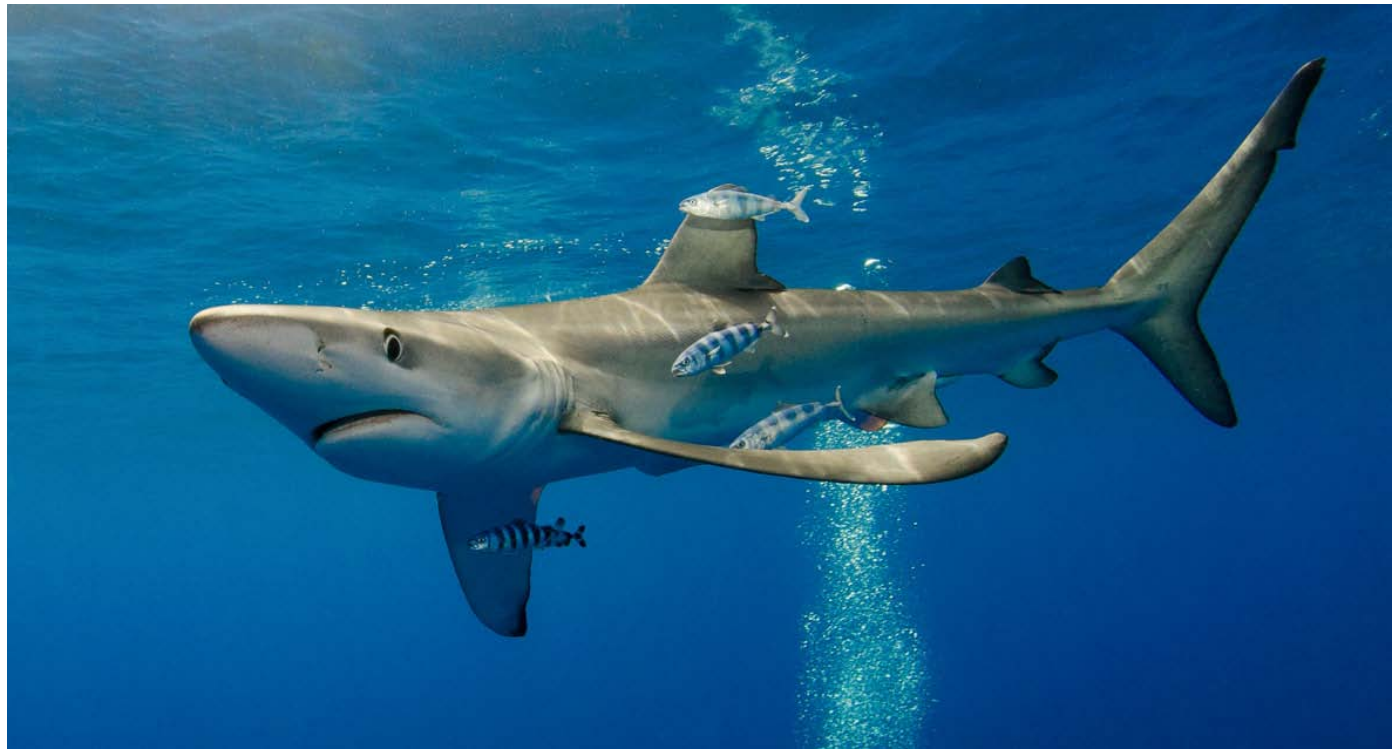


Amazing Azores

by Tom Burd

Hovering under the dive boat, 900 nautical miles from the Portuguese mainland and with 200 metres of Azorean blue water between me and the bottom, I was certainly starting to question the sanity of this holiday choice. However, these fears disappeared soon enough as the first of five exquisitely beautiful blue sharks ascended from the depths to greet us. I was instantly lovestruck, completely amazed by their slender design and how effortlessly they cruise through the water. Their alluring curves exude the elegance of an Italian supercar but their cheeky, inquisitive nature is that of a mischievous young child! This is certainly a dive you won't forget any time soon. I didn't know it then, but I would be lucky enough to spend the entire next two summers getting to know these amazing creatures very well indeed.

The tranquil archipelago of the Azores is one of Europe's last pristine gems, composed of 9 volcanic islands with waterfalls, lush green hills and an amazing array of wildlife both above and below the waves. Although still largely undiscovered by the outside world, the main tourist attraction over the years has been the resident population of sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and other abundant cetaceans. Recently however, divers have become aware of the amazing blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) encounters to be had around the islands, as well as the opportunity to be encircled by an entire squadron of huge Chilean devil rays (*Mobula tarapacana*). The local dive industry is now kicking off and underwater photographers worldwide are



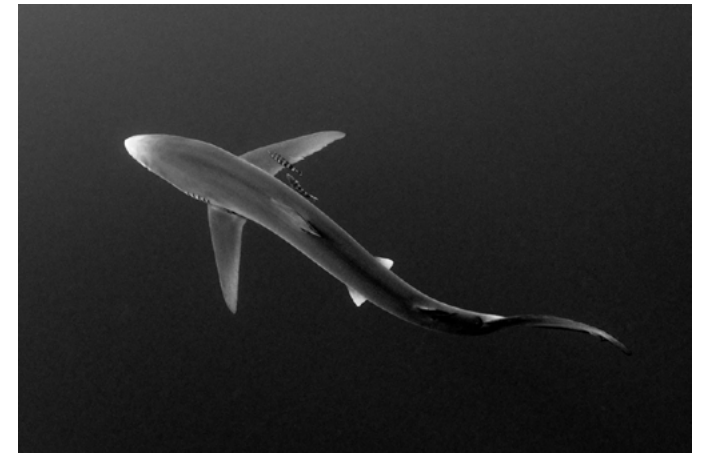
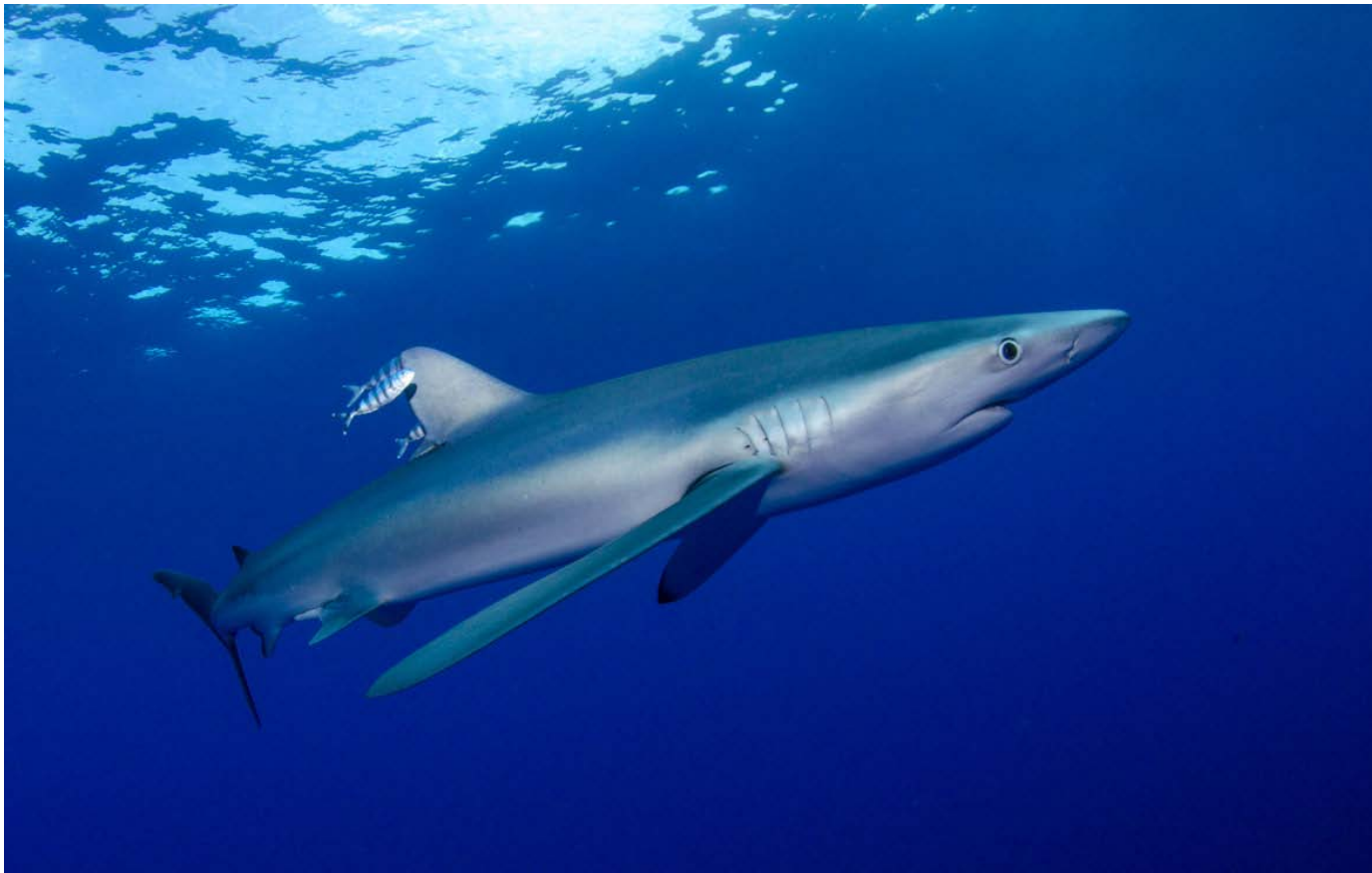
Blue sharks have to be one of the most charismatic elasmobranchs out there. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, 1x Sea and Sea YS-D1, ISO 400, f13, 1/160.

flocking to get a shot of these beauties in crystal clear water.

Blue sharks are one of the most wide ranging elasmobranchs (sharks, rays and skates) in the world, found mainly offshore in both tropical and temperate waters but also closer inshore where the continental shelf is narrow. They are extremely migratory, as recent tracking studies have shown, and their complex movement patterns are believed to be determined by prey distribution and breeding grounds. A trans-Atlantic trip in search of a companion seems to be no big deal for these guys! On average most of the sharks around the Azorean

central islands are between 1.5-3 metres in length, but the largest recorded individual was a massive 3.8 metres long. Blue sharks reach sexual maturity at 4-6 years of age and females give birth through viviparity, which means producing live young that are able to survive on their own.

As soon as you enter the water, it's obvious from where the blues get their name. Swimming close to the surface their entire backs emanate a striking blue tinge, and the rays of sunlight rippling across them is truly beautiful. Trying to capture this effect through the lens can be tricky, but usually the sharks stay around long enough for you to get



Don't forget to look down! As the dives happen in mid-water, it's easy to get a clean background for your shots. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 17mm, Natural Light, ISO 400, f13, 1/160.

These guys are not afraid to get up close and personal. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, 1x Sea and Sea YS-D1, ISO 400, f14, 1/160.

a good amount of photo opportunities. The water conditions are ideal for using natural lighting, as the visibility can reach 40 metres and all of the action happens within 10 metres of the surface. Strobes will obviously really help to light up the white underside of the sharks, giving your photos more of a punch as well as allowing you to follow the sharks deeper and shoot them from different angles. I have honestly yet to encounter another species of shark as curious and at ease around divers. A fish-eye lens is worth its weight in gold when these guys are butting your camera with their noses, allowing you to focus as close as possible and still get the whole

body in the frame. I tend to keep shutter speeds high to ensure that the subjects stay sharp, even though the blues are generally slow moving around divers. You also never know when a mako shark might turn up!

I find that recovering from such an amazing encounter is always helped along by a healthy sampling of local cheese and wine, and thankfully the Azores has plenty to offer in this department! The islands of Pico and Faial are where most of the shark diving happens and here there are many land-based attractions for those extended surface intervals, such as discovering Europe's longest

lava tunnels or visiting the vineyards classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Although nature tourism is now an important part of the local economy, Pico island in particular has a different story to tell. The traditional practice of whale hunting started in the 1700's throughout the islands, developing into a major industry which provided meat, oil and other important produce. There are three interesting museums on Pico, paying tribute to the courage of those involved in the dangerous hunts, as well as to the animals themselves and their importance to the island inhabitants. In 1987 the last whale hunt took place from Pico, signifying a



Mobulid rays can be accompanied by various species of remora, often causing scarring on their dorsal surface. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 16mm, Natural Light, ISO 500, f11, 1/160.

change in global mentality towards these ocean giants. This part of history will never fade however, and still today the old traditional rowing boats are used in annual races to commemorate their past.

Most divers visiting the Azores will also find themselves embarking upon the epic journey to Princess Alice Bank, an underwater seamount situated 45 nautical miles offshore. The sunrise

behind Mount Pico, as you leave land behind, is in itself certainly worth getting out of bed for, even without the promise of one of the most exciting dives in the world! The long trip is regularly animated by schools of Atlantic spotted dolphin and bottlenose dolphin, as well as a sperm whale or two if you're lucky. Upon arrival at the seamount there is no sign of land, as the summit of the

Few can stop themselves imitating these beautiful creatures. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm at 14mm, Natural Light, ISO320, f18, 1/250.

pinnacle is roughly 35 metres underwater, but the occasional fin slicing through the surface assures you that you're in the right place! These fins belong to a member of the Mobulidae family, the Chilean devil



ray, which is closely related to the two larger manta ray species. It is quite different in appearance however and goes by many common names such as the box ray or the giant devil ray. Indeed these

magnificent creatures reach a maximum recorded disk width (wingspan) of 370 cm, so they are a very impressive sight underwater, especially when you find yourself completely surrounded by a



Most encounters happen near the surface at Princess Alice, which makes for some great lighting opportunities. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 17mm, Natural Light, ISO 500, f14, 1/125.

full carousel of over 30 individuals! Their dorsal surface has a unique bronze colouring, completely different from their larger cousins, which seemingly glows near the surface and can make for some fantastic shots.

Although the season can vary, throughout the summer months (June to October) large congregations of these rays are continuously found at Princess Alice Bank, which makes this one of the few locations to have such excellent chances of an encounter. On a good day the visibility is such that you can see the pinnacle from the surface, as well as the entire squadron of rays and everything else that happens to be around. This includes schools of barracuda too plentiful to capture with even the widest lens, and

Mobula tarapacana have very different ventral patterns from the Manta species. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, 1x Sea and Sea YS-D1, ISO 500, f16, 1/125.

huge greater amberjacks that make the blue sharks look like puppies!

Once anchored, more experienced divers can choose to visit the bottom to experience the sense of remoteness and the awe inspiring scenery rivalled only by the likes of the Socorro and Galapagos islands. The mobulas do venture deep, but are most often found within the top 15 metres, so divers hang on to the anchor line or hover mid-water





Divers marvel at the spectacle overhead. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 13mm, Natural Light, ISO 500, f11, 1/160.

waiting for the mobulas to come around. I've found that some of my best photo encounters with them have been whilst freediving, although they do very much enjoy diver's bubbles and are not afraid to come close to check you out! Unfortunately the currents are difficult to predict at this location, so be sure to pack your scuba gear as freediving is not always an option. This really is an experience of a lifetime, and it is one of those places where truly anything can happen, you just have to go and try your luck. My craziest moment there was undoubtedly when a heavily pregnant whale shark turned up, escorted on

either side by two mobulas acting as body guards (or so I like to think), but of course with no camera to hand, who's going to believe that?

As underwater photographers, we are driven by a fascination for the mesmerising world that we enter every time we put on our masks. Those who dive are able to see the beauty and intricacy of this environment, but are also made aware of its fragility. It's up to us to convince others that the oceans are worth preserving, so I would like to take a minute to involve you with a conservation issue of which I am very passionate. I'm sure you are



Hanging out with the blues. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, 1x Sea and Sea YS-D1, ISO 400, f18, 1/160.

aware of the vast worldwide fish stock declines in recent decades, including the loss of large apex predators, such as sharks. It is easy to think that shark populations are collapsing due to illegal fishing in far away countries, where law enforcement is difficult and we have no control over the market, but in truth overfishing is happening very close to home.

The Azores, as it belongs to mainland Portugal, must abide by EU fishing regulations. Since 2013 local authorities have been strict in implementing the European ban on shark finning, despite initially opposing the proposal, however

this does not mean that all is well. A staggering 100 Spanish and 30 Portuguese longliners have special permits to catch swordfish in the Azorean waters, in addition to the local fisheries. Longlining, which involves thousands of individual hooks spread over hundreds of kilometres of line, is an extremely indiscriminate fishing method. Many non-target species are taken, including endangered and protected animals, which cannot legally be landed and are therefore discarded at sea. Ironically the "swordfish" catches regularly consist of 95-100% blue shark. Official records indicate



Certainly worth getting up for: Mount Pico at sunrise. iPhone 5, ISO 50, f2.4, 1/1695.

that 2,800 tons of shark are landed annually in the port of Horta on the island of Faial, but through their research Sharkproject International believes that the figure was closer to 5,000 tons between 2012 and 2013. This number has since dropped as the sharks are now being unloaded directly in mainland Spain and Portugal, mainly in the towns of Vigo and Peniche respectively. It is difficult to translate weight into numbers of individual sharks, but to give you a rough idea of scale an average adult weighs 50-80 kgs. The average size of blue sharks caught over the past couple of years has dropped

dramatically, and this shift towards juvenile catches is extremely worrying as it is believed that the Azores is a crucial pupping ground for the entire North Atlantic (Source: Sharkproject).

Originally the majority of the shark diving took place at Banco Condor, a deep sea plateau near Faial Island. Since it was re-opened to commercial fishing in 2014, the sharks have seemingly disappeared from the area but are thankfully still being found elsewhere. All dive shops in the area have noticed a dramatic decline in sightings over the past few years and as a dive guide it is not only extremely sad to see such an amazing

creature disappear, but it is also disheartening for the local economy. Whilst writing I have contemplated how publicising this issue could affect dive commerce on the island, but I've come to the conclusion that people need to be informed, as they have the power to positively affect the situation by supporting the dive community. My final message is to go and enjoy these amazing creatures, and most importantly, please help us protect them by signing the petition opposite to put an end to longlining in Europe once and for all.



Tom Burd

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SHARKPROJECT



These are not the type of images we should be taking.

Join the fight to ban longlining in Europe.

Sign the petition [HERE!](#)

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