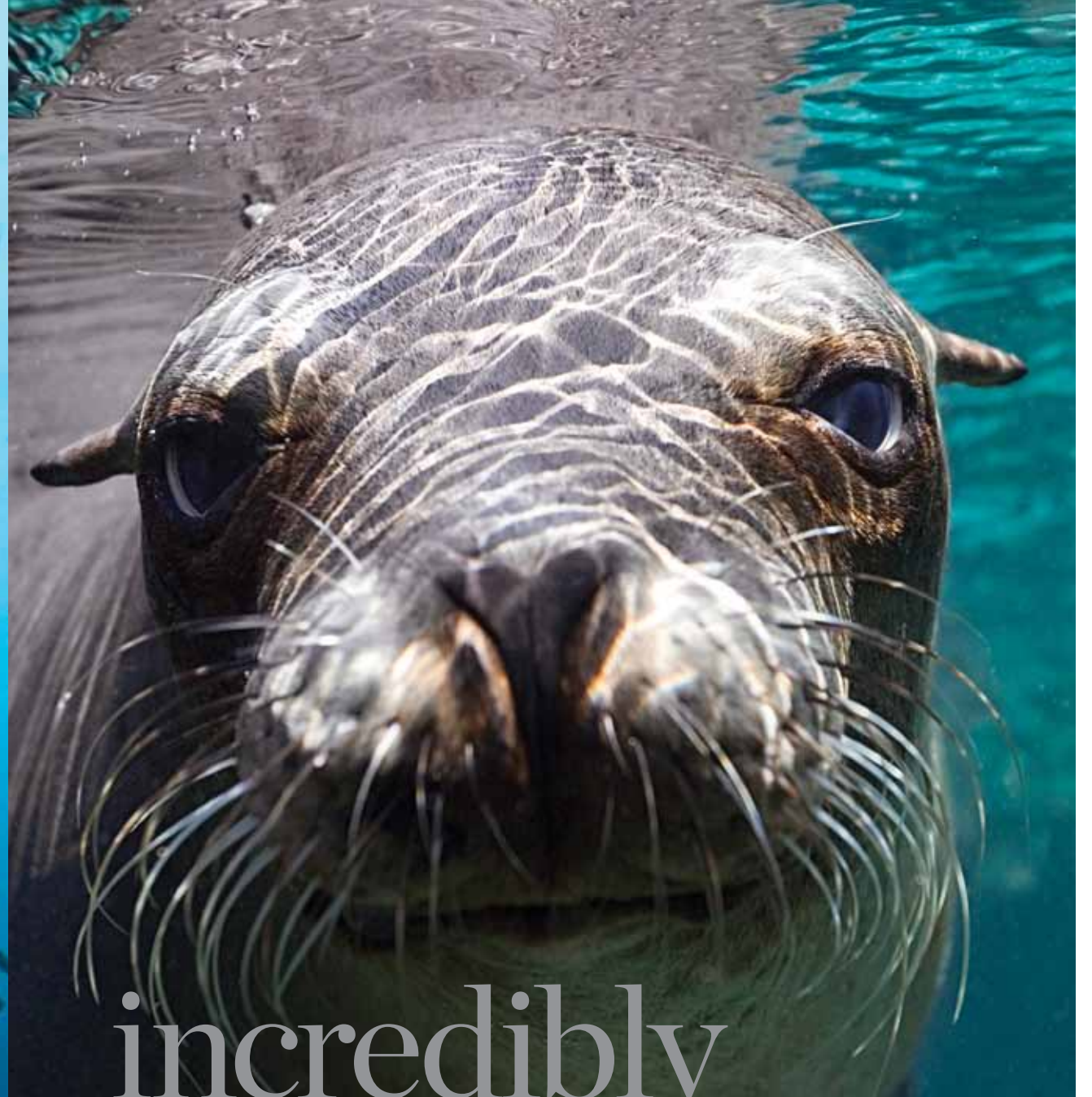


extremely **BIG** &



BRANDON COLE (2)



incredibly **CLOSE**

BY DAVID ESPINOSA



The Galapagos is one of those bucket-list destinations you dream about. At least I did – for more than 20 years. But the reality of the Galapagos is far more impressive than our dreams. Hammerhead sharks? The schools of these beautiful fish are a sensory overload impossible to capture in words or photographs. And yet what's

most inspiring about diving in the Galapagos is the mass of big animals – the hammerheads, sea lions, whale sharks and mola mola – that get up close and personal. (In some cases, it seems as if they crave the attention.) Big fish, close encounters – with all these reasons to go, it's time to turn this electrifying destination into reality.

Overleaf, from left: Scalloped hammerheads; Galapagos sea lion; this page: Galapagos sea lion at Cousins Rock.

1 Cousins Rock

You could be excused for jumping in at Cousins Rock, and thinking you'd died and gone to heaven. Massive schools of barracuda form tornadoes in the current just off the rock, which can be circumnavigated in two dives (if you're feeling particularly energetic). Moray eels swim between bushes of black coral, and black-blotched sting-rays find cover on the sand. More important, Cousins is your introduction to Galapagos sea lions, which dive-bomb past you at reckless speeds. You could be excused for wanting to stay here the entire week. But the best is yet to come.

LIVE IT

→ GALAPAGOS SKY

This 100-foot, 16-passenger boat features four decks, including a magnificent third deck that has four staterooms with massive windows offering panoramic views. **CONTACT** galapagosky.com

→ GALAPAGOS AGGRESSOR I & II

The longest continuous-running operator in the Galapagos (since 1993), *Galapagos Aggressor I & II* deluxe diving yachts have seven staterooms and room for 14 passengers each. **CONTACT** aggressor.com

→ WOLF BUDDY & DARWIN BUDDY

Buddy Dive has utilized diving expertise from its famous Bonaire resorts and custom-built two identical, luxurious, 120-foot, four-deck yachts. **CONTACT** buddydive-galapagos.com

BRANDON COLE

2

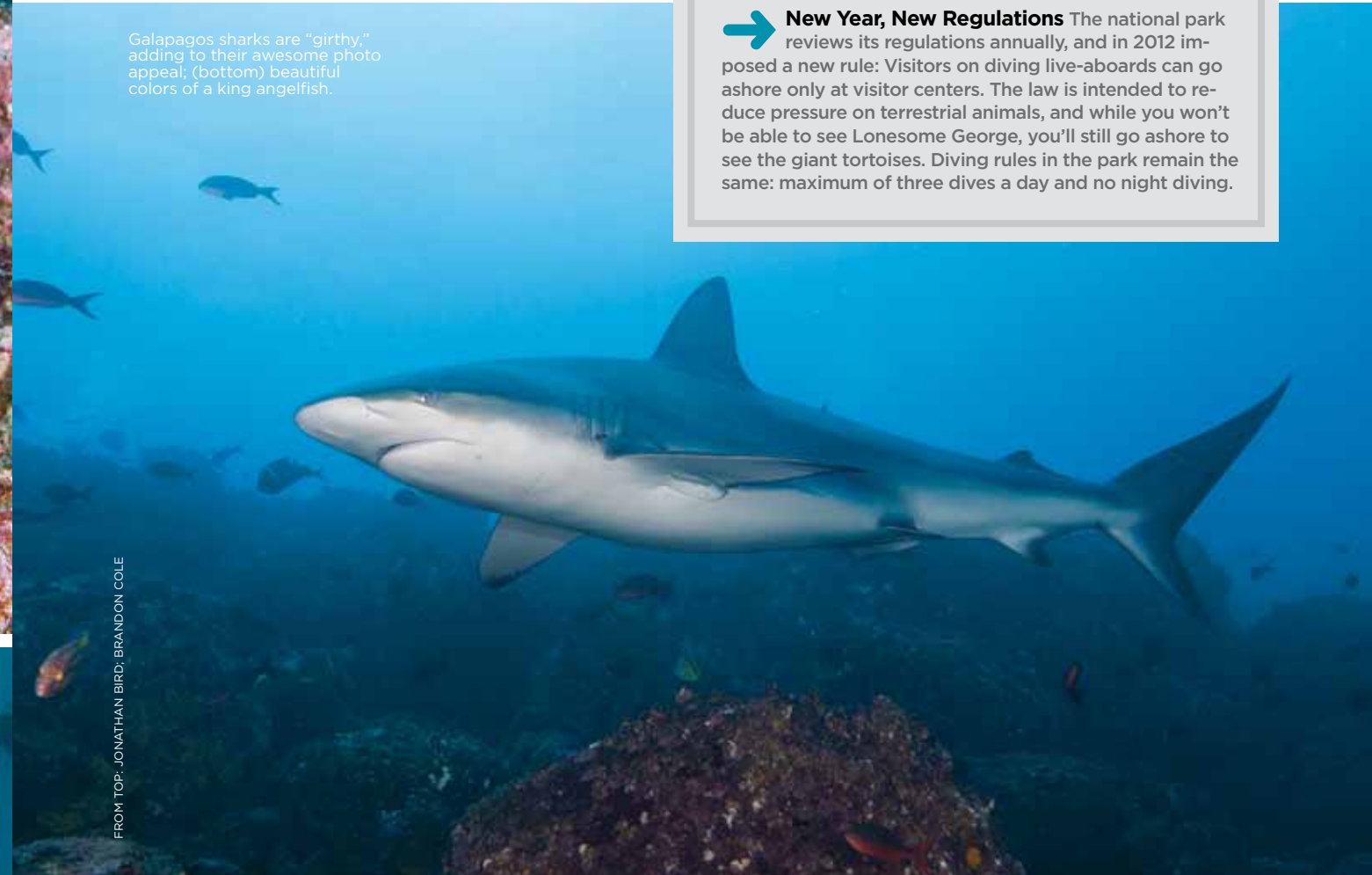
Wolf Island

The Galapagos every diver knows from the glossy magazine photographs (like the ones you see here!) is on full display at Wolf Island, a lonely outpost in the north of the Galapagos National Park. This is your introduction to Galapagos sharks, schools of hammerheads so thick that the sun disappears, and eagle rays that fly in formation. Ever see a moray eel free-swimming out of its hole? Your dive guide will soon tire of pointing them out. Never mind the ubiquitous sea lions, desk-size tuna, wahoo and slender silky sharks. The good news is you should get at least four dives at Wolf Island (over two days). The bad news is you get *only* four dives at Wolf Island.



Galapagos sharks are "girthy," adding to their awesome photo appeal; (bottom) beautiful colors of a king angelfish.

➔ **New Year, New Regulations** The national park reviews its regulations annually, and in 2012 imposed a new rule: Visitors on diving live-aboards can go ashore only at visitor centers. The law is intended to reduce pressure on terrestrial animals, and while you won't be able to see Lonesome George, you'll still go ashore to see the giant tortoises. Diving rules in the park remain the same: maximum of three dives a day and no night diving.



FROM TOP: JONATHAN BIRD; BRANDON COLE



Hammerheads are often found off Wolf at sites such as the Landslide; (top) a fine-spotted moray at the Caves, Wolf Island.

BRANDON COLE (2)

3

Roca Redonda

Some boats spend only one dive at Roca Redonda, but it's a welcome diversion from the previous days' diving with hammerheads and Galapagos sharks. Not that you've grown tired of schooling sharks (or that Redonda doesn't have these predators— it does), but this small island just north of the equator has quirkier highlights too, like a seabed that bubbles effervescently. Those are the fumaroles, vents from which gas escapes, evidence of these islands' volcanic nature. When you get tired of the fumaroles or the gaudy nudibranchs that swarm them, just follow the current to the sharks, turtles and rays.



4 Darwin Island

Not that you'd need extra motivation to dive what might be the world's most famous site, but when divemasters say a site is their favorite, you sit up and take notice. Live-aboards spend a full day and a half at Darwin's Arch, a site full of boulders and small walls where divers can hook in and watch whale sharks swim past or schooling hammerheads in the blue. When you tire of being motionless, unhook and let the current pull you into a shallow channel where tiger sharks lurk, and pairs of Galapagos sharks and hammerheads speed past you in their rush to meet up with the main school.



← **The World's Best Surface Intervals** If you're anything like us, you'd rather spend your life underwater; since we don't have gills, though, we eventually have to surface. In Galapagos, surface intervals are almost better than the diving: Every day you're treated to dolphin escorts, land visits with giant tortoises, imposing volcanic islands and Zodiac rides to watch as blue-footed boobies, marine iguanas, penguins and sea lions live Darwin's evolution.

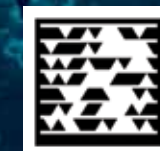


From top: There's more to the Galapagos than sharks and rays — yellowtail surgeonfish and Mexican hogfish are just as cool.



FROM TOP: JONATHAN BIRD; BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE: BRANDON COLE (2)

The whale shark "season" is June through November, but you can always get lucky at Darwin; (top) Darwin's Arch.



SCAN THIS TAG TO CHECK OUT a video of whale sharks, mantas, mola mola and hammerheads, visit sportdiver.com/galapagosanimals.



Expect the unexpected at Punta Vicente Roca, including encounters with boobies and red-lipped batfish (bottom).

5 Punta Vicente Roca

The chill you get when you first jump in at Punta Vicente Roca is shocking. It's more than 10 degrees colder here than any other dive in the national park, even if the sun is shining down on the steep wall; but it's this cold, nutrient-rich water that supports a cast of characters unlike anything you've already seen. Inside the bay you'll be treated to mola mola, penguins, marine iguanas, red-lipped batfish, seahorses, horn sharks and, if by some miracle you hadn't gotten your fill already, the world's friendliest sea lions guaranteed to ham it up for the cameras.



6 Cape Marshall

On the eastern edge of Isabela, Cape Marshall's topography reminds some divers of Indo-Pacific reefs, with beautiful soft corals bathed in crystal-clear visibility. As with all Galapagos sites, there are sharks — remarkably bold whitetips that swim along the edge of the wall — but it's the giant Pacific manta rays, schools of striped salemas and golden cownose rays that make Cape Marshall so unforgettable, a dive that will persist even as you wash your gear on the top deck, and wait for it all to dry as you cruise back to port.



Schools of striped salemas might be found at Cape Marshall.

ALEKS BARTNICKA; OPPOSITE: BRANDON COLE (2)

A DIVERS GUIDE TO: GALAPAGOS

AVERAGE WATER TEMP
60 to 75 degrees F (June through November); 70 to 86 (December to May)

WHAT TO WEAR 5 mm suit should suffice for all diving except Punta Vicente Roca

AVERAGE VIZ 50 feet

WHEN TO GO June through December is the whale-shark season. December through May has better conditions for mantas and hammerheads.

INFO sportdiver.com/Galapagos

MAIN ATTRACTIONS
Darwin's Arch Arguably the world's most famous site, this is where the big fish — hammerheads, whale sharks, tiger sharks and schools of tuna — come to play.

The Caves There are pretty swim-throughs, but the highlights on this drift dive are dolphins, eagle rays and thousands of fish.

Cape Marshall Don't get too caught up in the walls covered in corals; it's the eagle rays, schools of striped salemas, bold whitetip sharks and giant mantas that will get your adrenaline pumping here.

Punta Vicente Roca Unlike any other dive in the Galapagos, the bone-chilling water here brings in the weird stuff, like mola mola, red-lipped batfish and horn sharks.



BEFORE YOU GO
PADI Enriched Air Diver
Nitrox is perfect for these dives. Go to padi.com.