

Diving with the Yemaya II in Columbia's

Malpelo Island

Text and photos by
Wolfgang Pölzer





Good size scorpionfish hiding from the strong current. PREVIOUS PAGE: You can even find some spots with colorful coral life on Malpelo

Three of world's best shark spots are located far off the coast of Central and South American, in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The least known of them, the tiny Colombian island of Malpelo, together with Galapagos and Cocos, create a "golden triangle" for big fish fans.

The current tugged at our fins. Severe threshold enables us to the rhythm of the long-drawn swell incessantly a few meters to the front and back. We had long since become accustomed to the incessant beeping of the dive computer display, which did not recognize the rapid changes in pressure. Even here,

a good 20 meters down, the forces of nature had no doubt who was the strongest.

Swarms of doctor-, handle- and butterflyfish could be on anything of it and seemed to dance around us effortlessly. Moray eels, with bodies as thick as a person's arms, were not peering out of their residential holes with only their heads as one usually finds them, but meandered out in the open virtually defenseless between the sparsely colonized rocks. Mostly flat, sharp barnacles were growing on the outcroppings; beautiful pink-colored coralline algae covered the jagged volcanic rock.

A dark gap yawned before us. Not quite three meters wide, but certainly more than ten feet tall, we were lured into the pitch black rock. Startled by

our headlights, a handsome whitetip reef shark peered at us in the distance. Shortly after, we were blocked by a wall of Blaustreifenschnappern in the way. They seemed reluctant to give us room to pass.

Behind the school of fish, a deep blue shadow loomed. The slot-shaped cavity turned out to be about a 20-meter-long tunnel. Shortly before starting their impressive romp, Dickkopf mackerel made their sickle-shaped fins; they were incredibly quick and agile. During the slow ascent to the surface, we were honored by a squad of eagle rays. The graceful animals soared in formation far below us on the barren rocky reef.

After leaving the reef behind, it seemed a long time after we shot our surface marker buoy to notify the dive boat to come to us that they finally



School of snappers at the dive site Cathedral



noticed us. There was extremely great danger in being abandoned, unnoticed out here. Being a good 500 kilometers from the Colombian coast and far away from any shipping routes was really uncomfortable. After a few minutes, neither substrate nor reef could be seen.

An invisible current came at us through the eastern Pacific. At a depth of around five meters, the sea suddenly turned dark ahead of us. Had the current taken us back to the rocks? No, it was a gigantic wall of jacks coming towards us -- the biggest school I have ever seen. Thousands of silvery fish bodies orbited around us, enveloped us, obstructing the view between buddies. We enjoyed the feeling of being part of the swarm for a few minutes. But just as suddenly as it started, the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jackfish and grouper hunting in front of a cave; The few corals are either hard and tiny or soft and very flexible to endure the strong currents; Resting grouper; Moray eels are very common at Malpelo and almost always out in the open and swimming freely



Silky shark
(left)
Wrasse
(below)

Malpelo

MV YEMAYA II

YEAR: 1965. Originally built as a supply ship for oil platforms, then a private yacht, floating casino and escort vessel for deep sea fishing. Finally, in 2008 completely renovated and converted into a dive boat.

CREW: Seven-man crew plus two dive guides

LENGTH: 35 feet

SHIP TYPE: Steel ship motor yacht.

ENGINE: 1,300 hp diesel

CABINS: Two double cabins including bath / WC, four double cabins with private sink but shared shower / toilet for two adjoining rooms, as well as two large master cabins. Maximum occupancy is 16 guests. All cabins with individually controlled air-conditioning is not.

FACILITIES: Ample space, upper deck with covered dining tables, lounge and sun deck. Spacious dive deck with lights and camera charger (110V), air shower, two sinks and two showers. Air-conditioned lounge with flat screen TV and DVD player in the lower deck.

Two sturdy eight-meter fiberglass dinghy with 2x2 110 or 140 hp for 12 divers.

Two Air and Nitrox membrane compressor 1, 2 and 3 Water power generators.

ELECTRICITY: 24 hours 110 V, American flat plug (adapter needed) in each cabin, 220 V only in the engine room.



Giant school of jackfish (above); Tiny little corals blooming in the current (right)

swarm was gone. Visibility cleared as the mackerel left us to move with the current.

The otherwise empty desert-like blue sea, however, had another surprise in store for us. About two dozen tuna plowed past us. Their interest in us seemed extremely low. After a few seconds, we had the open ocean back to ourselves. But not for long.

First, only a shadow could be seen on the edge of our vision. I had a little more than a hunch, a hope. Yes, it was a shark. One, no two, no, a whole group! And then the numbers increased very quickly. Out of nowhere, the sharks suddenly appeared everywhere.

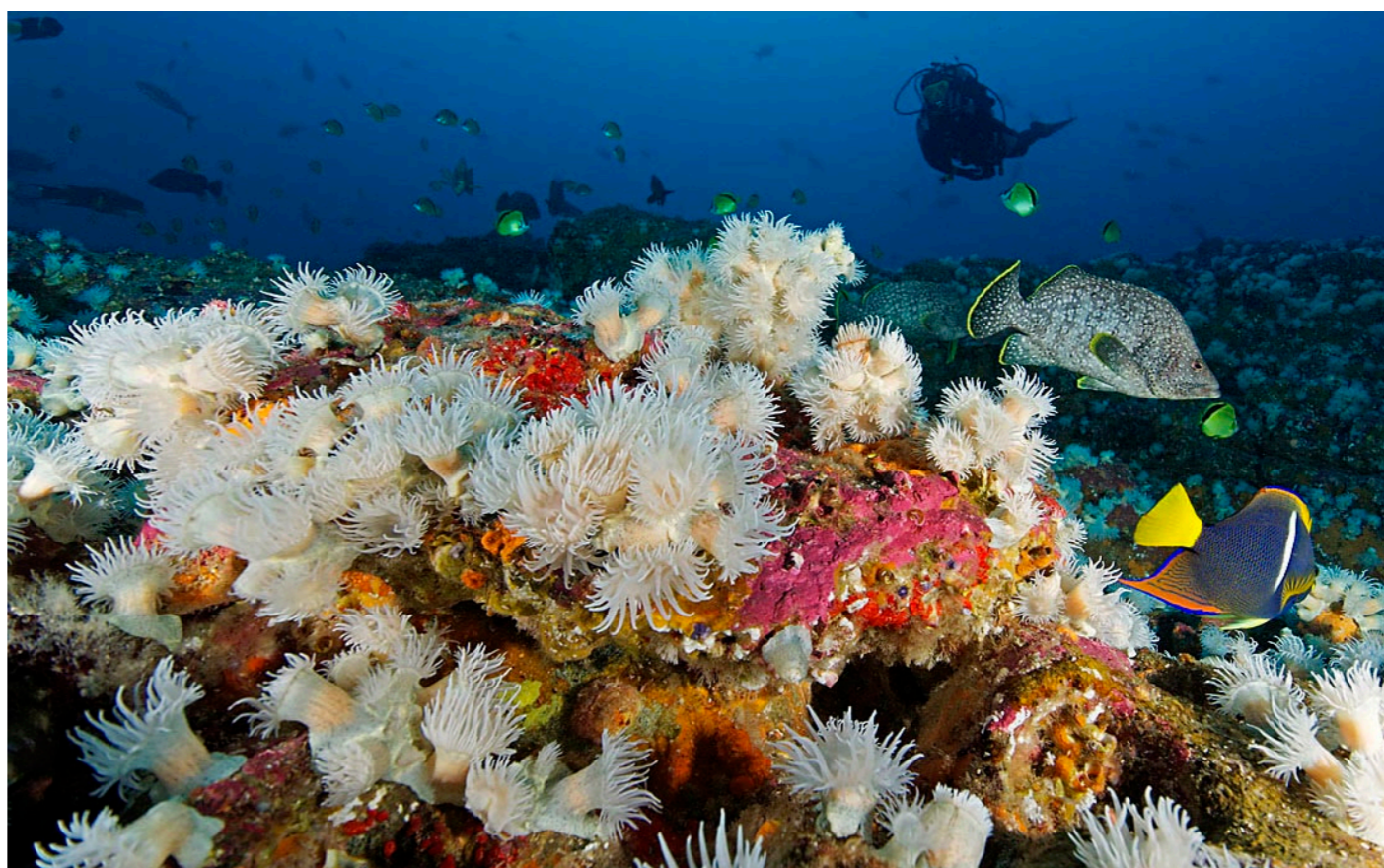
During the entire dive, we had hoped, feared that this would happen. Now, it had come true. We were surrounded by a vast amount of about

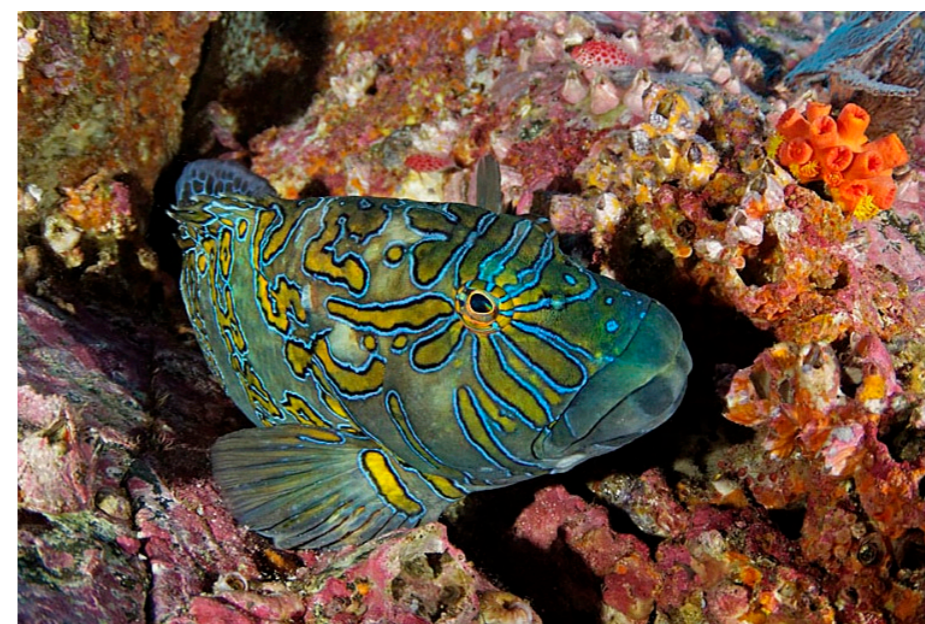
two-meter-long silky sharks! The lean, slightly golden, shimmering predators circled us, swam among us, enveloped us.

Their numbers were difficult to estimate; it was impossible to count them. Who knew how many were still out of sight? With over a hundred schools—some say even up to a thousand—these clusters of silky sharks are found only here at Malpelo and are unique in the world.

The animals seemed curious but not aggressive. Most did not come closer than five meters; some were brave and came within about two meters.

When others approached, they differed simply in their depth. Unfortunately, our air supply dwindled, as did the sharks, and all the schools of fish slowly lost their interest in us. We began our ascent.





MV YEMAYA II

VESSEL OWNER: Otmar Hanser, German, of Panama

EDUCATION: Only PADI nitrox (US\$170)

LANGUAGES: English, German, Spanish

DIVING REGULATIONS: Provides certification, log book and final medical confirmation. Minimum

QUALIFICATIONS: AOWD and 30 dives. We dive for safety on Malpelo (flow) only in groups.

MAXIMUM GROUP SIZE: 8 divers per guide.

MAXIMUM DEPTH: 40 meters.

REQUIRED SAFETY EQUIPMENT at the greatest possible buoy (preferably with 20-meter reel), a whistle and a small mirror. For every free diver is a transmitter of the GPS and radio-tracking system "Nautilus Lifeline" is available.

NATIONAL PARK FEES:
Coiba: \$20 pr person pr trip
Malpelo: \$85 pr person pr day
Cocos: \$35 pr person pr day

NITROX 32% SURCHARGE: \$100 pr person per entire tour

SAFARI TOURS: Year-round 6-15 day tours mainly to Coiba and Malpelo. A few events per year to Cocos.

DECOMPRESSION CHAMBER: Panama City

Just below the surface, we saw an arrow-shaped something shoot toward us, stop about three feet away, turn and disappear just as quickly. We saw just enough to realize that our brief visitor was a marlin. What a dive!

Features of Malpelo

The tiny islands of Malpelo are located about 650 kilometers southeast of Cocos and around 1,200 kilometers northeast of Galapagos in the eastern Pacific. Malpelo is nothing more than the top of a huge undersea mountain range. The island's banks fall into the sea to a depth of about 4,000 meters. Up to eight different ocean currents meet here during the year, all of which bring nutrient-rich deep water, and explain the high volume of large fish.

Around the main island, about 300 meters high, are assembled a dozen small rugged crags; almost all their submerged cliffs and rocky slopes harbor excellent diving spots.

Local fauna include two endemic species of lizards, which thrive here almost exclusively,

as well as terns, gulls, frigate birds and masked boobies. The latter boast a population of nearly 30,000, and are the second largest colony of masked boobies in the world. Important to us divers, however, are the sharks of which there are still enough living around the small island group.

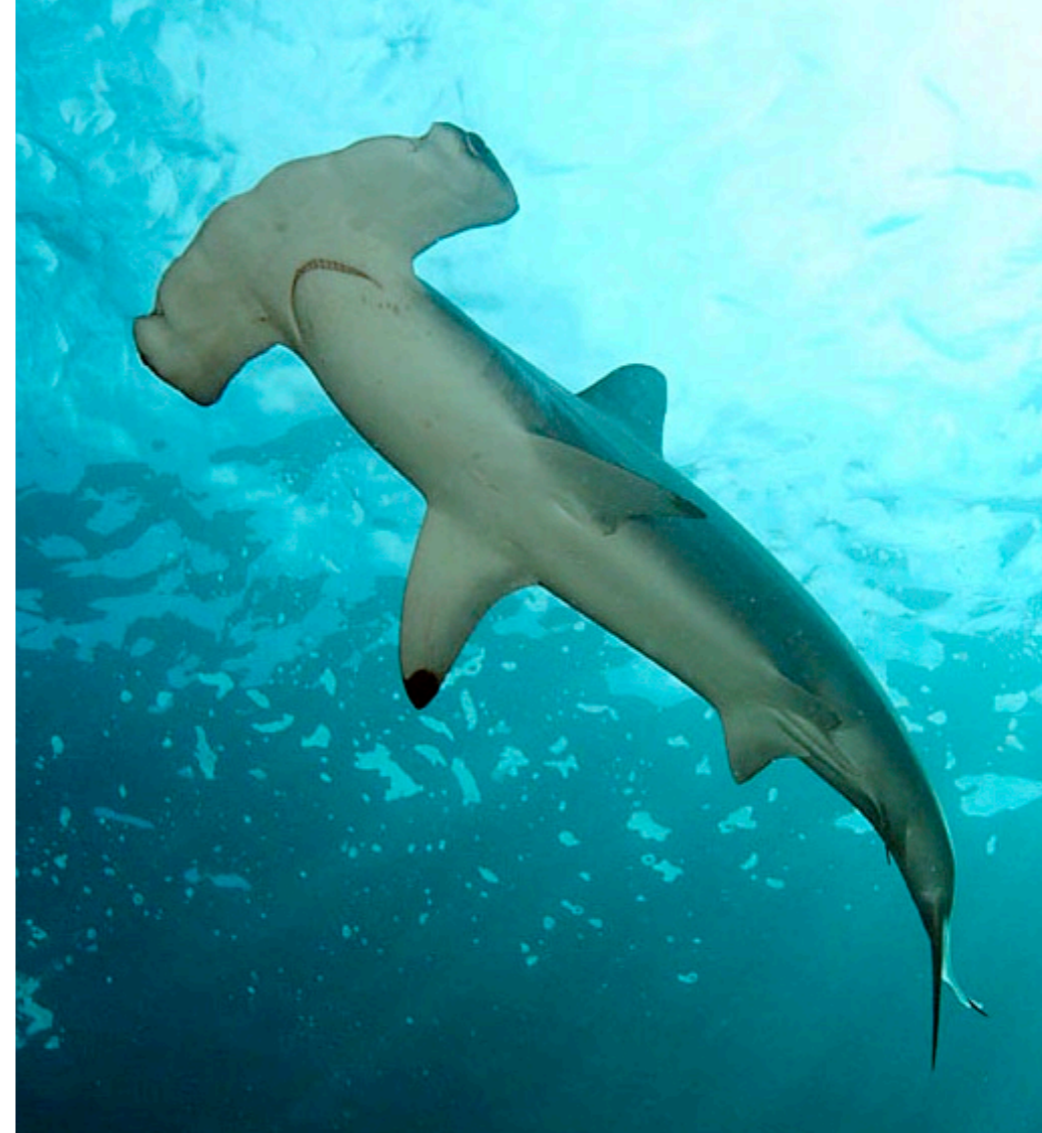
Sharks, sharks and more sharks...

In addition to the aforementioned silky sharks, there are huge schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks, Galapagos sharks, whitetip reef sharks, whale sharks and the rare shield tooth sharks (*Odontaspis ferox* or smalltooth sand tiger shark) which can be encountered only at depths below 50 meters.

Fortunately, the region was formally made into a protected marine reserve in 1995, and in 2006, got on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Far from the mainland coast and surrounded by legal and illegal international fishing fleets, it is



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Scorpionfish; Grouper getting cleaned by butterflyfish; Giant hawkfish; Sunset at the island of Malpelo



Hammerhead shark (left)

Malpelo

If you are lucky, you can see a school of up to 200 silky sharks! The only spot on Earth where this has been seen before (far left)

MV YEMAYA II

FEATURES: mainly 12 liters and 3 liters piece 15 DIN / INT aluminum tanks—no adapter required. There are six rental equipment available on board—those who arrive without their own equipment, however, should pre-order rental equipment.

PRICE EXAMPLE: 9 nights on board (one dive Coiba and 5 days diving Malpelo), including 3 to 4 dives per day, VP, water, soft drinks, tea, coffee, snacks, round trip transfer to Panama City from US\$3,600, plus National Park fee (1 \$20 x 5 x 85 Coiba and Malpelo) = \$445 plus transfer airport/hotel/airport: \$35 Total: \$4,080.

FUEL SURCHARGE of \$100 is added if the oil price (Brent) of \$100 per barrel. A barrel of oil costs about \$120 will be charged a surcharge of \$160.

WEBSITE: www.coibadiveexpeditions.com

- PROS:**
- Unique dive sites
 - Stable and comfortable boat
 - Excellent food
 - Nitrox 32 additional charge
 - Nautilus free Lifeline radio per diver

- CONS:**
- Long, arduous arrival
 - Only suitable for seaworthy, advanced divers
 - High cost of Malpelo National Park (USD\$85/day)



Whitetip reefsharks are not so common, like on Cocos Island

the major fish stocks that need to be protected at all cost. Located on the barren main island, a small Colombian military unit is stationed, which in recent years has acted on several occasions as an armed force against illegal long-line fishing. In addition, the few dive boats operating locally offer the sharks a little bit of protection, as the divers are vigilant and report to the base any ship that appears in the reserve. Unfortunately, they are not always equipped with a patrol boat.

One must be aware that the exclusiveness of the diving here is due to the low traffic of dive boats -- there are just five dive boats that have permission to operate in Malpelo. However, they are not allowed to operate simultaneously but sequentially.

Because of this rule, only one dive boat at a time is allowed to anchor at permanent buoys.

Of course, not everyone is so spectacular dive from Malpelo as described above, but in fact has just taken place without any exaggeration! On the agenda are meetings with the various schools of fish, groups of grouper, eagle rays, and also almost always on nearly every dive, hammerhead sharks. These range the seas mostly in large schools of up to a hundred animals and head directly to the many cleaning stations on the reef where they can get the full treatment from cleaner fish and shrimp.

Diving

When diving the seas around Malpelo, protective gloves are

recommended. Because you will want to see hammerhead sharks and it is not comfortable just floating through the reef, you will want to cling onto current-protected rocks covered with barnacles that have sharp edges. Furthermore, a large surface marker buoy is recommended, along with a 20-meter-long duty reel, if possible. A strong current breaks away from the reef, so there is a need to be able to have at depth a buoy shot immediately to the surface to mark your location. Diving here can be tedious and is certainly not for beginners, but diligent divers are often rewarded with unusual sightings.

The crossing from Panama to Malpelo takes a whopping 30 hours, and the Pacific Ocean is certainly not known to be



as still as a glassy lake. It is thus only recommended for die-hard divers -- at least bring your seasickness tablets in your pack. Since the tour is usually combined with Coiba, the first stage after eight hours of driving is done.

Travel only about 20 miles off Panama's coastal island group, and the area is still completely unknown. During the last Ice Age, the 27,000-square-kilometer archipelago of 38 islands was still connected to the mainland. The huge main island of Coiba is often referred to as the world's largest uninhabited tropical coral island and definitely has the largest coral reef of the eastern Pacific.

The diversity of the national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site is enormous both above and below the water. It boasts untouched tropical rain forests with a lot of endemic species such as unique

howler monkeys, opossums and white-tailed deer, but also crocodiles and numerous bird species, plus miles of snow-white sand beaches and river systems that can be explored by kayak.

There are about 30 dive sites in the park, which promise sensational encounters with schools of mobulas, cow-nosed rays, huge schools of fish, but also frogfish, sharks and turtles. In fact, whale sharks have been seen more frequently between Coiba and Malpelo than before. Another highlight is that

over 1,000 humpback whales come here to give birth and then to mate again from July to October.

Dive season Malpelo is an all season destination, but divers will find different



Large spiny lobsters are seen very common; Dive boat, *Yemaya II* (right); School of barracuda in crystal clear water (top)



A surface marker buoy with a long reel is an absolute must-have for diving on Malpelo; Diver and corals on the rocky reef (top)



highlights in each season.

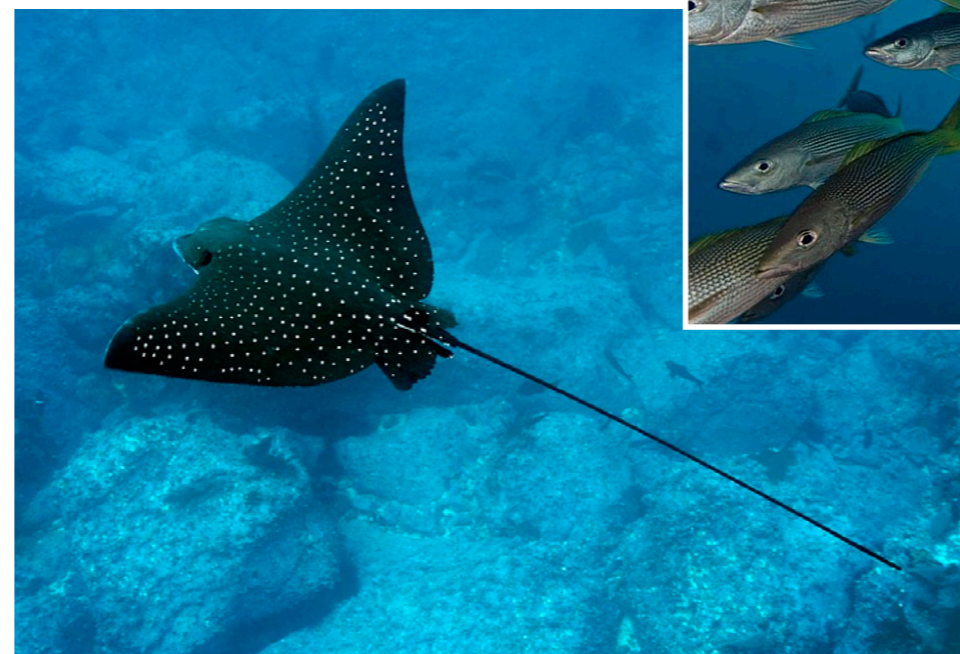
- Large schools of silky sharks (Silky Shark): May to early August.
- Large schools of hammerhead sharks: year-round, best from January to April.
- The rare sand tiger sharks (below 50 to 60 meters!) (Smalltooth Sand Tiger Shark, *Odontaspis ferox*): January to April.
- Whale sharks are kept on all year around Coiba and Malpelo. The best chance you have to see them is from July to September.
- As a bonus, come July-November to find over 1,000 humpback whales in the

waters of Coiba giving birth to young and mating.

Visibility can fluctuate within hours, between ten and well over 30 meters. The best chance for quiet seas is in March and April.

Water temperatures fluctuate throughout the year at the surface, between 26-28°C. There is a thermocline at significantly cooler, deeper water, but it can fluctuate from day to day. It increases from January to April from up to 25 meters to 15 meters. It is usually a little colder than 22°C under the thermocline; from January to April, temperatures may even drop to 15°C. One is usually best equipped with a 5-7mm suit and optional ice vest with hood.

It may all sound like insider's tips, but your dives can also be really sensational. However, one also needs to have a bit of luck. Visibility is generally much more modest in the park than on Malpelo and can often fall back to a few meters. That in this case, neither the past



Booby looking for fish

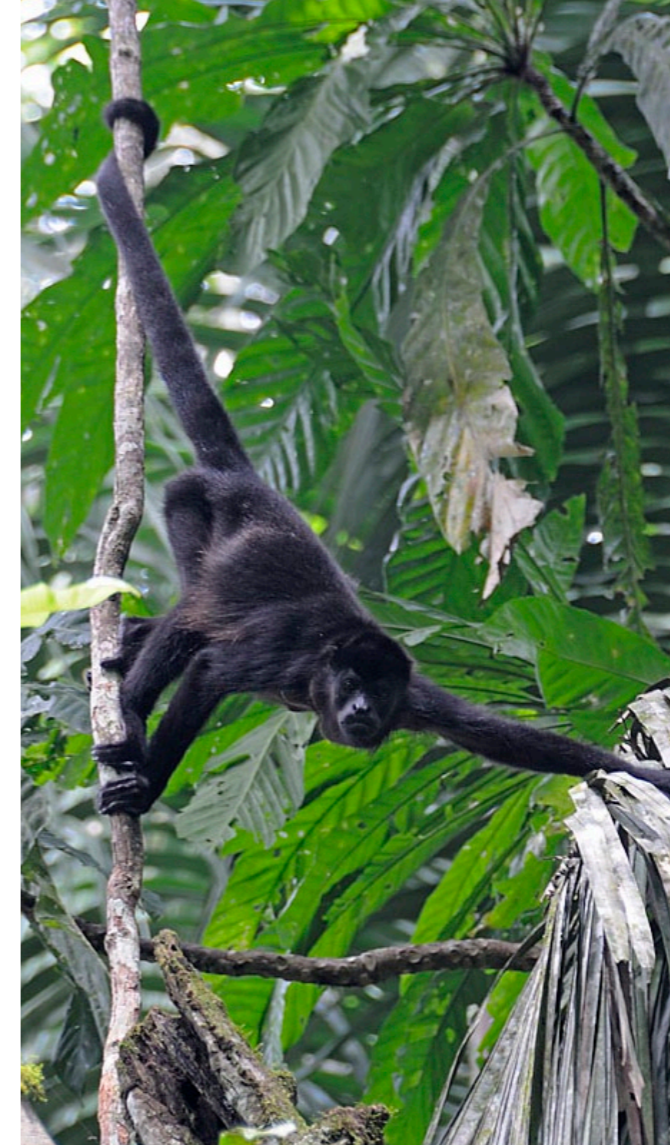
perhaps, or the giant whale shark floating school on skates or even a mother whale with calf gets to face is obvious.

Malpelo is undoubtedly one of the top ten of the world's best shark and big fish-regions. Seaworthiness, a minimum level of fitness as well as some diving experience—mainly current—is strongly

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Malpelo, a group of islands and rocks 500km from the coast; Several moray eels sharing one cave; Snappers; Eagle ray; Scorpionfish



Malpelo



THIS PAGE: On a jungle tour in Panama you find at least three different species of monkeys, colorful insects and fresh water turtles. Location of Malpelo Island on global map

recommended. A trip combining Malpelo with Coiba is definitely worthwhile. You will have the added chance of experiencing sensational dives around Coiba, too.

Top dive sites

Washing Machine. At this site, divers swim over several rocky shoals at the Isla Coiba Jicaron before getting to a minimum depth of ten meters. There are many schools of surgeonfish, jacks and snapper, but also colorful sea fans, anemones and bright yellow lionfish. Groupers, moray eels, eagle rays, whitetip reef sharks, hammerheads and whale sharks are often found. Very strong currents.

La Nevera. This site is located at a stepped, sloping cliff on Malpelo's west coast. The Spanish, La Nevera, refers to the refrigerator-cold deep currents that often attract large schools of hammerhead

sharks to two cleaning stations here at about 20 meters. In addition, there are many moray eels, groupers, stingrays and Galapagos sharks. Very noticeable swell.

Altar de Virginia. This site is located in a 12-meter-deep bay on the east side of Malpelo, near the pier. With a little luck, you can watch up close schools of hammerhead sharks coming to cleaning stations in shallow water. In addition, there are often eagle rays, a large school of barracuda, turtles and Galapagos sharks patrolling the area. Outside the bay, there are often strong currents.

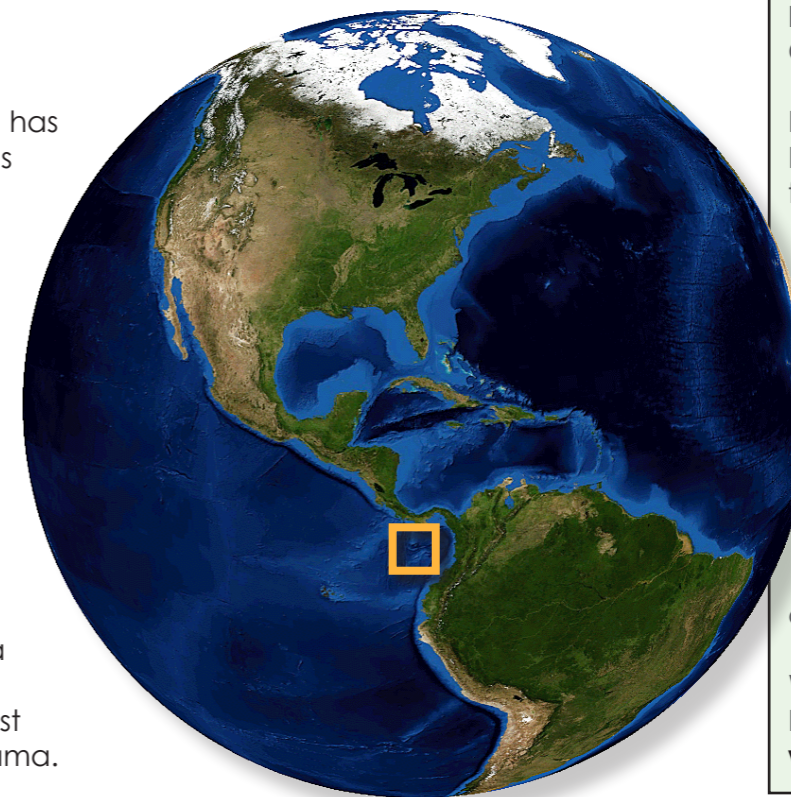
Topside excursions

If desired, you can climb a rope ladder hanging on a metal bridge and climb Malpelo. The barren rocky island is about 300 meters high and houses a small ranger station, a myriad of sea birds and a few

endemic lizards.

Coiba is far more diverse. The largest uninhabited tropical island in the world has very rich flora and fauna with numerous endemic species. As an alternative program to diving, there is trekking by kayak along the rivers of the original, pristine rain forest or walking on deserted white sandy beaches.

Before or after the safari, it is well worth the extra time to spend a few days in Panama. One can enjoy short expert-guided sightseeing tours of Panama Canal, city tours in Panama City, rainforest excursions on foot or by canoe as well as multi-day expeditions in the cloud-enshrouded forests of the highlands or a trip to visit the Kuna Yala Indians on the Caribbean side of the country organized by the Swiss ecologist Rainald Framhein (www.yalatourspanama.com). ■



NASA

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE We took Condor Airlines from Frankfurt to Panama City, with a short stopover in the Dominican Republic (about 12 hours). Usually one night is required before one goes on the four-hour bus ride to Puerto Mutis. *The Yemaya II* departs from this tiny river port, located about ten kilometers from the mouth of the river.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS Passport (valid at least six months). EU citizens do not need a visa to travel to Panama.

CURRENCY Balboa, linked 1:1 to the U.S. dollar. In fact, there are currently only Balboa coins. Legal tender is, in fact, the U.S. dollar. On the ship, one may pay in U.S. dollars or euros, but only in cash.

COMMUNICATIONS Tri-band capable cell phones work in Panama. The ship usually gets no cell phone reception. For an additional charge, however, a satellite phone is available. Internet is available in Panama City.

DECOMPRESSION CHAMBER Panama City. Due to the distance from Malpelo, a rescue helicopter cannot be used. Conservative diving is therefore advised.

TIME GMT -6 hours (- 7 summer time)

CLIMATE Dry season is from mid-December to early May, and then the rainy season comes, with heavy rain only during the months of October and November.

WEBSITES
Panama Tourism
www.visitpanama.com