

ANGLERXTRAS

By: JOSHUA W. BROER

The Whale Shark

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?



The guitar god Jimi Hendrix wanted to know, “are you experienced”, as referenced by his 1967 album of the same name. While Jimi may have been referring to his own band’s name, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, or, well, something other, it’s truly left up to the audience to determine what you think of as “experience”. We all have our own unique happenings and ideas about such things in life. In this case, whether you’re a diver, or strictly a hook- and-line angler, at some point on the water you’ll probably experience something you’ll never forget - something new and something that most people will never even come close to.

After 30 plus years of conventional fishing and 20 years of diving and spear fishing, this kind of epiphany happened to me about 30 miles out in the Gulf. A dive trip had been arranged by good friend and dive buddy Louis Balderstein.

A day not to be forgotten, May 31st, 2010, Memorial Day, that morning held the promise of sunny skies, light winds, calm seas, great visibility, and grouper, snapper, hogfish and amberjack to spear

and put in the box. As it turned out, all of that came to fruition as the wreck we dove that day, the Sheridan, a 180 ft. tugboat that lies fully intact and upright in 80 ft of water, proved to be quite a bit more than just a place to spearfish.

For me, the wreck’s main attraction is the plethora of bottom fish. Usually you can limit out on gag grouper, hogfish, amberjack, etc. And even those days when the visibility isn’t great or the

number of fish not that thick, there are schools of decent sized mangrove snapper to help fill the cooler. Some days, like on our last visit to the site, the top of the wreck is swarming with hundreds of amberjack, one of the Gulf’s most bad-to-the-bone, fight-to-the-end, toughest, strongest fish out there. Whether catching them with conventional hook-and-line tackle or wrestling them into submission after a shot from your spear

gun, these bruisers just never seem to give up. Anyone who has reeled one in from the boat will gladly pass the rod to another angler due to aching muscles and a sore back.

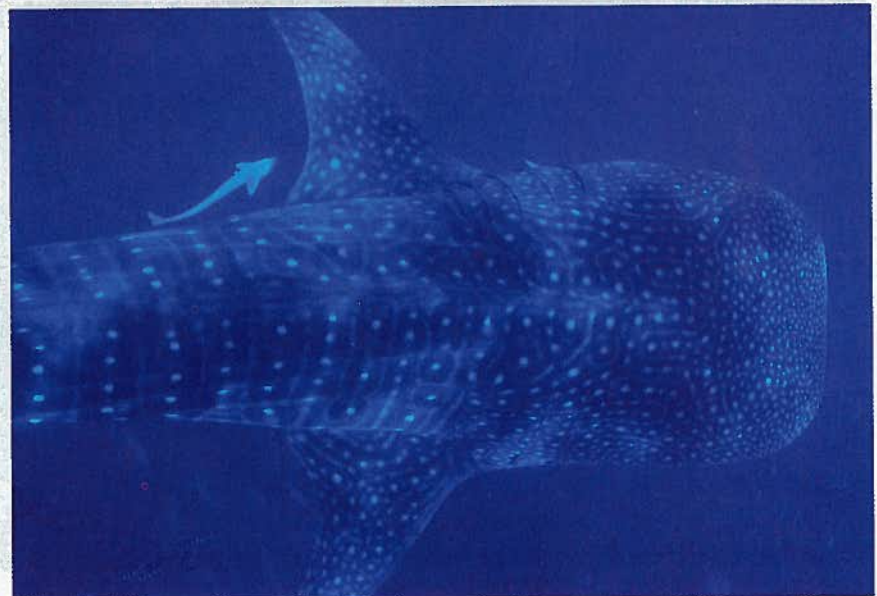
When spearing, if you don't get a good clean shot to the head and are still dealing with a lively fish, they will run circles around you with your retrieval line faster than you can blink. This is always great fun and amusement for the many barracuda circling the wreck and eyeing your, and potentially their catch.

On this particular day, our bottom-dwelling target fish of choice were not very plentiful. Luckily though, the wreck was teeming with hundreds of medium to large amberjack which swam consistent circles around us. They were mainly halfway down in the water column, not at all spooked, so were little work for our high-powered guns. It was a quick and easy limit on those guys. But amberjack fishing, as exciting as it can be, is not the story here. They are not the "experience" that changes one's life. Captain Louis, unbeknownst to even him, put us right next to a 20 plus foot whale shark. Now, usually it is not wise to get into a body of water with anything that is 20 feet long - a conservative guess on our part. But the whale shark, scientifically known as *Rhincodon typus*, is a slow-moving, filter-feeding shark that, despite its size, does not pose significant danger to humans. Whale sharks are gentle and often play with scuba and free-divers. There have been documented cases of the shark's large tail fin unintentionally hitting divers but beyond that they are no threat at all.

So, what's all the fuss? How about these few tidbits... For starters, this is the largest living fish species in the ocean. The largest confirmed individual was 41.50 feet in length and the heaviest weighed more than 79,000 lbs. Unconfirmed claims have put some fish at near 70 feet long. This ancient ocean dweller has been around for about 60 million years, according to biologists, and has a lifespan of about 70 years.

Want to see one in captivity? You can take a trip as far as to aquariums in Japan and China, or as close as the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. Want to see one in the wild? You can find them as far away as the Galapagos Islands or as close as the Isla Mujeres in Mexico. So why was this one here, so near to our coast? There have actually been a number of sightings in the past few months and some have suggested that the oil spill is pushing the fish in unusual directions.

Luckily, for humans in any case, it targets only concentrations of plankton and small fish to make up its diet. But with a capacious mouth which can be up to five feet wide, you could



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swim right in. This animal is truly beautiful. The body is mostly grey with a white belly. Three prominent ridges run along each side and the skin is marked with a checkerboard of pale yellow spots and stripes. Knowing this fish only from TV documentaries, I nevertheless immediately recognized the species. A chorus of "Oh my God it's a whale shark" echoed throughout the boat. I was stunned with excitement. All I could do was stand there, statue-like, gazing at this magnificent creature. Captain Louis and another diver quick with his gear were both in the water and swimming with the shark. I remained frozen.

While Louis and dive buddy followed the shark around trying to get a shot on one very large cobia that trailed it (another dive boat had already displayed their prize cobia that they had taken off the shark), I managed to remember one important thing, one little detail that frames this story... I had an underwater camera with me. It was only then that I finally sprang to life and knew what my mission was. I grabbed the camera and nothing else - no mask, no snorkel, no fins, and dove in. I snapped away feverishly as the shark swam calmly in consistent patterns to and fro just beneath the water's surface. I free dove down to 30 feet to get a shot of Captain Louis catching a free ride on the shark's huge dorsal fin. At one point, the huge fish swam right towards me, slow and methodical and seemingly without any intention of stopping. Again, I was frozen with amazement and disbelief.

I've caught sharks, small sharks, medium sharks, some large. I've dived wrecks with sharks countless times. I've been in the water with big reef sharks, bulls, hammerheads, others. It wasn't always fun or exciting. This, however, would mark the greatest experience of my outdoor life. The shark turned peacefully just before approaching me as I stroked its belly. Oh yes, I was, "experienced".

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