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### Close Encounters of the Finned Kind !!!



I was generally considered to be quite a bright kid. At school I achieved good grades, secured a few A-levels and managed to land myself a job at a respectable city stockbroking firm. And so it was that I found myself questioning my own sanity as I stood on the aft deck watching the dark shapes of at least a dozen sharks circulating below me. Speculating whether this was indeed the height of macho diving madness and with vivid flashback of "Jaws" playing havoc with my over active imagination, I took the plunge!

There can be no question that diving with sharks is one of the hottest tickets in the dive travel industry today. Public fascination with sharks, by people in general and divers in particular, has never been greater and – compared to the "Jaws" hysteria of the Seventies – thankfully, never more enlightened. Huge numbers of scuba divers are now doing the unthinkable ... actively going in search of sharks and taking them on, eyeball-to-eyeball, without any special protection at all. So are we all going crazy? ... No we are not! We are merely learning that the myth of the shark as an indiscriminate predator, out to kill anybody that so much as dips his or her toe in the sea simply isn't true. The reality is that the shark plays a crucial role in the ecology of the ocean by thinning out the weak and sick fish. In their natural environment sharks are, with a few exceptions, cautious and wary and for the most part they keep their distance from divers. Although sharks are found everywhere in the world's oceans, most divers go a lifetime without even a single shark experience. However, our preoccupation, some might say lurid fascination, with the business end of the shark – i.e. the jaws and teeth – means that for many, a lasting close encounter is what we are really after.

The Bahamas, often called the shark capital of the world, is probably one of the best places to really get up close and personal with sharks. This group of some 700 islands boasts the largest collection of shark diving operations in the world. An estimated 20,000 divers experience sharks each year and to date there hasn't been a single incident or accident reported.

Our search for sharks took us to Stuart Cove's, possibly the slickest dive operation in The Bahamas and one of the pioneers of shark feeding. A 45-minute boat ride takes us to The Arena where, we are promised, the sharks will be waiting. Drawn by the sound of the engine, as many as 30 sharks congregate around the dive boat, eager for the action to begin. After a short briefing, during which, Devon, the shark-feeder, describes shark behaviour and tells us what to expect during the dive, its time to kit up and go. At this stage my apprehension is growing as, opposite me, Devon is donning his chain mail suit and crash hat ... where's mine? Struggling to control my racing pulse and rapid shallow breathing, I descend through a mass of circling sharks. Gradually all of the divers move into position on the white sandy bottom and there we wait for the show to begin.

The sharks formed an intimidating entourage as Devon, box of dead fishy bits in hand, made his way down to the centre of The Arena. Activity was intensifying all the time and the sheer size, number and exceptionally close proximity of the sharks became almost overwhelming. Huge groupers lurked amongst the sharks, waiting patiently for an opportunity to poach any loose morsels. Struggling to keep the unwieldy 4-ft aluminium feeding-pole under control amidst the mêlée, Devon extricated a dead fish head from his box and offered it to the sharks. The speed and agility of these amazing creatures became only too apparent as they contended aggressively for the spoils. At this stage I couldn't help feeling that Devon may not have been quite as in control as he would have liked us to think. As the feed continued my anxieties and apprehensions slowly started to subside and by the 5 fish head I was able to relax and marvel at the extraordinary spectacle that was taking place literally right in front of my mask. After about 30 minutes the box was empty and Devon waved goodbye before making his way back to the boat. The sharks gradually dispersed and left us with an opportunity to hunt for any teeth that may have been lost during the feed. I secured myself a very respectable bounty of 5 teeth before checking my tank pressure (shark diving does very little for your air consumption) and heading back to the surface. Back on board the grinning faces and excitable chatter told its own story and was a striking contrast to the apprehensive atmosphere immediately before the dive.

As my post shark euphoria began to wane I found myself idly wondering about my next shark dive. Maybe something a little bit bigger or just a little bit more intimidating next time? ..... maybe Hammerheads in the Galapagos Island?..... maybe shark tagging along the Great Barrier Reef? ..... or maybe, just maybe cage diving with Great Whites in South Africa? Now all I need to do is find myself a buddy ... any offers?

## Technically Speaking

Technical diving is without a doubt one of the fastest growing segments within the sports diving industry. Indeed, you only need to count the number of divers sporting twin sets at Stoney Cove on a Sunday for proof of that fact. Therefore, news that PADI, through its affiliate DSAT (Diving Science and Technology), was venturing beyond the recreational limits and into the realms of "tek" came as little surprise.

Technical diving rewards divers with underwater sites and experiences beyond the limits of recreational diving, but at a cost. Technical diving involves a higher degree of risk and the only way to properly manage this increased risk is through extensive training and equipment.

Technical diving requires a high level of commitment, firstly to gain the necessary skills and knowledge and secondly to spending time mastering these skills and then applying them strictly, without exception or compromise.

The DSAT Tec Deep Diver course trains divers to conduct gas-switch extended decompression dives using air, enriched air and oxygen to a maximum depth of 50 metres. In addition, the course aims to ensure that each diver has adequate knowledge of technical diving equipment and that he or she fully understands the risks and procedures required to manage them.

To enroll on the Tec Deep Diver course you must meet the following prerequisites:

- 18 years of age
- PADI Advanced Open Water
- PADI Rescue Diver
- PADI Enriched Air
- PADI Deep Diver and
- Minimum of 100 logged dives, of which 20 must have been made using EANx, 25 must be deeper than 18mtrs and 15 deeper than 30mtrs.

If you are interested in technical diving but don't have the certifications or experience to take the Tec Deep Diver course, then the Apprentice Tec Diver course provides an excellent foundation. A sub-course within the Tec Deep course, Apprentice Tec uses the same course materials and follows the same philosophies. Apprentice Tec divers are qualified to make gas switch, extended no-decompression dives to a maximum of 40mtrs, using air or enriched air up to 60%. To enroll on the Apprentice Tec Diver course you must meet the following prerequisites :

- 18 years of age
- PADI Advanced Open Water
- PADI Enriched Air
- PADI Deep Diver and
- Minimum of 50 logged dives, of which 10 must have been made using EANx, 12 must be deeper than 18mtrs and 6 deeper than 30mtrs.

Anyone interested in technical diving should contact Ray or Lesley at the Dive Centre for more information. Adventure Divers is also a TDI Premier Facility and as such we can offer a complete range of technical programmes, all the way up to Trimix Instructor ... Yes Trimix Instructor !!

## A Rarebit of Welsh Diving



Anybody involved in outdoor pursuits will already be wary of one place that has worse weather than England - Wales! Despite the gloomy weather forecasts, groups of Adventure Divers set off for Pembrokeshire on Friday the 7th of July. Work commitments had delayed my departure, but the journey was surprisingly smooth and after some white knuckle hairpin bends I finally saw the welcoming lights of the bar at the St. David's Dive Centre at about 1.00am. I made it just in time for a quick pint, before stumbling up to my room and fumbling my way up to the top bunk in pitch darkness. In morning, Rob and Paul were surprised to find a new arrival in the room, but both were soon to appreciate the addition of a trainee Divemaster, as tea making skills feature highly on the course requirements.

Having enjoyed a mountainous breakfast, the gear was loaded up and we made our way down to St. Justinian's Bay. As we loaded cylinders, dive bags and weight belts on to the winch skip, we realised that the steep steps hugging the cliff face and plunging down to the sea would have to be climbed up at the end of the day - delightful!

The "Gower Ranger" is moored in the bay and we had to transfer from the jetty beneath the Lifeboat Station to our dive boat in an even more beat up RIB than Adventure Diver (that was in the old days! - ed.) As twenty-six cylinders, countless pounds of weight, several large dive bags and thirteen Adventure Divers boarded the RIB, I had visions of our first dive being a salvage operation right there in the harbour. With water pouring over the gunwales, the RIB battled out to the hardboat where everything was safely transferred.

Surprisingly the weather was not too abysmal, and we headed out in rolling seas to our first site, the "Haematite". A running current meant that we would have to make a negatively buoyant descent, finning down the shotline. Only Ray, who went in first, saw anything of this wreck - for the rest of us it proved an extremely adventurous dive. By the time Steve and I began our descent, the line had been tugged off the wreck. Steve was fighting with a temperamental regulator that seemed intent on drowning him. We later discovered that a torn mouthpiece was letting in as much water as air. He change to his octo and we continued into the murky depths finning hard against the current and feeling the clutching embrace of the colder water.

At 23m I was feeling decidedly peculiar - the next thing I remembered was my head clearing, Steve pulling me up and me giving him a big okay. He said afterwards that I had stopped and looked up, big brown saucer eyes filling my mask! It just goes to show that given the right

conditions narcosis can happen at shallower depths! By the time we reached the seabed, there was no sign of a wreck, but we could make out the drag mark of the shotline. We began finning for all we were worth, but couldn't lose the blasted anchor. It sat below us - perhaps it was finning too! We gave up and drifted away over a featureless seabed. This was not our most memorable dive!

Back on the boat, the pitching seas were making things uncomfortable for everyone. There's something awfully masochistic about spending your holiday on a boat that thinks it belongs in a rodeo, especially when you get seasick on a waterbed! Fortunately things calmed down, and our afternoon dive in Ramsey Sound was much more fun. A gentle drift pushed us along a stepped reef loaded with marine life. Crabs and sea spiders were abundant - in a deep crevice we saw a monstrous edible crab that was almost half a metre wide. The seabed was literally crawling with serpent stars, but the highlight of our dive was definitely an encounter with a very inquisitive lesser spotted dogfish. The little shark may have regretted bumping into Steve "Irwin" Ambrose, however, and certainly knows a thing or two about Greco-Roman wrestling now. Jacqui probably enjoyed the moment of the weekend, when a playful seal took a shine to her fins!

Overnight the wind howled, and squalls and showers spat and rattled against our windows. Yet somehow, it was clear in the morning. We enjoyed an uncharacteristically quick start to make slack water on the Count d'Aspremant; a ship that foundered in Ramsey Sound nearly 100 years ago. There was none of the high drama of the previous day, and Steve and I found ourselves first to reach the boiler. I was just adjusting my kit when Steve's frantic pointing caught my attention. He disappeared around the boiler and so I followed, only to be met by four and a half feet of flailing silvery tail. A large conger eel was obviously not best pleased to see us, but to see such a beautiful specimen hunting during the day has to be one of my British diving highlights. I always think there is something eerie about wrecks, and the moment that we turned around the stern and looked up at the big four-bladed propeller framed against the green background was certainly sombre. Plenty of butterflyfish were about and shoals of bib were lurking in the recesses of the wreck. I also had my first look at a spiny squat lobster.

We enjoyed sandwiches and several cups of hot tea in the lee of Ramsey Island. Puffins, guillemots, kittiwakes and gulls wheeled around the cliffs, and their mewing calls, accompanied by the warm sunshine and gentle rocking motion of the boat made thinking about diving again very difficult. I am still relatively green when it comes to UK diving, so when the skipper said, "There's a bit of a current running", Steve suggested I carry the SMB. What I did not know was that our skipper, Clive, is also the cox'n of the local Lifeboat, and that a "bit of a current" runs at 6 knots! We hit the water and the race was on. Immediately, my arm holding the SMB was wrenched towards the surface and we were flying through the water. Below us, the sea floor rushed past - one had barely had a chance to glimpse a crab or lobster before it was snatched away to the limits of the vis. We settled into this manic drift, turned to give each other a big

okay and looked ahead at precisely the same moment. Streaking towards us out of the murk was an impossibly large boulder. Quicker than the blink of an eye there were two Garfield splats on the rock! The current was pinning us down and we were both laughing so much that we were in danger of losing our regs. The drift continued, hurtling along, then slowing down, spitting us out, only to find us again and rush off at right angles. We were dragged through a thick forest of

kelp and then dumped unceremoniously over the top of a shallow reef. It was an exhilarating ride and as good as any that our best theme parks have to offer. On surfacing, we were amazed to see that all the buddy teams had ended up spread out over a wide area. Clive had his hands full fishing us out of the sea.

Back on shore we spent some time exploring the quaint little city of St David's. The local sea life centre is a must for divers who want to brush up on their knowledge of local marine life. A group of us enjoyed a very civilised dinner at the Grove Hotel, and then adjourned to the bar, where a group of 60's die hard surfer dudes were enjoying a jam session. During one of their breaks, Steve stepped up and began strumming away. Pretty soon he had the whole pub humming and singing along and by the time he had done David Bowie's "Major Tom", the band were ready to offer him a contract! We made our way back to the dive centre under drizzly skies that promised to wash out the final day's diving.

A lifeboat cox will go out in just about anything though, and we managed to dive in the lee of Porthlisgi Point. The rough surface conditions had generated some deeper surge, and apart from some very pretty cuckoo wrasse and a shoal of pollack, there was little marine life activity.

Our final dive in Ramsey Sound took us back to the stepped reef of the first day. It proved to be just as entertaining and packed with life. We had an excellent sighting of a lesser spotted dogfish, but this time a tiny curled octopus that expelled a poor excuse for a cloud of ink and tried to disappear behind this rather ineffective smoke screen stole the show! Ray had suggested that we should approach big rocks feet first to prevent the Garfield splat scenario, so when the drift started nudging us towards a suitable boulder, I assumed the position. Imagine my surprise then, when, as I casually approached the rock, the impact drove my knees up into my chest and pinned me there in a painful crouch. The technique requires some fine tuning!

Clive showed us some of his skill as he piloted us through a running sea with three metre swells to get us back to St Justinian's. The long, hard, process of getting the gear back up those infernal steps began, and then thoughts were turning to the long road back to Lleogr.

While the weather wasn't really on our side and did limit us to more inshore dive sites, I was impressed with diving in Pembrokeshire. The marine life is abundant and the varying dive conditions have something for everyone. Coupled with comfortable accommodation and good food, St David's will definitely be seeing more of Adventure Divers in the future.

**Anthony Collins**