

# Experience the *Afuera*



Proyecto\_Domino



This is a unique opportunity to experience the Afuera (the great massing of whale sharks in the Caribbean) with one of the most celebrated whale shark researchers in the world:



Dr. Jennifer Schmidt. She is taking a small group of divers to the Mexican Riviera to swim, free dive and snorkel with the giant sharks during the Afuera.

**Afuera Objectives:** This expedition is field oriented and will seek to answer the following specific questions.

- How much time do the sharks spend feeding at the surface.
- What are the sea surface temperatures when whale sharks are present.
- We will also gather photographs of individual whale sharks for the Ecocean database.

**Dates:** July 30 to August 3, 2012  
August 4 to 8, 2012

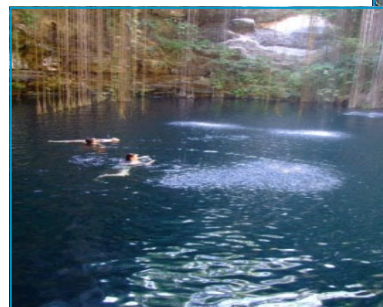
**Cost:** \$1200

Included: 4 nights hotel at the Radisson Hacienda Cancun with breakfast each day (double occupancy) and free internet, 3 days whale shark interaction including lunch.)

Not included: Airfare, airport transfers, hotel taxes and all meals not specified

A \$500 deposit is required to hold your space. Once a diver has been accepted on this trip, no refunds will be given. We understand the unexpected may arise and require that all participants purchase travel insurance.

*Optional side trips are available and can be arranged in Cancun. After the expedition you could dive Manchones Reef, visit the Cave of the Sleeping Sharks of Isla Mujeres, dive one of Mexico's crystal clear cenotes, or visit some of the world-famous Mayan ruins of the Yucatan such as Tulum or Chichen Itza.*



## ***Afuera Aggregation*** by Dr. Jennifer V. Schmidt

Whale sharks are pelagic (open ocean) animals, and are believed to spend most of their lives in deep waters far from shore. At certain times of the year, however, in certain parts of the world, large numbers of whale sharks gather in near-shore aggregations. These gatherings coincide with rich feeding opportunities, typically coral or fish spawning events. How whale sharks know when and where a spawn will occur is not understood, but these animals show up each year just as spawning begins. Photo-identification of individual whale sharks using spot patterns has shown that many animals return to the same aggregation site year after year.

Most whale shark aggregations number 10, 20, perhaps 50 animals — large numbers for a species that is otherwise seen only singly. For the past few years, however, an aggregation that has occurred off the eastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula is arguably the largest ever seen. In the summer of 2009, aerial photographs documented numbers reaching 600 animals east of Isla Mujeres, in the deep waters of the Caribbean Sea. This aggregation was termed the “Afuera” by local researchers; Afuera means “outside” in Spanish, and this region lies outside the ecological protection zone established by the Mexican government. But scientists wondered: Would the Afuera recur?

It did in fact occur again in 2010 and 2011, with whale sharks numbering in the hundreds gathering to feed on the eggs of a small tuna species. During the days I’ve spent at the Afuera the magnitude of this whale shark feast was obvious — the water was thick with fish spawn. Though I’ve had the opportunity to observe whale shark aggregations in several countries, none have approached the concentration of sharks within the Afuera. The enormous whale sharks circled slowly in the water, vacuuming tuna eggs with their mouths open wide. Totally engrossed in feeding, the sharks were oblivious to swimmers in the water, providing an unforgettable experience for many lucky tourists out on the local whale shark sightseeing boats.

Will this aggregation happen again in 2012? Like any wildlife phenomenon, the Afuera cannot be predicted with certainty, but it is likely the tuna will return to spawn, and the whale sharks will return to feast at this banquet.



***To book your space on the 2012 Afuera Expedition, contact***  
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