

+ ISLA MUJERES IS A SHORT FERRY RIDE FROM CANCUN AND IS PRIMARILY KNOWN FOR TWO THINGS: 1) A PARTY TOWN THAT'S LESS FORMAL AND LESS EXPENSIVE THAN CANCUN, AND 2) A PLACE WHERE CATCHING A SAILFISH IS ALMOST A SURE THING – AT LEAST FOR ABOUT THREE MONTHS OF THE YEAR.

My wife Kathy and I are divers and amateur underwater photographers and, inspired by the spectacular photographs of sailfish taken by Amos Nauchum in 2007, we chartered the *Lilly M* out of Isla Mujeres in February 2008 to try our luck. We were accompanied by a friend, Dr. Wojciech Szaniawski, better known as just Wally.

Unfortunately, the peak sailfish season seems to coincide with windy days and rough seas. Of the seven days, we were skunked one day (no encounters), were

blown out by wind on one day (too dangerous for divers getting in and out of the boat), had four days of good encounters but dirty water (lots of excitement but poor picture quality), and had one day of calm winds and clear water. We free dove almost exclusively so we were able to swim fast enough to keep up with the bait balls that were doing their best not to be eaten by the ravenous sailfish surrounding them. We were lucky enough to have several encounters lasting over 30 minutes, and one that lasted over an hour, which I understand is quite unusual.

The area of the fishing grounds was to my surprise not open deep blue water. Rather, at this time of the year they're in an area with a water depth of 120 feet over a sand bottom, which is no doubt the reason for the dirty water when the winds were up. The area also requires a three-hour boat ride from the marina where the *Lilly M* and all the other boats we saw were kept. The captain said at one point that we were closer to Cuba than Isla Mujeres. Frigate birds working near the surface were the telltale indicator of baitballs and the accompanying sailfish.

On one occasion, we saw a wahoo that after stalking the baitball for a while dove through it and was promptly attacked by a sailfish that took a big piece out of its back. Unfortunately, it all happened so fast I didn't actually see if the sailfish bit him or speared him. We have pictures of the wahoo, but none with a piece of his back missing. That was the only fish that we saw other than sardines and sailfish, although we frequently saw bait ruffling the water surface which the captain said was caused by bonita. There was also an occasional manta ray or dolphin.

The baitballs varied in size from as much as eight feet or more in diameter to as little as three feet or less. We saw and photographed sailfish using their beaks to stun sardines when they were right at the surface, but at depth the sailfish simply swam through the bait with their mouths open. When you think about it, it would probably be extremely difficult to slash their beaks fast enough to stun a sardine when completely submerged. Swing your hand through the air and then do the same thing in water, and you'll see what I mean. The sailfish often had their sails



up but not always, and their colour and markings varied dramatically. We saw some that exhibited beautiful blue fluorescent bodies and tails, others with stripes, some that looked uniformly silvery, and others that had bronze-like colours. What the 'true' colours were I don't know, but I believe they were changing their colours from time to time for some purpose.

Needless to say, the fish (particularly the sardines) moved very rapidly, and even 1/250 shutter speed often wasn't fast enough to completely stop the action. You could actually see the fear in the sardine's eyes as they tried to evade the

following sailfish. They not only swam fast, but they changed depth diving virtually out of sight (visibility was probably 50 feet or more) then back to near the surface for reasons I can't comprehend since it seemed to me they were considerably more vulnerable having reduced the dimension of their surroundings from three to two. We never saw more than one sailfish attacking the bait ball at a time despite the fact that there were as many as 30 in the area. It seemed the sailfish worked to keep the bait ball intact and then took turns picking off a sardine for dinner. Between Kathy and I we have a dozen pictures with a sardine in a sailfish's mouth. Kathy has had a Nikon D70 in a Subal housing for a couple of years, and she presented me with a Nikon D300 for Christmas, and I was lucky enough to get one of the first Sea & Sea housings for it. Both have the capability to fire multiple shots (6 per second for the D300), which is necessary to capture just the right moment when fish are moving so rapidly.

If you're willing to spend six hours a day traveling in a boat just to get a few minutes in the water with feeding sailfish and know in advance that your odds of having clear enough water to take decent photographs are about 1 in 7, I suggest you give Isla Mujeres a try!



Sailfish at work and play

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Kathy Lewis