

# SOCORRO ISLANDS

FEBRAURY 2007

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*Roca Partida – the pinnacle of Socorros diving, and the home of mantas and sharks.*

Where would the next great dive adventure be? A good friend and I contemplated this dilemma for a couple of month mid 2006. I had been to several liveaboard destinations in the last six years including Palau, the Red Sea, and the Merigui Archipelago off the coast of Myanmar. I really enjoyed the pelagics in Palau, but as the world is a pretty big place. I wanted to see something new. I started thinking we should go to a pelagic hotspot – so why not the Galapagos Islands? After checking the cost and the amount of time it takes to get there, I discovered why not. I opted for something a little easier logistics wise, namely the Socorro Islands. Although the cost of the liveaboard was about the same as the Galapagos, the travel down to Mexico was much more amiable – both time and money wise.

All I really knew about Socorros diving was it was highly renowned for fabulous manta encounters. “The friendliest mantas in the world” is actually one of the tag lines for this area. Although I had done some extensive diving with mantas in Hawaii and Myanmar, I never get the least bit tired of being in the presence of these incredibly graceful giants.

I also knew that several species of sharks frequented these remote islands, including silvertip sharks. I originally went to Myanmar to dive with silvertips three years earlier, only to find out after I arrived that the silvertips had been driven away years prior by the disgusting practices of finning and dynamite fishing.

The Socorros promised sharks and friendly manta encounters. That sounded like the ticket. I started researching liveaboards that frequented the Socorros and quickly discovered that there are only two options – the Solmar V and the Nautilus Explorer. As one of our prospective dive party knew the owner of the Nautilus Explorer, he told us to sign up for a liveaboard trip as a group and we could get a discount. This sounded great until the discount turned out to be that the owner's friend got to go for free, and we got to pay full fare. You win some, you lose some.

On a typical overcast February morning in Seattle, two friends and I set off for Cabo San Lucas, located on the southern end of the Baja Peninsula in Mexico. We arrived the day before our Socorros departure and spent the next morning doing a two tank local dive with a local outfit called Amigos Del Mar. Although the diving was not spectacular, the crew went out of their way to be friendly, courteous, and make certain we had a good time. Kudos to Amigos Del Mar's staff.



*Colorful reef fish like this grouper are easily accessible right outside of Cabo.*

That evening, we gathered at the hospitality room of a nearby hotel and met a representative of the Nautilus Explorer. Our paperwork was checked, luggage loaded, and we were whisked away in arranged transport along the coast to meet the boat and crew. The boat was anchored just outside the port – the only problem being that the port was not quite yet complete. In fact, it resembled more of a quarry than a port. In grandiose D-Day style, we loaded two skiffs on the sandy beach and headed

out to our home for the next eight days. We were welcomed aboard with margaritas and immediately made to feel right at home by the crew. We pulled anchor and set off across the Pacific Ocean for a 22 hour run to the Socorro Islands.

The Nautilus Explorer is an impressive vessel and dive platform. Built in 2000, her steel hull is 116' in length and totally designed around supporting divers. She has a well designed diving deck with ample space for over 20 divers. Each dive station has wet storage for fins, masks, etc. A large camera table and separate charging table reside near the dive deck. She has two fresh water hot showers on the deck (which are much appreciated), camera rinse tanks, a mask rinse tank, and even a wetsuit rinse tank laced with vinegar around the dive area (not that anyone in our dive party would ever pee in a wetsuit).

Inside the main deck on the Nautilus is a large common area, complete with flat screen TV, bar, and white board for dive briefings. Further forward is the mess hall where some type of food and beverage was always available. Below decks were the staterooms, crews' quarters, and two dorms. The top deck offers a jacuzzi tub, pilot house, two suites, some open deck space, and of course a shark cage (used for Guadalupe trips). The sun deck above offered yet more open space to bask in the sun, kayak and Zodiac storage, and the topside bridge.



*The Nautilus Explorer at dock in Cabo.*

The Nautilus Explorer is serviced by two skiffs, from which we did most (but not all) of our diving – an 18' inflatable Zodiac style boat and a 22' aluminum skiff. The

aluminum skiff is ingeniously hauled up on the angled dive deck while in transport, where as the inflatable is slung up to the sun deck.

The vessel is rigged to cater to rebreathers and Nitrox. The charge for Nitrox was an additional \$120 for the entire trip. Trimix is probably also an option on certain trips.

Our crew was the best I have encountered on a liveaboard. Captain Dave runs a good ship. He is a character and spent quite a bit of time socializing with us. The rest of the crew was very friendly, efficient, helpful, and did everything they can to accommodate any request. Five meals or snacks were served every day, starting with a pre-breakfast, followed by a big breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner. In between the meals was usually a dive. If you weren't diving, there was a good chance you were eating or sleeping.

The service on this vessel was simply incredible. The two hostesses catered to every passenger's needs, serving drinks, tending rooms, helping with meals, handing out glasses of water prior to dives, and welcoming returning divers with their choice of water, tea, hot chocolate, or apple cider. Simply outstanding.

Our three dive masters offered us some international flair as they came from Sweden, Canada, and Mexico. All were extremely competent, knowledgeable, and generally excited about what they do and the marine life they are privileged to dive with. They helped divers when needed, but also afforded us our freedom when we wanted. The main diving rules were as follows:

- Dive time was limited to 60 minutes.
- All divers must carry a signal marker buoy, diver alert, and signaling mirror (which they provide free of charge).
- Start your safety stop with 500 psi.
- No riding mantas.
- Don't go "blue" (stay in sight of structure).
- No gloves or dive lights (except for cameras/video). This is a Mexican law.

- First alcoholic drink = no more diving for the day.

Dive briefings were thorough and very detailed. Special sessions to address manta etiquette, shark identification, Socorro Island history, and even what to do in Cabo San Lucas upon returning were all very much appreciated.

The cruise from Cabo San Lucas to the Socorro Islands takes about 22 hours at the 7 to 10 knots cruising speed. Although the Nautilus is an impressive 116 feet in length, she is not immune to the rock and roll produced by seemingly endless 6-10' swells that the Pacific Ocean afforded us our week at sea (and we had calm weather). Anyone who is even remotely prone to seasickness should come well equipped.



*Although the reefs in the Socorro Islands are not covered in colorful corals, they are home to a number of colorful species such as this green moray eel.*

After our 240 mile cruise south and a little west of Cabo San Lucas, we spent the first day diving off a small island called San Benedicto. This uninhabited island is a young volcanic formation without any visible vegetation. This is not a place where you wanted to get stranded, but is quite a spectacle from a geology perspective. Cinder cones and lava flows are blatantly evident. We ended up with four dives on the first day at a site called "San Benedicto Canyon" where a lava flow has created a ridge amidst deeper water and provides a great vantage point to see pelagics.

That evening we pulled anchor and headed about 30 miles further south to Socorro Island. We checked in at the Mexican naval

base on the island, then spent the rest of the day doing three dives on two more volcanic ridges that border upon much deeper water at Punta Tosca.

Socorro Island is by far the biggest of the islands in this small, scattered group. She is covered in vegetation and is currently only inhabited by the military and 1500 sheep as she has been recently subjected to some volcanic rumblings.



*The Socorros are located approximately 240 miles off the coast of Baha.*

That night, the weather and sea were amiable so we pulled anchor again and made a break for Roca Partida – the main event. Roca Partida lies about 70 miles west of Socorro Island in the middle of absolutely no where. This rock is about 200 feet long, 50 feet wide and stands 70 feet above sea level. This odd looking formation is actually the tip of a volcanic “plug” capping the top of a volcano 250 feet below the surface. The volcano, in turn, cascades down another 10,000 feet to the ocean floor. The plug is actually the last of the lava to leave the volcano, cooling to form this giant, vertical column of rock.

This isolated volcanic formation creates upwellings from cool, nutrient rich water deep below and starts the food chain. All sorts of marine life flocks to this area. We did seven dives in two days at this fantastic location.

After our two day stay at Roca Partida, we steamed during the night back to Socorro Island for 4 more dives at two sites – Cabo Pearce, another volcanic ridge, and La Petite Boiler, a fish dive on much smaller lava plug. This lava plug is about 50 feet in

diameter and thrust up from the substrate 120 feet below. Our final day was spent back at San Benedicto Island where we tried to dive a different site called “The Boiler”, but heavy swell forced us to retreat back to the “Canyon” where we did our final four dives.



*The Socorros are all about sharks and mantas. We frequently saw 5 species of sharks on most dives, include Galapagos sharks.*

The diving in the Socorros was truly spectacular. However there are a couple of things to know about the diving out here, at least in February. First, water temps are not the warmest. Temperatures were in the low 70's. I wore a 5mm suit and a hood for most of my dives, but also did several dives in my drysuit. Four dives a day in cool water can suck the energy out of you. If I was to come here again, I would bring a 7/5mm suit.

Visibility would come and go. It would tend to open up to 60 to 80 feet along the up-current side of ridges. However, on the ridge, in the shallows, or along the down-current side of a ridge, the visibility would tend to drop to 40-50 feet.

Surge and currents are also prevalent in this area. However, we had only two dives out of 22 where we encountered a severe ass kicking where we had to claw our way down the anchor line hand over fist. During one of those dives the current subsided about half way through. Surge was evident, especially above 40 fsw at Roca Partida. Doing a lot of diving on the coast in the Neah Bay area, I felt right at home. The surge could also make getting from the Nautilus Explorer to the aluminum skiff a bit of a challenge.

Now the great stuff; the marine life.

On the first dive at San Benedicto Canyon, we had a 12' manta ray circle us for the first half of the dive. Although it wasn't considered a "friendly manta" that allowed us to stroke its belly, it did come within 5 feet of us time after time. Later that dive, a school of scalloped hammerheads swam by in the distance – almost magically appearing and disappearing. We also witnessed several juvenile silvertips and one Galapagos shark actively working a cleaning station. Oh yeah – three dolphins stopped by for a quick visit, but kept their distance. Wow! – and that was just one dive. There is so much to cover at each site – where to start...



*Diving with these gentle giants is a religious experience – an experience that never gets old.*

Let's start with the sharks. I saw at least one shark on every dive, except one. The five "common" species of shark in these waters are the whitetip, silvertip, silky, scalloped hammerhead and Galapagos. The whitetip, silvertip, and Galapagos were readily found near the bottom working cleaning stations. At Roca Partida, more than a dozen whitetip sharks could be found resting on numerous ledges on the east side of the rock, often in groups. The whitetips were amongst the biggest I have seen - up to five feet in length. The silvertips, with bright white highlights on their dorsal, tail, and pectoral fins, ranged from three to five feet in length. The Galapagos sharks had quite a range in size, with the largest being a lone specimen about eight feet in length I spotted twice at San Benedicto Canyon. The scalloped hammerheads tended to be very cautious, often just flashing within visible range then disappearing. However, at Cabo Pearce we had a school of ten hammerheads swim over the top of us. Roca Partida probably offered the best

hammerhead viewing as I could hang motionless amidst a large school of jacks and watch the silvertips, whitetips, and hammerheads leisurely cruise around and sometimes through the school. The hammerheads ranged between 5 and 8 feet in length.

The silky sharks seemed more interested in what was going at the surface rather than at depth, although I did occasionally see them at depth. I had my best encounters with silky sharks while snorkeling – once during the day and once at night. On the night snorkel, we had five or six silky sharks repeatedly mull about us as they were attracted to our dive lights. The biggest silky shark in this group was about 5 feet in length. I got bumped a couple of times by these impressive and inquisitive sharks.



*Whitetip sharks are common in the Socorros and often lay in groups on shelves at Roca Partida.*

The potential exists to see lone tiger sharks, great hammerheads, and whale sharks. The divemaster spotted one large tiger shark while setting a buoy, but they tend to be somewhat shy animals. In fact, most of the shark species are shy. Getting good encounters with sharks usually requires patience, stealthiness, and a minimalist approach. We would have to usually sneak up covertly behind a ridge to a cleaning station to get a good look at the sharks. As soon as a couple of divers would come cruising down the reef 10 feet off the bottom, the sharks would vacate the area and head for deeper water.

Reef fish populations in the area are good, and there are a lot of different species. Most noticeable are the bright orange clarion anglefish and rather large green moray eels, both of which are found in abundance.

Large leather bass, colorful barberfish, scorpion fish, forcep butterflyfish, parrotfish, surgeonfish, and many other colorful species kept us entertained when not looking into the blue for pelagics.

Coral density in this area is severely lacking. As these islands are very young, they just haven't had time to become coral encrusted. There are some hard and soft corals in the shallower depths, but most of the area is comprised of exposed rock or sand substrate. The bad news is that I noted quite a few coral devouring crown of thorns seastars munching on whatever coral they could find.



*Huge schools of jacks were encountered every dive at Roca Partida.*

Pelagic fish abound at all sites, but especially at Roca Partida. Wahoo, rainbow runners, huge yellowfin tuna, and massive schools of jacks are readily found, and seem to be almost oblivious to a diver that approaches slowly and quietly.

Topside, we watched countless humpback whales come as close as 50 yards to our boat. Although there was only one brief sighting underwater on our trip, topside these behemoths put on quite a show. Tail slaps, spoutings, and/or breaches were common events every day. Underwater, we could hear the males singing so loud at times we were certain they were right next to us. Dolphins also made appearances, usually to ride our bow wave when underway. At Cabo Pearce, mantas could be seen on the surface doing backflips as they fed on plankton 30 yards from the boat. Various species of boobies graced the airways while frigate birds hassled the

boobies by ramming them in the gut in attempts to get them to cough up their dinner.

And finally the mantas. It is an almost religious experience and a definite privilege diving with these graceful giants. We were told that mantas have the largest brain relative to their size of all fish species. After diving with them in the Socorro, I believe it. They are naturally inquisitive and will seek out human interaction. We had good manta encounters on all seven dives at Roca Partida and three dives at the San Benedicto Canyon. During our last encounter at San Benedicto, two "friendly" mantas joined us the entire dive and allowed us to rub the underside of their bellies. It is quite a feeling having a 14 foot animal hover over the top of you and ask for contact.



*Several of the mantas we encountered were in the 12-15 foot range.*

Although all mantas are supposedly one species, there are two distinctive color patterns prevalent in the Socorro manta population. One pattern is the traditional black and white topside pattern – predominantly black with a white "V" on the back and possibly other white markings. The divemasters call these Chevron mantas. The other pattern is a unique and completely black topside appearance. These mantas are referred to as black mantas. The biggest manta we saw was about 14 feet in width, although the divemaster insists she was actually 15 feet across.

The great thing about mantas is that you do not need to find them. In fact, the best strategy is just hang motionless and let them come see you. As they circle, they will

actually make eye contact with you. Our divemasters stated there have been studies conducted where mantas recognize certain divers time after time, even if they change scuba gear, as long as they can see the diver's eyes. However, if the eyes are shielded, the manta doesn't recognize the diver at all. Once the manta has had a good look into the divers eyes, it decides whether or not it wants to have a personal encounter with that diver. If you are one of the lucky ones, the manta will glide over the top of you and slow down, asking you to run your hand along its belly. Note that mantas do not like to be touched anywhere else on their bodies, especially around the gills or on the wings.

All in all I would have to say this was an amazing experience. The Nautilus Explorer is the best run liveaboard I have been on by several orders of magnitude (the one exception being the Ocean Hunter II in Palau which was very good). All the personal touches and attention to details by

the crew and encounters with pelagics on almost every dive made this one of my top diving experiences. I came into this trip wanting to touch mantas, but in the end the mantas touched me.

