

# BIG TIME



It's big time you need – five days of diving from a 12-night trip – and it's big-time diving, with big currents, big animals and big thrills. We're talking the Socorro Islands, where **NIGEL WADE** has been living large

"I'VE NEVER ENCOUNTERED mantas before," Paul Colley told me as we were kitting up on deck. Fifteen minutes later we were under water. Paul was hovering at about 5m, fiddling with his camera rig, staring into the depths in the hope of catching his first glimpse of what so often proves to be an elusive and shy creature.

In an instant one beautifully sculpted leviathan, as bold as brass, cruised stealthily in behind him. The giant rose to the surface, clearly seeking to bathe in Paul's stream of regulator exhaust bubbles and intent on enjoying them tickling its belly.

The big ray's wingtips and back broke the meniscus as the animal exhibited its determination to get into the best position for its makeshift spa. Paul was still staring down, blinkered by his mask and unaware of the spectacle unfolding

underside of the creature above him. I swear I saw a glint in the manta's eye as it celebrated the win in its implausible game of hide-and-seek, and Paul frantically blasted away with his camera.

The encounter lasted a few short seconds before the 5m pelagic wanderer flicked its broad wings and silently disappeared, perhaps to find other players, leaving us both elated at the brief meeting between Pacific sea creature and UK landlubber.

We were diving at the famous El Boiler, a volcanic rock column rising from a Jurassic seabed at San Benedicto. This is one of three islands making up the Revillagigedo archipelago, also known as the Socorro islands, some 240 nautical miles offshore and under Mexican federal jurisdiction.

Our long journey had involved two flights, two hotel stopovers plus a full day and night cruising on our floating hotel,

above him. My own camera rig was inoperable, the strobe arms still folded and everything switched off from our RIB entry, and all I could do was gurgle "maaaantaaaaa!" as loudly as possible through my mouthpiece.

My unsuspecting buddy turned, his body stiffening in surprise as his entire field of view became filled with the

the *Nautilus Belle Amie*, and within minutes under water we had been rewarded with this incredible encounter. It wouldn't be our last.

The Revillagigedo Islands are a wild and remote destination, entirely at the mercy of Mother Nature's fury, with nowhere to hide should strong winds

and ripping currents prevail.

Sometimes the sea can be such a cruel mistress, but not for us – we were greeted with a light breeze and calm seas as we arrived, well-rested and eager, our departure from the marina at Cabo San Lucas on the southernmost tip of the Baja peninsula seemingly a lifetime ago.

On the following dive, again at El Boiler, we were met with surging current – two fins forward, one fin back as it played a game of push-me-pull-me on our hapless submerged bodies.

The sea creatures that call this place home were at ease with the water movement, maintaining their position with small fin- and tail-flicks. Oh, to be a fish, I thought, and then reconsidered, as the prospect of trying to survive here with thousands of predators lurking around every corner entered my mind.

As if to emphasise the point, a lone

hammerhead shark appeared in the distant blue, its silhouette unmistakable as it ghosted in and out of visibility range.

The sight of a big manta interacting playfully with other divers refocused my thoughts. It purposely swam from diver to diver, rising above them to bathe in bubbles, its whole body shuddering from time to time as if in ecstasy.

A second beast joined in, this one resembling a stealth bomber. All black with a pure white crest flanked with zig-

**Pictured:** Manta rays resemble giant birds flying elegantly through the water.

**Left:** Socorro Island at sunrise.

zag edges on its chest, it somersaulted in front of us as if showing off its superhero status.

Next morning I woke to the sound of the ship's anchor and chain crashing noisily into the depths, signalling our pre-dawn arrival at Socorro Island.

The Mexican Navy patrols these waters from an island-based station to maintain their marine reserve status.

The Socorro base was set up in 1957 and has become a small village housing around 45 military personnel. We had to

wait until after breakfast before the naval officers boarded our vessel, carrying firearms and looking very serious. They checked dive permits and the ship's documents before allowing us on our way.

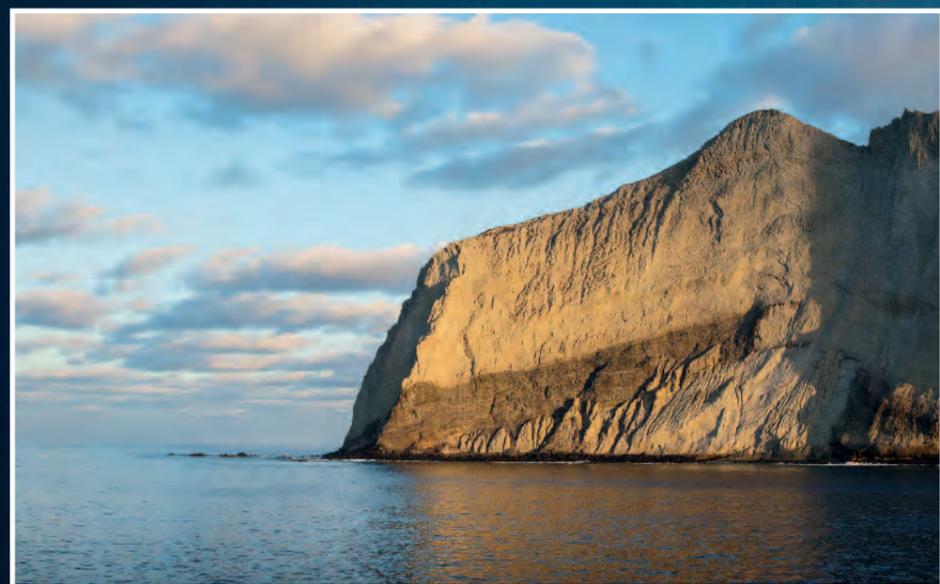
As *Belle Amie* moved from the naval base to our intended dive-site on the east of the island, we joined the Viking on the top deck for the morning briefing.

Big Swede Sten Johansson has worked these waters for a number of years, and was keen to share his knowledge.

We would be diving along a finger of ancient lava, reaching out across a sandy seabed. The narrow ridge had formed a wall that's frequently visited by, you guessed it, mantas.

The pelagic rays come here to enjoy the services offered at the many cleaning stations dotted along the rock-face.

The Socorro cleaning stations are



like nothing I have seen before. The cleanerfish are big clarion angelfish and black-nosed butterflyfish, which can be found congregating in loose groups over established rock formations awaiting the arrival of their customers.

The cleaners energetically remove parasites and dead skin tissue from the big rays as they hover almost motionless.

The Viking had been nominated to guide our group, and immediately led us to a known cleaner hotspot to await the arrival of potential clients.

But instead of mantas, we were greeted by a pod of dolphins, which announced their arrival with a noisy array of sonic peeps and darted excitedly from diver to diver, stopping for a few seconds to inspect one land-living interloper before excitedly finning to the next.

I must look like an ogre to these beautiful marine mammals, because they always seem to bypass me in favour of better-looking specimens.

This time was no different, and I was left wondering whether I should have a makeover or some plastic surgery in an effort to make me less repulsive to these clearly picky creatures.

The mantas did arrive, however, saving the dive for me as they comforted me with



**Above, from left:** A manta shows off the 'superhero emblem' on its chest at Socorro Island; a cheeky juvenile Mexican hogfish catches its reflection in the camera port.

**Right:** Even the dive guides are giants – the Viking, Sten Johansson.

**Below, from left:** Whitetip reef sharks crammed into the limited real estate at Roca Partida; a lone triggerfish joins silver-flanked jack just below the surface.

by relentless current and countless storms. All that remains under water is the solid basalt lava core, rising like a single spire from the depths.

This is not a place for lovers of coral reefs. Like its sibling islands the topography here is stark and monolithic, the only colour provided by barnacles and algae growth.

It's the sheer biomass of marine life that makes this archipelago the hottest

leeward side to be greeted by hundreds of silver-flanked jack basking in the slack water. They had been joined by a few individual orange triggerfish, which added a splash of colour to the mainly blue-soaked scene.

Below them, every hollow and cavern on the basalt pillar was jam-packed with sleeping whitetip reef sharks. Dozens of them were crammed into the limited flat-bottomed real estate offered in this mainly vertical world, lying in disjointed slumber besides and on top of each other.

In some hollows the sharks had to share their bedroom space with green moray eels and in one, half-a-dozen giant spiny lobsters packed tightly into a small alcove.

The barnacles at the base of the hollows seemed to be worn away by the constant to-ing and fro-ing of the rough-skinned tenants, offering little purchase and allowing the constant surge to gently rock the sharks to sleep in tandem.

Away from the topography of the rock, the blue water holds predators in large numbers. On one of our dives here we



witnessed the spectacle (albeit in the distance) of around 50 schooling hammerhead sharks. They were the only animals that seemed spooked by divers, slinking away beyond the limits of visibility as we approached.

In contrast, larger Galapagos and dusky sharks didn't seem at all fazed by our presence, going about their job of looking menacing with aplomb. On occasion they cruised past without so much as a cursory glance at their admiring audience.

**THE SMALLER SPECIES** seemed a bit miffed by the lack of attention they were receiving; on more than one occasion trumpetfish and cheeky-looking juvenile Mexican hogfish approached my camera rig, facing into the mirrored dome port as if to say "photograph me".

In reality they could see their reflection and probably assumed that they were encountering an interloper encroaching on their territory. Whatever the reason, they made great subjects.

The following night, 20 or so silky sharks surrounded the *Belle Amie* as she

lay at anchor, hunting baitfish attracted by the ship's powerful side-lights.

The sharks showed a different side to their daytime persona, attacking the shoal aggressively with their dorsal fins breaking the surface.

It made me wonder what was happening on the Rock; the hundreds of whitetips would also be actively seeking prey. Those strange bedfellows during the day were now on the menu, and I really wouldn't want to be a squirrelyfish, hogfish or wrasse right now, I thought, as I pictured the brutal packs of grey-skinned hunters wreaking havoc.

It appears that it's not only the mantas that enjoy the bubbles from the many divers. On our last day at Roca Partida, while maintaining my safety stop under a DSMB, I witnessed a big green parrotfish actively seeking out the rising bubbles from divers below.

The fish spiralled around a large jellyfish-shaped bubble as it shimmered and shook on its way to the surface.

With a final bump of its nose the fish burst the bubble, transforming it into what resembled shattered glass. The fish then visibly shook with excitement before descending to find another.

This game lasted for my entire safety stop, the divers below oblivious to the playground antics above them.

The manta rays and whitetip reef sharks we encountered at the Socorro Islands were huge, dwarfing their Indian Ocean cousins.

In this Land of the Giants, so was everything else; the cleanerfish were big, the lobsters were enormous, and our Viking dive-guide – well, he was a monster of a man but, like the mantas, he was also a gentle, fun-loving giant. █

## I WAS WONDERING IF I SHOULD HAVE A MAKEOVER OR PLASTIC SURGERY

a "you're not as abhorrent as you think" look of sympathy on their faces.

I had to suffer the many tales of close dolphin encounters from my fellow-divers, some of them backing up their stories with stunning images.

Oh well, "it is what it is", I thought as I contemplated suicide by alcohol abuse at the end of the day. I settled instead for a hot chocolate and an early night, in the knowledge that tomorrow we would be visiting the jewel in the crown of this archipelago, Roca Partida.

**NAMED AFTER THE TWIN PEAKS** that rise only 25m from the sea's surface, Roca Partida (parted rock) has no vegetation.

Instead, its weathered rock surface is coated with sun-bleached guano, dropped by generations of seabirds that have spent their lives calling this remote and no doubt hostile place home.

Topside, the insignificant rock looked a bit underwhelming, I thought, as I sipped my morning coffee on the top deck. Little did I know how overwhelming the spectacle would be below the surface.

The portion of rock visible from the boat is the decaying tip of an ancient volcano, its steep slopes long since eroded

dive destination on the planet. Apart from the residents, it's also an oasis in a desert, attracting pelagic species in their droves.

I rolled off the RIB into crystal water, immediately aware of the current tugging me away from the rock-face, and finning hard in bursts to try to negate the now-familiar surge found on all but a few of our previous dives.

I eventually arrived in the shelter of the



### WAY TO GO

Nigel Wade's trip was arranged by The Scuba Place, which offers the same 12-night, five-days' diving itinerary from £3900. Included is 5\* all-inclusive accommodation in Cabo San Lucas for one night before boarding and two nights on the way back, an overnight in Los Angeles, flights, transfers and taxes, plus eight nights on *Nautilus Belle Amie* or *Nautilus Explorer* ([www.nautilusbelleamie.com](http://www.nautilusbelleamie.com)) with 20 dives. Nitrox, marine-park fees and hotel-marina transfers are extra. Nigel flew with Virgin Atlantic from London to LA and on to Cabo San Lucas with Alaska Airlines, and stayed at Dreams Los Cabos ([www.dreamsresorts.com](http://www.dreamsresorts.com)). Nautilus trips to Socorro run from January through to July. Hyperbaric facilities are 250 miles away in Mexico, so conservative dive practices are recommended.

\* [www.thescubaplace.co.uk](http://www.thescubaplace.co.uk)