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The Shark Whisperers of Beqa Lagoon

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***Legendary shark experts
Ron and Valerie Taylor
called it “the best shark dive
in the world”.***

In Beqa Lagoon, brave men feed up to eight different shark species just a stone's throw from your position. While the sight of the mingling whitetip, blacktip and grey reef sharks and the bigger nurse, silvertip and lemon sharks already provides for a spectacle in itself, it's the world's largest bull sharks who steal the show here. That is, until the biggest predator of these waters, the tiger shark arrives on scene. Yet the thrill these ultimate shark dives provoke is not the end goal of the organizing company. It's part of a clever strategy that provides them the means to protect the sharks.

Shark Circus

As the sun rises over Fiji's main island *Viti Levu* we are already on our way to Pacific Harbour, where the unique diving experience is being offered. Through the open windows of our rental car a cool breeze carries the scent of flowers and villagers greet us with a typical loud *BULA!* (hello, welcome), as we pass them. When we arrive at the dive center, the guides help us to unload our diving gear and within a half hour we are already on our way to *Shark Reef*. During the 25 minute passage on the *Navua* river and *Beqa lagoon*, we get a thorough briefing about the diving spot, the different shark species and the way every diver is expected to behave during the dive. The safety of both the divers and the sharks is a priority. Once on site, we jump into the water one by one and descend along a line down to *The Arena*, at a depth of 30 meters.



It is clear why they call this site *The Arena* as it really has a theater like setting. The central open space is lined by a semi-circular, 20 cm high coral rock wall. All participants are asked to sit down behind it. A large number of big bass, pacific jack mackerel and rainbow mackerel is already present, circling the bait containers. As soon as the shark feeders take their positions, the first sharks also appear. The nurse and lemon sharks are a bit of a motley crew. They rush into the arena from all sides, but soon realize they only get a fish head when they approach the feeders from the correct side. Meanwhile, two guides have placed themselves behind the spectators with long, flat-ended aluminum sticks. They gently push sharks that come in too close into the right direction.

Courageous little whitetip reef sharks boldly meander through the much larger shark species, looking for scraps. The silvertips' behavior is entirely different. These alert and fast hunters prefer to patrol the edge of the arena until they have eye contact with one of the feeders. Then they cross the distance to their benefactor in the blink of an eye, and gobble up the offered food. After a few minutes the arena becomes increasingly crowded as ever more predators, including giant groupers and napoleon wrasse, are attracted by the food containers. Small and bigger coral fish circle ever faster in a frenzy, until they form a spiraling fish tornado. Behind it, we see the shadows of large predators appearing. The bull sharks have arrived! But they know that this is not their feeding spot, and that audacity will only be punished with a push and a tap of the aluminum push sticks. And so they patiently wait their turn.





Safety stop with superior "entertainment"

After 17 minutes, the whole group moves to a platform at 10 meters, and everyone picks a spot behind the rope. This is where the grey reef sharks are being fed. Smart and graceful as they are, they prove to know the procedure well. The platform becomes like a runway when one by one, the grey reef sharks descend, all using the same flight path to the man holding the tube with bait.

For the last couple of minutes of the dive we move once more, this time to a flat reef at 4 meters, to feed the white tip and black tip reef sharks. Extremely shy as black tips generally are, this feeding session provides a unique opportunity to admire this beautiful species from up close.



During the surface interval, a new container of bait is lowered from a separate boat down to our second dive site and our guides elaborate on our return.... their job as shark feeders. They come from Beqa Island on the opposite site of Beqa Lagoon and they tell us that they are protected by a pact their ancestors made with the sharks. "We promised to never hurt sharks and in return they don't bite us". During the animated conversation we indulge ourselves, snacking on the offered cookies and coconut until we're completely full. But meanwhile, deep down in the water and attracted by the irresistible scent of fish oil and tuna heads, increasing numbers of hungry apex predators anxiously await

The grand finale

The setting of the second feeding session is once again an open central space lined by a wall, but this one is only 15 meters deep. Inside and near the wall we can see a perforated steel box on the bottom, containing the fish heads for the bull sharks. The shark feeder is flanked by two bodyguards this time, to stifle the possibility of an incident. The bull sharks are colossal and it is immediately obvious that this is no child's play but a meticulously planned procedure built with expertise and experience. At first the sharks approach the feeders cautiously and calmly. But as the dive progresses, a few of the sharks get impatient and excited and things seem to get a bit hectic. While the group of feeding bull sharks passes, there are also still other sharks in the area and at certain moments the fish tornado moves right in front of our faces. But the guides have everything perfectly under control and any shark that falls out of line is immediately and decisively corrected using the push sticks. I don't feel unsafe for a single moment



After a quickly passing half hour, the show suddenly falls silent. The procession of bull sharks stops and the animals move to the background. I look up at the guides, reluctantly preparing myself to go back up, but then I see the reason for the abrupt change in atmosphere appearing. Long as a small submarine and with the unmistakable wide mouth and stripes on it's back, the king of the Fijian waters has come to claim his share. A gorgeous tiger shark glides slowly and majestically into the open space. His confident, calm moves make it clear that he is very conscious of his power and size. He clearly knows that not a single animal in these waters



The soul of the shark circus

The organization is sometimes criticized because the set up and interaction with the sharks is not natural and the sharks are conditioned by it. The owners of Beqa Adventure Divers (B.A.D.) confirm this themselves, but the show has a much bigger purpose than sensational entertainment by itself.

In 1999, when a dive guide made his first dive at a spot where, according to old sea charts, "Shark Reef" was situated, the only thing he found was a boring slope with debris, no sharks at all and barely some fish or coral growth. It was only after weeks of leaving bait behind, that he finally saw a couple of reef sharks. He then asked the elders of the villages responsible for the reef if he could bring divers along and feed the sharks. Every diver would pay a fee to the village if, in return, the villagers would stop fishing the reef. The elders agreed because they rarely caught any fish on the reef anyway.

Over the following years more and more sharks learned that the sound of a certain boat signaled a free meal.

Win-win for everyone and especially for the sharks

Now, the proceeds of the shark dives are being used for several noble purposes and the organization has secured national protection of the reef. The Fijian government was convinced of the economic value of the thriving business, because every shark diver contributes to the economical welfare of the country through his overnight stays, his restaurant visits and transport. Moreover, the shark diving operations create jobs. This resulted in a 50 km long passage between Viti Levu and Beqa Island to be declared Fiji's first shark sanctuary. The whole area is now an official *no-take* zone under the control of B.A.D. To ensure enforcement, the company trained 12 local rangers. The Swiss non-profit organization *The Shark Foundation* donated a patrol boat for this purpose. A portion of the proceeds is also being used to plant mangroves on various islands in the country. These function as nurseries for fish species and protect the Fijian coastlines against storm surges. Thanks to the mangrove program, BAD is now also a carbon neutral dive operation and the program has been made available for anyone to copy, to encourage other dive operations to offset their carbon footprint too.



Finally, the diving fees are also used to finance scientific research. The bull sharks' migration route was investigated by tagging the sharks. The results showed that the sharks frequent all corners of the Fijian waters and even far beyond. With this evidence in hand, B.A.D. is now working with the government to ban shark fishing throughout the country. It is certainly necessary as longlining by foreign fisheries is allowed in Fiji's national waters and village elders can autonomously decide whether their fishermen are allowed to target sharks (and sell the fins) or not. This despite the fact that the company has amply proved that live sharks represent a much higher value compared to the sale of shark fins.

Safety first

The shark dive companies are very aware that their success or failure depends on the level of safety they can guarantee their customers. Therefore they apply very strict safety rules. It is mandatory for all guests to wear a black diving suit covering the entire body, and black gloves. There are suits available at the dive center. The guides also demand undivided attention from each diver during the briefings. Cameras can only be used with arms bent tightly against the body and the use of an extension handle on a Go-Pro is not allowed. The team of guides generally consists of five people: the shark feeder, two bodyguards to protect the shark feeder and two guides who stand guard for the guests. Moreover, each guest who has less than 30 dives on his record gets a personal guide, while the maximum number of participants on each trip is limited to 20. Also essential to avoid incidents is of course the training of the shark feeders. Generally new employees are first introduced to other functions within the company, like steering the boat or managing the diving center. Once convinced of the character and skills of a potential feeder, they start a six-month intensive training to learn the strict procedures to follow while feeding. For example, sharks are always fed using the same hand while the other arm is folded tightly against the body and food can only be offered when the shark approaches from the correct direction. If the shark approaches from the wrong direction, then the food is hidden.



In addition, the intern-feeders are introduced into the science of shark behavior. Accompanied by established marine biologists and experienced feeders, the intern-feeder watches numerous videos of past feeding sessions, during which the sharks' behavior is analyzed. Due to the extensive training and experience of the shark whisperers, there has never been a single bite incident in their many years of operation. The number of shark attacks in Fiji's waters hasn't gone up since the startup of the company either. The official explanation for the low number of incidents with sharks in Fiji, despite the large number of sharks living in their waters, is that the rich fish stocks keep the sharks well fed. "But maybe", we wonder, "it might also have something to do with that mysterious pact the shark whisperers made with the sharks".



Frame

The Fiji archipelago consists of 333 islands of which only one-third is inhabited. The islands lie extremely isolated in the South Pacific, 4450 km Southwest of Honolulu, Hawaii and 3430 km East of Queensland, Australia. The expansive region (including national waters) covers an area of more than 18,300 km².

Travel information

Climate

Fiji enjoys a tropical climate. It can be dived all year round. The air temperature is between 25-32°C all year round. The dry season runs from June to October. These months offer the best visibility, but occasionally brisk winds can be blowing. The water temperature drops during this period to a minimum of 22-23°C. The rainy season can be felt between December and April. It is characterized by calm days and warmer water between 26-30°C. The visibility drops slightly in this period but is still up to 20 meters. December to March is hurricane season. Some islands receive considerably more rain than others. The mountains on Viti Levu divide the island between a dry northwestern part and a much more moist southeastern part.

Flights

Korean Air operates flights from Amsterdam to Seoul, South Korea, taking 9 hours 45 minutes and then onwards after a stopover of five hours, from Seoul to Nadi, Fiji in 10,5 hours. Other companies that offer a smooth transfer are Cathay Pacific and Qantas.

Ultimate sharkdive

Two companies offer the ultimate shark dive at Shark Reef departing from Pacific Harbour.

Bega Adventure Divers: The two dives take place at different sites. During the first dive, different shark species are being fed on separate levels: 30, 10 and 4 meters. For the second dive they move to a dive site at 15 meters, after which they do a safety stop on the reef. (Semi) professional photographers who join multiple trips are sometimes allowed a spot in the arena next to the feeder. Their ultimate shark dive is offered on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. www.fijisharkdive.com



Aqua-Trek: Both dives are conducted at the same dive site at 18 meters depth. There's a wreck situated next to the arena, which is used to do the safety stops. In agreement with the guides, photographers are sometimes allowed to sit at a separate spot with better views. Their ultimate shark dive is offered on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. www.aquatrek.com

Stay

Pacific Harbour is a small coastal tourist town with a few moderate to expensive hotels. We preferred to stay at *Maui Palms* (www.mauipalms-accommodation.com) at the beach of *Korolevu*, 35 km from *Pacific Harbour*. The romantic mini resort consists of 4 well cared for bungalows, which are situated just meters from the sandy beach and beautiful coral reef. At high tide baby blacktip reef sharks swim up to the waterfront and you can snorkel with them. The location is also perfect to visit the other highlights of the area.



Car rental

Multiple international car rental agencies are present in Fiji, but we preferred to work with the local company *Khans Rental Cars* (www.khansrental.com.fj). They offer the best prices in Viti Levu. Driving the company owner to the bus stop after receipt of our rental car was all part of the adventure.

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