

# Shark Lunch In The Bahamas

There are sharply divergent opinions on the subject of feeding marine life to encourage their appearance however there are no doubts that it can create a spectacular experience. Contributor Jaime Burns and his girlfriend Kim were invited aboard Black Beard's *Aqua Cat* in Barbados for a week long diving holiday filled with adrenalin rushing, heart pounding moments. And a highlight for them was the shark feed when they saw a few razor toothed friends up close and serious.

## WORDS AND PICTURES BY JAIME BURNS

WE HAD BEEN invited aboard *Aqua Cat*, based at Hurricane Hole Marina on Paradise Island in the Bahamas for a week of sharks, sharks and more sharks. Not only would we visit the area where *Open Water* had been filmed, we would also take part in a live shark feed and dive one of the Blue Holes. As we travelled over the large high road bridge onto Paradise Island we looked down over Hurricane Hole Marina, it was not difficult to see the *Aqua Cat* - all I had to do was look for the largest boat there.

After stowing our luggage away and setting up the dive gear on the wet deck for the following day's early dive, it was down to the galley for a meal, to meet the rest of the crew and our fellow divers for the week!

Early Sunday morning we kitted up ready for the first dive. This was to be Barracuda Shoals, a shallow dive with great visibility and well named as we saw a very large barracuda (at least 6ft), two stingrays and an 8ft nurse shark that was to be the first of many. Underneath one of the ledges, two lobsters peered

out nervously watching us. The reef was pristine with plenty of marine life, sponges, sea fans and gorgonians. As this was just the orientation dive I now had high hopes for the rest of the week!

Our late morning dive was a drift dive into a 'washing machine'. I had decided to take a camera but had no time to take pictures, I was too busy enjoying the ride. It was fast and furious - no sooner had we jumped off the back of the boat than we were swept along at approx four knots. The dive lasted 40 minutes and was a pure adrenaline rush all the way. The dive masters had told us to roll into a ball as we hit the washing machine and it would spin us round and then spit us out on the other side. What a rush!

And so to day two where we headed for Dog Rocks; so named for the three main pinnacles - South Dog, Middle Dog and North Dog. The reef starts at 35ft then slopes off to 50ft before dropping straight off into the abyss better known as the Exuma Sound. Black coral was abundant here as well as Orange Elephant Ear and Tube Sponges. There was so much to see that we could not

hope to see it all in one dive, so after 90 minutes we were back again. I spent a lot more time at the reef's edge looking out into the Exuma Sound and was rewarded with the sight of a large Southern Sting Ray and my first glimpse of a Caribbean Grey Reef shark.

The third dive of the day was on the *Austin Smith* wreck. This wreck was formerly known as the *USS Cape Current*, a United States coast guard cutter that was given to the Bahamas to be sunk as a dive site. It is intact and lies upright at 60ft and offers a great photographic opportunity and general diving. We disturbed a 5ft sleeping Nurse Shark off the starboard bow, a couple of groupers circled and a lobster was peering out from between rusty hull plates while the resident barracuda watched our progress at the bow. This was the only wreck we would visit this week and as a wreck diver I thought I was going to be a little disappointed, but how wrong I was.

The late afternoon dive was at Flat Rock. Although we were told that this would be a macro dive the reef had an abundance of fish life with large shoals





Jaime Burns

of Lane Snapper, Schoolmaster Snapper and French Grunts. We dived on the north side of the reef, the current swirled around both ends, giving a gentle decline in the seabed from 15ft to 25ft in the middle, where rocky outcrops were abundant with fish life, sea fans and sponges.

That evening was the first night dive at Barracuda Shoals. I went to the bar and left Kim and a couple of the other hardened dive guests to it. Kim informed me that she and the other divers saw two octopi, three lobsters and a large puffer fish, not to mention the macro life, although she did wonder were the 5ft barracuda that we had seen the day before had gone! Was he lurking at the boundaries of their torch beams, out of sight, watching with intent? Just like the sharks!

Day three and at 9.00am we were moored at Blacktip Wall - aptly named, as Blacktip Reef Sharks are often seen here. This wall is a great dive with many swim-throughs that open out onto the seaward face of the wall, here the bottom goes down to over 90ft. The sight of two young Blacktips gliding past about 10m out into the blue, reminded the whole group of what this afternoon's dive would bring.

After a respite and some lunch it would be time to swim with the big dogs. It was time for the shark feed, (cue Jaws music). The *Aqua Cat* moved anchorage a short



grey reef shark

distance to Amberjack Reef. Bearing in mind that of the 20 or so diving guests on board only four of them were experienced divers, this would be their first time in the water with a 10ft shark right next to them. We had an orientation dive so that divers would be familiar with the reef and where the DM's would place them before the shark feed would commence.

7 Caribbean Reef Sharks were already circling under the boat in anticipation of being fed and that was not going to happen until the last dive of the day. On entering the water we had to make sure we didn't land on the back of one as they were 8ft long and all female, which tend to be more aggressive.

We followed our divemaster down to the site, which was a flat circular rock with a metal eye embedded into the surface where the chum line would be anchored. Our divemaster indicated that we should kneel in the sand around the rock with our hands folded across our chest. Behind us were a number of smaller rocks circling us, which reminded me of the layout of Stonehenge and its sacrificial plinth.

We swam round to get more familiar with the site and the sharks swam round with us, coming in for a closer look on several occasions. Although they were a bit intimidating we didn't feel threatened; they were just as interested in us as we were in them. As time was getting short we headed back to *Aqua Cat* in nervous anticipation of the next dive. This was where things would get interesting.

An hour after our orientation of the dive site and we were back into the water. 12 Reef Sharks were now circling the area and they followed us down to the feeding site. We duly found a spot on the sandy bottom and knelt in the sand with arms crossed.

The chum was frozen onto a line and was connected to the metal eye in the centre rock by a carabineer. The chum soon began to melt and the feeding frenzy began. The sharks came in fast; two head butted each other and totally missed the chum. I guess having to close your eyes before you bite has a few draw-backs.

Yellow Jacks swarmed the bait ball themselves becoming food.

Bits of now melted chum were floating free, small reef fish darted in and out while the sharks fought to take turns on the main ball of thawing chum, sawing with their razor sharp teeth as they thrashed their bodies from side to side.

Three Reef Sharks shot past me, so close they nearly knocked me off my perch, just below the bait ball anchor. One of the experienced dive guests had a shark hit the front of his video camera housing;

but he had been right up at the bait ball when it happened. Barracuda hung around the edges of the feeding zone, darting in to take unsuspecting smaller reef fish by surprise.

All too soon it was over. The bait ball was devoured, leaving sharks and reef fish alike fighting over the scraps still floating in mid-water. Looking down from my vantage point atop the reef, all I could see were huge grins from every diver, it had been totally amazing and I was not the only one hooked.

Some of us went to the rock where the chum had been anchored looking for sharks' teeth as they always lose a few when feeding. I decided to hang around in mid-water trying to get a few close-up shots of the sharks that were sill circling the reef head.

Day four and off to Danger Reef, this was a memorable dive for Kim as she nearly became breakfast for the sharks. The dive started unremarkably except for the number of sharks, which were most obligingly swimming close enough for us to get some great shots.

Nothing much seemed to be happening when Kim (she later told me) spotted a Peacock Flounder on the seabed. On looking around she noticed that no one else had seen it, including the sharks. She decided to go down and take a picture, managing to take two before it decided to swim between her legs and hide in a crevice.



Grey Angelfish

Being above her I saw that the sharks had been attracted to something and I suddenly realised what was happening. Hastily I used my tank banger to get her attention. I gestured madly that she should come to the edge of the reef. It seemed that the sharks had spotted the flounder, which is a delicacy to them, and Kim was in the middle of eight 8ft sharks, three large grouper and some Yellow Jacks that were circling her. Now Kim knew why the flounder had made a hasty retreat. She managed to extricate herself without mishap and is here to tell the tale. Just!

An hour later we were back in the water for yet another close up shark experience and more sharks had arrived. After her near miss on the first dive Kim made sure that she kept the sharks in

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sight at all times and just took pictures of them and other divers. The group were circled and shadowed by up to 14 Grey Reefers between 4ft and 10ft long at any one time. I was able to get very close to these guys as they were a lot more relaxed with no food in the water.

Our second day five dive was Up Jumped the Devil - an interesting dive with pillars and swim-throughs, which start at 50ft and go down to 90ft on the sand. Marine life was sparse here but was made up for by the curiosity of a young turtle who stayed with us for about half the dive.

The first afternoon dive was Crab Mountain. Starting at 55ft the coral was spaced out like fingers on the sandy bottom, which slopes down to 70ft and drops off into the blue at a sheer wall. We saw silversides and a big Southern Sting Ray. A barracuda cruised past riding the current. The water was crystal clear and had been since the second day out.

Our fourth dive was on Closemon. This was a shallow dive and great for snorkelling as it started at 10ft and gradually sloped down to a depth of

just 25ft. The sandy bottom was covered in small clumps of coral, which were teeming with young marine life. There were many fantastic photo options here and with only two more dives to go the following morning, I was making the most of this one.

Our last day and we headed for the Blue Hole; blue holes are a phenomenon created during several ice ages, when sea levels were 400ft lower and the Bahamas was a great exposed limestone platform. Centuries of acidic rainwater etched into the vast bank, creating circular depressions and other magnificent formations. The rim of this large blue hole lies in 40ft of water surrounded by coral heads and schools of fish including Sergeant Majors, Atlantic Spade Fish, grouper, angel fish and Southern Sting Rays.

The hole is about 80ft-100ft across, and 200ft deep. At 80ft there is a cave on the wall that is usually full of Spiny Lobster, but we were unlucky on our dive as we didn't see any. As you go deep the water gets noticeably colder and the visibility declines to almost nothing. At the bottom I landed on what proved to be 2m of soft sediment. Up to this point I had been following someone's video camera lights, but was plunged into darkness by the sediment. Very scary! Hoping not to land on one of the sleeping Nurse Shark that are known to frequent the bottom of this particular Blue Hole, I quickly inflated my BCD and starting to ascend. It was very cold down there. Not something I would do again.

The last dive was at Periwinkle Reef. This was a

shallow dive with the top of the reef starting at 10ft and dropping to the sandy bottom at just 20ft - it was teeming with fish. As the first ones in, Kim and I were attacked by a school of Sargent Major Fish who kept going for our heads. Believe me they had a nasty nip. I was told afterwards that divers often feed them here with breakfast cereal.

All in all it had been one of the most memorable weeks of diving Kim and I have ever had. It was absolutely fantastic. The *Aqua Cat* was an awesome live-a-board, the crew were amazing and the sharks, they were right on Q. We are already planning to come back next year.

With sadness we departed the *Aqua Cat* the following afternoon, after it had docked back at Hurricane Hole. We said our goodbyes to those who had become our compatriots and friends, heading

back to our hotel. For the rest of the guests it was either a short flight back to the States or the longer flight back to the UK, but for Kim and I the odyssey would continue as we went on in search of the ultimate shark encounter... *to be continued.*



Jaime's turtle friend



Sargent fish can produce a nasty nip



THE AQUA CAT

**AIRLINES** Fly direct from UK to Nassau, Bahamas (Virgin Atlantic, Continental Airlines, United Airlines and US Airways) or fly to Miami where you pick up a connecting flight.

**CLIMATE** During the summer temperatures rarely rise above 90°F while the lowest winter temperatures vary between 40 and 50°F. The hurricane season extends from June through November (greatest risk August to October).

**DIVING WITH AQUA CAT** *Aqua Cat* offers week long live-a-board vacations in the Bahamas, leaving Nassau, every Saturday. The *Aqua Cat* is a 102' luxury catamaran and offers fast smooth travel to the remote parts of the Bahamas.

Live-a-board activities including scuba diving, snorkelling, kayaking, fishing, sunbathing, and island exploring. If you

aren't a certified scuba diver, full certification lessons are available. They also offer top of the line high quality scuba rental gear for those who require it.

*Aqua Cat* provides bar, meals, scuba diving and water sports all included in the price. Nitrox and E-6 processing are also available for a small extra charge.

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