



Photos: Mark Santa Maria, Galapagos Islands, August 2011

Meeting Report

Thursday, 20 October 2011

Galapagos Adventure

by Lloyd Borrett, VSAG

Unfortunately, our scheduled guest speaker for the October VSAG Monthly Meeting cancelled. So yours truly, ably assisted by new VSAG member Stephen McMaster, stepped forward.

The presentation was a hastily prepared dive report on a 7-day liveaboard trip we did back in August 2011 to dive the Darwin and Wolf Islands in the far north of the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.

The pictures used in the presentation were a combination of some gathered from the web, some from the live aboard company, some from dive video professional Mark Santa Maria who there shooting footage for a new promotional video (<http://liquidassets.tv/>), plus photos from the cameras of Stephen McMaster, Jonathan Aiken, your truly and others on the dive trip.

Getting there

Getting to the Galapagos Island consisted of the following flights: Melbourne to Sydney (Qantas, 1.2 hrs), Sydney to Buenos Aires (Qantas, 15 hrs), Buenos Aires to Guayaquil (LAN, 6 hrs) and Guayaquil

to San Cristobal (2 hrs). We then made the Humboldt Explorer liveaboard our home for the next 8 days and 7 nights.

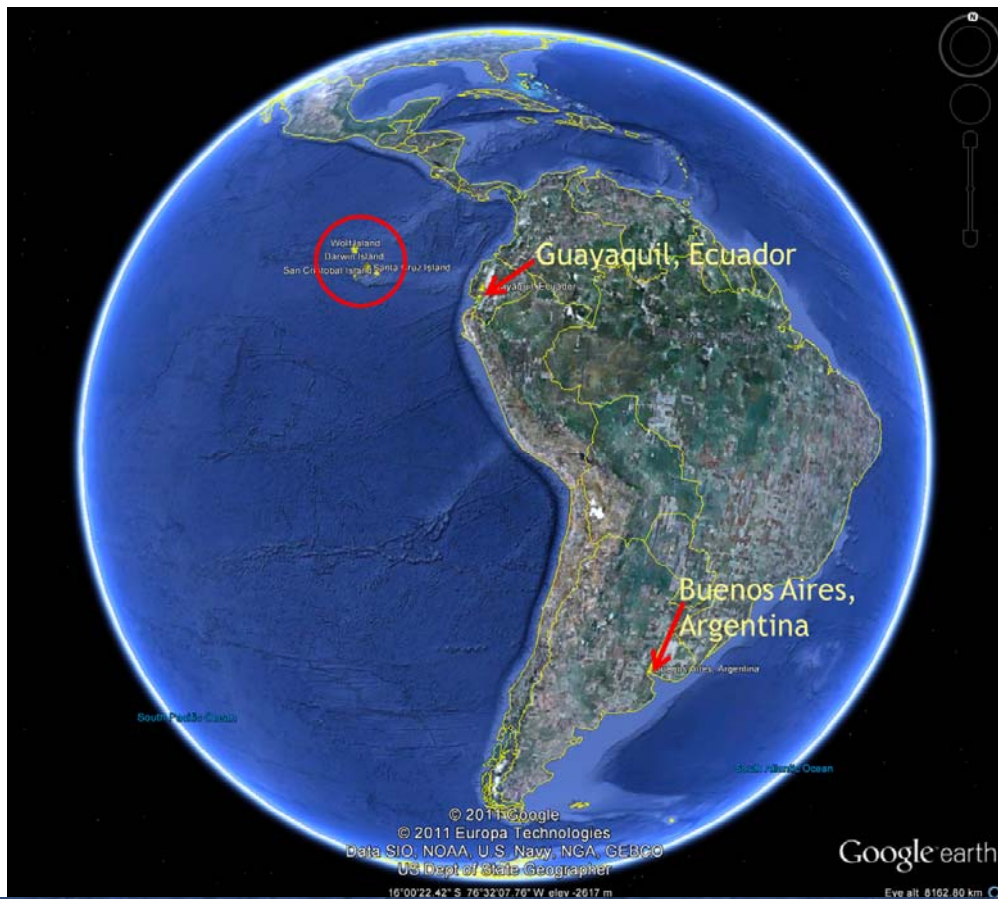


Diving Galapagos

Most people who visit the Galapagos Islands only see the various southern islands. The seriously spectacular diving is to be had at Darwin And Wolf Islands, in the far north of the Galapagos archipelago. That's where we were headed.

It takes two days for the live aboard to steam to these far north islands. Brief stops were made at three dive sites.





These were really checkout dives for the dive crew to gauge if people were going to be able to handle the dive conditions at the remote islands. You don't want anything to go pear-shaped when you're so far from any assistance.

These southern dives were okay, but absolutely nothing compared to what was to come.

Wolf Island

On first seeing Wolf Island I thought we might be back at Wilsons Promontory in Victoria. The terrain was similar to the offshore islands at The Prom. The weather conditions were similar. But underwater was a whole different story.

We did the regular dives where you hang on and look out into the blue. On the very first dive at Shark Alley we spent 20 minutes with a huge eagle ray just a few metres away hovering in the current. When we let go, we were flying fast in the current to the next hang-on spot.

Later we dived at El Derrumbe (The Landslide) where I was mugged by a



huge turtle. It came from behind, used my head to scratch its belly on, and then tried to dislodge my mask with a fin!

We did some dives moving along a wall of the island and up into some sea caves. Plenty of small lobsters, plus turtles and sharks, populated the caves.

Darwin's Arch, Darwin Island

Darwin Island is tiny and very, very remote. They first put someone onto the island by helicopter in the 1960s! But all of the dives are actually at Darwin's Arch, in an area about 200 metres long.

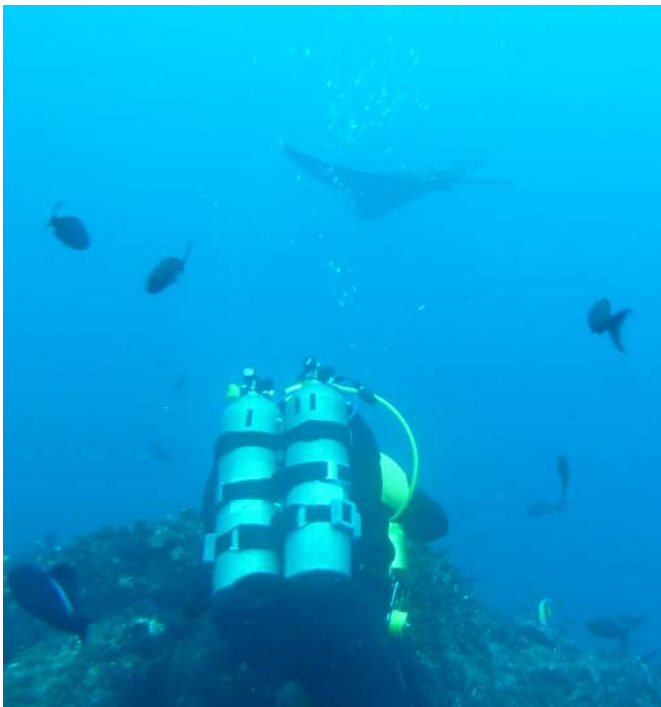
Darwin's Arch is a natural rock arch located less than a kilometre from the southeast corner of Darwin Island, Galapagos, Ecuador. The arch sits atop a wide, flat rock platform.

This is the only site we dived at Darwin Island and it's rated as the best dive site in the Galapagos and by many as one of the best dive sites in the world.

Strong currents from the south split as they hit the plateau and wrap around the dive site. Minor variations in the direc-



Darwin's Arch, Darwin Island,
Galapagos Islands, Ecuador



Stephen McMaster at Darwin Island, Galapagos.



Top: Lloyd Borrett with eagle ray at Wolf Island.
Above: Lloyd Borrett at Darwin's Arch.



tion of the currents cause a big difference in where they split and thus where the dive guides will start the dives.

Backscatter

At Darwin's Arch you roll back from the RIB and quickly descend to grab onto the rocks at about 15 metres. Then everyone gathers together and makes their way down to about 20 to 25 metres at the edge of a wall. You cling onto the rocks, being careful not to grab a large fine-spotted moray eel resident in the cracks between the rocks. Then you look out into the blue.

Typically there will be thousands of fish of all shapes and sizes everywhere, totally filling the water column. A parrot fish might be pecking away at some coral just



a few feet from you. Other fish swim between your arms. Anywhere else in the world you'd be totally amazed and blown away by this. At Darwin's Arch, all of these thousands of fish just become nothing but backscatter.

Your attention is totally consumed by the passing parade of large schools of hammerhead sharks, Galapagos sharks, silky





sharks, plus eagle rays, dolphins, green turtles, yellowfin tuna and other pelagics.

Hundreds of these large critters pass you by in the current and you are totally mesmerised by them all.

Sometimes a hammerhead shark will suddenly appear before you, then with a quick flick of its tail, vanish out into the blue. It is quite simply awesome.

Whale sharks are supposed to be around in the summer months, from early July through November, but we didn't see any. Of course, they were there the week before! We were told that during the 'whale shark season' you can see five or so on a single dive.

When we headed out into the blue at the



end of the dive it was common to have hammerhead sharks on the sands below, pods of dolphins moving through above us and the silky sharks moving in close and circling around us.

Earlier visits to Galapagos

VSAGer Michael Kakafikas worked as a dive guide and instructor for six months in the Galapagos Islands some years back. It was his first gig after qualifying as a dive instructor. Michael didn't make it out to the remote Wolf and Darwin islands, but he spoke briefly about some of his experiences diving the southern Galapagos Islands. ❖



So are you ready to go?