



# The Planet's **36** Greatest

JEREMY KOZMAN; OPPOSITE, TODD WINNER

# Big-Animal Encounters

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Small critters are cool, but we're betting that most of us became divers to see the big stuff. If you signed up to see sharks, whales and rays, check out this incredible collection of the world's 36 best big-animal encounters.

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**KONA, HAWAII**  
**Manta Rays**

Some animals are extra cool because they're less common – we're looking at you, humpbacks – but manta rays, with a cool factor of infinity, are fairly widespread. Socorro, Galapagos and the Maldives are home to excellent encounters, but it's the Big Island of Hawaii with a truly one-of-a-kind manta experience. Every night, boats from Kona gather in Garden Eel Cove. A powerful light box is placed 15 feet underwater; it attracts plankton which, in turn, bring in upwards of 40 mantas that scoop up the food only inches from your face. And while you know there are plenty of other mantas in the world, these personable rays – many of which return night after night – make it seem as if it's a private encounter of your very own. –DE

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**Contact:** Jack's Diving Locker [jacksdivinglocker.com](http://jacksdivinglocker.com)



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

**Manta Rays**

1. Do not touch the mantas. Mantas have a protective mucus on their skin which, when rubbed off, leaves the skin vulnerable.
2. Don't free-swim with the mantas – they need adequate room to navigate to the food.
3. Remain kneeling on the sand in a semicircle.
4. Shine your lights upward. The light attracts plankton, and the mantas feast.
5. Don't blow bubbles at the mantas; it's not amusing.

FROM LEFT: MASA USHIODA; ANDREW SALLMON



**COCOS, COSTA RICA**

**Hammerhead Sharks**

Between the long crossing from mainland Costa Rica, the near-daily rainstorms, and the current-swept dive sites, a trip to Cocos Island might seem more like a dare than a scuba vacation. However, these inconveniences don't matter to the die-hard divers who make the trek year after year. The Cocos-obsessed persist for one (big) reason: This is the sharkiest place on Earth. You'd think a starting lineup that includes reef, silky, Galapagos, tiger and whale sharks would be enough to earn the reputation; but the fanatics come for the hordes of scalloped hammerheads. Surrounded by a stark, jagged reef and watching the most bizarre-looking animals on Earth swarm overhead, it's impossible to escape the grip of the alien, otherworldly experience that repeatedly transforms visitors into Cocos addicts.

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– Andy Sallmon and Allison Vitsky Sallmon

**Contact:** Aggressor Fleet [aggressor.com](http://aggressor.com)





**PROVO, TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS**

## Spotted Eagle Rays

A smooth shape bursts out of the ocean, interrupting the boat ride to our dive site. A spotted eagle ray with outstretched wings sails into the air in a full breach, and following a smooth arc, disappears with a splash. It's a good omen but not surprising considering we're in Providenciales, eagle ray territory – the deep walls of Turks and Caicos are exposed to the Atlantic, drawing eagle rays that rival their manta cousins in size. On this site, eagle rays with 10-foot wingspans approach and pass close enough for a quick succession of photos. Undistracted, the rays continue their graceful flight, on their way to perform above-water acrobatics, or wow another group of divers. – *Matt Segal*

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**Contact:** Aggressor Fleet [aggressor.com](http://aggressor.com)



**MONTAGUE ISLAND, AUSTRALIA**

## Fur Seals

Montague Island lies 4 miles offshore, and is home to a large seasonal bachelor colony – numbering into the thousands during winter – of Australian and New Zealand fur seals. As the boat arrives, you'll be greeted by a number of seals cooling themselves in the water, waving their fins in the air as if to say hello. The seals seem to be just as curious about us as we are of them: As divers get in, the remainder of the seals scurry off the rocks and enter the water for playtime. These seals are extremely agile – one minute they'll be looking at you up close, gently nibbling your camera strobe or fins, and then the next minute, they're zooming off. The water is generally clear at Montague, and in addition to the seals, there are charismatic gray nurse sharks during the warmer months, but none quite so personable as the seals for which you came. – *Tony Brown*

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**Contact:** Dive Jervis Bay [divejervisbay.com](http://divejervisbay.com)

FROM LEFT: MATT SEGAL; TONY BROWN



GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND, BAHAMAS

## Caribbean Reef Sharks

Powerful and sleek, Caribbean reef sharks are impressive to encounter, but rarely do they stay with you during a dive. While frequently observed in the waters from Florida to Brazil, it's the shark-feeding dive off Grand Bahama Island that offers a distinctive, up-close

interaction. While kneeling in 40 feet of crystal-clear water, a shark feeder approaches with a dozen or more reef sharks in tow. Swimming slow circles in and around the divers, the sharks are fed by hand, one fish at a time, only a few feet away.

If divers are lucky, they'll also witness a shark being put into a state of tonic immobility. It's a peaceful and fascinating (not to mention exhilarating!) experience that will give you a new love of the ocean's top predator. — *Matthew Meier*

Contact: UNEXSO [unexso.com](http://unexso.com)



MATTHEW MEIER; OPPOSITE: ETHAN DANIELS

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SILVER BANK, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

## Humpback Whales

Few of us have ever been in the water with a colossal submarine, but on the off chance you have, then you might have an inkling of what it's like to gaze at 40 feet of marine mammal. There are few destinations where you can experience in-water encounters with humpback whales, but the Dominican Republic's Silver Bank may seasonally aggregate more of these

cetaceans than anywhere else. In association with scientists and operators, the DR has developed an effectively managed program allowing just a few licensed operators to bring snorkelers to view Atlantic humpbacks on their native Caribbean breeding and calving grounds, from late January through early April. Being in the water with one of the world's largest and most mysterious species, intimately observing their behaviors and listening to their eerie songs, can be described only as positively life-altering. — *Ethan Daniels*

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### Humpback Whales

1. Float on the surface, but don't dive down toward the whales. Let them approach you.
2. Stay to one side and toward the head of the mother (if observing a mother-and-calf pair).
3. Stay far away from the powerful tail.
4. Do not chase whales if they swim away. (They're faster than you anyway.)

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Contact: Aggressor Fleet [aggressor.com](http://aggressor.com)