

## TRAVEL

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# Aw, sharks

A dip with deep-sea monsters sets **Rachael Oakes-Ash** all a tremble

I forget I'm not a Catholic and cross myself before stepping into the water in the path of the world's largest shark. Fins are flying, arms flailing and the boat from which we've jumped is leaving us behind in open water too deep to be able to see anything that resembles the bottom.

"Look down, look down!" shouts our guide, a human version of Flipper the dolphin, but with blonde locks and a killer body.

For a moment I worry that the bacon and cream oysters I ate last night might have made me tastier for monsters lurking in the deep.

One look through my goggles and it's clear that the monster isn't lurking: it's just a metre below the surface and heading straight for me. Its mouth is wide and gaping, and I fear I'll slip between its rows of minute teeth, never to be seen again.

Whale sharks are the world's largest fish and, according to marine biologist Brad Norman of conservation group Ecocean, one of the most endangered of all shark species. I try to convey my empathy for the whale sharks' dwindling population using sign language, hoping the massive creature will pass me by.

Thankfully, I'm much too large to be on its menu. Whale sharks may grow to 18 metres and weigh more than 20 tonnes, but they do it all on a diet of krill, tiny crustaceans that form a mammoth shrimp cocktail worthy of a whale shark's metre-wide mouth.

Ningaloo Reef, which follows the empty Western Australian coastline north of Perth for about 260km, teems with more than 500 species of fish and 200 types of coral. Marine biologists are able to track the return of whale sharks to Ningaloo waters every year because each shark has a unique pattern of circles and lines on its skin.



Kite-surfing at Ningaloo, where whale sharks head in the southern winters

An abundance of krill around Ningaloo attracts the sharks during the Australian winter, and it's one of the few places in the world where you can swim with them.

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Norman founded Ecocean to educate people about whale sharks in the hope of reducing the number of cullings worldwide. His campaign appears to be having some impact, with Taiwan recently announcing a steep reduction in its annual quota.

Exmouth, about 1,200km north of Perth, is the main jumping-off point for a swim with Ningaloo's whale sharks. There isn't much there apart from an old US naval base, a pub, a caravan park and a petrol station, but property developers have started to make their mark, with the Novotel Ningaloo Resort on the beachfront and a new marina.

Only seven operators in Exmouth are licensed whale shark-spotters and each morning their boats, with 20 people onboard, head out past the reef break while a plane flies ahead. When a shark is spotted, the pilot radios the boats. The first to reach the shark has first pop at swimming with the beast. No more than 10 snorkellers are allowed to swim with the sharks at any time.

When I see my first whale shark underwater, time seems to slow down. It's as though I'm suspended. A quiet descends, my fearful thoughts disappear and a sense of peace comes over me.

When I finally lift my head above the surface, there's a cacophony of whooping and cheering. The shark has dived too deep to follow, so we're hauled back onboard and the search begins anew.

We eventually notch up five more encounters and the only thing stopping us from a sixth is the time: the sun is about to set.

On the journey back a pod of dolphins cavorts around the boat, sea turtles check us out and a hammerhead shark gives us a cautious once over.

We're waterlogged, on a high and - best of all - our limbs are all still connected to our torsos. That's a result in my book.

**Getting there**  
Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) flies from Hong Kong to Perth.  
Sky West (skywest.com.au) operates connecting flights to Exmouth. Adopt a whale shark and help save a dwindling population at whaleshark.org



The harmless whale shark (top and above) is the biggest fish in the world

## Detours: Tequila trail



PHOTO: AFP

for those who can't wait - tequila. In Amatitan we're loaded onto buses for a short drive to Hacienda San José del Refugio, a sprawling Spanish-style farm that dates from 1820 and includes agave fields, a distillery, a large family home and living quarters for many of the workers.

The walking tour begins with a demonstration in which a *jimador* (field worker) slices away the long leaves from the agave, leaving only the heart, or *piña*. These are cut in half to reduce their weight, then piled in large mounds before being cooked in ovens. The sweet juice is used to make tequila, which is transformed into a fiery drink once it has been fermented.

After the tour, guests are led to a large covered patio for a buffet that includes chile verde, enchiladas, taquitos, salad, rice and beans. Costumed performers from different regions of Mexico sing and dance. By the end of the day many in our group are joining in.

"It's an interesting tour," says Emma Marvin, who is taking a sabbatical from her job in London to teach English in Guadalajara. "I realise that tequila is taken seriously here and I was quite surprised how differently people see it. It's a refined drink."

Tequila Express tours operate on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year. Most sell out in advance, but last-minute seats are usually available for Sunday trips.

At 770 pesos (HK\$560) it isn't cheap, but it's definitely worthwhile. Tickets are available from [www.ticketmaster.com.mx](http://www.ticketmaster.com.mx).

Michael Martínez (MCT)

The fun begins as soon as the train pulls out of the station. A mariachi band strikes up, drink orders are taken and the host elicits a few cheers and laughs from the guests in his car. We're heading towards a traditional Mexican fiesta, with music, dancing, food and good times - and a tequila factory tour.

It's the tour that draws most visitors to the Tequila Express, an all-day excursion that departs from the city of Guadalajara in the morning and returns that evening.

Visitors take a look at the Herradura tequila operation in Amatitan, a small, dusty town about 32km east of Tequila.

"This is a tour for having fun and learning Mexican traditions," says Paco Aguilera, one of the guides. "We let people have as much fun as they want and drink as much as they want, but we want them to know it's a family environment."

That doesn't mean you can't party. Mariachis stroll through each car during the 90-minute journey, there's plenty of chips and salsa, as well as soft drinks, beer and -

## Big deal Peter Walbrook

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Aero International is selling a two-night package to Chengdu starting at HK\$2,650 per person, twin-share, including round trip, economy class flights with Dragonair and accommodation at the Tianfu Sunshine Hotel ([chengdutravel.com/en/hotels](http://chengdutravel.com/en/hotels)). International hotels on offer include the Sofitel Wanda

Chengdu (sofitel.com) for HK\$3,250 and the Shangri-La for HK\$3,650 (add HK\$100 to upgrade to a Deluxe Riverview room). Prices include daily breakfast and will be available until the end of next month. For details and reservations, call Aero International (tel: 2545 6669) or go to [aerohkg.com](http://aerohkg.com).

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