

Swim on gently, O Giants!

BY SRAVASTI GHOSH DASTIDAR

A sleepy village in the Philippines comes alive after it learnt to lure in giant whale sharks tantalizingly close to its shores and these gentle giants are just the bait

The thought of waking up at 4 am while holidaying and journeying for 3 hours from Cebu City to Oslob was not at all stimulating. Experiencing a 30-minute friendly swim with the gentle giants of the sea was. After watching blue whales in Mirissa, humpback whales in Jervis Bay, dolphins off all possible sea and river coasts, one may not be enthused about another whale-watching session. How different could it be, I thought. Our Cebuan friend insisted it was not just watching from a safe boat. It was swimming - with the whale sharks. 'A must-do'. Interesting but we thought it was better to watch sharks on NatGeo.

WHALE SHARKS SWIM
EVER SO CLOSE TO THE
SHORES OF OSLOB



“They’re not dangerous to humans and they are not right beside you. This gigantic fish’s name is misleading. It is a docile, filter-feeding shark, feasting on plankton, krill and shrimps. It does not attack human beings.”

Great! That means we won’t be gobbled up... even if it’s a 42 feet long, 21.5 tonne shark with a mouth almost five feet wide when open.

The eager expectation in our children’s eyes was enough to make us decide to go for it.

The trip was booked, a day before, with the travel desk, and off we went with groggy eyes. Our chirpy guide, fully awake, engaged us with anecdotes about the whale sharks of Oslob.

Till a few years back, Tan-awan in Oslob was a sleepy little fishing village. Outsiders would venture in, only if lost, on the way to the beautiful Tumulog Falls. The fishermen observed that when they baited the fish with small shrimps, whale sharks would arrive instead and not let the fish come near the nets. The numbers

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varied from 8 to 20 at a time! Often, they had to stop fishing due to this. Some divers spotted this and marketed the idea of swimming with these giants to the world of divers and snorkelers.

They started enticing the butandings (Tagalog for whale sharks), to an area near the coast, with feeder boats. The visitors were taken on boats and literally, let loose.

The throngs of tourists had a negative impact on the tuki (Visaya for whale sharks). This vulnerable species was being exposed to the bacteria and infection from humans due to close interaction; many sustained injuries by getting scratched or entangled in the propellers of the boats; the migratory and spawning patterns were changing as they were flocking to the area of assured food instead of following the natural bloom of plankton; the village could not supply the amount of food needed. The food was imported, hence not fresh.

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This was bad news for the locals. For them, the visits of the whale sharks meant livelihood - for the shark-spotters, the boatmen; the low-budget hotels and restaurants, which mushroomed overnight; the shopkeepers and parking lot attendants; and the guides. So, the local government imposed regulations to control the chaotic and dangerous interaction.

Our scenic journey along the coastline ended as we reached the picturesque Brumini Resort with room and eating facilities. There was an option of parking the car and changing in the public showers or renting a room for the day. We opted to rent. Then, changed and were taken to the whale-watching location.

Pretty methodical place, the briefings centre. Whale watching timings are from 6 AM to 1 PM. Announcements were being made every 10 minutes to every new set of tourists, arriving in hordes. We were warned not to touch the sharks, to keep at least a 4 m distance from

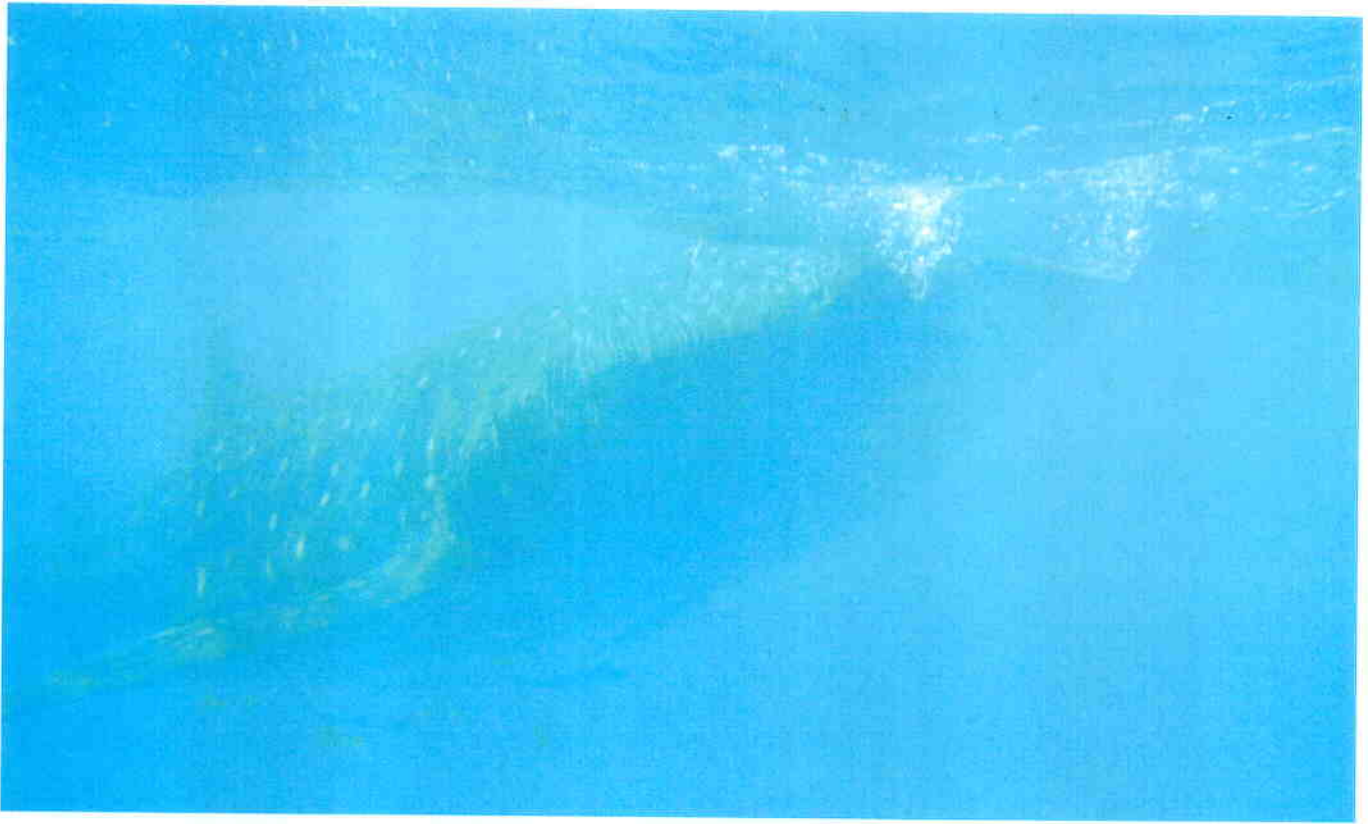
We were warned not to touch the sharks, to keep at least a 4m distance from them, not to apply sunscreen - the chemicals were harmful for the fish, no flash photography, etc.

them; not to apply sunscreen lotion - the chemicals were harmful for the fish, no flash photography, etc.

How does one calculate 4 m in the deep, while treading? The two swimmers in our family were trying hard to keep the butterflies from fluttering in the stomach.

We were given tickets and taken to the boarding area. If the numerous tourists in the briefing area were a dampener, then the sight of at least 25 boats in the sea with 4-8 passengers each, plus the feeding boats was a shock. I wondered how the sharks would come in this circus! The authorities may have laid down guidelines but shouldn't the number of visitors be restricted? Will the trip be worth it, after all?

Secured in life jackets, we boarded the narrow rowing boat with bamboo brackets on the sides for balancing. Our moods changed while riding over the crystal waters under the blue skies with scattered white clouds, the



gentle breeze blowing over us from the green island. 100 m into the sea, our boat was tied to the other boats. My daughter and husband went in with their snorkeling gear and underwater camera. I watched from an insecure position in a rocking boat, balancing my 5-year old son between my knees and a heavy camera in one hand, fervently hoping that the whale wouldn't surface from under the boat and topple us over.

5 minutes...and lo behold! There it was... the first of the whale sharks! A feeder boat was luring it by throwing shrimps into the sea. The shark was following it, intent on swallowing the food. It was right beside us!

A magnificent creation with a wide-mouthed broad, flat head and a short snout; large gills on each side; distinct colours of the vertical and horizontal stripes forming a checkered pattern against a dark background. Yes, it was that close... not separated by the glass wall of an aquarium... yet its smooth gliding motion belied its immensity. I wondered how it made its way through the congested course.

The threatening feeling diminished, though the boat rocked dangerously as the sharks kept coming. At least 5 sharks in 30 minutes!

“Very exciting but I was really scared that they might swallow me. I will do it again,” said my daughter. My son kept describing them with wide-eyed wonder.

It was time for the swimmers to keep away from them. Some, like my daughter and husband (out of their gears by now but camera clicking away) were trying to cling onto the boats to avoid contact and mutual harm. Some base human beings had conveniently forgotten the warnings of the briefing centre.

It was thrilling for those in and out of water.

“Very exciting but I was really scared that they might swallow me. I will do it again,” said my daughter. My son kept describing them with wide-eyed wonder.

“An exciting yet uncomfortable feeling with the big creature touching me, almost coming on to me, underwater. If I had known before, I would have hesitated. On hindsight, the coolness of the deep blue ocean; bobbing up and down alongside the boat; diving occasionally to see these majestic creatures was a lifetime experience. I would do it again with a lesser sense of panic!” - was the more mature reaction.

Indeed, a lifetime experience. For the sake of the sharks, I would prefer them to be allowed to behave more naturally. I wish to encounter them in wilder environments. And say, ‘Swim on gently, O Giants, towards greener waters’. ■