



EXPEDITION DIARY Honduras 2009

By Jon Shrives & Thorben Selm

23 February

Hello everyone and welcome to the Honduras 2009 diary. I'm Jon, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. Thorben (my assistant) and I are just getting ready here in England, ready for the off later today, which brings me to the people you will be meeting during the expedition.

There's Thorben from Germany, expedition leader in training, who will be assisting me and learning the ropes of expedition leading. Thorben has lots of diving and first-aid experience, so he's the man to see if you are missing a leg or something along those lines. Then there's Marcio, our scientist from the Honduras Coral Reef Foundation (HCRF). There's also Jo Warwick from the UK who was hired by the HCRF to assist with diving and diving logistics. And there's yours truly.

We all look forward to meeting you in La Ceiba or on the island soon. My Honduras mobile number (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY) is +504 9842810 – or it should be provided the SIM is still working and has been kept up-to-date by our friends at HCRF. I'll confirm this in one of my next diary entries, but for now, please note this number. It may well change, as may many other things, so just remember to stay flexible :) – it's an expedition after all ;>

Anyway, I'll see slot 1 at the Quinta Real on Sunday. If you are around and would like to go out for a drink before the official start of the expedition on Sunday morning (be there at 07.00 or miss the boat, literally!), then I'll be hovering around the lobby at 20.00 on Saturday.

I must be off to pack up the last few things and then catch a flight with Thorben later today. If you are still trying to swot up for the expedition, remember to read the published reports from previous expeditions available via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

So long

Jon Shrives
Expedition leader

26 February

¡Hola everyone! Jon here again. Just thought I would send a little update, now that Thorben and I have navigated our way from Heathrow to Newark and Miami, finally arriving in Honduras yesterday. After a long journey, we were finally rewarded with a beautiful boat ride from La Ceiba out to the Cayos Cochinos islands. The weather is ideal at the moment, with a reasonably cool 24 degrees Celsius, but warm waters of 27 to 28 degrees. There have been some light rain showers, resulting in a few more bug than normal, so please remember to bring some long, light clothing for the evenings, such as trousers and shirts, and plenty of repellent. I would also suggest bringing a lightweight waterproof or poncho for the odd patch of rain you may encounter on the transfer over. Thorben and I have met with Joanna Warwick, the expedition dive instructor, and Marcio Arrone the expedition scientist. Together we have sat down and worked out our sampling schedule and dive sites for the Reef Check surveys. We're all very excited and looking forward to the next few weeks, where we will gather a wealth of data on the local reefs for both the local management agency and Reef Check.

I'll be traveling back to La Ceiba on Saturday morning with Thorben to finalise some paperwork and do a bit of shopping for the expedition. Thorben and I will be hanging around the cocktail bar at La Quinta Real Hotel from 19:30 – 20.00 on the Saturday evening if you would like to meet up with us for an informal dinner and introduction. Otherwise the expedition will officially start at 07:00 on the Sunday morning at La Quinta Real reception. Please be on time as the morning is the best time of day to transfer over by speed boat, whilst the waters are (hopefully) flat and calm.

Otherwise I hope all your preparations are going well. Please remember to bring plug adapters for any of your chargers or electrical equipment (the system on the island is a US plug 110V) and a small padlock for the personal lockers in the hut. As an added safety measure I would also like you to all have my personal mobile phone number for here in Honduras, which is +504 33842310. This is to supplement the previous emergency contact number you have been given. It's a different network and company, and in the unlikely event that the first number does not work, you can try this one. Again, this number is for emergency use only; for example if you are going to be late for assembly on the Sunday morning.

Otherwise good luck (¡Buena Suerte!) with your packing and respective journeys, we're all looking forward to meeting you very soon!

28 February

Hello everyone! Jon here again! Bienvenidos a Honduras (welcome to Honduras) for the slot 1 team, who even as we speak, are making their way by plane and bus, to meet in La Ceiba for the start of the 2009 expedition. Hopefully Thorben and I will meet up with the team later on this evening, at the Hotel Quinta Real.

We've had a busy few days on Cayos setting up for the start of the expedition, but Marcio and Thorben did manage to squeeze in a dive to check the mooring lines at some of the dives sites we'll use. This was Thorben's first dive in Cayos Cochinos, and whilst he was snorkeling over to their descent point, both he and Marcio were greeted by a gigantic stingray, leisurely gliding along the sandy bottom below. As if this wasn't enough, after their descent down to the reef, they encountered a beautiful spotted eagle ray, swimming effortlessly over the coral backdrop. Let's hope this first time luck holds out for both slot one and two teams!

Well, the weather is a sunny 27 degrees Celsius now and there are no clouds in the sky, so hopefully the man-flu I contracted from Newark airport (nothing against Newark airport, it's just that it was minus 3 Celsius there!) should clear up in time for our first team dive on Monday. Thorben and I have to shoot off now to do some last few bits of paperwork, but stay tuned as we'll be in touch over the next couple of days to let you know how the slot 1 settles in! ¡Hasta luego!

2 March

Hello everyone! So good news! We all made it safely back to the research base on Cayo Menor, early yesterday morning. Previously, on the Saturday, Thorben and I successfully met up with the slot 1 team for a few evening drinks and an informal introduction and chat. Early the next morning we made our way to the La Ceiba dock, in a small convoy of trucks and taxis. From there we had a calm and sunny crossing from La Ceiba to Cayos Cochinos and the research base. We spent the day settling in and unpacking, and after some dry but very necessary safety briefs, the team members were introduced to the traditional Reef Check training video featuring the now legendary Craig and his "Outstanding!" presentation. After the video we then all made our way down to the beach where we set up a dry run of the Reef Check surveys. A 100 m tape was laid out on the sand and the team members took it in turns to practice counting fish, assessing invertebrate numbers or recording substratum type (yes a lot of SD! (Sorry SD is the reef check code for sand! A bit of an in joke!)). There were also a few surprise coconuts doubling as parrotfish, corals, whale sharks, you name it! Imagination was key! The team finished off the day with some well deserved cold beers and casual chats around the porch, watching the sun go down over the palm trees and the tranquil Caribbean sea.

Today the team had perfect weather for being indoors for the Eco-Diver lectures; rain, rain and more rain! Unfortunately we couldn't do our check dives, instead we enjoyed the shallow seas episode of the BBC's Planet Earth, and started some Reef Check indicator species revision. Even as we speak the team members are eagerly testing each other on fish, invertebrate and coral identification!

Well goodbye for now, but it's more of an ¡Hasta Luego! (See you later!) as I'll be in touch soon to let you know how the rest of the training goes and brag about the weather (once it clears up!).

¡Ciao!

8 March

Hi everyone, for a change, and a special treat, I'm going to hand over to my assistant and expedition leader in training, Thorben, for this diary entry. But before I do that, just a quick reminder that the emergency contact number for the expedition has changed to +504 33842310 as the +504 9842810 number is no longer valid due to some problems with the SIM card.

Chat again soon, but for now, over to Thorben:

¡Buenos noches! (Yes, it is dark already) This is Thorben this time and I will give you a little update on what has been going on. Unfortunately for the past two days the weather has been either fairly miserable or windy or the sea was too choppy to go out and conduct some surveys. Instead we had some very interesting lectures by Jon. As these are usually given at Oxford University we all feel under intense academic pressure ;) Furthermore, we also conducted a few quizzes, sorry, I meant tests, for Reef Check and the group performed very well.

This morning we finally managed to get out and wet again. This was one of the few "fun dives" (believe it or not, we are actually here in order to do work!), diving El Avion, which translates to "The Aeroplane". Indeed we did find a two-engine aircraft at about 16 – 18 m depth, covered by loads of different forms of life, such as corals or sponges. Funnily, the door did bounce with the waves as if it was to say "Come on in" (which we didn't!). In the afternoon we went to visit some local fishing communities, getting a taste of the local way of life. It was interesting to see this and also that there are efforts to take fishing pressure off through local community projects. Projects such as a small restaurant and guesthouses for eco-tourism to provide alternative means of income, which makes them less dependent on fishing and thereby relieve fishing pressure. This is one of the many contributions aimed for by Biosphere Expeditions. It is good to see that it works!

We then de-briefed for the day. Now the team is very keen to catch up with the science again, i.e. the survey dives.

¡Hasta luego!

Thorben

10 March

Hola everyone! Jon here again. Thanks Thorben for the last diary entry.

So unfortunately Slot 1's run of bad luck has continued, with some more strong winds, and today we had to cancel a dive due to excessive current. However, slot 2 will be glad to hear, that although it's been windy, it has at least been very sunny too! We have managed some successful morning dives though, and the team has been working like a well-oiled machine. Yesterday's dive was a resounding success and completed in record time! At the moment we have our fingers crossed for a night where the wind will die down, so slot 1 can get a night dive in. Over the last few nights we've had some fantastic sightings of the majestic Eagle Rays, gliding around the dock, attracted in by the lights. We hope we can join them before Friday, when the slot 1 team have to head back to La Ceiba for the end of their time here! We have fingers and toes crossed for some better weather tomorrow afternoon, so please cross your fingers for us too! We'll be in touch again before we wrap up the slot 1 expedition on Friday! Stay tuned!

¡Hasta luego!

13 March

Hey everyone! Jon and Thorben here again! Well we're now in La Ceiba to wish goodbye to the outgoing slot 1 team and welcome the incoming slot 2. It's safe to say we managed to end the slot 1 expedition on a real high. After being dogged by bad weather and cancelled dives, the team came up with a great strategy to redouble our efforts. The team split in half, and on each dive we managed to do two transects! On top of this, we started doing back to back dives, to make the most of the good weather in the mornings. We would come back from our 8 am dive, and like a formula one pit crew, everyone would have a different job to turn the boat around inside of 20 minutes. Some would take the BCDs and regs, whilst others would scramble to get new, full SCUBA tanks, others taking the old ones away. Like a well oiled machine, the heroic efforts of the slot 1 team, allowed us to claw back 4 transects in one morning! The next day we repeated this feat, so that within 3 days, the exhausted team members managed to survey all but one transect - a weeks worth of work in just 3 mornings! They certainly earned their cold beers last night, and as a last night celebration we all chipped in to a big pile of snacks and swapped stories!

So, now we're in La Cebia, and sad farewells have been made. Slot 1 have laid down the gauntlet for slot 2. We're all excited to be meeting up with the slot 2 team members, and again Thorben and myself will be in La Quinta Real Hotel lobby at 19:00 if anyone fancies meeting for an informal dinner before the expedition officially starts on the Sunday morning at 6:30 am in the hotel lobby. Again, if anyone needs to contact me in an emergency, for example failure to meet on the Sunday or late to the meeting, my contact number is +504 33842310

Looking forward to meeting you all, and congratulations again to the slot 1 team!

¡Hasta luego y buen viaje!

15 March

¡Buenas tardes! Although I should say buenas dias or buenas noches, depending where you are in the world right now! So the Slot 2 team have arrived in Cayos Cochinos. We were treated to a relatively easy boat journey this morning, albeit a bit bumpier than slot 1's glassy clam sea two days ago. Even with the swells, we all enjoyed the early morning mist, lazily draped around the emerald green mountains of the Honduran coastline. This stunning scenery evidently inspired the new team, as they excitedly chirped away in the boat, swapping diving stories and discussing adventurous travels. I have to admire their spirit. Even though some have travelled over to Honduras from far and wide, without a stop-over, they seem to have shrugged off their jet lag, and even as we speak, they are starting their first practice Reef Check transect on the baking hot sand of the research station's beach. Even three hours of my voice, as I gave various introductory talks and briefs, doesn't seem to have broken their spirits! Their enthusiasm is definitely encouraging! Perhaps the traditional "Outstanding" Reef Check video presentation with Craig, is responsible for the buzz - who knows!

Well with the paperwork done and the practice transect finished, all the team have to do now is enjoy some well earned first day R&R. They're going to need it, as the training continues tomorrow with an orientation and identification dive in the morning and another three hours of my voice in the afternoon! Poor things, but hopefully the content of the identification lectures will keep them awake!

We'll be in touch again to update you on how the training went and also if we got to see any cool rays or other exciting flora and fauna on our first day!

Until then - ¡Cuidate! (take care!)

19 March

Hello everyone! So the slot 2 team have settled in well and today are conducting their second day of data collection. Today the team also tried out the patent pending slot 1 method of back to back dives, two transects per dive. They passed with flying colours! Even with a few team members missing due to ear problems and some colds. Best they stay out of the water - better safe than sorry when it comes to ears and diving, but hopefully we'll be back up to a full complement soon. The second and third day of training also went well, and the team participated in the new Reef Check quiz (sounds nicer than an exam!) to test their identification skills and find out what they really knew about fish, invertebrates and substrata. This was also a useful exercise for the team to find their strengths and weaknesses and what they need to revise.

Our first real survey dive was yesterday at Peli 4 - a nice introductory site, with a gentle slope of a reef wall. Conditions were calm and the water a clear crystal blue - quite a contrast to poor slot 1's first few days! As I finished laying the 100 m long transect tape for the 12 m deep survey, Stuart (my dive buddy) and I floated in amongst a breathtaking school of several hundred bar jack. Usually these predatory fish roam around in trios or alone, and are somewhat timid. It was a pleasant surprise for us to be met by this wall of silvery fish, who rather than shy, were boisterous enough to school around us for a good few minutes, close enough to touch! Although this was a great treat for Stuart and I, it was nothing compared to the eagle rays Karen and Mel swam with off the pier on Tuesday! The rays had been attracted in so close to the pier, that rather than use scuba, it was sufficient to hop into the shallow waters with just snorkelling gear and watch these beautiful creatures glide by in the gloom, every now and then, turned a golden colour by the myriad of torches.

Well, stay tuned for the next update in a couple of days, when I let you know how our first week of data collection went!

¡Hasta luego!

25 March

Hello all. Firstly, apologies I've not been in touch for a while, it's been a dramatic few days here on the island, to say the least! Shortly after the last diary entry, a helicopter crashed just off the pier. The pilot escaped with minor injuries and was the only person onboard. He was extremely lucky, as the helicopter flooded and capsized quickly, but he managed to get himself out, and the Honduran boat drivers raced to the scene in minutes. All of this occurred at night to make things even more difficult! Whilst the team members witnessed the crash, no one else was injured, and all the debris remained at the impact site. The pilot was treated by Thorben and a local Honduran doctor, whilst some of the team and I rushed around gathering medical supplies and oxygen. Fortunately the pilot was not seriously hurt, but was evacuated to the mainland hospital in La Ceiba, where he is making a full recovery.

The next few days involved rediscovering the wreck once it had sunk, and several insurance teams visiting to inspect the remains of the helicopter. On the plus side we now have a new artificial reef!

Then I developed malaria. Fortunately for me it was the milder strain: *Plasmodium vivax*. I had to take a big course of big pills and spent a couple more days in bed feeling pretty poorly, sorry for myself and embarrassed, that of all the people – it had to happen to the expedition leader! Fortunately my fever broke on Monday night and I transferred back to the island first thing on Tuesday to check on the team. Since then I've been recovering well.

Regardless of the drama, the team managed to slot back into collecting data on their morning dives. One of the team members, Will, was even treated to the sight of a beautiful and delicate sea horse, although the rest of us, green with envy, are trying to persuade him it was only a hallucination!

Nurse sharks and turtles still seem ever elusive for this team, and as a final chance, I've sent the team out on a last day fun dive to the site "Peli 2.5" aka "Dicky C", the site where the 2008 expedition discovered two nurse sharks on two separate occasions. So fingers crossed!

Well, it's time to pack up and finish a few last pieces of paper work. The team all passed their Reef Check exams with flying colours, and I treated them to some underwater footage of Biosphere Expeditions' new study site: the desert fjords and coral fields of Musandam in Oman. This afternoon I intend to take the team over to the Plantation Beach Hotel on the larger island for a bit of afternoon R&R as a final treat. Then it's the last night revelries, but not too late, as we have a very early transfer to La Ceiba in the morning! I'll be in touch again to let you all know how our transfer went. Until then, I wish you all a hearty: ¡Hasta luego y adios!

27 March

¡Hola! Well, we all made it across to the official end of the expedition, early (very early!) this morning in La Ceiba. Although we were all a bit blurry-eyed from the 5 a.m. start, we were treated to a beautiful crossing. As the palm tree islands of the Cayos Cochinos faded behind us, the tall, lush mountains of the coast cut a stunning horizon; multiple shades of lilacs and purple against the pink dawn sky. With the formal debrief, thanks and farewells made, only a few team members are now left in La Ceiba, as most made their onward journeys by plane and bus.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank both teams for their hard work. Both slots faced their own unique set of challenges, yet both rallied round when it counted and went that extra mile to get the work done, and get the data collected. ¡Muchísima gracias everyone!

We wish you all a ¡Buen Viaje! (safe journey) back to your homes, and hope to see you again on another Biosphere Expeditions project sometime! Thank you too, to you the readers, hopefully you've all enjoyed the diary and are hungry for more! So, until the next expedition... ¡Cuidate y Adios!

Jon and Thorben