

# BEQA THE SERIOUS SHARKS

> EARLY FEBRUARY EIGHT VERY KEEN SHARK DIVERS LEFT FOR BEQA LAGOON WITH GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND A LITTLE TREPIDATION TO DIVE WITH 'SERIOUS' SHARKS. EIGHT SPECIES WERE ON THE AGENDA INCLUDING TAWNY NURSE, SICKLEFIN LEMON, WHITETIP REEF, BLACKTIP, GREY REEF, SILVERTIP, BULL – AND MAYBE EVEN TIGERS.

: **RON HUNTER**  
IMAGES CATE BARROW

**B**eqa Adventure Divers are the guardians of the Beqa Lagoon Shark Reef Marine Protected Area (MPA) which was created to protect and study the precious populations of shark species in the lagoon. Four mornings a week Beqa Adventure Divers conduct a trio of big fish and shark handfeeds during a double dive – The Big Fish Encounter – at Shark Reef MPA. Each week between 800 to 1,000 kilos of fish frames and heads are re-introduced to the food chain during these very well controlled and safe shark feeds.

The feed starts the moment the boat pulls up at the mooring; fish frames are tossed over the side and immediately devoured by the most aggressive critters in the MPA, the scores of giant trevally that maraud here. The sound of them crunching the fish frames sets off the

dinner gong for the rest of the denizens of the MPA.

We're quickly in the water gathered around our Fijian dive guides and shark feeders, and descend together to the first of three feeding stations at 29 metres. This is the 'Arena'. All the way down we're in a whirlpool of massive giant trevally (GTs), red bass and hundreds of other smaller fish. We settle along a coral boulder buttress and our cameras are soon firing as more fish parts are pulled out of the bins. Now the GTs really get into it, they're such aggressive fish, swooping in to snatch and swallow everything on offer including massive fishheads offered by the feeders. We've been advised to wear black gloves lest our lily-white hands also become part of the food chain. Cameras are also at risk, and kept close to your body. Black long-sleeved and legged wetsuits are the order



Main: Bull shark  
Left: Sickle-fin lemon shark

of the day. These simple rules keep body parts and equipment safe from the GTs.

The noise of the GTs feeding starts to attract bigger residents of the MPA. A huge shape glides in, a massive Queensland giant grouper estimated to weigh one tonne; this is one of two giant groupers that enjoy a hand-delivered snack before unhurriedly gliding off into the blue. These groupers are at the top of the food chain, and the only big fish entirely unfazed by the aggressive GTs.

Three other characters of the reef suddenly arrive for their share of the spoils. Three tawny nurse sharks suck in any fish pieces offered, but it's not fast enough for them so they barge in and compete to get their heads right inside the bins full of food. These three metre long gentle sharks invariably bring a smile to everyone there, including the Fijian feeders.

Some of us move down to the actual feeding Arena and are right in the action

with an aluminium prodder. We all start looking over our shoulders – these are apex predators with a bad reputation. Our time at this depth is almost up, and the GTs are really darting around now as the bin is emptied of fish parts. Six bull sharks are now in and the action has moved up a notch so we withdraw to the observation area two metres away and leave the bulls and GTs to sort out the remains of the food, in seconds it's all gone and relative calm ensues.

Seventeen minutes into the dive our no-deco limit approaches so we move slowly up the wall to The Den, the next feeding station at 10 metres. The GTs are even more aggressive here, at times barging into the feeder, once even knocking him over; no amount of prodding deters them for more than a second or two. Grey reef and whitetips circle endeavouring to get a feed, but are all intimidated by the marauding GTs. The whitetip sharks know the rules and approach the Fijian feeder slowly from the right direction and are rewarded with handfed fish scraps. Meanwhile other dive guides try prodding them away with aluminium poles but are only partially successful as the GTs now number around 50 and just keep on coming. The grey reef sharks are bulky, shiny, very fast, and can also be quite ill-mannered, approaching the feeder too fast from the wrong side or from above, all against the 'code of conduct', they're prodded away without receiving any food. They attempt darting in again until one or two of them remember their manners, and though still moving quickly, they do approach down low from the correct side and are then fed.

There's a second stage to this shallow feeding area; there's no surge this day, so we're able to ascend to the reeftop at three metres. Here in the shallows blacktip sharks patrol, beautifully marked, streamlined and very fast. They're slightly better mannered than the grey reefies, dashing in for a feed while competing with the GTs, who cause all the problems with their dominant behaviour. The whitetips are also up here, and again are polite and rewarded with food and affectionate strokes by the Fijian feeder. Photo opps are great – sparkling light bounces off the glistening bodies of the blacktips, and we have to be quick to get the shot. What a great safety stop before ascending to the waiting boat.

Our second dive is to the third feeding

station at 16 metres, the Take Out. A perforated stainless steel box of about one cubic metre holds fish pieces and heads for the bull sharks. This is their designated feeding station, and here we may see one of the two tiger sharks that occasionally visit the MPA if we're lucky (lucky?). We again line up behind a low (too low?) buttress of coral rubble; the Fijian feeder is just two metres in front of us. Around 100 or more GTs are swirling around the box and the feeder, the other Fijian feeders and guides are positioned strategically behind and to the side of us, all armed with aluminium prodders. Safety concerns are paramount and the tried and tested feeding procedure commences. One Fijian feeder will take an armful of fish pieces to around six metres above the feeding station, prodding the GTs away before letting the lot go and swimming back down to the group. All hell breaks loose, with the GTs in an absolute feeding frenzy, red bass and other smaller predatory fish dart in for anything the GTs miss. Then they're circling, darting massive shapes join the fray – the big bulls have arrived in numbers.

At first cautious the bull sharks swim by the feeding box and the waiting Fijian feeder, Rusi, easily recognised by his bright yellow hood. The smaller bull sharks dash in much too fast and are reminded of the rules; they are soon replaced by the big bull sharks who are much better mannered, approaching Rusi slowly and then opening their mouths they take the offered fishhead biting onto it, before gulping it down as they speed away. As quickly as one is fed, another lines up and cruises in for a share. The big females seem more dominant and the smaller males and lesser females wait their turn in the 'pecking order'. It is very hard to count the sharks, the visibility is around 20 to 25 metres at the start, but this reduces as the coral sand is stirred up. Visibility drops to eight or 10 metres adding another dimension as the bull sharks loom from the floating detritus. We now have at least 30 bulls lining up for their feed or swimming rapidly by, things are getting very exciting. One large female, instead of turning to her left after being fed, turns right and speeds past us less than a metre away. Eyes wide, cameras blazing, it's a 'puckering moment' for us all. Shark after shark is fed, they keep on coming. Every so often one comes right up to us, mouth full of fish head, showing all those teeth

between its drawn back lips – before you can blink, its tail sweeps past your face as it speeds off to our right.

Everyone is alert, particularly Rusi, who must maintain utmost concentration. Three smaller two metre long bull sharks are tussling over a dropped fishhead right next to Rusi; he kicks them away with his fins and gives one a push on the nose. After 15 minutes Rusi is exhausted and leaves the feeder's spot with a bunch of fish frames to draw the bulls up above us



Top: Grey reef shark  
Bottom: Bull shark turning politely

– GTs circle our heads, swirls from their tails buffet our bodies. The tawny nurse sharks almost brush against us with mouths full of food – there's so much happening so fast it's hard to know where or what to photograph.

Other large shapes are circling, coming into view, then disappearing and reappearing. Four, no, five... suddenly there's 12 bull sharks that have been attracted to the feeding station. One is a huge female 'Big Momma', nearly three metres long; her massive girth makes her seem twice as big as the other two to two and a half metre long bulls also circling. The bull sharks do not, however, come into be fed – they know this is not their designated feeding station, all they might get here is a punch on the nose or a poke

and lets the food go, then takes up a guarding role behind us. Wati is the new feeder, not as experienced as Rusi, but with cat-like reflexes and unbelievable calm, he begins to feed the line-up of sharks. A smaller male bull dashes in and head butts Wati, just a mistake on the shark's part Wati explains later, but bad manners and the shark gets a punch on the nose to remind him of the rules. Wati keeps up a constant feed for the next 10 minutes and the bulls keep on coming. Pedro replaces Wati and the action continues. Another 10 minutes and the fish pieces are exhausted – comparative calm returns to Shark Reef. Our dive time of 40 minutes is up and we cautiously return up the reef wall; a safety stop at five metres under the boat then back onboard. Just another dive in a tropical paradise!

The shark feed at Shark Reef in Beqa

#### SHARK CODE OF CONDUCT

- Do not approach the feeder too fast or you will not be fed.
- Do not approach the feeder from the wrong side or you will not be fed.
- Do not approach the feeder from above or you will not be fed!

Top: Bull sharks above tawny shark  
Bottom: Bull shark with Rusi at feeding station

Lagoon is conducted under very strict and very safe procedures, The attentiveness and skills, not to mention plain guts of the Fijian dive guides and feeders is absolutely amazing and without them this fantastic experience would not be possible.

In Beqa Lagoon we interspersed our shark dives with soft coral reef and wreck dives. These dives are a story unto themselves

and are a must-do there. The reef dives are again made so good by the knowledge of the Fijian dive guides.

On one memorable day we were travelling across Beqa Lagoon on our way to dive the reefs near Beqa Island. Half-way there we came upon a huge pod of pilot whales. David immediately halted the boat and said, "let's get in the water and swim with them". The Fijian

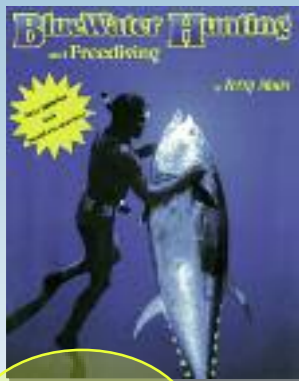
dive guides who are absolutely fearless with the bull and tiger sharks, all rolled their eyes and said "No it's too dangerous, we might get eaten". David's years of experience swimming with whales including humpback and pilot whales in Tonga won out, and everyone got into the water and swam with these whales for over an hour. Pilot whales are usually on the move and encounters with them consist of them swimming by. Not this time – these whales swam up to and around the snorkelers in the water as close as two metres away checking us out. The Fijian dive guides once back onboard were all cheering and smiling having experienced such a great unplanned stop on the way to the dive sites.

Would I go back to do it again? Hell yes! Oh! And by the way, we did not see a tiger shark this time, but maybe when we return ...?



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## BEQA SHARKS IN 2012

**D**ive Forster at Fisherman's Wharf will be running another tour to Shark Reef and Beqa Lagoon in Fiji in February 2012 – this is when the biggest concentration of bull sharks occurs. This tour will be led by world famous shark expert David Hinshelwood. David will also be conducting (at no charge) a PADI Shark Awareness course whilst he is there – only for the first eight divers to book though – so early bookings are advisable.

### TRIP FACT FILE:

Departure date ex Sydney, Australia - 1 February 2012

Return date ex Nadi, Fiji - 10 February 2012

### Inclusions:

- Return airfares ex Sydney including taxes
- Return road transfers Nadi / Beqa Lagoon
- Nine nights' twin-share deluxe, airconditioned accommodation at Lagoon Resort
- Three superb meals each day
- Eight dives (four days) with the 'Serious Sharks' of Beqa Lagoon
- Six dives (three days) on soft coral reefs and wrecks
- Cylinders, weightbelts, and dive guide services
- Complimentary PADI Shark Awareness Course, conducted by tour leader, David
- Cost ex Sydney \$AUD3200; ex Nadi \$AUD2650 (as at 1 January 2011 and subject to change)

Email [ron@diveforster.com.au](mailto:ron@diveforster.com.au) for more information on the tour to Beqa Lagoon

### Ron Hunter's Dive Expeditions

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