

Chapter 4 Cocos Island, Costa Rica

When I started diving everyone told me that the best diving required great visibility and pretty reefs. With experience I realized that good visibility is over-rated, and while they are nice, pretty reefs are not required for exciting dives. After diving on a lot of pretty reefs in clean water, my interests started changing. This happened when I saw my first sharks in the Sea of Cortez. I was enthralled by their beauty and how different their real behavior is from the “Hollywood” perception of shark behavior. The more I saw the more I wanted to see. I started hearing about an island off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica where divers reported seeing many large sharks, including huge schools of hammerheads. The name of this place was Cocos Island. I made my first trip to Cocos in 1988 with Coleen, made six more trips after that, and it remains today one of my favorite dive destinations in the world.

Cocos is one of the most beautiful places on earth, uninhabited except for a small base of Costa Rican park rangers. All things considered, access, diving conditions, boats, it is perhaps the best place in the world to see big animals underwater. It is like a green tropical jewel, an emerald with the Pacific Ocean as its setting. It is everyone’s idea of an uninhabited tropical South Seas island; it was Robert Louis Stevenson’s inspiration for *Treasure Island*, and Michael Crichton’s for *Jurassic Park*. 300 miles west of the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, Cocos is a feast for the eyes, topside and underwater.

A trip to Cocos is unlike most dive trips, land-based or liveaboard, because of its distance from the mainland. Three boats now make the trip, the Okeanos Aggressor, one of the Aggressor fleet boats, and two “Hunter” boats, the Undersea Hunter and the Sea Hunter. The boat is boarded in the little west coast town of Puntarenas, which is about a two hour drive from the Costa Rican capital city of San Jose:



Puntarenas, Costa Rica

The drive from San Jose to Puntarenas takes you through some beautiful Costa Rican countryside:



Coffee growing west of San Jose

It takes about 36 hours to cover the 300 ocean miles between Puntarenas and Cocos Island. The boat leaves Puntarenas in the late afternoon, runs all night, all the next day, all the next night, and arrives at the island early the next morning. The typical trips are ten days long, a day and a half of travel on each end and 7 full days of diving at the island. The crossing can be relaxing and productive if the ocean is calm. The full day at sea can be spent loafing, eating, sunning, eating, getting equipment ready, and eating. If the water is rough it can be agony—you wedge yourself into your bunk for most of a day and a half. The only good part of a rough crossing is you don't eat so much. In my experience the roughest crossings, the worst weather, and the best diving (more sharks and other big animals), is in the summer "wet season." This, of course, is a generality, and all generalities, including this one, are false.



An easy crossing on the Undersea Hunter

This is almost everyone's arriving and departing view of the island:



Arriving and leaving Cocos Island

My first trip to Cocos was on the Okeanos Aggressor. That was a wonderful experience, the boat was very adequate, and the crew was great. But my second trip was on the Undersea Hunter, and I fell in love with that boat and its fascinating owners, Avi Klapfer and Yosy Naaman, and all my subsequent trips were on the Undersea Hunter.



The Undersea Hunter at Cocos Island

One of the things I like about the Hunter is its dive operation, the Hunter uses fiberglass skiffs (pangas); the Okeanos uses inflatables. The pangas are faster, more stable, more comfortable, and easier to enter than the inflatables.

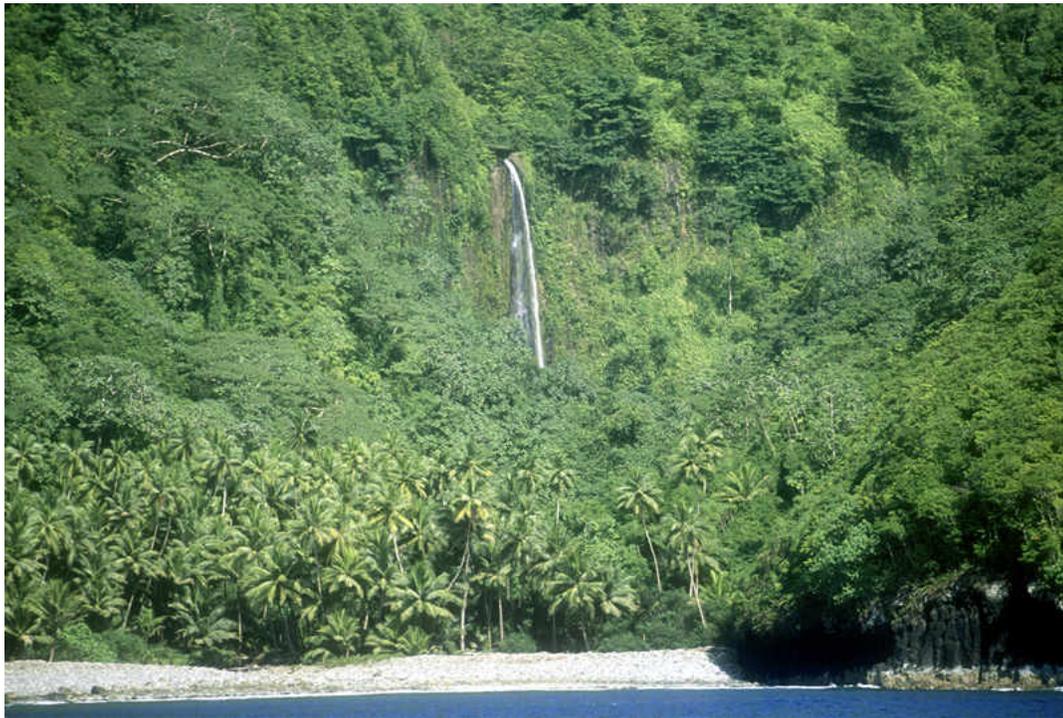


Group returning from Dirty Rock on one of the Undersea Hunter's pangas, the famous Amos Nachoum at the bow

I had two major impressions the first time I saw the island up close, one was that I had never seen anything so totally green, the second that the island seemed to be leaking. There were waterfalls everywhere:



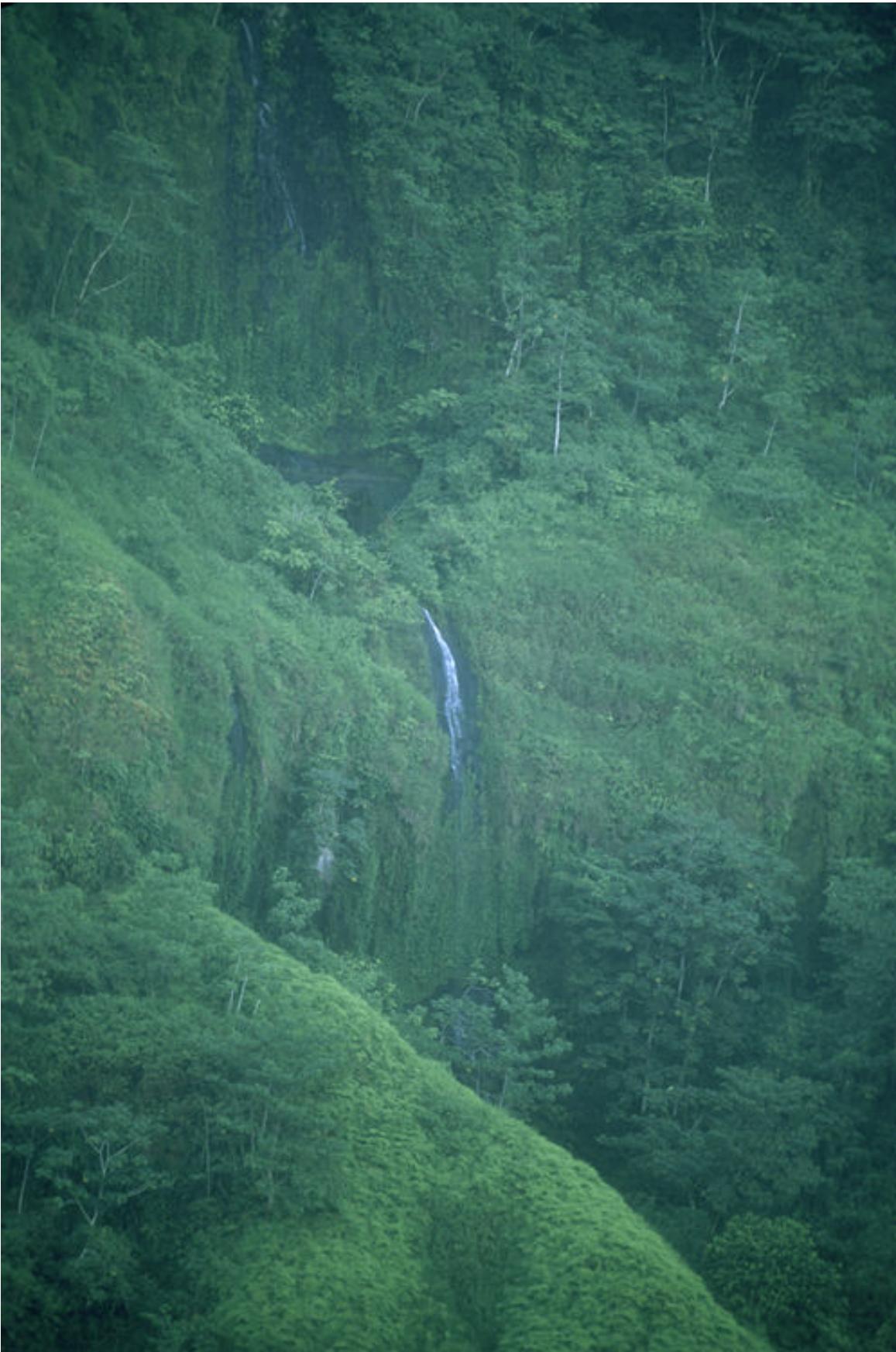
The island is leaking



More leaks



Leaks everywhere!



Even more leaks



Cocos Island scene

Getting to Cocos Island is, as they say, half the fun. Well, maybe not half the fun but a lot of fun. I refer, of course, to the part of the trip in mainland Costa Rica. Costa Rica is a fantastic country, rich in beauty, natural resources and marvelous friendly people. Almost everyone starts the trip with a flight to the capital city San Jose, which is in a mountain valley roughly in the center of the country.



San Jose, capital of Costa Rica

The central square in San Jose is built above a magnificent subterranean Gold Museum with beautiful displays and many pre-Columbian pieces:



Central square in San Jose, built above Gold Museum

On my last six trips I would take at least a week for topside touring in Costa Rica before leaving for Cocos. The parts of the country that I liked the best were the Tortuguero area in the northeast, on the Caribbean near the Nicaraguan border; the Guanacaste area on the Pacific in the northwestern part of the country; the cloud forest of Monteverde; and the Drake Bay area of the Osa Peninsula in the southwest.



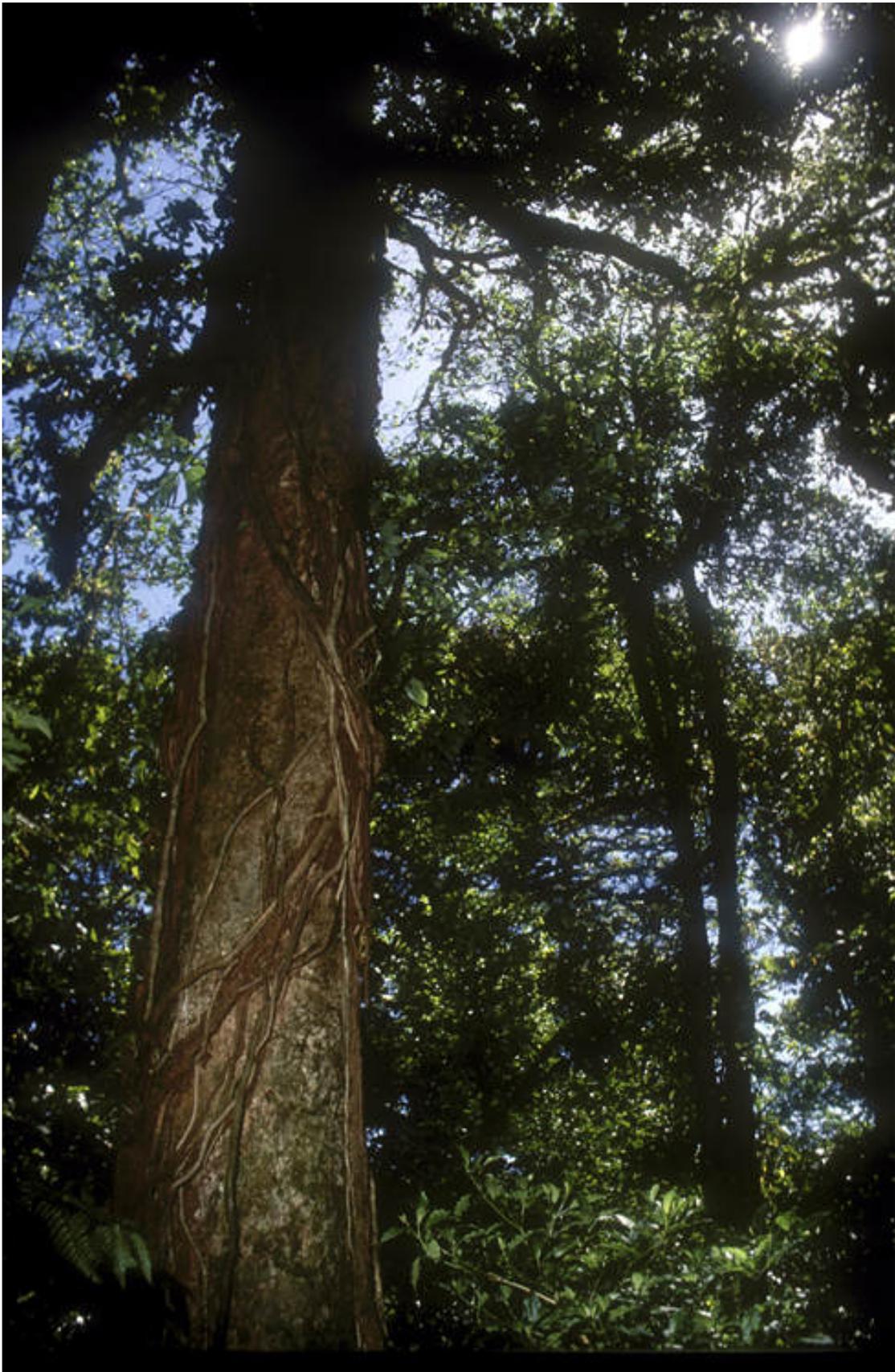
Jungle river near Tortuguero



Beach scene, El Ocotal, Guanacaste



Beach scene in Drake Bay



Monteverde cloud forest

Here are some images of topside Costa Rican critters:



Cayman



Tree frog



Tree frog, Monteverde



Tree frog, Monteverde



Poison dart frog, Tortuguero



Poison dart frog, Tortuguero



Poison dart frog, Tortuguero



Moth, Monteverde



Moth, Monteverde



Praying mantis, Tortuguero



Caterpillar, looks like a nudibranch!



Butterfly, Monteverde



Scarlet macaw, Drake Bay

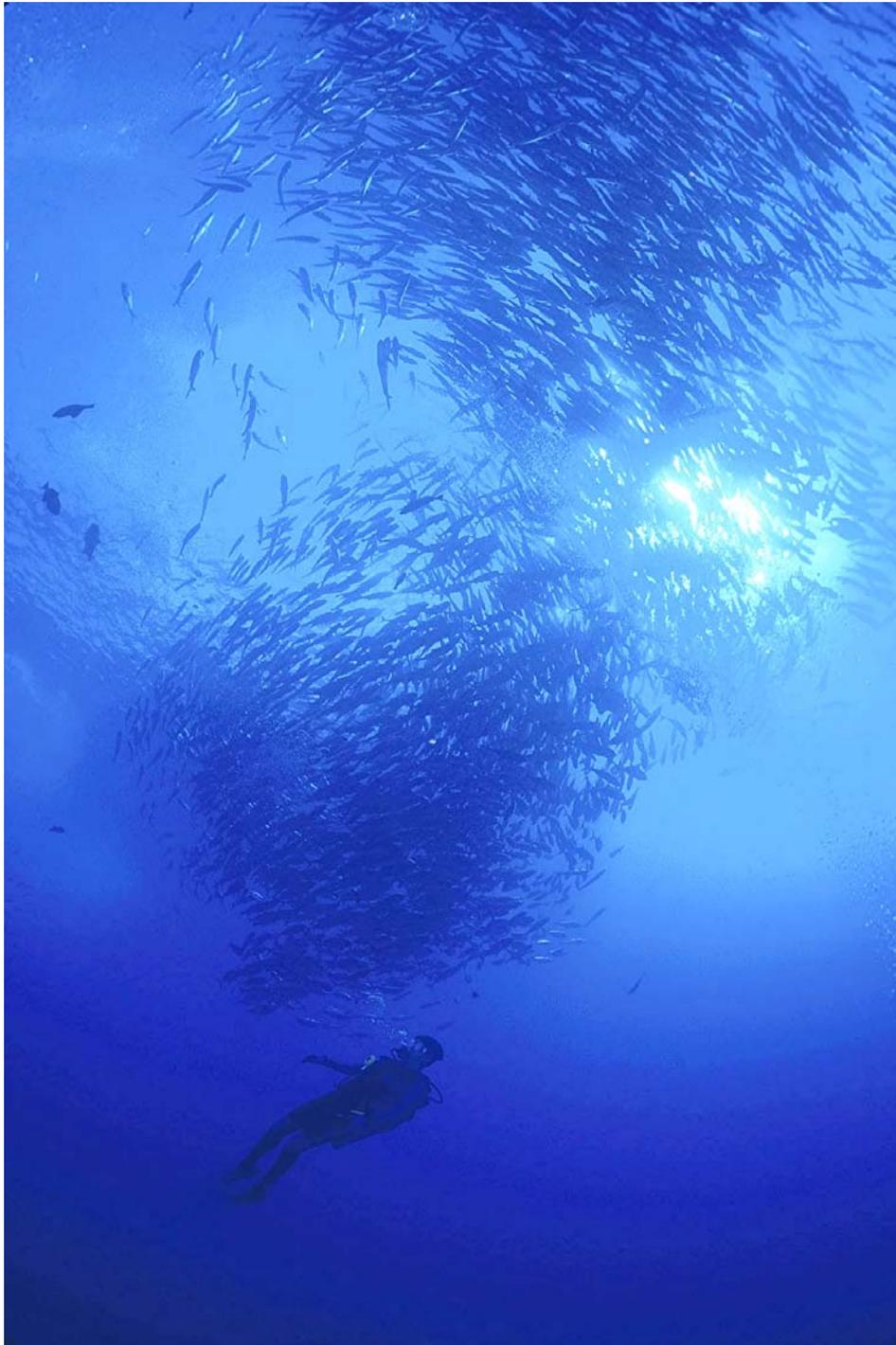


Tree sloth



Orchid

Describing Cocos underwater is a bit overwhelming; you don't know where to start. There is so much to say. The amount of marine life around this island is truly breathtaking. Some animals are there on some trips and not on others, but you can always count on one thing: the great schools of bigeye jacks (*Caranx sexfasciatus*). I have seen big schools of jacks in many other places, the Sea of Cortez, the Solomons, Papua New Guinea, but the size of the Cocos schools is unmatched. They literally block out the sun. They can be seen at many of the charted Cocos dive sites, but the largest and most reliable school is at Sharkfin Rock. They are always there, like friends. The big jack schools are one of the most wonderful, emotional, inspiring things I have seen underwater:



School of jacks at Sharkfin Rock



These are big fish, 20-25 pounds each, Caranx sexfasciatus

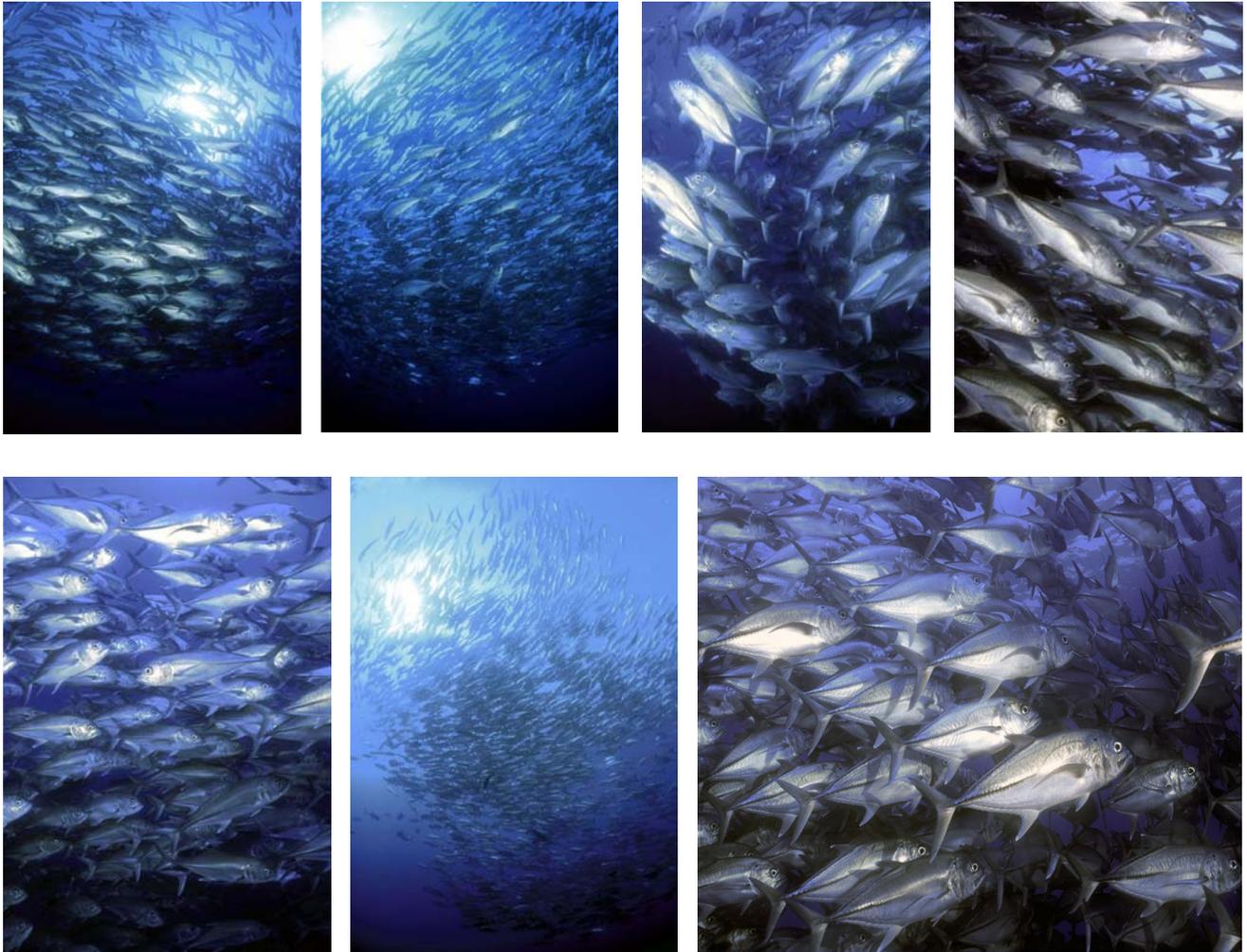


Swooping in and out of the valleys at Dirty Rock



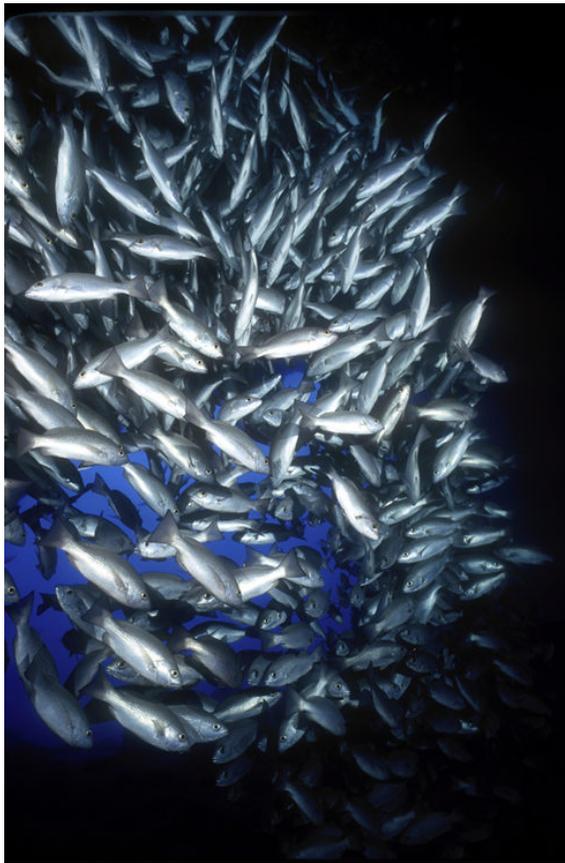
Jacks, Sharkfin Rock

If you approach slowly, the jacks let you enter the school. They gently part as you pass by. It can be disorienting—all you see are silvery fish sides. It is difficult to tell which direction is up and you have to watch your bubbles to tell for sure. Here is a collage of jack photos I made over the years at Cocos:

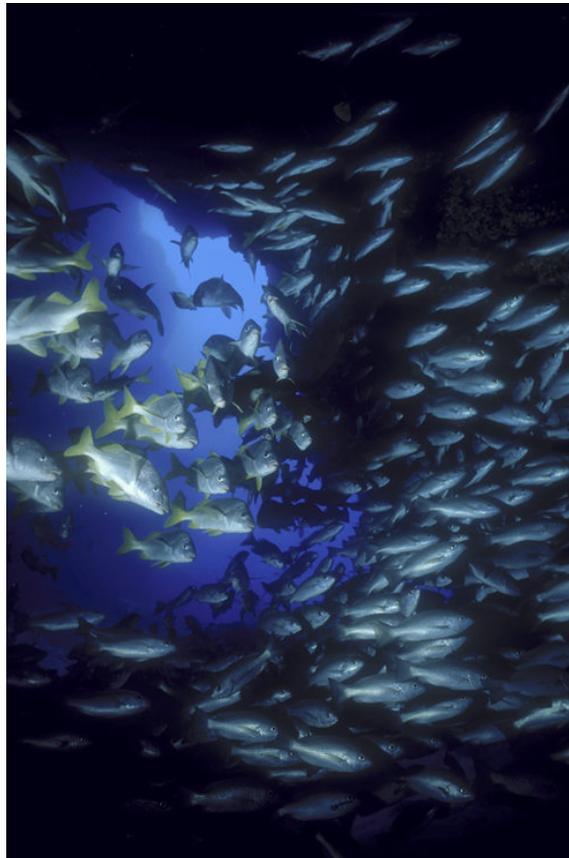


Jack collage

Of course there are dense schools of other fish species everywhere. There is a magical site called Dos Amigos, featuring a very large underwater arch, at least 70 feet from top to bottom. The arch is always filled with schools of fish and the photographic opportunities abound:



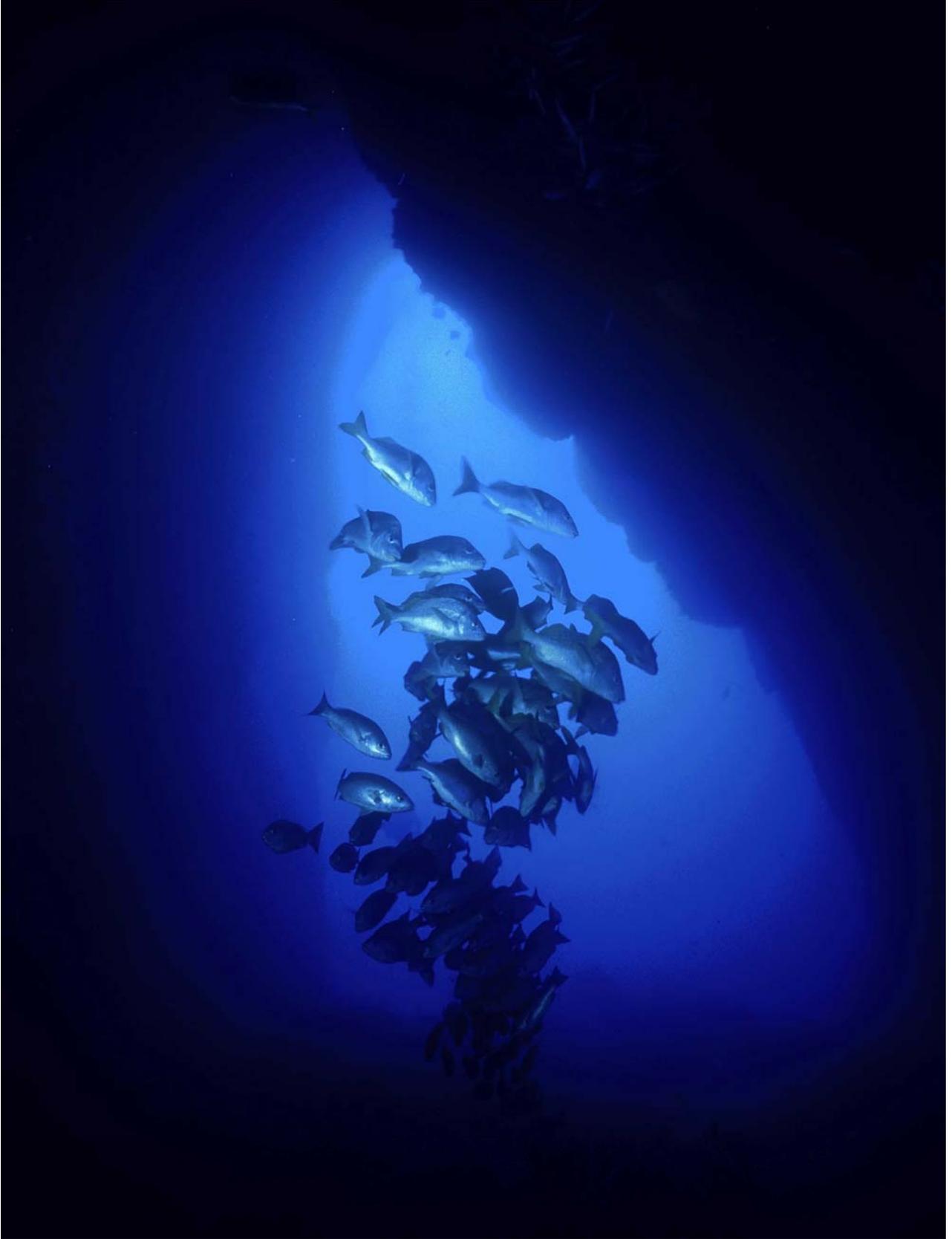
School of grunts, probably Peruvian (Roncador peruano), in the arch at Dos Amigos



Peruvian and yellowtail grunts in the arch at Dos Amigos



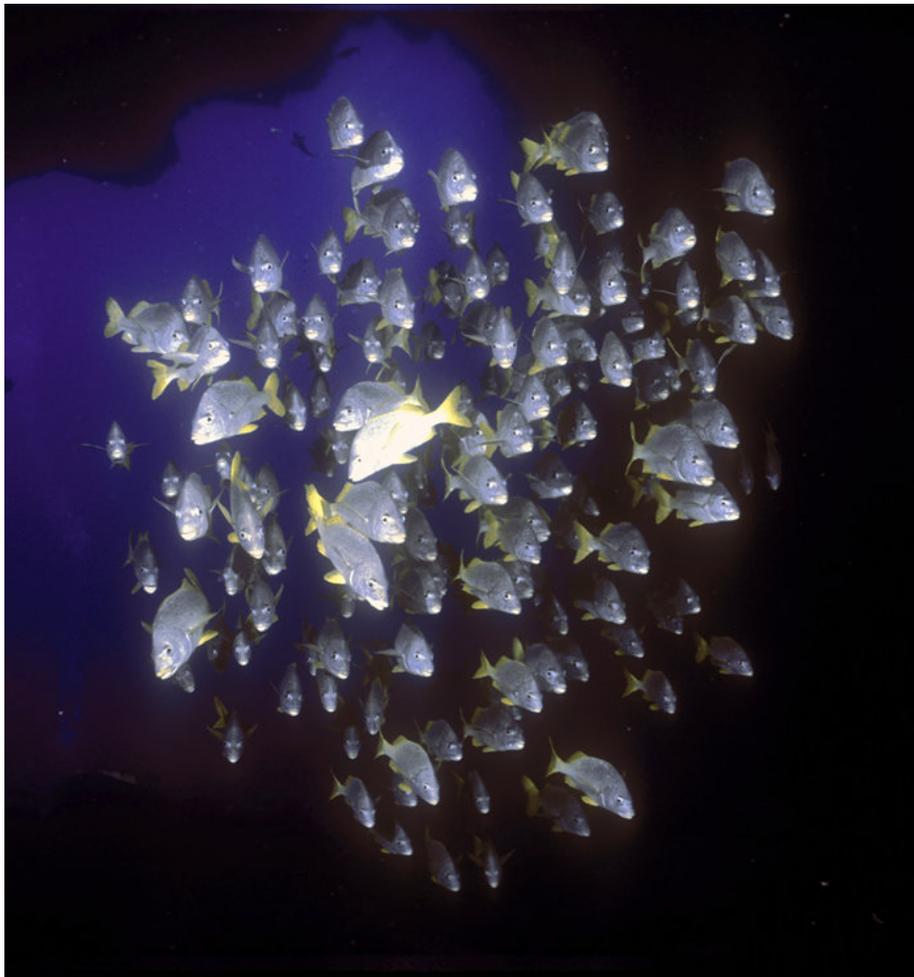
Grunts in the arch at Dos Amigos



Grunts in the arch at Dos Amigos

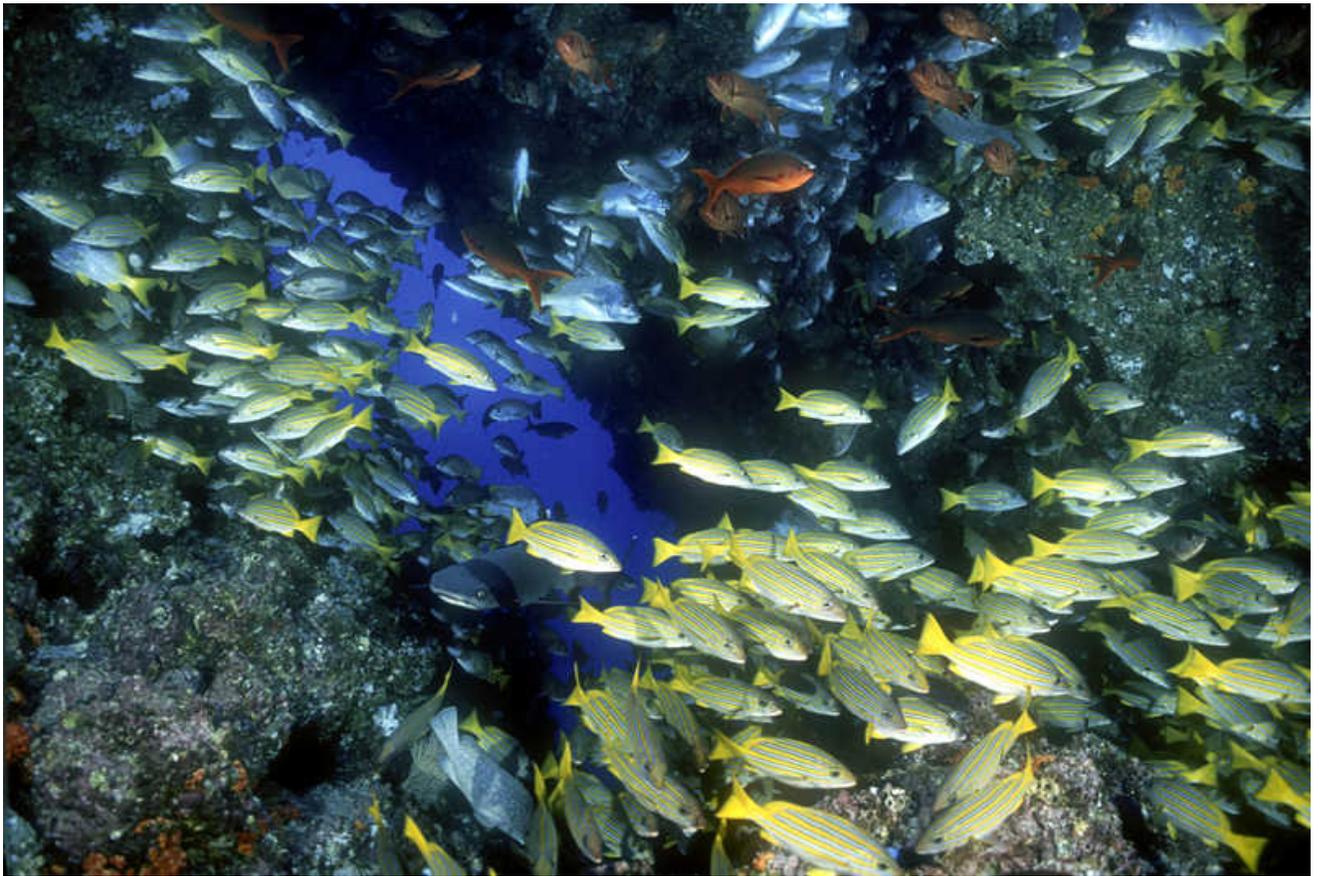


Grunts at Dos Amigos



*School of yellowtail grunts (*Anisotremus interruptus*) in the arch at Dos Amigos*

There is another smaller arch, really just a swim-through, at a very popular site called Submerged Rock. It is always filled with fish:



Swim-through at Submerged Rock, note whitetip shark passing through the blue-striped snapper (*Lutjanus viridis*)

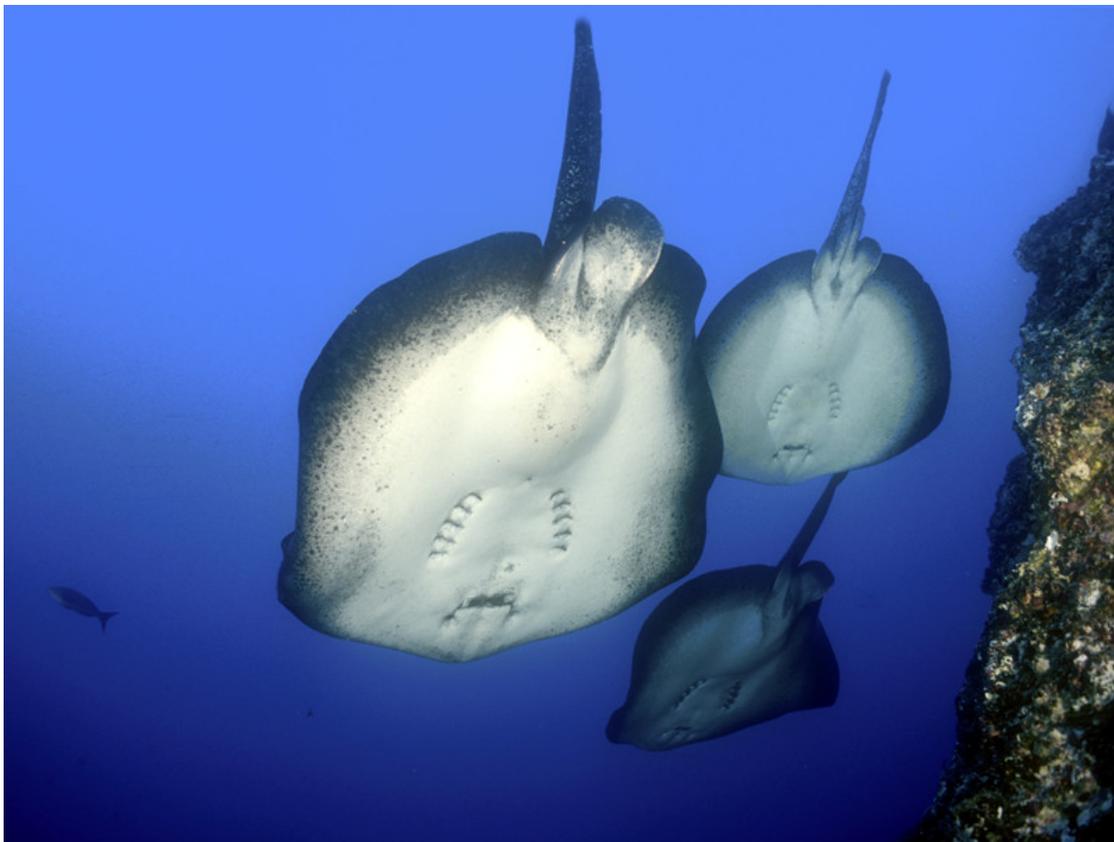


In the swim-through at Submerged Rock

Cocos has a large population of marble rays. They are like little space ships and make good photographic subjects:



Marble ray, Gary Powell in background, Dirty Rock



Trio of marble rays in heavy current at Dirty Rock



Marble ray at Dirty Rock



Green sea turtle

I have seen many Pacific manta rays at Cocos, the encounters have not compared with those in the Revillagigedos, but they are always thrilling. One day we were having lunch on the Undersea Hunter, anchored in Chatham Bay, when someone noticed a manta on the surface right next to the boat. It stayed for several hours and allowed all of us to snorkel

with it, photograph it, and for some of our divers, to grab on and take a ride. It did not seem bothered by the physical contact or the attention:



Diver and lunch manta



Taking a ride with our lunch manta

Here's a photo of our "lunch manta" and his hitchhiking remoras that I made with a free-dive on snorkel:

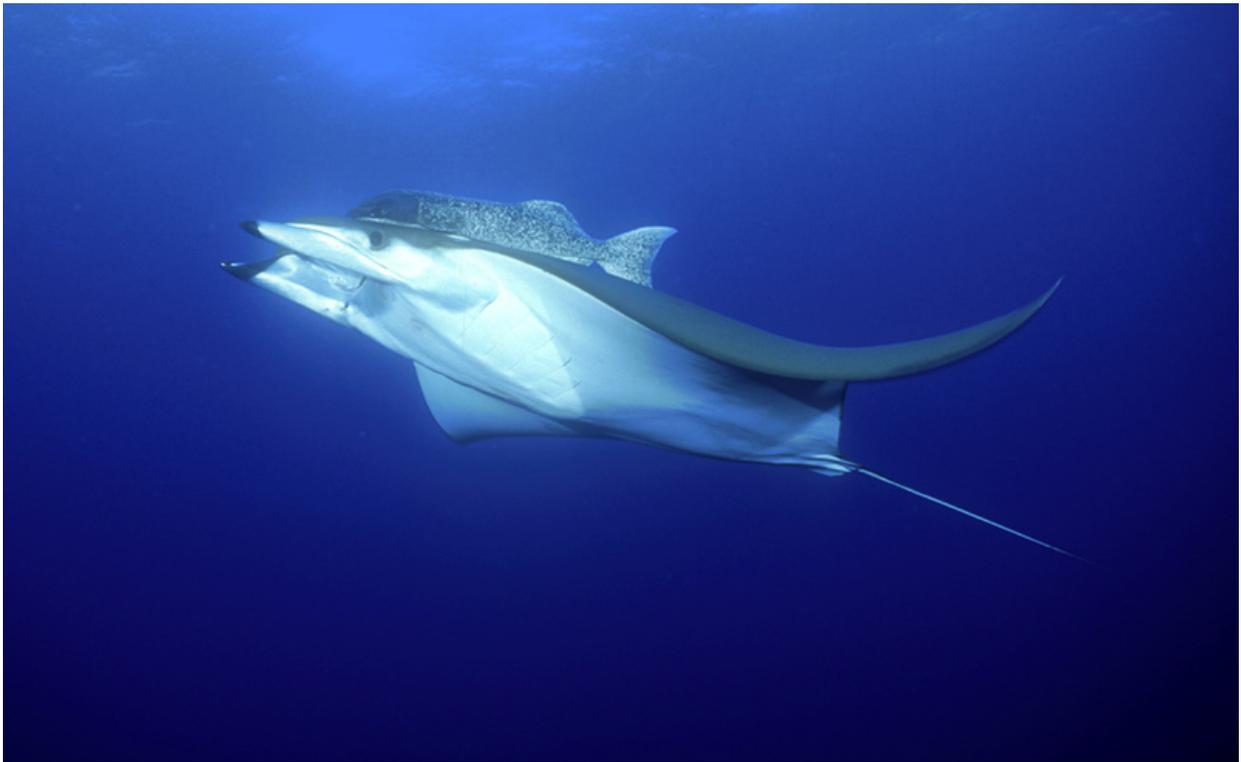


Lunch manta with remoras

Mobulas are smaller cousins to the big Pacific mantas:



Mobula at Alcyone



Mobula at Dirty Rock

Here's something that isn't photographed too often, a large yellowfin tuna. He swam right by me in open water after a dive:

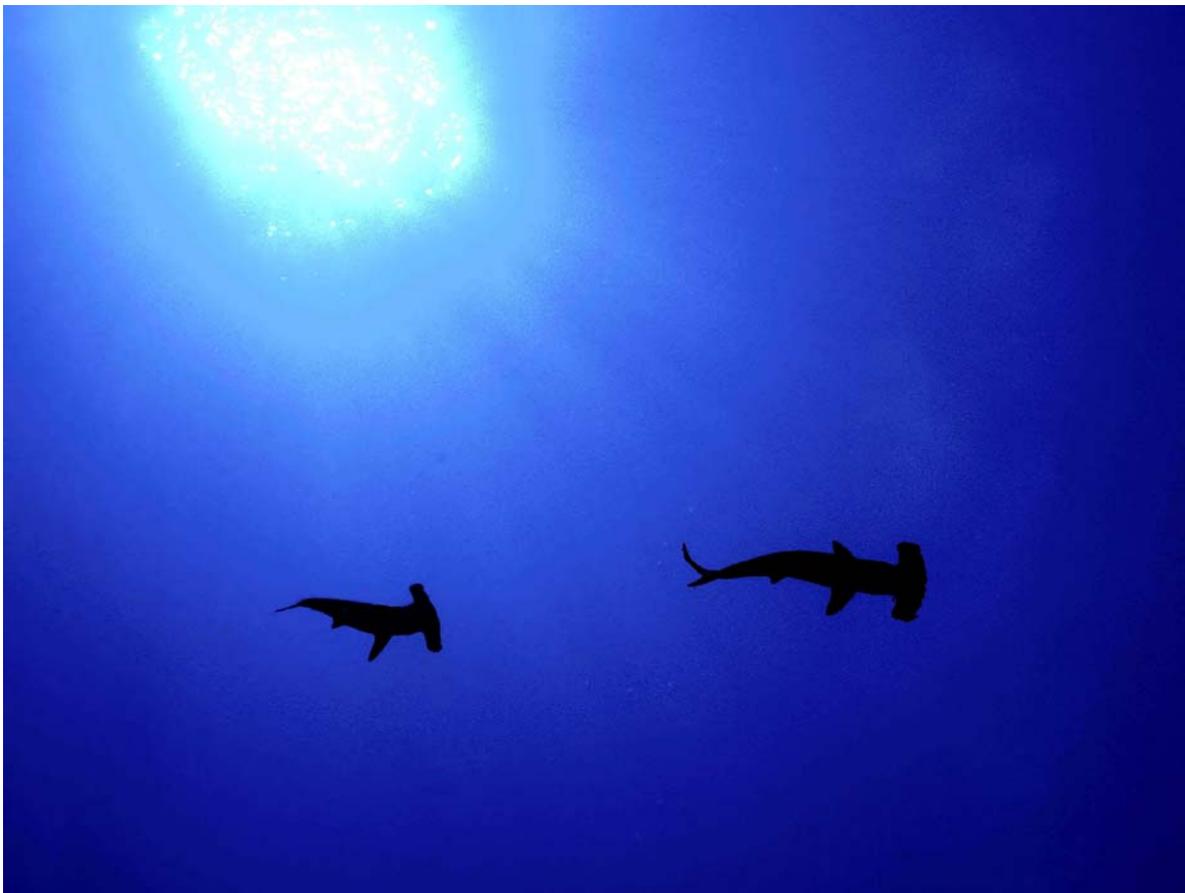


Yellowfin tuna

Most divers, including me, come to Cocos for the sharks. They are rarely disappointed:



Hammerhead shark school at Alcyone



Pair of hammerheads at Alcyone



Hammerhead at Manuelita



Hammerhead at Dirty Rock



Hammerhead at Dirty Rock

On one trip I noticed large numbers of hammerheads cruising near the bottom on the outside of Manuelita at about 130 fsw. Individuals occasionally left the school and cruised slowly up the rocky slope to about 80 fsw and paused, rolling to one side, almost stopping (stalling?) at a cleaning station. Clouds of barberfish would peck away at what appeared to be open mating sores. The sharks would swim as slowly as they could at the station, before circling away and descending to meet the school again on the bottom. I was able to wedge myself into the rocks slightly to the side and above the cleaning station and observe and photograph the amazing behavior. I'm sure I could have gotten closer with a rebreather but I still managed to get very close, without bothering them with my bubbles:



Hammerheads approaching cleaning station at Manuelita



Hammerheads cleaned by barberfish at Manuelita



Hammerhead leaving cleaning station

Second only to the hammerhead in numbers at Cocos is the whitetip shark (not to be confused with the more beautiful silvertip shark, see Chapter 5). Whitetips are kind of like the catfish of sharks—they are not as streamlined as the more classic “requiem” or *carcharhinid* species. They actually have little barbels on the sides of their mouths (thus the “catfish” thing), and they often lie on the bottom, sometimes piled up on top of each other:



Pregnant female whitetip



Whitetip missing top of dorsal fin



Whitetip

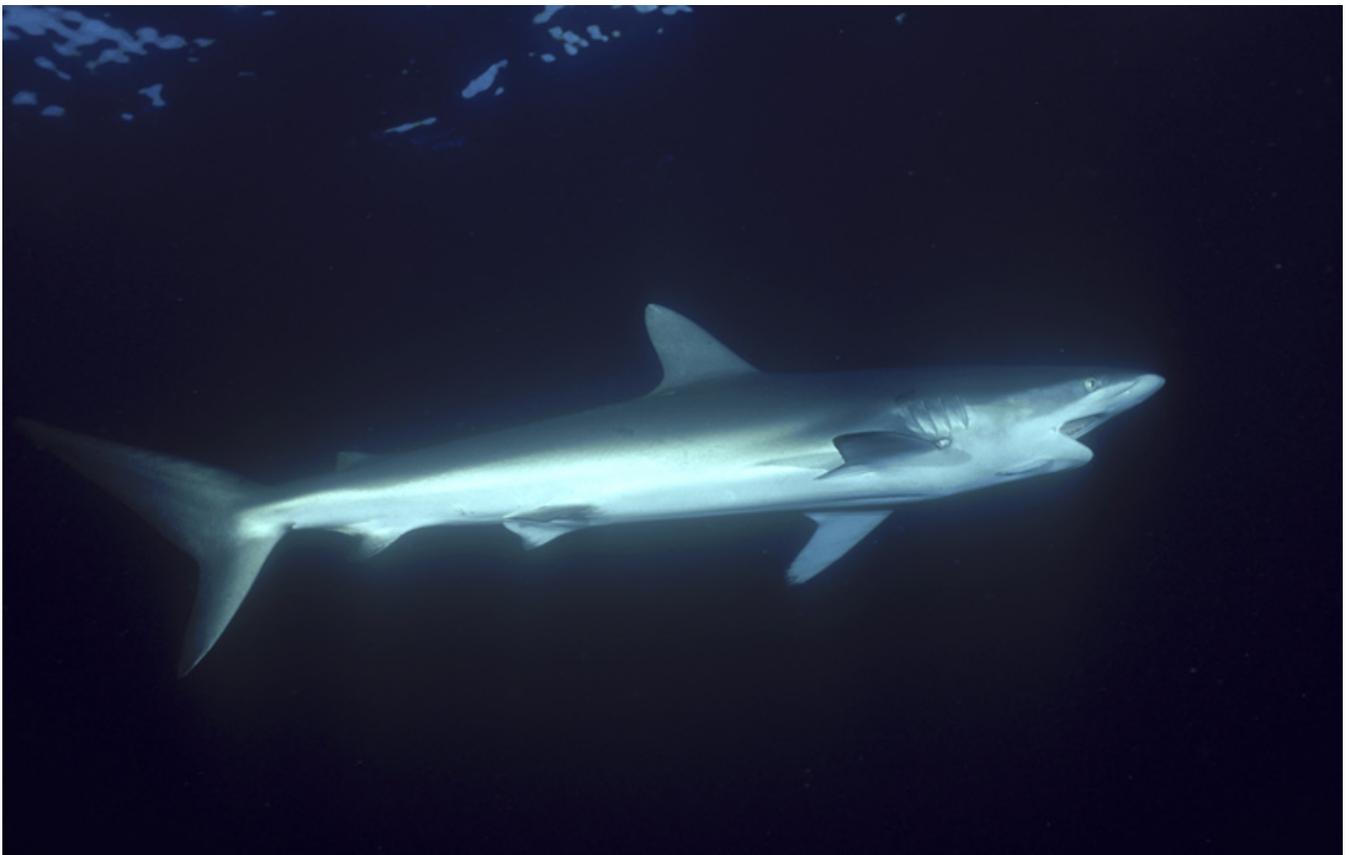


Whitetip pileup on bottom

Silky sharks are very beautiful and graceful, without doubt the boldest shark I have encountered. Unlike most other sharks, who could care less about you or who actively avoid you, silkies are very interested in what you are and will come very close to check you out. I have gently pushed them away many times with my fins, camera, and strobes. They are a medium-sized, open-water shark; most individuals at Cocos are about 4 to 6 feet in length. You don't see them on or near the reefs, only in open water away from any structure. I think their boldness comes from the fact that they feed mostly on schools of small open-water fish, and on large dead animals floating in the blue water. Any open-water "event" (like you bobbing on the surface) attracts them. I have never considered their behavior to be aggressive, just curious.



Silky shark



Silky shark



Silky shark



Silky with entourage

After ascending from a dive it is not unusual for the surface currents to carry the diver far from the dive site, where you end up floating in open water. All Cocos divers carry inflatable red "safety sausages" and whistles or air-powered "Dive Alerts" for such occasions, but even without those devices the panga drivers are extremely good at finding the divers on the surface. However it often takes 20-30 minutes of floating, or more, before you are picked up. On these surface floats large numbers of silkies often congregate around you and stay with you until the pickup.



Silky shark checking us out after dive

I always found watching this post-dive silky behavior exciting and beautiful, but it can be disconcerting for inexperienced divers and those who are uncomfortable with sharks. On one trip one of the divers, a very personable orthodontist from New Jersey and a new diver, was going to Cocos specifically to face, and hopefully overcome, his fear of sharks. He thought that diving at the sharkiest place he knew would help him get over his phobia. Kind of like someone with a fear of flying learning how to fly. On the first day of at the island my brother-in-law Gary Powell and I surfaced with him after a fabulous dive at Dirty Rock. Surface currents were strong and we were being swept away from the pinnacle into open water. Predictably, as we were floating along on the surface waiting for the panga, I noticed that there were about 30 big silkies cruising just below us at fin level.

The scene was surreal. Here we were, the three of us, bobbing along quietly in open water, 300 miles off the west coast of Central America, several miles from the main island, with no boat in sight and a big school of 6-8 foot sharks right below us. The Hunter was blocked from our view by the small outcropping of guano-covered rocks that give Dirty Rock its name. Unless they are very close, the two pangas are not easily seen when your eyes are

only about a foot above the water surface. Gary and I were not concerned; we had been in this situation before. The panga drivers know which direction the currents are running and where to look for us. They were undoubtedly busy with other divers and would get to us when they could. Rather than our dentist friend finding out about the sharks suddenly on his own, and going into shock or cardiac arrest or worse, I told him calmly and deliberately, kind of matter-of-factly, that there were lots of sharks right under us. His eyes widened and he dipped his mask into the water to check out the scene below. His head rotated from side to side as he took in the size of the gathering below him. He raised his head and looked at both of us with his eyes wide, damn near filling up his mask. The look he gave us can only be described as a mixture of fear and awe. He lowered his head and looked underwater again. Here this quiet, intelligent man with an intense fear of sharks was looking at his worst nightmare, about 30 big silkies brushing past his fins. Finally he looked up and softly uttered one of the most priceless, memorable remarks I have ever heard, "*Should I be worried?*"

Gary and I exploded with laughter, which I think both puzzled him and at the same time, eased his mind a little bit. When we could talk we told him no, don't be worried (yeh, right), just relax and enjoy it, push them away if they get too close. We all eventually survived, and were picked up shortly by the pangero. It was a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime experience. I think as the week progressed and he spent more quality time with sharks, the therapy started kicking in, because his fear seemed to change to awe, and like the rest of us, he couldn't stop babbling about how beautiful and graceful sharks are.

In March of 1992 I made a Cocos trip which was right in the middle of a major El Nino event. The water was very warm, in the low 90s, and there were no sharks to be seen anywhere. Even the whitetips were absent. We thought they had gone deep, and they probably had, but if so it was deeper than we could go. I set my depth record on that trip, doing a bounce dive down to 160 fsw at Dirty Rock, but I didn't see a single shark. All was not lost, because early in the trip one of the crew found an orange frogfish at about 50 fsw on a rock at Manuelita, the small island just outside Chatham Bay where the Undersea Hunter normally anchored for the night. The frogfish was within easy swimming distance from where the boat anchored, and lacking sharks, it became the primary photographic subject for the week. Unfortunately for the frogfish, fortunately for the divers, the fish stayed in the same place all week, and was easy to find. It may be the single most photographed Cocos Island fish in history. Let's see, 14 divers, probably 15 frogfish dives for each diver, 36 frames with two strobes firing on each frame, $14 \times 15 \times 36 \times 2 = 15,120$, that's a lot of strobes flashing in one week. Particularly for an animal that can't close or blink its eyes. I made my contribution to blinding this beautiful and strange fish:



Frogfish at Manuelita, probably blind from all the strobes flashing