

SHARKS, FISH

& OTHER THINGS

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WORLD WIDE, DIVING WITH SHARKS, LARGE SCHOOLS OF PELAGIC FISH, UNAFRAID REEF FISH IN WARM CLEAR WATER HAS BECOME RATHER HARD TO FIND. MOST OF THE GOOD SPOTS WE FREQUENTED 30 OR 40 YEARS AGO HAVE BEEN DENUED OF LIFE TO THE POINT WHERE WE SIMPLY NO LONGER GO TO THOSE PLACES ANY MORE.

Serious overfishing is without doubt the main culprit, often followed by unchecked pollution – this means Ron and I are constantly looking for new dive locations rich in the wide variety of marine animals suitable for our photography.

We've always known that the passes through the reefs of the Tuamotus group of atolls were rich in large marine life but it was so far away we'd never managed to get there. Last year we had the opportunity to go and see for ourselves. What a rewarding dive trip it turned out to be.

Lying as they do on the opposite side of the Pacific to Australia, the waters of Tahiti have remained mostly free from the ravenous onslaught of foreign fishermen. Sprinkled across four million square kilometres of clear, unpolluted warm Pacific Ocean, the variety and quality of the diving locations are amazing. It was like going back to a time before long lines, drift nets and shark fin soup! It's not easy to get there. Eight hours flying time from Sydney via Auckland just to reach Papeete seems awkward, but it is the only way. It's

also very expensive compared to say Fiji or Vanuatu, but the diving around the islands of Tahiti has to be some of the most exciting in the world.

Ron and I spent three wonderful weeks diving some of the more remote, as well as the most accessible, dive locations French Polynesia has to offer. The first two weeks were on the *Tahiti Aggressor* a fantastic vessel equipped for some of the most extreme diving we've ever experienced. The *Aggressor* works the huge atolls which are easily reached out of Rangiroa I'm no weakling when it comes to hard core diving, but when the dive master taped a radio with an antenna to my BC and fastened a reef hook to the strap I did start to wonder. 'It's just an extra safety precaution' we were told and, although I never needed it, there were several times while I was drifting around the lagoon waiting to be picked up, that little yellow radio poking into my neck was a definite comfort.

Unlike Tahiti and its adjacent islands which are high and spectacular, the coral cays of the Tuamotus lie low to the ocean.

Linked as they are by coral flats, the few passes that flow between the open ocean and the enclosed waters are a highway for all sea creatures wishing to leave or enter the huge lagoons. Great hammerheads, lemon sharks, whitetips, silvertips, nurse sharks, manta rays, eagle rays and of course the famous schools of grey reef all use the passes. Seemingly unafraid of divers, they fly with the current on the rising tide through the pass to feed in the tranquil lagoon waters. We divers, cameras in hand, like to fly with them. An experienced divemaster who knows the best gullies and caves to rest in is essential, as the uninitiated could easily take the wrong gutter and miss most of the big animals and all the excitement.

A general pass dive from the *Tahiti Aggressor* goes like this. The dive tender with four divemasters and 16 divers positions itself in the ocean some distance from the pass. Although there's no bottom to be seen, the water is already flowing at around two knots towards the entrance. We always dove in two very separate groups. Each group would follow the divemaster into the water and drop down



to about 70 to 90 feet. First a few sharks and maybe a dolphin or two would appear then the bottom would rise from the blue depths until at 80 feet you and the reef are on a collision course.

Sharks, hundreds of them already visible, are milling around beneath you. When it seems you'll collide with the lip of the pass you hook in. Well, everyone else would hook in. Ron and I found it easier to film just bracing against the corals. After maybe 15 minutes during which the sharks, quite unafraid, swim all around, you get the signal to unhook which you must do immediately or get left behind.

This is how they start what must be some of the greatest drift dives in the world. Certainly some of the best and most exciting ones I've ever experienced.

There are hundreds of sharks, thousands of fish and, if you're lucky eagle rays by the dozen all using the pass as a non-stop freeway. We know from the records that 30 years ago these sharks would react aggressively towards divers twisting and turning in a show of unafraid belligerence. Now it seems we are simply accepted as other marine creatures using the pass as a highway into the lagoon.

The grey reef sharks gather in huge schools facing the current. The idea (well, mine anyhow) was to somehow stop before I was swirled through the pack and take as many photographs as possible. You have to take plenty because at least half of the shots will have either bubbles or another fish in front of your lens and it's no use shooing the fish away as they simply ignore you. For most of the dives I used a video camera but on several occasions I carried a digital in a home made (Ron Taylor!) housing. The resulting images were, even to me, amazing.

On several dives one of the divemasters released a little food which always caused commotion amongst the sharks and the fish. While exciting to watch, my

best photos were captured without food in the water while braced against the flow in front of a pack of sharks which were swimming towards me. I never used a flash but the camera found enough light to produce some exceptional images. Of course it wasn't all pass diving. There were plenty of corner dives where anything could happen and generally did. Corner dives took place out of the current when the tide was dropping and the water, somewhat murky, was flowing from the lagoon and emptying into the open ocean.

It was on a corner dive where I met the very friendly manta ray and two large silvertips who, I was told, visit on every dive. At Rangiroa there's one corner dive where dozens of turtles feeding on black sponge seem to pose for the camera and another where a large dolphin swims around the divers.

What I loved the most was the water clarity off the fringing reefs. It was without any particles and, if you could avoid other people's bubbles and the thousands of black triggerfish that always seemed to be swarming before the lens, the ensuing photography had a wonderful sparkle.

We were there for the sharks but the fish were surprisingly tame and at times I longed for my fish photographing camera. There were many big schools of different fish species all completely unafraid. On inquiring how there came to be so many grouper and other fish in such large numbers I was told that ciguatera (fish poisoning) was a problem with most of the reef fish. Only open water species were safe to eat.

Our two weeks of eating, diving and sleeping flew by. It was our second trip on the *Tahiti Aggressor*. Next time we plan to use shore-based dive operators and concentrate on what for us were the best dive locations for large animals. Once we needed to go no further than the Barrier Reef or Coral Sea for good shark action but indiscriminate long liners have depleted



the large marine life that back in the 60s and 70s was so prolific.

Our friend and dive buddy Mike Neumann kept telling us we must see the big lemon sharks at Moorea before we left the islands. We'd already had several rather pleasant dives off the island of Tahiti on route to the Tuamotus, but the lemon sharks sounded amazing. We decided it was a must.

We only had two days of diving left when we arrived at the Intercontinental Beachcomber Resort 27 miles from the Moorea ferry pier. The hotel, which meandered along and sometimes over the lagoon, seemed to have everything including a very fine dive operation. Sadly, due to the monsoon weather, conditions were rough. Full of hope we went to the dive shop and requested giant lemon sharks, blacktips and friendly rays. The divemaster, somewhat taken aback by two elderly divers wanting so much in just three dives, promised to do his best.

At 9 am next morning we were bouncing around over a patch of ocean outside the reef. Already a dozen blacktip sharks were circling our dive boat. Our divemaster was dropping a few pieces of fish into the water. This, he said, was necessary to attract the big lemon sharks into the shallower water.

Twelve metres down we were confronted with fish bedlam. Huge yellowtail kingfish of a size not seen by us since the 60s mixed with dozens of blacktips swirled around the divemaster. The pesky black triggerfish were there by the hundreds. I thought 'thank goodness for Photoshop, I can stamp them out'. It was a really impressive feed and one they do every day. The big lemons arrived in a pack and they were very big! It was obvious they were used to being handfed for they took their turn approaching the feeder in a polite and gentle fashion.

Compared to the elegant, beautifully marked blacktips, the lemons appeared

graceless and plain. Their small eyes and dull greyish skin didn't make for beautiful photography, but they came very close, two or three together – and for the first time in my life I managed to get good photographs of lemon sharks. I also managed to get very pleasing images of the blacktips.

With so many sharks and fish our food didn't last long. The lemons seemed to know when the bag was empty, lost interest and disappeared but the blacktips and kingfish stayed with us for the remainder of the dive.

We did a second dive in the same area and to my surprise the blacktips were still there following along like puppy dogs begging for food. I've never experienced such attention from any other shark species unless food is offered. The following day brought more wind and rain but the dive action was so good we pushed to be taken out again. Once again we had an 8.30 start. This time we went in the opposite direction and took no bait. Conditions were not good and the water had lost its fine clarity. However as I dropped down I could see about a dozen grey reef sharks and several blacktips swimming around. A big lemon came in for a look but didn't stay. Again the sharks followed along swimming around and around. I was using a video camera so the overcast conditions were not a huge problem.

Our time diving off Moorea was far too short. We didn't get to see Stingray City, the dolphins or the canyons. Moorea with its high peaks and blue lagoon and wonderful marine life is one place we want to visit again.

Ron and I have only scratched the surface of what French Polynesia has to offer divers. Much of the diving is world class and even the quieter locations nearly always produced a few surprises such as a manta ray or a school of chevron barracuda.

My own favourite dives were in Tumakohua Pass at Fakarua Atoll and off Moorea. There's a tiny resort on Tumakohua Pass one hour by boat from the airport. It looked idyllic, the perfect place for an away-from-it-all few days and I believe diving is available. We plan to return to French Polynesia next year for some more of the most exciting diving in the world – and the sharks off Moorea are going to be top of the agenda!

info

GETTING THERE Tahiti is halfway between California and Australia, on the same side of the International Date Line as North America, and in the same time zone as Hawaii.

Air Tahiti Nui connects with Papeete via Los Angeles, Paris, Tokyo, Auckland and Sydney (three times a week in code share with Qantas). Flight info is on www.airtahitinui-usa.com

Air New Zealand also operates 3-4 flights per week ex Auckland so check www.airnewzealand.com

There's excellent information about Tahiti and Her Islands available on the Tahiti Tourisme website

www.tahiti-tourisme.com

For info on the Aggressor Fleet and their cruises -

www.aggressor.com

Valerie's Tips: Divers and their gear are generally overweight. From Australia, Qantas gives an allowance for sporting equipment and have rarely charged us for our excess even when we've been grossly overweight. You can also organise accommodation more in keeping with prices Australians are used to. Also, make sure you ask for advice on the land-based diving about which we knew nothing but found so rewarding.

