PHOTOGRAPHY BY MACDUFF EVERTON

ISLA HOLBOX, MEXICO

little island

THIS ENTICING ISLE’S STAR ATTRACTION ISN’T ON
From the prow of Aline, a 26-foot skiff, I reckon the dark form in the distance to be the bobbing trunk of a coconut tree, uprooted perhaps by a storm. Then from the silvery horizon, a second trunk appears, and a third.

There’s just one problem with my Big Tree Theory: These tree trunks are swimming, and as the Aline closes the distance, its customary gray-green dorsal fin breaks the placid surface.

"Titanus belize," says the Albrook captain, Ahmed Janmaat, as he cuts the boat's four 80-horsepower Yamaha engines. Another dorsal fin and plaits through the matted water, and then another… in a moment, we are surrounded by whale sharks, at least a half dozen circles within 50 yards.

A 30-foot-long shadow slips like a submarine toward the bow of the Aline and veers to port side in the hot current. A giant deep-sea creature passes us… a whale shark. The long, dark body is a stark contrast to the bright, aquamarine ocean. As it passes us, it opens its mouth and spits out a large mass of jellyfish, which fly through the water like tiny stars. The whale shark seems to be feeding on these tiny organisms, as if it were in a sandstorm.

Though only about 100 miles northwest of Cancun, Isla Holbox (IS-la OHL-oh) is worlds away from the garrison and bustle of the city and the Riviera Maya to the south. Spring-fresh freshwater springs on the nearby mainland make this a 19th-century haven of the infamous pirate Francisco de Mocha — better known as Blackbeard — but it wasn’t until the mid-19th century that the wealthy, 30-mile-long barrier island supported a permanent settlement. These early residents — a mix of Spaniards and Native Americans — lived off the land and sea, developing a unique culture that blended European and indigenous influences.

There is no doubt that the whale sharks are the stars of the show. As the boat continues to move, we see more of these massive creatures, their bodies gliding gracefully through the water. They are so large that they can be seen from miles away. The sight is truly awe-inspiring.

"El gigante," says the woman on the boat, pointing to the massive whale shark in the distance. "The biggest one I’ve ever seen!" She is in awe of the creature, her voice filled with wonder. "It’s so big, I can’t even describe it."

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one seems certain where it breeds or even how long it lives. One of only three filter-feeding shark species, the whale opens and closes its mussel to channel seawater over a series of sieve-like pads that trap plankton and other tiny organisms. This filtration system allows the gigantic fish to inhale up to 9 pounds of plankton an hour as it mows through the dense blooms.

Normally solitary animals, whale sharks come together in periodic aggregations in tropical seas around the world, the largest of which occurs each summer just a few miles from Isla Holbox, at Cabo Catoche, the northernmost point on the Yucatán. Here, the warm, shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico encounter an upwelling of cooler, nutrient-rich water from the depths of the Caribbean, triggering an explosion of plankton. The annual feast attracts whale sharks in mind-boggling numbers, especially during July and August; one recent aerial survey counted some 1,200 of the creatures. Fishermen like Florencio have known for decades about these seasonal gatherings, but the scientific community has taken notice only within the last 10 years. As word spread, adventurous travelers began to make their way to Isla Holbox to experience first-hand the mass feedings of these imperceptible giant sharks.

Even among Mexicans, Isla Holbox remains terra incognita. "In Cancún, really few people know about the island," says 27-year-old Yuliana Luna, a native of Puebla state, near Mexico City, who has worked on Holbox for three years. "It's really new."

There are just a handful of cars and trucks on the island; the taxi rank at the ferry dock is lined instead with carritos, or golf carts, and the "airport" is basically a glorified white-sand landing strip nearly bordered with thousands of sun-bleached conch shells. The village of Holbox is nestled on the island's west end, with a grid of white-sand streets flanked by low houses made of wood and stucco and roofed with thatch, or newer two-story concrete-block buildings decorated with hand-painted murals celebrating local marine life.

"Here, it's very surrealist," observes Sandra Perez, a Cuban-born painter who first set eyes on Holbox a decade ago and promptly purchased an acre and a half of beachfront land where she built a rustic, art-filled boutique hotel called Casa Sandra. "The people are very authentic and simple. It's a fisherman's town, everyone living in hammocks." That accounts for the breezy, informal quality of the half-dozen or so small, owner-operated hotels dotting the beachfront.

On an island of fewer than 2,000 people, nearly everyone is related by blood or marriage. "If we are married and we divorce, in the Carnival they have a song about our divorce," Perez explains while smoking a cigarillo. "That is surreali sm."

When I ask Perez about the island's attractions, she waves off the question.

"The first activity on Holbox is nothing," she says. "Stay quiet and relax."

Indeed, the island has its own beguiling rhythm: a few early-morning hours of activity followed by a leisurely swim in the warm, calm shallows of the broad, bleached-white beach and then a soporific siesta in a shaded lounge chair. The town
The sharks only visit a few months each year, but the town's seductively unassuming character is a constant that can be relished year-round.
BLUE LAGOON
A tour boat heads into Laguna de Yalahau, off Holbox. Opposite, top and bottom: Cuban-born artist Sandra Perez's intimate CasaSandra Hotel.
sized fish with a wide-open plankton hole brushes past. I'm overcome by wonder and relief as I make eye contact (“The krill is over there!” I shout silently), but as I spin like a matador to avoid bumping into this 25-footer, I feel a dull blow against my back. I've just been gently mugged by a second, even larger, whale shark.

The close encounters go on like this for half an hour. When the sharks gradually disperse, I climb back aboard the Aline, and Jimenez cruises a few hundred yards away to another cluster. Then it's back in the water for another round of dominos. The magical meetings don't end until late morning, when the sharks disappear into deeper, cooler water.

As lucrative as these four-hour tours are for boat captains, a few ancient fishermen still cling to the bygone ways. I find one such old salt, 70-year-old Francisco Gasca, known to everyone as Don Paco, down on the beach by the pier, emptying the contents of his battered old panga after another 12-hour day at sea. Don Paco seems ready for anything: a single hand line for fish; a 15-foot bamboo pole to smite octopuses; an air compressor to dive for lobster; an Igloo cooler.

"If I stop fishing, I'll die," says the lifelong pescador, who claims he once caught 21 sharks in a single night. He tells me he prefers the hard work of fishing to guiding tour groups, but admits the influx of visitors has been an economic boon for his hometown — and even for his pockets.

"Because there are tourists," Gasca explains, "I can always sell my catch."

The biggest fish ever landed on Holbox may have been a certain Cuban visitor named Fidel Castro. In 1955, the young firebrand was released from prison by dictator Fulgencio Batista and went into exile in Mexico, where he founded the revolutionary 26th of July Movement and met Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Sometime before November 1956, the pair — along with Fidel's brother, Raúl, and some compadres — arrived by boat to isolated Holbox, which lies only 120 miles across the Yucatán Channel from Cuba.

"I was on the beach, and Fidel came," relates Florencio. "At that time there were no hotels. There were seven guys, and they needed a place to stay."

Florencio had no idea who the strangers were. The quiet men stayed a week at his house and then departed again by boat. In lieu of money, the Cubans left Florencio clothes. They soon returned to Cuba and drove out Batista from power.

Snorkeling with the whale sharks and listening to fishermen’s tales may be Holbox’s chief diversions, but it’s also possible to fly-fish for tarpon on the flats of Yahalau Lagoon and to spot several hundred bird species, especially in the mangrove...
For now, local women will continue to scour the beach for shells to string into necklaces to sell to visitors, lovers will canoodle in the sun-splashed shallows, and Don Paco will land his daily catch.

islets. Holbox lies within a huge protected Yucatán reserve called Yum Balam, which encompasses 162,000 acres and is home to a variety of endangered species, including jaguar and puma and the West Indian manatee.

From the lagoon-side port, a panga carries me five miles east, while ospreys knife across the brilliant sky. At tiny Isla Pajaros, a rickety tinker toy observation tower built of zapatito wood offers a birds-eye view of hundreds of roosting frigate birds, as well as brown pelicans, cormorants, great egrets and white ibises. In the winter, migrating white pelicans also congregate here, and just to the west of the lagoon, the Río Lagartos Wildlife Refuge supports the largest population of nesting pink flamingoes in the Americas.

Holbox is an island that seems to be on permanent siesta. In the afternoons, fishermen sway from hammocks in the shade of thatch-roofed palapas, and I recall Sandra Perez's wise words: Stay quiet and relax. After all, the sharks only visit a few months each year, but the town's seductively unassuming character is a constant that can be relished year-round. As one day melts into the next, I loaf in a beachfront lounge chair, wander the sandy streets and just soak up the bucolic vibe. I begin to recognize local dogs who greet me with wagging tails or half-hearted growls. I develop a taste for ceviche: raw octopus or fish marinated in coconut water and lime juice — briny, tart, and fresh-from-the-sea sweet. And the cheladas — cold beers served with ice and lime in salt-rimmed mugs — slide down almost too easily.

Sensing they stand on the cusp of major tourism-related changes, Holbox islanders last year voted in a new mayor, Javier "Koki" Martinez, a schoolteacher who campaigned on a "Green Plan." After a brief delay — "The Mayor will be back immediately, in one hour," a security guard informs me — Martinez greets me inside his small, second-story office at the crazily painted alcaldía.

A youthful 30, this son of a Holbox fisherman was out late the previous night looking to reprimand a local teenager for blasting reggaeton from his carrera after hours. That's the type of misdemeanor that hits the island's police blotter. And Koki intends to keep it at this harmless level. Alfredo Jimenez believes the tourism-driven improvements have benefited his still-humble island: "We have clean water, ice and electricity. Most people still don't lock their doors."

And nobody wants to lose that small-town innocence. "It won't develop because we don't have a reef," says Ornella Seroni, who owns another of Holbox's boutique hotels, the 11-room Mawimbi. "The natural quality is the only thing we have. If it develops a lot, it's better to stay in Cancún or go up to Isla Mujeres."

For now, local women will continue to scour the beach for shells to string into necklaces to sell to visitors, lovers will canoodle in the sun-splashed shallows, and Don Paco will land his daily catch. Merchants and food hawkers will set up their stalls around the gozalo to sell pottery and fried dough, a church youth group will sing hymns beside the plaza, hipsters will strum acoustic guitars inside the hand shell and the townsfolk will take their evening stroll on the car-free streets.

"The whole town realizes this is a gift," says Jimenez, my whale guide. "We don't want to mess it up."

For THE ESSENTIALS on Holbox, turn to page 86.