

# THE GREAT HAMMERHEAD OF BIMINI, BAHAMAS

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE**

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Always in search of sharks, my new adventures take me back to the Bahamas, to this time see the big hammerhead shark. From December till April, these sharks like the west side of Bahamas's waters to feed and/or reproduce. The great hammerhead feeds mostly on stingrays, small sharks and crustaceans. The Bahamas which is surrounded by large sandy bottoms, attracts and possesses numerous species of rays and sharks. With its mangrove swamps, the Bahamas is also a nursery for lemon, nurse and bull sharks.

I decide to spend a week aboard the MV Shearwater with Jim Abernethy. Jim has dived in the Bahamas for more than 12 years. He is undoubtedly one of the biggest specialists in the diving industry to dive with these magnificent creatures.

To start my journey, I headed to West Palm Beach in the North of Miami to board the boat which would take us to Bimini Island in the Bahamas. The crossing takes 7-8 hours depending on the weather conditions. A stop

at customs was made before our arrival the next morning to settle all the paperwork before entering Bahamas water territory. After the simple procedure, we headed 3km along the coast.

Over a bottom of white coral at a depth of 10m, George the captain releases the anchor. It is hard to believe that at this depth that sharks, that amongst them, the great hammerhead is going to appear below us.

The crew settles the various cages of bait out of the boat and after a mere 5 minutes, the first sharks begin to appear. Very slowly swimming and with clear water, it is possible to distinguish the characteristic shape of the nurse shark. The divemaster gets ready and dives in from the stern of the boat with his bait. Impatient to dive with sharks and to perceive the great hammerhead, I decide to follow him with another diver without knowing if the great hammerhead is around.

For an underwater photographer, diving into

clear blue water in 24 degrees is an enormous pleasure, especially with sharks all around. I get in with as little noise as possible and descend down to 12m near the divemaster. The wait begins with about ten nurse sharks swimming around us. Although these sharks look clumsy, they remain merciless predators to crustaceans and molluscs.

With our presence, they are incredibly curious and do not hesitate to touch us during their inquisition. After spending 20 playful minutes with these nurse sharks, the divemaster suddenly points his finger toward us. Indeed, within the limits of the blue, a shape appears and turns back. The tension rises in us. Is it the great hammerhead?

5 minutes pass and our guest appears from the blue. A female great hammerhead shark of 4m swims towards us. Majestic, agile, graceful and rapid, this mythical shark is finally here! While moving her wide head from left to right, she goes over towards the divemaster, but prevents her from coming to bite the cage with

the bait. Slowly and without aggressiveness, the hammerhead allows to be touched and then she is pushed away by the divemaster:

As a cartilaginous animal, the shark turns 180 degrees within a fraction of a second in order to come back and smell the bait. The divemaster knowing their behavior all too well, is not surprised by this and gently pushes her away once again.

The great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*) is the largest species of hammerhead shark, attaining a maximum length of 6.1m (20ft). It is found in tropical and warm temperate waters worldwide, inhabiting coastal areas and the continental shelf. The great hammerhead can be distinguished from other hammerheads by the shape of its 'hammer' (called the 'cephalofoil'), which is wide with an almost straight front margin, and by its tall, sickle-shaped first dorsal fin. A solitary, strong-swimming apex predator, the great hammerhead feeds on a wide variety of prey ranging from crustaceans and cephalopods,

to bony fish and smaller sharks. Observations of this species in the wild suggest that the cephalofoil functions to immobilize stingrays, a favored prey. This species has a viviparous mode of reproduction, bearing litters of up to 55 pups every two years.

Although potentially dangerous, the great hammerhead rarely attacks humans. It sometimes behaves inquisitively towards divers and should be treated with respect. This shark is heavily fished for its large fins, which are extremely valuable on the Asian market as it is the main ingredient to shark fin soup. As a result, great hammerhead populations are declining substantially worldwide, and it has been assessed as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Diving down at only 12m with the great hammerhead is a truly unique experience. In spite of the great hammerhead being present in all the tropical oceans to date, it is only possible to make these shallow dives with them in the Bahamas. They can be seen in

French Polynesia, South Africa or in Australia, but not as close up as here.

If you follow your dive computer's profile, it is possible to do 4 dives with these magnificent creatures. In the afternoon, our hammerhead made way to 2 other females. They stayed with us till nightfall, giving us a continuous show as they left and returned, mixing with the nurse sharks. We spotted 2 bull sharks swimming in the background, but with the large females present, they did not approach us. The females had the run of the neighborhood and it was their territory at this stage, keeping the smaller sized bull sharks out.

To sum up my experience, the Bahamas is a destination of predilection for shark lovers. If you one day decide to spend a week away to refresh, I suggest a discovery in the Bahamas to see these wonderful creatures for who they really are. They are simply beautiful wild animals that deserve our respect and to understand them, we are to admire them in their environment.