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# SHARK MANIA!



1: Divers cast a wary eye on the grey reef sharks below  
2: "Fish are friends...not food!"

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> THE OBJECTIVE, OF COURSE, WAS TO DIVE WITH SHARKS AS OFTEN AS WE COULD, AND WITH AS MANY DIFFERENT TYPES AS POSSIBLE. SIX DIFFERENT ISLANDS OVER 30 DAYS. THIS WAS A TRUE SOUTH SEAS ADVENTURE: EXPLORING THE RICH AND VARIED UNDERWATER WILDERNESS OF FRENCH POLYNESIA.

Today we were after grey reef sharks at Muri Muri, an exciting open ocean dive just outside the reef on Bora Bora. With seas running at two metres, the small inflatable bounced wildly as we approached the site. Before long, it was time to roll over the side into the warm cobalt blue water, escaping the rollers for the relative peace underwater. The sharks were there instantly. First, a fleeting glimpse of a curious blacktip swimming furtively just a few feet below the surface. Then, almost as quickly, a pack of grey reef sharks came in, some over two metres long. Dozens of them, circling, eyeing us with wary pale green eyes. They filled the water column... sharks were above, below, in front and behind us. A note from our journal recorded the moment perfectly: "It's very hard to focus on f/stops, exposure and strobe control settings when there are dozens of sharks circling inches away from your mask!"

Muri Muri is only one of several dives at Bora Bora where sharks can regularly be seen. Bora Bora is most famous for its indescribably beautiful lagoon and dramatic volcanic peaks, but its underwater adventures shouldn't be taken lightly. On this dive we swam along a wondrous dropoff with dozens of blacktip

and grey reef sharks, along with schools of barracuda and jack in about 30 metres. These sharks are very accustomed to scuba divers. In fact, some of the local operators actually feed them, which accounts for their boldness and curiosity.

Bora Bora's lesser-known cousin Moorea affords divers with some adrenaline-fueled dives with lemon sharks. Here, we dove at the Dropoff, a lovely reef just a few minutes away from the resort by boat. With lionfish, turtles and large schools of butterfly fish to occupy our attention, we almost forgot we were looking for sharks – until a 2.5 metre lemon shark suddenly appeared over a ridge and caused us to skip a breath. These sharks are immense and can often be seen swimming close to the bottom searching for their next meal. In *Jaws*, Captain Quint describes the black doll-like eyes of the great white shark. Lemon sharks, in contrast, have a yellowish tinge to their eyes, hence their name.

After spending time in the more touristy and well known islands near Tahiti, we headed north to the more remote Tuamotos. First stop Manihi. This small atoll is just an hour or so by air from Tahiti, but it feels like a world away. Rising just a few feet above sea level, the

small strip of land that circles the lagoon hosts a few hotels, a small town and a few residences. The airport is a small open-air shack and arriving here sets the tone for the entire visit.

Inside the lagoon is a fabulous dive called The Circus, which is really a manta ray cleaning station. Each morning, a dozen or more of these gentle giants emerge from the edge of visibility to circle several large rock outcroppings hoping to be 'cleaned' by resident butterflyfish. Divers are brought to the bottom in about 25 metres and, after just a few quiet moments of remaining still, the action begins in earnest.

Outside the Pass (a cut on the circling reef of the atoll), however, is where our senses were overwhelmed. Rolling backwards off the small skiff, we entered a world of crystalline beauty. Unlike the slightly cloudy water inside the lagoon, here we found almost gin-clear water. Hard corals in riotous green, yellow, purple and fuchsia extended as far as the eye could see. We swam as if inside a Monet painting. And, just to kick it up a notch, blacktip reef sharks greeted us at every turn, casting their curious gaze

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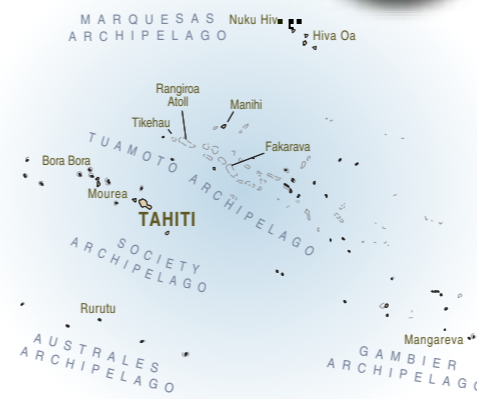
upon us as we drifted over the unspoiled wilderness. Manihi, however, was but a prelude for the adventures to come.

Next stop Fakarava, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and home to some of the most breathtaking coral reefs we've ever encountered. Another atoll in the vast Pacific north of Tahiti, Fakarava boasts just a few pensiones and hotels for guests and a small town near the north pass. Here, despite some heavy rains, we found ourselves diving with more grey reef sharks, blacktips and, on occasion, the peculiarly-shaped Napoleon wrasse.

One afternoon, as we drifted slowly along the dropoff at 30 metres, we literally stopped in our tracks. Ahead was a massive manta ray around three metres wide, maybe more. We stopped... and so did she. For several minutes, neither diver nor manta moved an inch. Then, tentatively, the ray began to creep slowly



From the left:  
A juvenile blacktip reef shark swims in the shallows of the Blue Lagoon in Rangiroa.  
Blacktip Reef Shark in the waters of Bora Bora  
Some of the Bora Bora beaches feel like a living, breathing Corona Beer TV commercial!  
Silvertip reef sharks can be found in Rangiroa's passes.  
The Bora Bora lagoon is filled with colourful reef fish.  
Grey Reef Sharks gather beneath the dive boat in Bora Bora



## REQUIEM SHARKS (*Carcharhinidae*)

The *Carcharhinidae* family are migratory, live-bearing sharks of warm seas such as the silvertip shark, grey reef shark, blacktip reef shark and the lemon shark. Family members have the usual carcharhiniform characteristics: the eyes are round, the pectoral fins are completely behind the five gill slits, and they feed on a wide variety of bony fishes, eagle rays, smaller sharks, cephalopods, crustaceans, and have also been known to feed on sea snakes and seabirds.

The silvertip shark (*Carcharhinus albimarginatus*) can grow up to 3m in length. They are an aggressive, powerful apex predator which may be potentially dangerous to humans, as they often approach divers quite closely.

The lemon shark (*Negaprion brevirostris*) can also grow up to 3m in length, and while they've been reported to attack humans, there's never been a death.

The grey reef shark (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) can grow up to 1.9m in length. They are fast-swimming, agile, and aggressive predators despite their moderate size. They were the first shark species known to perform a threat display, which involves a 'hunched' posture with characteristically dropped pectoral fins, and an exaggerated, side-to-side swimming motion.

The blacktip reef shark (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) can grow up to 1.6m in length. They are timid and skittish sharks that are difficult to approach and seldom pose a danger to humans unless roused by food.

currents, Tiputa is a heart-stopping drift dive like no other. We entered the water on the ocean side and immediately began a descent to 40 metres. Along the way were omnipresent blacktip reef sharks and the larger grey reefs.

Suddenly, we could hear the strident calls of the dive master as he pointed excitedly into the blue and screamed into his regulator: a large silky shark was cruising up from the deep and headed right towards us. Silky sharks are sleek and beautiful underwater, even if a bit unpredictable. This was an unexpected encounter... and just as soon as it began, the shark disappeared as we were swept up in the incoming current. In a few short moments we were flying over the bottom in a 9-knot current. Torrents of water flow through this pass each day, and on the surface large standing waves hint at the maelstrom below. We cruised over a bottom stripped bare of growth by the force of the water. Our hearts raced as

we approached a rise in the bottom and, with computers screaming, we grabbed onto the rocks with all of our strength and pulled ourselves over and behind the rocky outcrop into the relative quiet of a small gully.

As we crouched below the current spewing over the ridge, small rocks rolled by and the roar of the moving water was distinct. But, even here, sharks carve a living; we spotted a dozen or so whitetips gathered under a rocky shelf, waiting out the tidal flow in calm water. Tiputa is a must-do dive but it requires great buoyancy skills and should only be attempted by those with the proper experience.

Outside the reef at Avaturu Pass we found ourselves diving with silvertip sharks along a picture-perfect reef and dropoff. Silvertips are stocky animals that look as if they mean business. This was our sixth



Left: A lemon shark comes in for a close look in Moorea.  
Top: Tiputa Pass in Rangiroa creates prodigious currents.



different species of shark in Polynesian waters! Suddenly, a pod of dolphin appeared in the distance, their clicks and whistles clearly audible. Later, we'd all laugh as the dive master cautioned us from looking to dive with dolphins again: "You have to be careful," he said in a heavy French accent. "Sharks follow the dolphins looking for the weakest dolphin. And when you are in the water, you are the weakest dolphin!"

Our final dives on this magnificent adventure were off the main island of Tahiti. We hadn't been enthusiastic about diving there... after all, it's the main population centre and how good could the diving be? And would we see sharks?

After a quiet entry along a pretty reef called St. Etienne's Dropoff we stopped

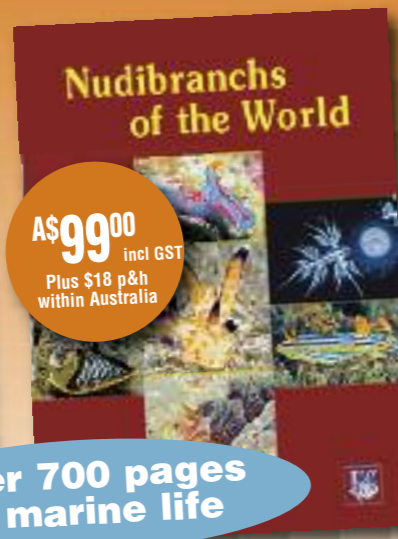
and peered under a rocky ledge. There, resting in the narrow confines of the wall was a small whitetip reef shark! 30 days, six islands, six species of shark... and now we'd seen sharks on every island!

The islands of French Polynesia are some of the most beautiful in the world. The lagoons, beaches, mountains and resorts are second to none. Underwater, divers are treated to encounters each and every day that would be the envy of divers the world over: sharks, turtles, rays, barracuda, Napoleon wrasse, tuna and lionfish are just a few of the attractions awaiting adventurous divers. So pack your gear, book a flight and make sure you bring enough memory for your digital camera to take lots of pictures... because you're gonna need it!

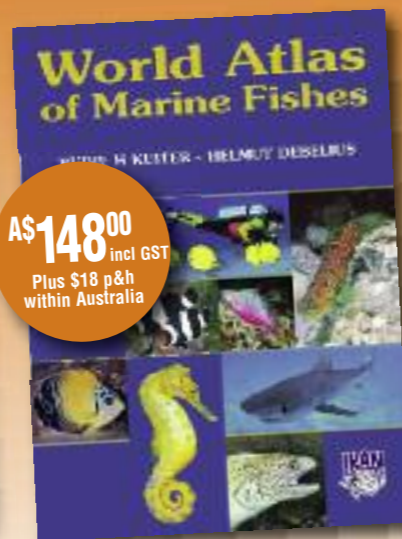
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