



# SWIMMING WITH Giants

A traveler ventures to the warm waters of southeastern Mexico to fulfill a bucket-list trip.

BY DEBBRA DUNNING BROUILLETTE

**W**hite spots on a dark gray background were all I could see on my first jump from the boat into the water. Fins and foam and flailing arms obscured my view of the fish I'd come a long way to see—and then it was gone.

Our group of seven explorers had boarded a chartered speedboat at Puerto Juarez dock in Cancun and headed out to sea in search of migrating whale sharks, the largest living fish on the planet.

A few of my friends couldn't fathom why swimming with a creature the size of a school bus would be on my bucket list, but I was thrilled to be here—an hour-and-a-half away from the nearest shore in a line of boats filled with passengers outfitted with masks, snorkels and fins, waiting their turn to swim with these gentle giants.

## Amazing Animals

Even though whale sharks can reach lengths of 40 feet or more and weigh a whopping 20,000-plus pounds, they do not pose a significant threat to humans. Known as filter feeders, the sharks have gigantic 5-foot-wide mouths and can devour large amounts of tiny plankton as they swim close to the surface.

On my second entry into the water, I looked down to see the full outline of a whale shark right below me. But by the time I took a quick shot with my underwater camera, it had passed me—and I couldn't swim fast enough to catch up.

Third time's the charm, I thought, as I sat on the boat's edge waiting for another chance to have a meaningful experience with a creature I'd waited



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years to see. This time, one of the crew members who assisted us in the water took my hand and helped me keep up, ensuring I had a couple of exhilarating minutes with the whale shark right beside me.

Although the annual migration of hundreds of these docile fish occurs between May and September, July and August are the prime months to swim with whale sharks off the coast of Cancun and throughout the Yucatan Peninsula.

### More Underwater Thrills

By late afternoon, we returned to our luxury suites at the Grand Residences Riviera Cancun tired but exhilarated by our shared experience.



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**Mariachi singers add festivity to evening meals at El Faro Grill.**

After a rejuvenating soak in a Jacuzzi tub on my terrace overlooking the sea, I was ready to meet up with my friends for a “toes-in-the-sand” tequila tasting at the resort’s aptly named Heaven Beach Bar. A celebratory dinner of Mexican specialties with a gourmet flair followed at El Faro Grill. Mariachi singers moved among the tables as we dined on delectable dishes such as seared tuna tostados and fresh, succulent octopus with almond sauce.

The next morning, while the rest of our travel companions relaxed at the resort, a friend and I were transported to Scuba Cancun’s marina, where we joined other scuba divers and snorkelers for an excursion to Cancun Underwater Museum of Art.

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**Grand Residences Riviera Cancun (above)** offers luxury amenities, including adult and family pools. Hundreds of life-size sculptures, submerged in 10 to 28 feet of water, comprise Cancun's Underwater Museum of Art (right).



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Founded in 2009, the site, which is among Mexico's most-visited attractions, features a display of 500 life-size sculptures submerged in the bay between Cancun and Isla Mujeres. Covered with sponges and coral, the area has become an unusual artificial reef visited by thousands of divers, snorkelers and glass-bottom-boat passengers each year.

## In the Lap of Luxury

After two days of exhilarating adventure, I found the resort hard to leave. Set on a glorious stretch of sugar-soft sand fronting the Caribbean Sea, it features numerous ocean-view and beachfront suites of varying sizes and several swimming pools, including an adults-only infinity pool with a swim-up bar.

The resort is located near Cancun International Airport and just two miles from Puerto Morales, a small, laid back fishing village said to have inspired Jimmy Buffett's hit song *Margaritaville*. On-site activities in-

clude tennis, a 24-hour fitness center, dance and yoga classes, snorkeling, adult-supervised kids' activities and more.

Whale-shark excursions can be booked through the Grand Residences concierge, which can arrange a multitude of off-resort activities such as visits to Mayan ruins or a round of golf at one of several championship courses.

## Planning Your Trip

To learn more, call (855) 381-4340 or log on to [grandresidencesrivieracancun.com](http://grandresidencesrivieracancun.com). For trip-planning assistance, contact your local AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel). **H&A**

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