

# THE TIGER SHARKS OF THE BAHAMAS

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE**

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For those of you who read the EDA quarterly magazine, some of you may have come across some of my articles which most of the time, focus on sharks. In fact, since several years now, I've been passionate about sharks. Being a photographer, this subject is great to shoot; they are fast, agile and mysterious, making them more attractive to my camera. This new venture to the Bahamas was a dream destination.

In September of last year, one of my work colleagues spoke of an old friend of his who works on HD videos focusing on the likes of whales, sharks and mantas. Patrick Masse is a professional film maker and on making contact with him, he was quick to respond to my email and talk me through his new passion. This is how my story begins.

After checking my dates of availability, I made the decision to go with Patrick to Bimini Island. This is one of the best places on earth to

dive with one of the ocean's most amazing predators, the great hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*). The great hammerhead shark is the largest amongst the 9 species discovered. It is a very shy and solitary shark. French Polynesia, Australia and the Bahamas are some of the places known for the chance to see them. Bimini is the best place to approach this species in great conditions of shallow, clear blue water.

The Bahamas is composed of a chain of islands located about 80 miles (130km) east of Miami, Florida. Bimini is the closest point in the Bahamas from the United States and approximately 137 miles (209km) northwest of Nassau. This is an 8 day trip with 5 full days close to Bimini island, on the west side. I arrived on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of March and met the group at the hotel just 2km away from the airport where the dive operator from Scuba-Adventure was to collect us in the afternoon for our first dive.

Jim Abernethy, a diver with 25 years experience in shark diving, welcomed us at the dive centre while our dive bags were taken and placed in the boat.

The M/V Shear Water, is a 20 metre long boat that accommodates 10 guests and 4 crew members. The large saloon is equipped with plug outlets and tables for you to charge your camera equipment and rest between the dives. We had our dinner onboard before leaving the marina at 10pm to make tracks on the 10 hour journey ahead to reach our destination point.

#### DAY 1 – 2 DIVES + ONE REEF DIVE

In the morning, we were all set to see the island. The 10 hour cruise over had been a little choppy due to the wind, but in the end, the night's journey was now just a memory.

Our Captain, George Hugues ordered the anchor release and 5 minutes later, fresh bait

was thrown overboard. For several years now, Bimini has been visited by many photographers and videographers wanting to see the great hammerheads, especially during the best times of the season from January until April/May.

A shark lab has been based on the island for more than 20 years. They study the behavior of all the sharks around the island and they recently tagged a great hammerhead in order to understand why they come so close to the land and to find out where they move to afterwards. As a shy shark, even with the bait, the noise or over feeding can cancel the chance of seeing them.

During our dive briefing, our divemaster explained the procedures to follow during the next 5 days in order to avoid any accidents. We were told that bull sharks are already under the boat. Bull sharks are potentially dangerous predators and those with big cameras are told to push them away if they come in contact,

whereas the other divers are given a plastic stick in order to do the same. We were then ready for our first shark dive encounter:

After one hour, the first group resurfaced. The water temperature was 26°C with 20m visibility. After a last equipment check, we jumped into the water as the second group. Slowly descending along the anchor line, we reached the bottom at 10 to 12 metres.

5 to 6 bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*) swam all around us with such agile and graceful movements, paying very little attention to us. When you look them directly in the eyes, it looks as though they are talking to you. They slowly swim just above the sand and sometimes their pectoral fins cut the sand like a knife. It's so amazing to dive with these wonderful sharks. They are strong and can reach 3.5 metres in lengths. These sharks are capable of living in both salt water and fresh water.

Sharks used to be so mysterious to us, dangerous and even considered man eaters. How wrong we were. They are part of a healthy ecosystem. Sharks are a sign of a healthy reef. They are the top of the food chain and not at all what most people say or think; dangerous!

Getting back onto the boat after our first dive, Jim told us that when the bull sharks are here first, there are few chances to see the great hammerheads. We'll see anyway. We will continue to bait and continue to try for the next 2 days.

After 2 dives with several nurse sharks and bull sharks, Jim gives us the opportunity to dive a little further away on a nice reef, seeing as we still haven't seen any hammerheads. There are many types of sponges on the reef, in all shapes and colours surrounded by angelfish, groupers, lion fish and butterfly fish. A little nurse shark sleeps between 2 rocks and a juvenile grey



reef shark sometimes swims around to inspect us. A big stingray covered by sand keeps an eye out and suddenly swims off in a cloud of dust as a diver comes in too close. Several little rays are seen throughout and we can now see why the great hammerheads would come so close to Bimini during a few months of the year. It's a rich feeding ground for them.

#### DAY 2

We moved the boat from the bay back to the previous day's spot. Weather permitting, we have decided to stay on for the night to have another chance at seeing great hammerheads by keeping the area baited. We had 20 bull sharks and 6-7 tawny nurse sharks (*Nebrius ferrugineus*) hanging around our legs with their partnered remoras.

#### DAY 3

With another unsuccessful day of encountering great hammerheads, we decided to move our next 2 days on to Tiger Beach. This famous dive site is 80 miles further north. It's a great spot to see a lot of marine activity and is home to tiger sharks, making them a guarantee to see. The decision was approved by the captain, so the move north was made in the night.

#### DAY 4

The reef is huge with sand patches, cliffs and rocks and is an absolute paradise for divers. The nearest island is 35 miles away. The depth of this area is around 12 metres and the visibility is good all year round.

Jim has been coming here for the past 15 years.

In the beginning he only did reef dives, but he then saw that tiger sharks inhabited this little heaven. He began diving the site once a week when time allowed and learnt to know the place and all its sharks by heart! His greatest love there is Emma, a female tiger shark of 4 metres that has lived around the site for several years now. She sometimes leaves the reef but no one knows of her other destination. Maybe to deliver or to get pregnant?

The beauty of this place astonishes everyone with its clear blue water and the fact that there is no other land around in sight for miles. Below the boat, the sharks swim in full swing. Caribbean reef sharks (*Carcharhinus perezi*), lemon sharks and tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier*) are here.

After our breakfast, we are ready for the days dives. The second group get prepared and after jumping into the water, we descend along the line attached at the back of the boat.

It's surprising to see the level of activity waiting for us. There are about thirty or more sharks swimming around us. Lemon sharks (*Negaprion acutidens*), Caribbean reef sharks, nurse sharks and tiger sharks are everywhere. In the middle of the first day, we had 5 tiger sharks with us. Emma though, is not with them! Stephany, another female of 3.5 metres is and she is the divemaster's favorite tiger. She is huge and not at all shy. We realize how very different the experience is compared to diving with bull sharks. When Stephany approached us the first time, it was

very impressive. She then came in directly to one of the other divers and made contact with his camera. One push, and she moved a little to the side and then came back. Second push was made and she moved again and came back. A third push was made! She's definitely curious, but not aggressive.

With big square noses and a distinct vertical pattern of dark bands on their sides, tiger sharks are feeding opportunists. In some sharks, scientists have found plastic, pieces of tyres, birds, fish, crabs and other sharks. Sea turtles are a favourite. In fact, their jaws can break the turtle shells. Tigers and great whites are the only sharks able to do so. These sharks can be seen in both shallow and deep waters.

#### DAY 5

During our last day, we start paying less attention to the 20 or 30 lemon and Caribbean sharks around us and enjoy the rest of the colourful marine life. A lemon shark covered in remoras with its mouth wide open has a cleaning wrasse swimming gently inside its scary mouth full of sharp teeth. I come close enough to take some shots before the lemon gets annoyed with this little fish. It was a short but good experience to share this little event.

Unfortunately, the day has come to an end and we are all sad to have to come out of the last dive. This place is amazing and there is no doubt that I will one day come back.

A big thank you to Patrick Masse.

## DIVING DESTINATIONS

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