

Fijian Feast, Beqa Banquet

By Nigel Marsh

Fiji's Beqa Lagoon has become famous around the world for just one dive site - Shark Reef - rated by many as the best shark dive in the world. However, Beqa Lagoon has much more than sharks, with rich coral reefs, artificial reefs and an amazing collection of marine life. Beqa Lagoon has something for everyone.

Beqa Lagoon is located off the southern side of the main Fijian island of Viti Levu. Diving here is centred around the small town of Pacific Harbour, around a three-hour drive from Nadi along the picturesque Coral Coast. My wife, Helen and I recently spent a week there with Beqa Adventure Divers (BAD) that are based in the very comfortable Lagoon Resort at Pacific Harbour.

The next day we were off to Shark Reef, which BAD dive three to four times a week. In 1998, local dive operators started dumping fish scraps on a reef to see if they could attract a few sharks. They got permission from the local villages to use Shark Reef for this experiment, as it had a lot of dead coral from coral bleaching. For several months they regularly dropped the fish scraps on the same site before

they decided to have a look and see what they had attracted.

Chief shark feeders Manasa 'Papa' and Rusiate 'Rusi' told us about that first dive, and how they were amazed by the number of sharks swarming around, especially bull sharks. Over the next few months Papa and Rusi started to feed the sharks and teach them some manners. Three feeding platforms and viewing areas were built, so they could feed different sharks at each location. After several more months everything was ready to take paying customers to safely see the sharks being fed. It didn't take long for word to get out and for Shark Reef to become the most popular shark dive in the world.

BAD have a perfect safety record with their shark feeds. They give a full briefing prior to the shark feed, on what will happen and what to expect, they also lay down a couple of simple rules. Everyone in full wetsuits, everyone wears black gloves, no

Eliki gives the dive brief prior to the shark dives. Nikon D90, Tokina 12-24mm, 1/200, f7.1.



snorkels, no hand waving and hang onto your camera - as they can quickly disappear if floating around, eaten by one of the giant trevally!

Our first dive at Shark Reef had outstanding conditions, flat seas and 30m plus visibility. The first feed is at 30m, and as soon as we entered the water we could see masses of fish swarming under the boat, plus several reef sharks below. We headed down to 30m to the viewing area and then watched one of the feeders bringing down a bin full of fish heads, tails and frames. You could hardly see him, or the bin, as he was being circled by a whirlpool of hundreds of giant trevally, red bass, fusiliers, rainbow runners and surgeonfish, plus one huge Queensland groper.

With everyone in place and the bin on the bottom, the lid was opened to feed this overwhelming mass of fish. The first to be fed was the groper, who quickly swallowed several fish heads. Then the giant trevally and red bass charged in for food, fighting with each other for scraps.

In the background we could see half a dozen bull sharks cruising about, occasionally one would charge in to pick up a scrap that escaped the fish. Tawny nurse sharks, lemon sharks and silvertip sharks regular appear at this feed, but we didn't see any during our stay. After 17 minutes the food was gone and it was time to move up to 10m, where the reef sharks get fed.

Papa was up there waiting for us with several dozen grey reef sharks, white tip reef sharks and black tip reef sharks milling around him. Papa informed us that this is the most difficult feed, as he can have a dozen sharks charging at the bait at one time. With everyone situated along the coral wall we watched Papa for 20 minutes as he fed the reef sharks.



Rusi, with his distinctive yellow hood, feeds a bull shark. Nikon D50, Nikkor 18-55mm, 1/100, f8, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 Strobe.

This was spectacular shark action, but getting photos was a challenge, the sharks were performing well, but at times it was hard to see them with the schools of sergeant majors milling about. The sharks were coming within inches of our heads, but Papa had more of a handful with white tip reef sharks squirming between his legs and grey reef sharks zooming in from several directions at once. The black tip reef sharks were very shy and didn't feed, but a large moray eel slipped in to take some food.

During the shark feed there were around a dozen BAD staff in the water, either feeding or as safety divers. At no time do you feel threatened by the sharks, which all know the routine; this is a very professional operation with safety the number one concern.

For the second dive it was down to 15m for the bull shark feed. We were diving Shark Reef in



A group of black tip reef sharks in the shallows. Nikon D50, Nikkor 18-55mm, 1/100, f11, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 Strobe.

October, the end of the bull shark season when they depart for two to three months to breed, but we still had around a dozen bull sharks in attendance. After all the frenetic pace of the reef shark feed, the bull shark feed was more subdued, but no less exciting.

These bull sharks are huge, 2.5m to 3m long and stocky. However, the crew from BAD informed us that these were the small ones, and we should see the big ones that come in after the breeding season. Rusi was feeding the bull sharks, which are much more well-mannered than the reef sharks, coming in from the left as trained and then exiting on the right. It was an impressive sight seeing these large sharks feed so gently from Rusi's hand. The food and bottom time went all too quickly and we returned to the boat impressed with Shark Reef.

Our last Shark Reef day came all too quick. For the first dive Papa did a third feed for the black tip reef sharks at 4m on the top of the reef. It was



When Scarface makes an appearance the action gets red hot at Shark Reef. Nikon D50, Nikkor 18-55mm, 1/100, f8, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 Strobe.

great fun watching a dozen zippy black tips as they munched on the food, but hard to know which way to point the camera with so much action.

The final dive was the bull shark feed and again around a dozen bull sharks were coming in for the food. After ten minutes we heard a sound from a safety diver and turned to see a white shape behind all the fish. This white shape kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It was Scarface, the resident 4.5m long tiger shark, and was she an amazing sight!

Scarface makes an appearance about once a week and when she comes into feed the bull sharks hang in the background, you couldn't blame them as was twice as big. Scarface slowly swam straight up to Rusi and opened her giant mouth, allowing him to drop in the food. After getting a piece of food she then slowly cruised over the watching divers, the first time just a foot above our heads!

It was quite a sight to see this huge tiger shark slowly cruising around like a submarine, either



While photographing the shark action at Shark Reef was our main goal, we also had plenty of opportunities to explore the rich reefs and wrecks in Beqa Lagoon. Helen with a wall of colourful soft corals at ET. Nikon D50, Tokina 10-17mm, 1/100, f10, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 Strobe.

coming in for food or checking out the divers. At one stage she did a drive by, coasting by all the assembled divers. For close to 30 minutes we watched this massive shark feed with awe. We surfaced with a huge smile, what a way to end a week of great diving.

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