

Walkers Key bull shark experience

By Pete Horsley

Over the past thirty one years I have swam with sharks all over the world but none of these experiences could prepare me for what I found at Walkers Cay in the Bahamas.

It was a cold February morning when a select group of divers left for Walkers where we would be joined by the respected British shark expert Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch.

The idea behind this trip dreamed up by Jeremy and the tour operator Divequest was to introduce a limited number of divers to these creatures under a supervised controlled condition having educated them in the thought processes of these the apex predators. The divers, now members of the Sharks Trust, would become ambassadors for this much maligned species and on their return to the U.K. try in their own small way to pass on the facts about sharks and dispel the all too well known Hollywood image of these creatures.

Walkers Cay and the diving operations manager, Gary Adkison, have now a world famous reputation for what is called "The Chumsicle Dive".

This consists of a refuse bin size block of ice packed with fish heads and other goodies that are irresistible to sharks being lowered to the sea bed while divers form a circle around it, huge numbers of sharks come in to feed on the bait and afford the divers the opportunity to interact with them and learn by their experience. The sharks while I was there were usually Caribbean reef and Nurse. This in itself would have made the whole trip worthwhile but we as a group were privileged to be allowed access to an area that Gary keeps off the normal tourist itinerary.



All underwater shots taken with a Nikon F100 in a Subal housing with 20mm lens. Ektachrome Elite film.



We were however lucky enough to be on the island while Ron and Valerie Taylor were making a movie and we had the chance to meet and talk sharks with them.

In two to three feet of water off the North coast of the island a large gathering of Bull sharks takes place each year. These animals are not captive or trained in anyway, they are wild and roam free. It was here that I experienced my close encounter with one of the most fascinating and misunderstood creatures of all time.

The Bull Sharks are described as being as dangerous as a great white and capable of eating almost anything and come within touching distance, they cruise around in an almost hypnotic effect just drawing

you into the water. Adrenalin takes the place of fear, or perhaps this is fear, if it is then there was no urge to run, quite the opposite in fact. I was drawn to be in the middle of the group and stroke them, swim alongside them and become one of their group. That first day was an unbelievable rush of emotions, all the time you are trying to reconcile that you are with one of natures most evolved predators, you are trying to remember everything that you have been told, respect, behavior and most important



Lemon Sharks will come into water that is only as deep as your knees with no fear of getting grounded.

observe what is going on, sharks do not attack indiscriminately, they will, like most creatures, give some warning as to their intentions.

Day one quickly passed into day two. The initial rush was over and we were settled and comfortable moving and working with these magnificent beasts. Little did I know that morning when I entered the water that I was about to have an experience that is the making of peoples nightmares, I certainly did not realise that by the end of the day I would be in a position to explain the nightmare and possibly calm peoples fear of the scenario.

As on every dive I was carrying my Subal F100 camera, we were wearing only skin wetsuits so there was no place to attach the camera lanyard, I slipped it around my wrist just for safe keeping, you become very attached to this expensive piece of kit as soon as you realise just what it is capable of producing. I moved about ten feet offshore in about four feet of water and began simply bobbing to the bottom to get images of the sharks as they passed between me and the shore, the visibility was not brilliant but good enough to see the sharks at about ten feet. Jeremy and Gary were onshore





overseeing the procedure and keeping the sharks attention by dropping the occasional fish head in the water. At this stage a magnificent nine foot Lemon Shark joined in and I was positioning myself to get a portrait shot with possibly the mouth open. Out of nowhere a fish head appeared in front me, my mind racing with what to do and what not to do, killing zone, not a good place to be, move away.

At lightning speed the Lemon took the bait in front of me and together with two large bulls barreled into me, I can still see open mouths and teeth in my whole field of view, the Lemon grabbed the camera which you recall was attached to my wrist, the Bull took my fin the third hit me square on and pushed me back into a fourth Bull, for three or four seconds all Hell broke loose and I was tossed around like a rag doll. As quickly as events took place it was all over and everything went calm, I did note however the other divers who were in the water with me were now at a respectful distance away from me now.

To an observer on shore I was attacked by sharks and was lucky to walk away with only teeth marks on the camera, but in the light of what I know now lets break down what happened. The sharks did not regard

me as prey, I was simply another predator in the water with them competing for food, they treat me as they would any other competitor, as they have no hands, they use their mouths to hold things and check if they are edible, the camera is painted silver and to a shark resembles a large piece of fish and well worth taking. The Bull shark knowing that my means of propulsion is my fins tried to nip them off thus stopping me from competing, he found them not to behave like flesh so he released. They generally bullied me to show their dominance and then left me alone.

There are ways and means of expressing your dominance during an event like this but that was lesson three the following day. Of course the whole thing wouldn't have happened had the fish head not been thrown so close but even in the most controlled of situations sods law is always present. A very valuable lesson from Gary. The old saying goes "Tell me and I will forget, Show me and I will remember, Let me do and I will understand". The experience of Walkers Cay has done just that, the learning curve was excellent, and the experience was brilliant. If it can be summed up in one word it has got to be "Respect".

It is without doubt one of the

most enlightening experiences I have had and drives home just how powerful and beautiful these creatures are.

The Shark Trust needs your help. To become a member please contact them on the number below.

Pete Horsley

The Shark Trust
01752 672008
www.sharktrust.org/



DIVEQUEST

The Ultimate in Diving

WORLDWIDE DIVING ADVENTURES FOR UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHERS

MARTIN EDGE

Bonaire Photography Course (May 2002)

LINDA DUNK

Travels with my Camera: Kungkungan Bay (October 2002)

MALCOLM HEY

Bonaire Photography Course (November 2002)

CHARLES HOOD

Images of Sangalaki: Turtles and Manta Rays (June 2002)

MARK WALKER

The Channel Islands of Southern California (September 2002)

GAVIN ANDERSON

Borneo's Reefs and Rainforest (September 2002)

JEREMY STAFFORD-DEITSCH

Corsica: Pearl of the Mediterranean (September 2002)

Shark Week Special (February 2002)

Great Hammerhead Expedition (February 2002)

WORLDWIDE: CARIBBEAN • SOUTH-EAST ASIA • THE PACIFIC • AUSTRALIA

Ask for our DIVEQUEST brochure: 01254-826322

E-mail: divers@divequest.co.uk Fully bonded: ATOL PROTECTED 2937

Website: www.divequest.co.uk (on-line brochure)