

Fakarava Atoll's Tumakohua Pass

with Colin Gans

One might be mistaken for thinking that diving the same pass each day would become a little monotonous but with the volume and variety of life which passes through Fakarava Atoll's Tumakohua Pass there is little time for boredom or complacency. Fakarava is renowned as a remote destination less frequently visited and for its parade of grey reef sharks.

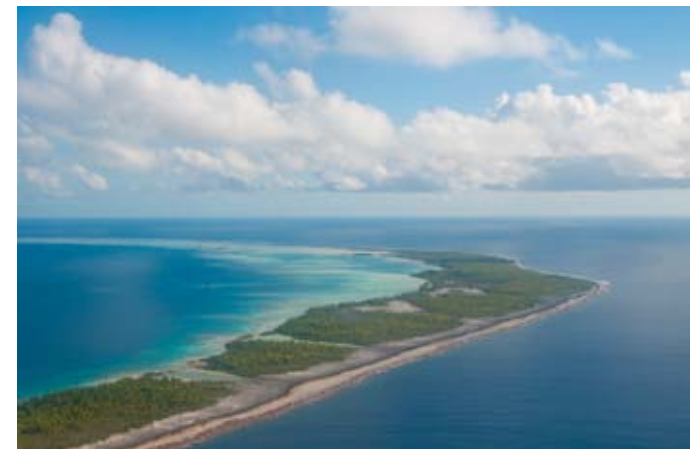
One of a group of many low lying atolls in the South Pacific's Tuamotus group of French Polynesia, like its sister island, Rangiroa; Fakarava has two deep water passes which concentrate marine life entering and egressing its large rectangular shaped lagoon. A higher proportion of divers visit the more easily reachable north pass which is relatively close to the airport. The only way to reach the Tumakohua (south) pass is by boat; a fact which in my opinion places this location in my 'special places to visit' category. The waters of the protected lagoon are vast and it is not possible to see land when facing inwards looking up its 60 kilometre length.

After researching the atoll for dive sites I decided on spending all my time at the south pass which, at 200 metres wide, has the appeal of being more confined when compared with the other atoll passes in the region. The pass itself has a maximum depth of roughly 33 metres and during the incoming tide life passes through this marine bottleneck, at



Sealux Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 17mm, manual exposure, 1/160th @ F9, ISO 250

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speed, providing photo opportunities for the underwater photographer.

Once in the lagoon proper, conditions are generally calm and protected although not nearly as interesting from a marine wildlife photography perspective as the pass itself. The pass, the depths surrounding the pass entrance and the outer reef are really what make for the action: one of the few places on our planet where it is still possible to see schools of more than 200 grey reef sharks gathered in parade as tidal flows turn over water in the lagoon. On a single dive, I encountered six species of shark: grey reef shark, blacktip shark, blacktip reef shark, whitetip reef shark, silky shark, and tawny nurse shark. In addition to this, other species of shark including giant hammerheads are reported. Grouper, mantas, eagle rays and many other big fish were evident along with cetaceans. The hard coral harbours many interesting varieties of smaller creatures including molluscs and nudibranchs but a 'muck diving' destination this is not.

The influx of fresh water on an incoming tide provides best visibility for image making and while diving on the outgoing tide is interesting, more turbid conditions are generally experienced. Timing is everything with pass diving and the knowledge of the guide or boatman of where and



Sealux Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm, manual exposure, 1/250th @ F14, ISO 250

when to drop you in is key. I began my 8 days of diving here around the new moon and each day's incoming pass dive was later than the previous with the boatman assessing the timing of still water for the drop-in. Staying at the Tetamanu village on the pass itself provided an added benefit of quickly being able to assess tidal conditions. We observed significant tidal flow and a 'river' was quite evident in the pass around mid tide.

Some days we entered outside the pass in blue deep water of 300 metres plus and on one particular dive at 30 metres depth we were visited by a curious pair of silky sharks coming in from opposite directions to investigate us. Having only blue water; no bottom or reef walls as a point of reference in such a situation can make things a little disorientating and on this occasion our guide needed



Sealux Nikon D300, Nikon 12-24mm at 24mm Manual exposure, 1/160th @F7.1, ISO 250

to surface in order to reacquaint himself with the direction of the pass entrance. Once resigned to 'going with the flow' the diving can be effortless and tantamount to simply being an observer on a moving stage. On other days I made use of a reef hook to remain stationary and capture the action.

The 'incoming tide' dives mostly end in a small channel leading up to the dive centre at the village and here the resident napoleon wrasse wait to greet you along with numerous blacktip reef sharks whose antics

in breaking the surface of the water while hunting provide entertainment. In the evenings at dusk I found the appearance of the blacktips to be strangely comforting in the calm and tranquility of the lagoon. One night as we were sitting in the small 'restaurant', built on poles on the water located just on the edge of the channel, we were distracted by the sound of a cetacean blow. Moments later in the moonlight just metres away from where we sat, a humpback whale emerged and blew again, this time so close that it startled us and



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its back glinted in the moonlight as it gently submerged and continued on its way out the pass to the open sea.

At the time of my visit, excluding other guests, there were only six people resident at the intimate village of Tetamanu. The main attraction of this locale is that it is situated on the south pass itself.



*The local Napoleons are friendly.
Sealux Nikon D300, Nikon 12-24mm
at 12mm Manual exposure, 1/200th @
F10, ISO 250*

While day trippers from the north may get to dive the south pass on occasion, the only practical way of doing so over a number of days is to stay close to the pass itself to avoid lengthy commutes by boat. Accommodation wise one cannot get any closer than this to the action with the restaurant above water and water lapping the

poles of the small accommodation bungalows at high tides. The village is run along traditional lines and it would be hard not to get to know the locals during a ten day stay. Locally grown herbs, fruit and vegetables in season are used for meals with fish and coconut delicacies in obvious abundance. Chickens are kept in the village mainly for eggs but fish and rice certainly form the staples. The diet of mainly fish and rice resulted in some weight loss during my ten day stay and not being fully conversant in French turned into an opportunity to catch up on reading. Solar power provides lighting in the village and battery recharging is available in the restaurant; preferably during daylight hours. A torch is useful after dusk and if it rains for a few consecutive days then power becomes a scarce resource. Mosquito repellant is also useful. While I did not find these limitations to be particularly inconvenient and are to be expected when visiting remote locations they are worthwhile knowing about from a planning perspective. The focus of this visit for me was really all about pass diving and the photo opportunities it presented.

Staying at Tetamanu village on the Tumakohua pass of Fakarava in order to experience consecutive days of diving here is best enjoyed by intrepid underwater photographers

who can create their own entertainment and are not too phased by language barriers or more limited menus. This is very special location and one whose shark population and ecosystem will hopefully survive in environmentally challenging years to come.

Getting to Tetamanu from Fakarava airport involves a short car journey to the wharf followed by a speed boat trip down the length of the lagoon. Depending on conditions the boat trip can take two hours or more. The domestic internal flight between Fakarava and Papeete takes just over an hour. The cost of the internal flight is high and in my case matched the cost of the fare for the international leg. International flights to Tahiti (Papeete) are available from many destinations including Paris and Auckland with Air Tahiti Nui.

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