was pretty easy and the lines were not long. After you get through security there is plenty of last minute shopping and of course food and Starbucks. We did have a bit of an eye opener as Lisa was sitting at a table eating and drinking her coffee and she had her roller bag next to her. As she got up to go to her gate she asked where her carry on was, as we all start looking around asking her if she had left it in security. She said no, that she had it right next to her at the table when she sat down. She ran off to security to double check and sure enough they had her bag only she had not left it, someone had stolen it from right beside her. Fortunately, security had seen it happen and followed the guy to make sure they weren't together and when he tried to leave the airport with her bag, they grabbed him. She was very lucky! We always hear about it, but never think it will happen to us. So keep an eye on your stuff at all times! Time to go so we say bye to Linda as she is taking a flight 1 hour later than the rest of us and we will lose Allison in Dallas as she heads east. When we land in Dallas we are ½ hour late and by the time we get off the plane we have less than an hour to get through immigration and customs. If the lines are short we should be able to make it. As we enter the hallway they tell us to walk around this incredible long line that reaches all the way down this huge hallway.



Unfortunately, our line for US citizens is just as long on the other end of the room. This has to be a 2+ hour line, we will never make it. I see a guy who is standing there with a paddle that says "express pass" so we stop and tell him we have 30 minutes until our flight departs and he informs us that unless we have an orange express pass he cannot let us through. He tells us to ask the other lady down the way, we talk with her, she sends us back, we flag 3 more people as the group stays together so we might have a chance. Finally we connect with a gal that takes our ticket and speaks to someone else and then she takes us 3 at a time to the front of the line. Ok, we might have a chance now as we hustle off to luggage and one by one each of the group shows up but we are missing Hal, Allison and Skip. We start grabbing our luggage and see another express pass line through customs, but they won't let us through. I see Marle sneak through but the rest of the group has to go around, meanwhile Hope, Bob and I are still waiting for our bags. Finally, we grab our bags and attempt to go through the express pass line again, a gal says no way and we just keep walking as she yells a very snide comment. Even the express lane was still a 15 minute wait, but we could still make it. We run to drop off our luggage and run to security as the gal tells us there is no waiting at the next checkpoint. Off and running again and luckily there is no one there and we skate through. We are at D gate and have to make it to C gate which involves a train, but we ask an agent and he told us the shortest way was to run up and over so away we went. We have 10 minutes before the flight departs it's looking good, not sure where anyone else is but I know that everyone was at the security checkpoint and running for the flight. I see the gate has just a few people left and I spot Marle but she hasn't seen anyone else yet. So we let them know that we have 6 more in our group running for the flight and they understand and let me wait until Hope and Brad show up, but they have lost sight of Dale, Peggy, Kathy & Penny. Finally, everyone comes running up and we make it by the skin of our teeth! Only thanks to the kind lady who fast tracked us through immigration! We called Hal as we were pulling out from the gate and he was just making it through immigration, so he had already rebooked a later flight. As far as Allison and Skip we have no idea how they fared, we'll probably know tomorrow. Beside the flight fiasco we had a great trip, lots of new things for us this trip as we enjoyed lots of Whale Sharks and of course the Cenotes.

Thanks everyone for joining us, we had a fantastic time and look forward to another travel adventure with you.

Kelley & Bob



Hotel: Casa de Gopala

This hotel is a small boutique place located just a few blocks off the beach right in the heart of Playa del Carmen. It is close to everything you need, restaurants, shopping, diving etc. The rooms are pretty good size and the suites are even bigger with kitchenettes and all rooms have a refrigerator in them. They are nice and clean with maid service every day. The front desk staff is really nice and helpful with any arrangements you might need. The beds are too hard for my liking but if you like a firm bed it will be fine. I did hear a few complaints about not having some hot water in some of the rooms, but we were in 17 and had plenty all the time. I would say the only bad part of this hotel doesn't have anything to do with the hotel but the neighbor next door has a pen with 4



Peacocks, a Turkey and some unknown bird that makes a horrible squawk all night long. I think the reason they have them is that they pluck the feathers from the Peacocks and use them in jewelry creations they sell in the store next door. Along with the Peacock, Turkey gobble and dogs barking it is quite the symphony at times. Even with earplugs you could not keep the sound out along with the live band at the night club across the street. If you're a sound sleeper you will do fine. Our package included breakfast every morning which was ½ way around the block from the hotel called Café

Toucan and you had a couple of choices which included either eggs, pancakes or fruit. Coffee and orange juice with toast came with it as well. They did a really good job getting everyone in and out in a timely manner so we could get to the dive shop on time. You are located just a couple of blocks off the beach and it is centrally located in Playa del Carmen which is nice for shopping and eating, all within walking distance.

Yucatek Divers:

Is located just around the corner from the hotel which you walked to every morning. So between the hotel, restaurant and dive shop all three are located on the same block. They did a good job staggering the meeting times so all 18 of us did not show up at the same time. The group was split up to do different activities on different days, so ½ the group would go to the Cenotes and the other ½ would do reef diving. They had two dive boats so there were 4-5 divers per boat and you need to be comfortable doing a back roll off the side. You do have to wade up to your waist in the water to get on the boat so booties or good shoes and a dry bag are a must. They do provide you with mesh bags but I would recommend bringing one of your own preferably a backpack style especially if you are carrying a camera system. There are no rinse tanks for cameras except back at the dive shop where you will also rinse all your equipment. There is no place to store your camera system so you will need to carry it back and forth to the hotel and down to the dive boat. The first dive is drift diving similar to the same sort of diving in Cozumel, just not quite as good. The second dive is a shallow reef, with fingers that you bob and weave through to hide from the current. Here you have good schooling fish and our group had a Manta come by and the other group had 2 Sailfish so you can really have some unique animal encounters. Since the reefs are so close you are usually back by noon from the 2 dives. If you were on the Cenote dive that day then a van comes and picks everyone up and all equipment is loaded into the van. It can be anywhere from 20 minutes to over an hour drive depending on which Cenote you are going to for the day. If the Cenote is large, like Dos Ojos you will stay and do two dives, if it is one of the smaller cenotes then you will pack up and drive to another one close by for the second dive. Afterwards they provide you with a sandwich for the drive back to the dive shop which you usually return by 2-3:00 pm. If you have never done Cenote diving you should try it, as it is unlike any other diving you will ever do and they are very beautiful inside.

Whale Shark Diving: UWE www.whalesharkproject.com www.underwaterexpeditions.com.mx

We had scheduled 2 days of Whale Shark snorkeling just to hedge our bet and make sure we really were going to be able to see them. The morning starts early with a pick-up at 7:00 am and you do not get breakfast at the restaurant since they open at 7:00. Instead they supply you with an apple, juice and breakfast bar for the hour

drive to Cancun where we are meeting the boat. Upon arrival at the dock they have instant coffee, juice, water and cake for you to eat before leaving. The first day we went out it was already rough even at the dock so we knew we were going to be in for a rough ride, as you can be anywhere from 20-30 miles off shore with no protection. You need to medicate! Even people who are not usually prone to seasickness were sick, even my medicated people got sick, so take precautions. It took us about 1 ½ hours to reach the sharks because it was so rough and once we arrived we were a little horrified at what we saw. There had to be 100 boats and god knows how many snorkelers in the water with sharks swimming amongst all of the mess. This is not how I pictured this whole thing to go down, I was sure someone was going to get run over by a boat. The way it's supposed to work is that each boat is to find one shark and only have 2 people in with a guide at a time. You have 2 guides on the boat so you can have 4 people in the water at one time only. There were 10 of us on the boat so you waited your turn and then rotated in when the shark swam away or the snorkeler got tired. I actually have no idea how long we were with the sharks, probably about 2 hours. On the way back you stop at the beach where the crew makes a fantastic shrimp ceviche and pass out all the cervezas. It is then just a short ride to the dock for the return trip back to Playa del Carmen. They do have fresh water showers to rinse off and restrooms so be sure to bring a dry change of clothes for the bus ride back. Here's a couple of pointers for the next time. Be sure to eat a good breakfast before you leave. Most of us went to Starbucks the night before and grabbed a good protein sandwich so you have lots of energy because you are kicking your ass off. Bring snack/energy bars in a dry bag so you have something to snack on quickly between jumps. Don't forget some pesos to tip the crew and captain of the boat at the end of the tour. The second time we went out, we were better prepared, better medicated and the water was calmer so this time the boats were spread far apart and everyone had plenty of sharks to choose from so it wasn't that crazy.