

Shortfin Mako Sharks

by Gregory Sweeney

Northeast off the coast of Cancun on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico lies the small island of Isla Mujeres. The island is approximately five miles long and one half mile at its widest point. Just a short ferry ride from Cancun, the island offers beaches, scuba diving, and a relaxing place to shop and dine. In the summer months the island plays host to guests drawn in by the whale shark ecotourism trips. Guests travel out into the Gulf of Mexico and snorkel with the gentle giants. If they are lucky they also may encounter giant manta rays.

Isla Mujeres is best known for wintertime fishing and game fishing of sailfish. The sailfish attract many fishermen, but also underwater photographers. Watching the great coordinated predation of the bait balls is a thrill and photographing it underwater is challenging but rewarding. The sailfish work together as a fast moving team to keep the baitfish tightly packed in the bait ball. Being in the water to witness during this action is as exciting as catching a sailfish on the rod.

Adding to the adventure of Isla Mujeres is the chance to see shortfin mako sharks up close. Captain

Anthony Mendillo is now offering this opportunity to photographers and shark fans during the winter season.

Captain Anthony was the pioneer of the sailfish freediving experience. Also he was involved in early efforts to preserve the sailfishing industry. The fishermen of Isla Mujeres all agreed to a Code of Conduct that only allows traditional fishing methods.

The same spirit of sustainability and responsible tourism extends to the whale shark trip and to the mako cage dives.

Capt Anthony and crew have worked with Guy Harvey Research Institute to catch, tag, and release Makos, which are then tracked to add valuable and previously unknown

Using one of the two ports in the cage, you can get a clear water shot as the mako circles around me

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO400 1/125sec at f/13

The Keen M is a powerful and fast fishboat usually used for sailfish but it has been modified to carry the mako shark cage



© Anthony Mendillo





The cage fits 2 people with a hooka air supply located in the boat. It has Lexan polycarbonate panels on the sides and one large one in the front with 2 open ports facing front.

Canon EOS 5D MKIII in a Nexus housing with EF15mm f2.8 fisheye lens at ISO 400 1/400 at f/10 – 1/3ev

details about the timing and long distance migratory movements of this vulnerable species. This experience has added greatly to the knowledge of the Mexico shortfin mako population and their overlap with other populations tracked by the Guy Harvey Research Institute. Close interaction with the makos has also taught the crew the secrets of location, behaviors, bait preference, and seasonality. This know-how leads

to a 70% success rate for attracting makos to the boat.

The makos in this area of the Caribbean are large compared to those in some other locations. Average sizes for shortfin makos are 3.2 m (10ft) in length and 60 – 135 kg (132 – 298lb). The Isla Mujeres population averages in the top of that range at 114 kg (250lb). Shortfin makos are a beautiful and photogenic fish in brilliant metallic blue and a white



The mako charges toward me and I take cover behind the bullet proof acrylic panel while he devours the bait

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO 220 1/250sec at f/13

underside. They inhabit offshore temperate and tropical seas worldwide and this pelagic species can be found from the surface to depths of 150m (490ft) normally far from land, though occasionally around islands or inlets. Makos are seldom found in waters colder than 16°C (61°F)

Makos are curious and feel and taste everything with their mouth including the cages, floats, transom, and midwater bait or other targets. Their prey is cephalopods and bony fish including bonitos and swordfish.

They hunt by lunging vertically up and tearing off chunks of flank or fins. Makos swim below their prey and have a high probability of reaching prey before it is alerted due to their high velocity. Makos are the fastest species of shark. This speed and hunting method makes Makos one of only a few shark species to accomplish a full breach out of the water as part of its predatory attack. Captain Anthony has observed makos of all sizes doing this full breach behavior and he has developed



© Anthony Mendillo

A mako shark takes the bait.

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO400 1/125sec at f/13

methods to allow guests to see and photograph the breaches.

Our boat is the very comfortable Keen M , a 41 ft custom Michael Fitz Sportfish with a 580 hp diesel. We leave the dock on Isla Mujeres in the early morning and head to the waters North of the island. The cage is mounted on the back. Once we reached the deep 400 ft water, the trolling lines are baited. No hooks are used so as not to hurt the shark. It did not take long to attract a shark.

When it hit the bait its whole body launched out of the water like a rocket and with tail flapping did a nearly complete flip smacking back into the water on its side with its prize in mouth.

I have my camera set to burst mode with a fast shutter of 1/1250 sec. I will only get a few frames per leap and it happens with little warning. A shout comes from a crewmember and I press my shutter capturing the full breach.

With a confirmed shark in the area, bait crates

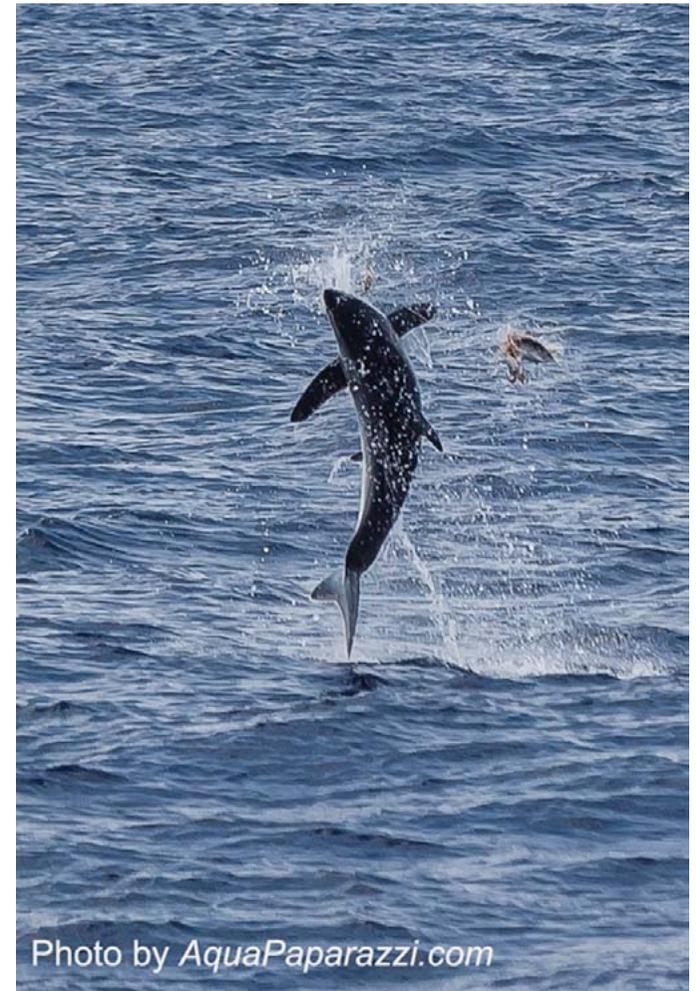


Photo by AquaPaparazzi.com

A mako makes a dramatic strike on the trolling bait lifting it out of the water in a full breach.

Canon EOS-1Dx with EF70-200mm F2.8L USM at 1/1250 ,f8.0, -2/3EV, ISO 250

are set around the boat and scum scent slick started behind the boat. Now it is time to deploy cage in the water.

The cage adds a safety factor for the guests and piece of mind for the captain. This area is subject



The mako circles the cage then comes close to investigate a few of the floats
Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO400
1/125sec at f/13

people in the cage. This allows monitoring of the air supply and leaves more room in the cage for the guests.

Using a tether, the cage is floated 2m away from boat so the shark can do a complete 360° around the cage.

In the cage I am able to see the makos up close and swimming very calm and curious right in front of me. They come to the bait floating nearby first to investigate then to strike. They even investigate the cage on a few passes. As the large eye connects with me I feel secure in this strong cage.

The makos will stay with the boat and cage for extended periods. Some encounters have been 3 hours long with the same shark staying with the boat feeding and circling. Our mako stayed for almost an hour doing many passes by the cage and boat. I am able to get great shots of the full shark passing by either the side or the front of the cage. As the mako comes close to check out the cage I get some close up and front opportunities. Later back on the boat it is still circling and I get some topside shots of attacks on the bait to add to my breaching shot. Capt Anthony has seen guests achieve great images with everything from professional cameras and video rigs to GoPros on a stick.

Hunting for and photographing shortfin mako was a fun and productive day. I returned with great underwater images from the cage and spectacular breaching shots from the boat. The cage experience is exciting: the sharks come close and stay close

to wind, current and the boat is constantly drifting. Using the cage eliminates the worry that guests will drift too far from the boat or let go of the line drifting quickly out of sight of the boat and crew. Without the worry of where the guests are, the crew can concentrate on keeping the makos close to the boat and interested; coaxing them into the best position for observation and photos.

Engineered to be similar to the cages used in South Africa for great white shark encounters, this one has room enough for 2 people. It sports bars of

stainless steel and aluminum with a solid floor and a top protected with bars. The cage floats a bit above the surface of the water to enable communication with the boat if needed. At eye level on the sides and front are clear panels made of Lexan polycarbonate sheet. The front has two open ports for cameras.

Captain Mendillo has experimented with different ways to rig the air supply to the cage: They tried bottles in the cage, but now opt to leave the bottles in the boat and run hookah lines to the

making many passes and allowing time to get a variety of images and angles. The encounters are very engaging and guests can get a great experience even if they stay in the boat and forego the cage. It is a good feeling to know that a sustainable tourism activity is being built around this vulnerable sport fish. Since the season overlaps with sailfish season it is possible to get both of these exciting large fish on the same holiday using the same crew. It is thrilling enough to appeal to both photographers and fishermen.



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Swim with Whale Sharks Isla Mujeres, Mexico



July 2016 / 2017

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6 guests plus crew

Sailfish and Sardine Run
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