

Whale Shark



TOURISM GUIDELINES for the BELIZE BARRIER REEF

In Belize, whale sharks seasonally visit Gladden Spit, a promontory midway along the Belize Barrier Reef to feed on the spawn of aggregating snappers—the only place this has been documented and is known to occur worldwide. Due to the importance of both snapper spawning aggregations and associated whale sharks, **Gladden Spit and the Silk Cayes were declared a marine reserve on 18 May 2000 (Gazette No. 68/2000)**, and whale shark tourism regulations were drafted to regulate the increasing number of whale shark tours. The reserve is co-managed by Friends of

Nature and The Belize Department of Fisheries.

Relatively slow moving animals, whale sharks are curious but docile. At Gladden Spit whale sharks will readily approach boats, snorkelers and divers if they do not feel threatened. They will often remain close to divers and snorkelers and even boats if not chased or harassed. To ensure that whale sharks are not harmed by tourism or boating activities in their main aggregation zone, please follow the guidelines below to good whale shark etiquette—as summarized from the Gladden Spit & Silk Cayes marine reserve regulations.

... Guidelines ... Guidelines ... Guidelines ...

TOUR GUIDES, BOATMEN AND FISHERMEN:

- All whale shark tour guides must hold a valid whale shark license
- Only 8 snorkelers per snorkel guide permitted
- Only 8 divers per licensed divemaster
- All boats should approach whale sharks at idle speed or no more than 2 knots/hour, and remain at least 50 feet (15 m) away from the animal(s)
- Do not block the whale shark's path with the boat.
- Discharge your passengers 50 feet (15 m) from the whale shark
- To avoid harassing the sharks and to maximize safety, tour boats should keep a distance of 200ft (60m) away from each other during a whale shark tour with snorkelers/divers in the water
- When the whale shark(s) has gone, have all snorkelers/divers on the surface get back into the boat
- When divers and snorkelers have returned to the boat, please leave the area to give other tour guides and guests an opportunity with a whale shark
- **All snorkelers and divers on whale shark tours must be out of the water by 5:30 pm**



SNORKELERS & DIVERS:

- Make sure to get a whale shark interaction briefing from your whale shark licensed tour guide
- **Do not touch, ride or chase** after a whale shark (a finable offense!)
- If diving, remain above **80 ft/24 m** to avoid disturbing reef fish spawning aggregations
- Remain at least **10 ft /3 m** away from the shark
- Do not block the whale shark's path
- When your tour guide tells you to leave the water, please pay attention and get in the boat as quickly as you can
- **Most importantly RELAX and let the whale shark approach you, it's only curious!**



ARE YOU A THREAT TO A WHALE SHARK?

Research in Belize and Australia's Ningaloo Reef has shown that whale sharks will tell you very clearly when they are feeling uncomfortable around you by:

- Banking or "giving you the shoulder" when near you
- Noticeably increasing its swimming speed
- Moving away from you & rapidly diving deep
- **So best to let the whale shark check you out!**

PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE...

By adhering to these guidelines you will have a better chance of interacting with a whale shark without annoying it or chasing it away. This will ensure that your fellow tour guides and tourists are also able to experience this wonderful interaction on a repeated basis.



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Gladden Spit & Silk Cayes Marine Reserve

Gladden Spit is a promontory also known as "Point of reef" or the elbow. The site has a short sloping shelf that drops off steeply at about 130 ft / 40 m to over 2,000 m (6,600 ft) depth within 10 km of the reef. Gladden Spit hosts over 25 species of reef fish that aggregate to spawn and a seasonal congregation of whale sharks.

Declared on 18 May 2000 at the Silk Cayes, and now co-managed by Fisheries and the NGO Friends of Nature, the marine reserve covers 10,523 hectares and includes a general use zone, a no-take zone around the Silk Cayes, a conch restoration zone and a whale shark and reef fish spawning aggregation conservation zone.

