

TRAVEL

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In Fiji, dancing with sharks

Without the protection of a cage, the exhilaration of getting up close to some of the world's most awe-inspiring apex predators is beyond compare

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There's a moment when the sheer awe of being arms-length from a procession of hungry sharks — so close that you lock eyes with each one as it blitzes by your head — gives way to a sudden burst of clarity, and all your thoughts coalesce into a single edifying idea: "Maybe I should duck."

Scuba diving in Fiji, a collection of some 300 islands strewn across the South Pacific, poses a kind of recreational Sophie's Choice for anyone with less than a month on his hands. Do I chase mana rays across the famed Astrolabe Reef off Kadavu Island? Can I make it to the pristine, remote waters between the big islands? What about the legendary soft corals carpeting the Great White Wall in the Somosomo Strait? Shark diving in Pacific Harbor, a couple of hours' drive from the international airport on Viti Levu,

what any honest diver will admit to yearn for: lots and lots of big fish. Giant trevally, each bigger than a grown man's torso, racing around in swarms. A grouper the size of a love seat. Schools of plump snapper. Stealthy suckers, with their eerily flat heads. And such vast quantities of smaller reef fish clouding the deep that they alone, not the raging seas above, often pose the biggest obstacle to an unobstructed photograph of the huge bull sharks lumbering by.

There is a trick to luring sharks. I quickly learned when I was in Fiji last fall, and it is deviously simple. Dive boats churn up the waters with kilograms of discarded fish scraps, drawing a storm of life from kilometers around. Purists may call it cheating. Biologists fret over the potential impact on shark behavior, or on the delicate balance of life around the reefs. But there is no debating its efficacy.

Kneeling on the sea floor, almost 30m down, I counted 10 adult bull sharks circling directly overhead on one of my six shark dives; their skin taut over thick layers of muscle. Higher up, as many as two dozen speedy, snaller sharks — gray reefs, black tips and white tips, with their catlike eyes darted by our stunned group, close enough that I felt a swoosh of water on my face from a passing tail. Had we not been clamping down so tightly on our regulators, our mounds would surely have been agape.

But if attracting the sharks is a relatively crude affair, handling them is nothing short of an art. With no cage to protect us, professional divers flanked the group, gripping aluminum prods in case the predators became overzealous. Then the feeder would reach into his bag of fish parts and wave the sharks in, one by one. Clad in chain mail under his wet suit, the feeder would dangle and sway the waiting flesh, enticing the powerful beasts, some of them about 2.4m long, to eat right from his outstretched hand.

The smaller sharks, graceful and lithe, needed little encouragement. With surprising discipline, they took turns approaching the feeder in an orderly single file, snatching the

treats and quickly swooping away, their white bellies nearly grazing our heads as they scurried off.

Keenly aware of the ritual, they then circled around for the next spot in line. When a brazen newcomer from another reef broke ranks and rushed up from behind, one of the feeders, Manasa Buluvou, a Fijian man who goes by the nickname Papa, deftly grabbed the 1.5m shark, spun it around and socked it in the gut with an uppercut — a lesson in manners, Papa later explained.

But the big bull sharks, despite their reputation as aggressive man-eaters, were strangely shy. An enormous and visibly pregnant one the divers called Big Mama seemed almost finicky as she warily sniffed at the flesh being offered her before turning up her nose entirely. Some of the bulls lurked in the distance, no more than silhouettes in the blue. Others swam languidly toward us, as if playing a lazy game of chicken before nonchalantly turning away.

R. Dean Grubbs, a shark expert at Florida State University, says this is probably the safest way to encounter bull sharks, in deep, clear water, where they are far less likely to mistake you for their normal prey, as they do with swimmers and surfers in the shallows or at the surface. Some sharks, including bulls, also have space issues, so the fact that they've come to you, not the other way around, means they're less likely to feel crowded and testy.

But George Burgess, director of the Florida Program for Shark Research, contends that once you start luring big sharks all bets are off, pointing to the death of a tourist on a shark dive in the Bahamas last year. Still, he acknowledges that statisticians don't show that cichu dives are any more dangerous than normal dives. In fact, the bigger concern for researchers like him and Grubbs is the impact on the sharks themselves.

Even Papa wonders if his beloved sharks have grown a little complacent under his care, though they still adhere to many of their natural habits, like migrating or disappearing up the rivers for weeks on end when it's time to breed. And because some shark-diving profits go to the villages themselves, no one fishes along the reef or drops anchor on it, granting it a welcome reprieve from overfishing.

Some of the local divers say the reef certainly looks a lot healthier than it did before the shark diving started here 10 years ago. Long before Christianity, Papa said, the people of his village considered sharks their spiritual guardians and looked to them for protection before going into the water. Now, Papa said, he is the protector, boasting that he and his crew are deputized to impound illegal fishing boats that wander in the area to pluck from the healthy fish stocks there. He even speaks of the sharks as his children.

"They know Papa's coming," he said, heading out to sea one morning, his nickname emblazoned across his T-shirt. "They're waiting for me."

PHOTO: RICHARD BORG