

SENSORY OVERLOAD



BRANDI MUELLER returns to Galapagos 15 years after her first visit. Would it be as good as it was then? Take a wild guess!

WE HAVE BEEN UNDER WATER for almost an hour. Our dive-guide Walter is summoning us away from the reef and into the blue for our safety-stop. I'm not ready yet, though my computer, air gauge and our dive time-limit suggests otherwise.

But another three hammerheads swim past and the hogfish that has become my sidekick for the dive is still swimming nose-to-nose with me and my mask.

I follow to 3m as requested, mentally whispering thank-you to the ocean for another amazing dive in Galapagos.

Then I'm suddenly surrounded by pink – a school of Pacific creole wrasse has engulfed our group.

I spin in a circle and they're on all sides, above and below. Through the pink curtain of zigzagging fish comes a shadow from below – a turtle slowly swimming towards us.

Aiming my camera in its direction, I notice another shadow to my other side.

A hammerhead – at 3m! The lighting is perfect, the shallow water clear and I can't decide which direction to shoot first.

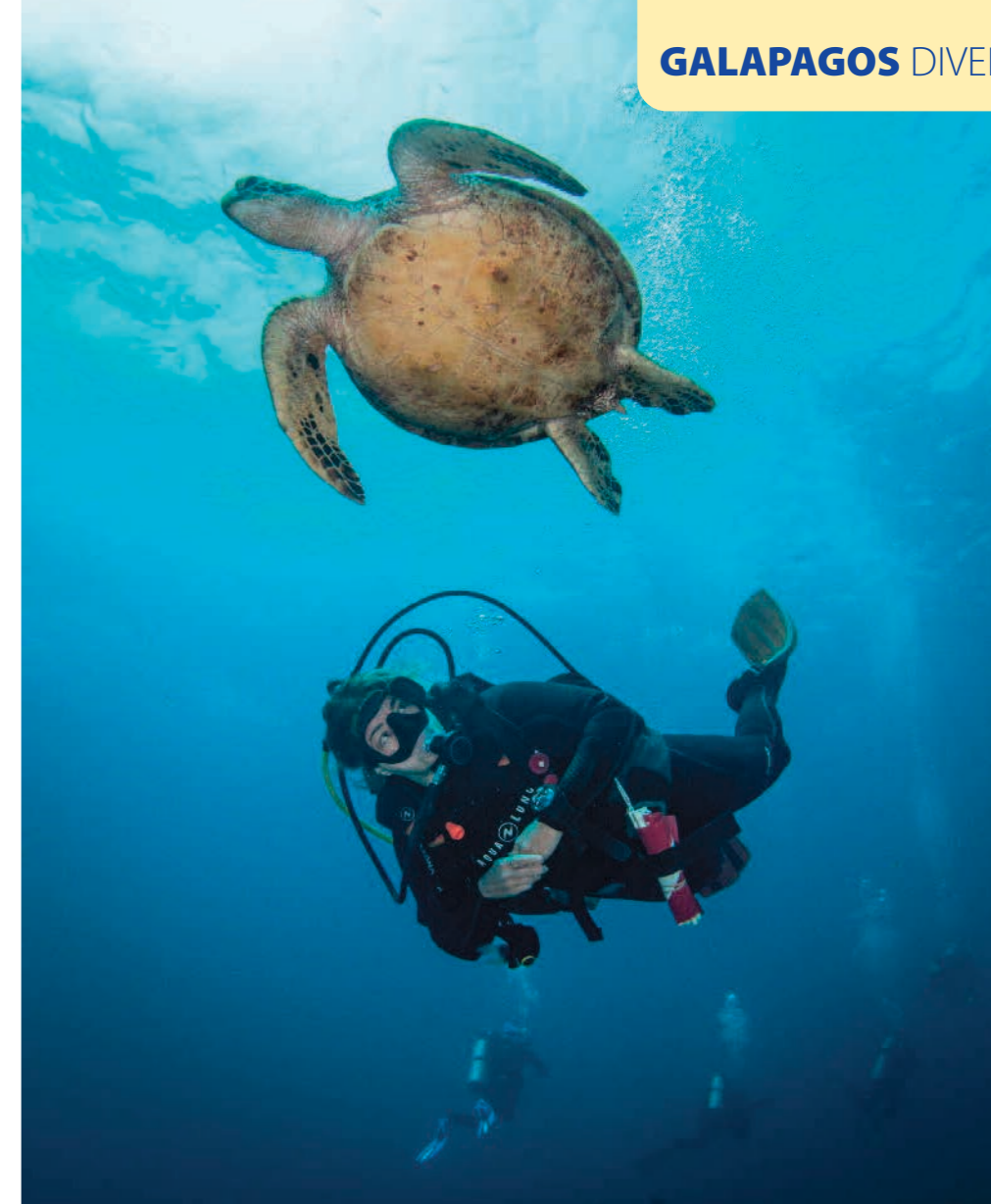
The hammerhead wins.

Suddenly all the fish turn and disappear. We're alone in the blue again, until I see what has made them depart.

A yellowfin tuna longer than me (and quite a bit pudgier) cruises past me. Once it's out of sight, we're surrounded by pink again.

I see the other divers surfacing and can hear the dinghy moving closer, but I still hold back. Already having made a habit of being the last one aboard (yeah, I'm that girl) I turn and there is another turtle, surrounded by silver pompano fish.

This is super-interesting behaviour, where it looks as if the fish are cleaning



Above: Turtle going up for a breather.

Opposite, clockwise from top: massed barracuda; diving penguin; Pacific creole wrasse; passing hammerhead.

Below: This sea-lion started behaving like a dolphin when the pod came past.

the turtle but are in reality using its rough shell to clean themselves. They dart down onto the shell and twist sideways in a bid to remove parasites and dead skin.

I look up and the first diver is still passing up his gear, with several others still at 3m.

I have time to take a few photos. Did I mention that I'm being "that diver" yet? I really want a shot of this behaviour. Generally I know better than to chase

anything, but time is running out and I don't think anyone else has seen the turtle or will be mad if I scare it away.

I snap a few shots, but not quite close enough, before it moves away.

Then I see a hammerhead less than a metre from me. All this is happening within the haze of pink wrasse, which go on moving up and down, eating plankton and obscuring my vision beyond them.

Looking to see if any divers remain under water, I see our dive-guide filming in the distance. I swim towards him – if I'm with *him*, no one can get mad at me.

We slowly surface but keep dipping our heads to watch more hammerheads, turtles and pink fish.

I don't want to get out – and that's only the safety-stop of one dive in Galapagos.

As the dinghy takes us back to the *Galapagos Aggressor III*, dolphins jump all around us. I hope the surface interval passes quickly.

IT HAD BEEN 15 YEARS since I was last in Galapagos. That first trip had been transformative; my first dives with big animals, current and cold water. I was in my early 20s and from that point on if anyone asked about my favourite diving



destination, Galapagos was the answer.

Recently, with many more dives and locations in my dive-log, I had started to wonder if it was really as good as I remembered.

That trip had also been with Aggressor, and there was no other way I could imagine going back. I had been on *Galapagos Aggressor I* then, now I was on *III*, but I knew the service and standards would be the same as I had come to expect over the years. They proved this to be true before I even boarded the boat.

Because of some Covid technical difficulties (see *Deep Breath* in this issue) I got stuck in Guayaquil in Ecuador overnight and missed the day when we were meant to board the boat, and feared that I'd missed the trip entirely.

But because the first day was spent diving in the same area as the airport, I

was able to fly in first thing next morning.

A lovely crew-member met me at the airport and we were picked up by the dinghy. And what started out chaotically now turned into smooth sailing.

The others were diving, and after a boat tour and safety briefing I was shown my cabin, unpacked and set up my gear.

I met my shipmates over an excellent three-course lunch with soup, mains and dessert. I knew immediately that I'd need to start turning down dessert if it was served twice a day.

That afternoon we took a land tour,

so it was back to the boat to change and back to the island for a snorkel.

Several adorable penguins were standing on a rock and I managed to get close, but they weren't getting into the water. Giving up, I swam around seeing lots of fish and then decided to rejoin the penguins.

Mid-swim, somebody yelled: "They're in the water!" and I swam quicker.

For the next 30 minutes we watched four penguins hunting, ganging up on tiny fish and shooting like underwater missiles to catch them. They're so fast!

One second they were there, then they'd be gone, and then they'd be back, catching fish with speed and agility.

I realised how lucky and happy I was that I hadn't missed the boat.

Below: Hogfish being cleaned by a barberfish.

Below left: Playful sea-lion.



hiking to the top of Cerro Bartolome to be greeted by a sea-lion mum and pup at the docking area.

After much *ooohing* and *ahhhing* over them Walter, who had also been a guide on my first visit, motioned us up the trail.

The views of this Martian volcanic landscape were excellent, and we saw lizards and cacti along the way.

Later the dinghy took us around the island to look for penguins.

Walter asked if anyone wanted to try to snorkel with them and I raised my hand,

ON MY FIRST DAY of diving it seemed to me that I had arrived just in time for the really good stuff. My first dive had hammerheads, turtles and even a manta at Cabo Marshall, then we were off across the Equator to the small, uninhabited islands of Wolf and Darwin.

The truly enchanted Galapagos islands feature active volcanoes, moving tectonic plates and the meeting of three currents.

The warm Panama current comes from the north-east, the cold Peru Oceanic current (Humboldt) from the south-east and the Cromwell current, a cold undercurrent from the central Pacific, creates upwellings on the west side of Isabela Island. These conditions bring together nutrients and marine life in a unique and healthy ecosystem.

At Wolf Island we were instructed to descend to around 20m, find a clear spot on the rocks to hold onto if there was a current, and watch the show.

And show it was. As in documentaries,

the schools of hammerheads passing before us darkened the blue water with their unique shapes. Some came close, as did Galapagos sharks and so many turtles.

The hammerheads come to the area to be cleaned by king angelfish and barberfish. It's incredible to see these big, mean-looking sharks allow the pretty purple angelfish to pick at their faces and backs to remove parasites – but they don't eat their cleaners.

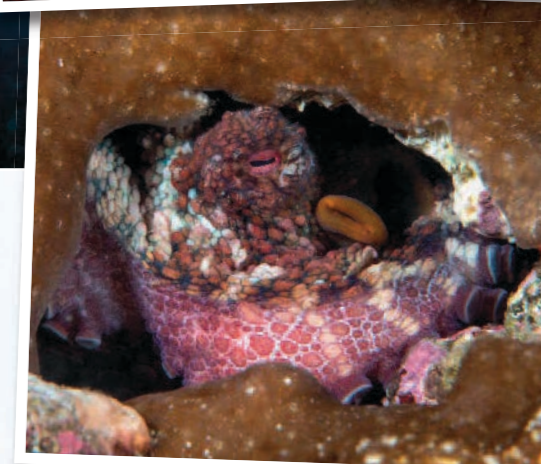
ONE DIVE AT WOLF was undertaken in hopes of seeing sea-lions. There

were a few, but it was the end of the day in low light and a swell was pushing us back and forth in the shallows where the sea-lions were.

At the end of the dive everyone was back on the boat and I handed my camera up to the driver. The people on the boat gasped and pointed behind me. An adult sea-lion had surfaced not 2m behind me.

I politely asked for my camera back. (I can't help it! It's the Galapagos – if there's a place to be "that diver", it's here!)

This amazing sea-lion proceeded to flirt with my camera for several minutes. 🐾



Clockwise from above: Hammerhead sharks at Wolf; seahorse; octopus.





It would spin and blow bubbles right at it, then twist and turn away for a second before coming right back to my dome-
port.

It might have been seducing its own reflection. I didn't care, it was amazing.

After getting a few shots I could be happy with, I switched to video intending to film just for a few seconds.

I was feeling guilty that the others were all waiting for me. But this sea-lion!

After perhaps 30 seconds it seemed to be leaving. I kept shooting, hoping to get that classic end shot of the animal swimming away, when I saw a shadow behind it. Straining to see what it was, there was another – and another.

The sea-lion looked back at me, as if checking that I was seeing this, as a massive pod of bottlenose dolphins swam by. The sea-lion continued to dance and spin, acting as if it was a dolphin.

Once the school disappeared into the blue (I was beside myself with emotion by



Clockwise from top: The eagle rays had been elusive but turned up eventually; Galapagos must-see – giant tortoise; the extraordinary red-lipped batfish; blenny.

now) the sea-lion came back up and stuck its face right into my camera before blowing bubbles and swimming off.

Luckily the other divers had jumped in when they saw the dolphins, so they could also enjoy this magical moment.

TOWARDS THE END of the trip we dived around the west side of Isabela Island, where colder water supports a marine ecosystem quite unlike that we had seen at the beginning of the trip.

The temperature dipped to 15°C and the underwater landscape was far more temperate, with algae-covered rocks and colder-water marine life.

I remembered this dive from my previous trip, being blown away that not only did the Galapagos have big animals but this site had seahorses and frogfish too. Thanks to Walter's excellent spotting techniques, I saw these again, as well as nudibranchs and a lot of



colourful blennies.

Another dive in the same area at Cabo Douglas around Fernandina Island felt like freezing-cold muck-diving, searching for the infamous red-lipped batfish, a strange creature with bright ruby lipstick.

Later in the dive I saw something fly past me. It was a cormorant!

There is something so strange but amazing about seeing birds under water.

Continuing with strange things, we finished the dive in the shallows, where Godzilla's spawn were hanging out.

Marine iguanas, looking like small dinosaurs, were munching algae off rocks.

Clockwise from above: Godzilla's spawn – a marine iguana; nudibranch; surprise – a cormorant hunting under water; blue-footed booby with its egg; a dolphin performing off the bow.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Aggressor departs from Baltra Island (GPS) in Galapagos. Flights are from Quito (UIO) or Guayaquil (GYE) in Ecuador. Most routes from the UK transit through the USA in Miami or Houston before continuing to Quito. Aggressor staff meet passengers at the airport.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ *Galapagos Aggressor III*, aggressor.com

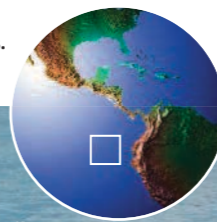
WHEN TO GO ▶ Diving is year round but animal sightings are seasonal, so plan accordingly. December to May is rainy season with warmer water of 21-30°C and sightings include hammerheads, mantas and eagle rays. June-November is dry season (16-24°C) and this is the time to see whale sharks.

HEALTH ▶ Recompression chambers in Puerto Ayora, Galapagos and in Guayaquil. Current Covid requirements for Ecuador include a negative RT-PCR test within 10 days of arrival. Galapagos also requires a negative RT-PCR test within 96 hours of arrival. Aggressor recommends planning a night in Guayaquil where a Covid test can be arranged in your hotel room and the results are delivered by email within 24 hours.

MONEY ▶ US dollar. Credit cards accepted on the boat and some tourist establishments (sometimes with fees). Cash is needed for transport and smaller restaurants and shops. ATMs on Santa Cruz.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from £900. Seven-day charters from US \$6595 (two sharing). \$100 park fee and \$20 Galapagos visitor visa.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ galapagosislands.com



Returning to the island of Santa Cruz, on a final dive at Cousin's Rock we saw a school of eagle rays we'd been searching for all week. We spent the afternoon on a land tour, because no trip to Galapagos is final without seeing the giant tortoise.

I also spent an extra day bird-watching at Seymour Island, where the frigate birds were mating and the males were showing off their big red pouches to the females.

We spotted a few blue-footed booby birds – one even had an egg!

This is one of the best diving locations on Earth, and experiencing it with Aggressor Fleet is the way to do it.

Even in these Covid-difficult times the crew was fantastic, the service impeccable, and I left needing to go on a diet after eating so much wonderful food.

I hope it doesn't take 15 years to get back to Galapagos again. 