

Bottom Time

IWC AQUATIMER DEEP THREE

BY JASON HEATON

The bow of the dive boat was angling precariously close to the jagged rocks of Bartolomé Island and the big outboards strained in reverse as we clambered onto the gunwales. The combination of heavy dive gear and four-foot swells made balancing difficult. I checked my regulator one last time and then at the count of three, the four of us back-rolled in unison into the foamy water. By the time I bobbed to the surface, I'd already been swept in front of the boat and I swiveled around to find the others. Our guide gave the thumbs-down and we all deflated our buoyancy vests and quickly descended. The strong currents here demanded a lot of lead and I sank like a stone, equalizing my sinuses as I kicked for the bottom.

I glanced at the IWC Aquatimer Deep Three on my wrist; its depth-gauge needle

indicated that I'd already gone 15m, yet the surge was still strong. Our group rendezvoused at an outcrop of rock, our trail of exhaled bubbles going sideways in the three-knot current. This was tough diving, yet the rewards were worth the effort. The day before, at North Seymour, we had swum with countless sharks of four different species, a flock of eagle rays and huge schools of baitfish. Now, I caught my breath and scanned the hazy water for life. As if on cue, the familiar profile of a scalloped hammerhead shark cruised past, oblivious to the current. Welcome to the Galapagos Islands.

This is a fitting place to test out the latest IWC dive watches for several reasons. First of all, the diving here is challenging and demands not only sharp skills, but also the best equipment. Secondly, IWC Schaffhausen has a special



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01 The IWC Aquatimer Deep Three, which accompanied the author during his dive at the Galapagos Islands 02 With a digital dive computer on his right wrist and the Aquatimer Deep Three on the left, the author was ready to mingle with the bountiful marine life 03 The strong currents around the Galapagos Islands attract a diverse population of sea creatures 04 The author, all set for the dive — albeit sans gloves

connection with these islands, having been a longtime supporter of the Charles Darwin Foundation, a research and environmental organization based here. And finally, the Galapagos Islands are known as the birthplace of Darwin's theories on natural selection and the origins of species — the latest Aquatimers themselves are the latest evolution of IWC's dive-watch line that dates back to 1967. I've dived with two examples of the Aquatimer's previous iterations, and it was three years ago that I tested the line's previous-generation chronograph for the very first "Bottom Time" column. Now, I've come full circle to test Darwin's theories underwater with the latest version. Have the new timepieces further adapted and evolved? Or have they gone the way of so many vestigial dive watches to become mere relics in an age of digital dive computers?

Diving in strong currents is much like moving in high winds. Staying streamlined and low to the ground minimizes the effort required to swim, and our small group picked our way from one rocky outcrop to another, pausing to rest in their leeward shadows to scan for wildlife. Where there was no shelter from the current, I clung to a jagged knob of rock, my legs trailing behind me like a flag and my mask being tugged sideways. Moving forward was less swimming than it was crawling hand over hand, careful not to cut fingers on the sharp volcanic rocks. I cursed my decision to leave gloves behind.

While the ocean currents around the Galapagos Islands make for tough diving,



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they are also what make it so rewarding. After all, it is these currents that bring such a bounty of underwater life there. Despite their position smack-dab on the equator, which makes the islands hot and arid, the waters that swirl around them are cold, brought up from the Southern Ocean and mixing with the cross-Pacific currents. The islands themselves are current or extinct volcanic cones rising from the sea floor in the middle of the Pacific, so when these blending currents hit their sloping flanks, they're forced to the surface, creating even more turbulence. Amidst all of this is a stew of plankton, which in turn brings huge schools of feeding fish of all shapes and sizes, and divers are able to witness the entire food chain, from bottom to top, all in one 60-minute dive.

IWC Schaffhausen has always been known as an engineering-driven company, and the Aquatimer is perhaps its greatest showcase.

While IWC's earliest dive watches were simple creatures housed in the same twin-crown Super Compressor cases as many other dive watches of the 1960s and '70s, the Aquatimer really came into its own as a unique species in the 1980s. This was when the German Navy came to Schaffhausen for timepieces for its combat and mine-clearance divers. The resulting watch was the now-legendary Ocean 2000, a minimalist masterpiece designed by Porsche Design, rendered in titanium and water-resistant to a crushing 2,000m. It became a design icon.

By the '90s, the Porsche Design partnership was over and the GST line of dive watches emerged. With this new family came the Deep One. This watch featured IWC's familiar Teutonic design cues, but added to it was perhaps the most useful function a diver could ask for: a mechanical depth gauge. Designed by then-IWC engineer Richard Habring, the Deep One,



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measuring 43mm in diameter, had an opening on its side that actually allowed water to flow into its case, where the pressure drove a center-mounted needle. This arrangement required modifying the watch's mechanical movement so the sweep seconds were in a subdial at six o'clock. The watch was sold with a small pump that could be used to test the function of the depth gauge without getting wet. The GST Deep One was ahead of its time, a bit finicky and sold in limited numbers, perhaps due to a dwindling target market of divers who had moved on to digital dive computers. But it remains an important ancestor in the Aquatimer's lineage.

From a perch at 20m, I scanned the blue distance for sharks and rays. A day earlier, we dived off of another island, North Seymour, and lost count of the sharks we saw there. The waters surrounding the Galapagos Islands are a protected marine reserve, and it's one of the last and best places on earth to dive with sharks. The far northern islands of Wolf and Darwin teem with migrating whale sharks and schools of hammerheads that number in the hundreds. At North Seymour, we saw a healthy school of more than a dozen of the alien-looking hammerheads, in addition to chunky Galapagos sharks, blacktips and the slender, docile whitetips. But Bartolomé is known more for its resident sea-lion colony, and as if on schedule, two sleek shapes corkscrewed into view. These were small females and they seemed curious and playful. Seemingly immune to the strong current that had us divers clinging to rocks to

keep from drifting out into the open ocean, the sea lions caroused at will among us, darting in and out from under a rock overhang, posing for our cameras before disappearing into the boiling froth at the surface for air.

IWC's second-generation depth-gauge watch, the Aquatimer Deep Two, improved on its predecessor, dispensing with the Bourdon-tube design and internal timing bezel. The case had swollen to 46mm and sported an outer rotating sapphire bezel. Instead of deliberately flooding the case, a port on the side of the case allowed water access to a pressure-sensing membrane that drove a rack-and-pinion system to move the depth-gauge needles (showing current and maximum depth) on the watch dial; the sweep seconds was back on the center pinion. The overall design was burlier and the watch much more reliable than the primordial Deep One, yet it lacked the clean lines of its predecessor. Also, IWC had moved away from titanium as a case material, to the disappointment of many who saw the material as inseparable from the company that pioneered its use. The Deep Two was an exceptional dive watch, but there was still room for improvement.

On the choppy two-hour boat ride out to Bartolomé, I slowly prepared for diving. This is a deliberate exercise, one each diver does in a silent ritual: slide the buoyancy vest onto the tank, tighten down the first-stage yoke, turn on the air and check pressure and regulator function, confirm weights and, finally, clip all hoses and gauges into place. Then, it's time to suit up. I

slithered into my 6.5mm hooded wetsuit, which was still damp and tacky from the previous day. On one wrist, I strapped on my digital dive computer; on the other, the Aquatimer Deep Three. I pressed the push-piece to reset the maximum-depth needle from yesterday's 19m setting. Far from a mere novelty, the addition of a depth gauge to a dive watch makes it a relevant backup instrument. It may be a cliché, but batteries do fail and straps break; and if a digital display goes dark, a diver has no depth or time reference. Smart divers always have a secondary gauge and bottom timer. The Deep Three puts both on one wrist.

The new watch would make Darwin proud: it is the culmination of everything IWC has learnt about building dive watches to date, and its evolutionary perfection is evident. Here is titanium again, the perfect metal from which to build a dive watch: corrosion-resistant, lightweight and extremely strong. The all-new bezel system is the most distinguishing feature of the new generation of Aquatimer, combining the cleaner look of the old Aquatimers with better functionality. The elapsed-timing ring once again sits under the sapphire crystal, protected and closer to the minute hand for precise read-off. Yet, rather than making use of a finicky and leak-prone crown to turn it, IWC has engineered a new clutch mechanism — the SafeDive — whereby the timing ring is turned via an outer rotating bezel. It works brilliantly: the bezel turns both way, while the one-way ratchet only allows the timing ring to rotate

PHOTOS GISHANI RATNAVAKE



anticlockwise to prevent an accidental bump from adding time to a dive. In a deliberate nod to its illustrious ancestry, the bezel design echoes that of the Ocean 2000.

Even the Deep Three's rubber strap is perfectly suited for underwater use: its accordion-style vents can be pulled taut and stretched over a wetsuit; at depth, when water pressure compresses a neoprene sleeve, the vents then contract to take up the slack and keep the strap tight on the wrist. The new Aquatimer family keeps the quick-release strap system of the previous generation, but adds a set of strap bars. While these bars lack shoulders and therefore aren't removable with a standard tool, they do allow for the use of a one-piece nylon strap — an option many divers will appreciate.

The depth-gauge mechanism of the Deep Three is largely carried over from the Deep Two and remains the best of breed in the rarified world of mechanical-depth-gauge watches. Two needles, one blue and one red, track both current and maximum depth — the latter reading being critical to calculating no-decompression times and, later, logging of a dive. One improvement to the new mechanism is the ability to fine-tune the gauge. A small thumb wheel on the left side of the case can be turned to align the zero position of the depth markers. It's something you will unlikely need, but IWC left nothing to chance with this latest flagship dive watch.

In my peripheral vision, silhouetted against the bright surface, I saw a much larger sea lion

angling toward our ledge. Its bulk suggested a male and we had been warned to keep an eye on these protective alphas. Sure enough, the graceful giant was aggressive, scattering the coy females and brushing by us with authority. At one point, he stopped directly in front of me, his big eyes meeting mine. We were two mammals looking at each other, one perfectly adapted for this environment, the other ill-suited. In a show of force, he opened his mouth and barked in my face, a rush of bubbles exhaled toward me as if to say, "You don't belong here", before swimming away. A glance at my Deep Three told me the same. At 20m, I'd have a maximum of 60 minutes before requiring decompression time and the minute hand crept toward the bezel's "50" mark. Following the group, I let go of the rocks and let the current take me out toward the blue where we slowly ascended.

At five meters, I leveled off and drifted, twisting the Aquatimer's bezel to time my three-minute safety stop. Our guide inflated a yellow marker buoy and I watched it unfurl like a slow-motion kite toward the surface to signal the boat to come and fetch us. The rocks of the island were well behind us, only thousand of miles of Pacific in view now as we drifted further offshore. Looking down, I caught sight of two huge mobula rays flapping gracefully below, arching up and down in the current, mouths open to swallow up plankton before disappearing into the blue. Time was up and I let myself rise to the surface. Farewell, Galapagos. ★



Seaworthy: the IWC Aquatimer Deep Three is fitted with a mechanical depth gauge, with indications of current and maximum depths, and features the all-new SafeDive bezel system comprising an inner and outer rotating bezel