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Whale Shark Festival Schedule Announced; Environmental Leader Project Domino to Participate

Swimming with Whale Sharks and Other Ecotourism Adventures to Aid in the Survival of this Fragile Marine Environment

ISLA MUJERES, MEXICO -- March 23, 2009 – This summer, thousands of visitors to Isla Mujeres, Mexico will celebrate the beauty and culture of this fishing community while championing the need to preserve a fragile marine ecosystem at the Whale Shark Festival, a five-day extravaganza that showcases the achievements, the traditions and the environmental splendor of Isla Mujeres.

Announced today, Project Domino, an initiative sponsored by the Mexican government helping scientists study whale sharks, has joined the Festival as a partner. Project Domino is dedicated to the study, preservation and tracking of whale sharks in the waters surrounding the Yucatan. Their local Photo Identification library is shared with the Global Tracking Library.

Project Domino joins Festival sponsors Ceviche Tours, an ecotourism company, and the Department of Tourism for Isla Mujeres. Nonprofit partners include environmental leaders ECOCEAN, a renowned marine conservation organization; and Amigos de Isla Contoy A.C., which promotes the conservation of Isla Contoy, nature areas and regional projects of the Yucatan peninsula.

The Festival will be held July 15-19, 2009 in Isla Mujeres, Quintana Roo, Mexico.

Swimming with Whale Sharks

Guests can swim with whale sharks, an endangered species and the largest fish in the ocean. They can join the worldwide effort to protect and preserve whale sharks by adding their photos to ECOCEAN's international Whale Shark Photo-Identification Library Project, a visual database of the unique markings that allow scientists to identify – and track – individual whale sharks. The Project incorporates a worldwide network of ecotourism sites, with regional databases (including that of Project Domino) connected to the global Photo Identification Library.

By contributing their excursion photos of whale sharks to the Library, guests take part in the important efforts to identify, track and protect this endangered species as “Citizen Scientists.”

Family-Friendly Events

At the Festival, guests can participate in a wide variety of family-friendly activities:

- Live music, traditional dancing, booths and displays by local artisans
- Tours of the Turtle Farm on Isla Mujeres
- Private excursions to Boca Iglesia, the first church built in North America (in 1517)
- Snorkeling, diving adventures to the reefs and wrecks surrounding Isla Mujeres
- Trips to Contoy Island to tour the National Park, the most important nesting place of sea birds in all of the Mexican Caribbean, and the Bird Sanctuary
- Swimming with whale sharks, the world's largest fish
- Sport fishing charters, in-shore and offshore

“The Festival is an opportunity for travelers to participate in ecotourism adventures and to immerse themselves in the culture of this vibrant island community,” said John Vater, who co-founded Ceviche Tours with his wife, Adriana, and longtime friend and Isla Mujeres native Luis “Cuco” Refugio and his family. “They can also become ‘Citizen Scientists’ by participating in conservation initiatives that truly impact the survival of the marine environment in Isla Mujeres.”

Academic Seminars

During the Festival, preeminent scholars on marine biology, sustainable ecotourism and Mayan Architecture will present sessions for the academic community as well as the general public.

Confirmed speakers include:

- Catalina Galindo de Prince, executive director of Amigos de Isla Contoy, A.C.
- Alfonso Morales, Mayan archaeologist who recently served as Principal Investigator for the Proyecto Grupo de las Cruces at Palenque (Mexico)
- Brad Norman, ECOCEAN founder and *National Geographic* Emerging Explorers award-winner
- Rafael de la Parra, Lead Marine Biologist for Project Domino

Environmental Education for Kids

Children will also participate, enjoying projects where they explore the reefs, fish, and learn about the local bird population and conservation efforts.

“The Whale Shark Festival is a true celebration of the culture, heritage and the beautiful marine habitat that make Isla Mujeres the Jewel of the Yucatan Peninsula,” said Eyder Jahil Hoth Pérez, director of tourism for Isla Mujeres.

For photos and more information, visit www.whalesharkfest.com.

About Ceviche Tours

Ceviche Tours provides sustainable ecotourism to the indigenous peoples of Isla Mujeres, Mexico. Founded by John and Adriana Vater of Spa Adriana in Huntington Village, NY, with longtime friend and Isla Mujeres native Luis “Cuco” Refugio and his family, Ceviche Tours works with the indigenous islanders of Isla Mujeres to help preserve their culture and maintain the integrity and beauty of the surrounding marine environment. Through education and photo identification efforts, Ceviche Tours joins the worldwide effort to protect and preserve whale sharks. As participants on our whale shark tours, guests are invited to be part of those identification and tracking efforts.

For more information, please contact www.cevichetours.com.

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