

Action Diver

DIVE HOLIDAY PLANNER 2018/19

DIVING WITH SHARKS

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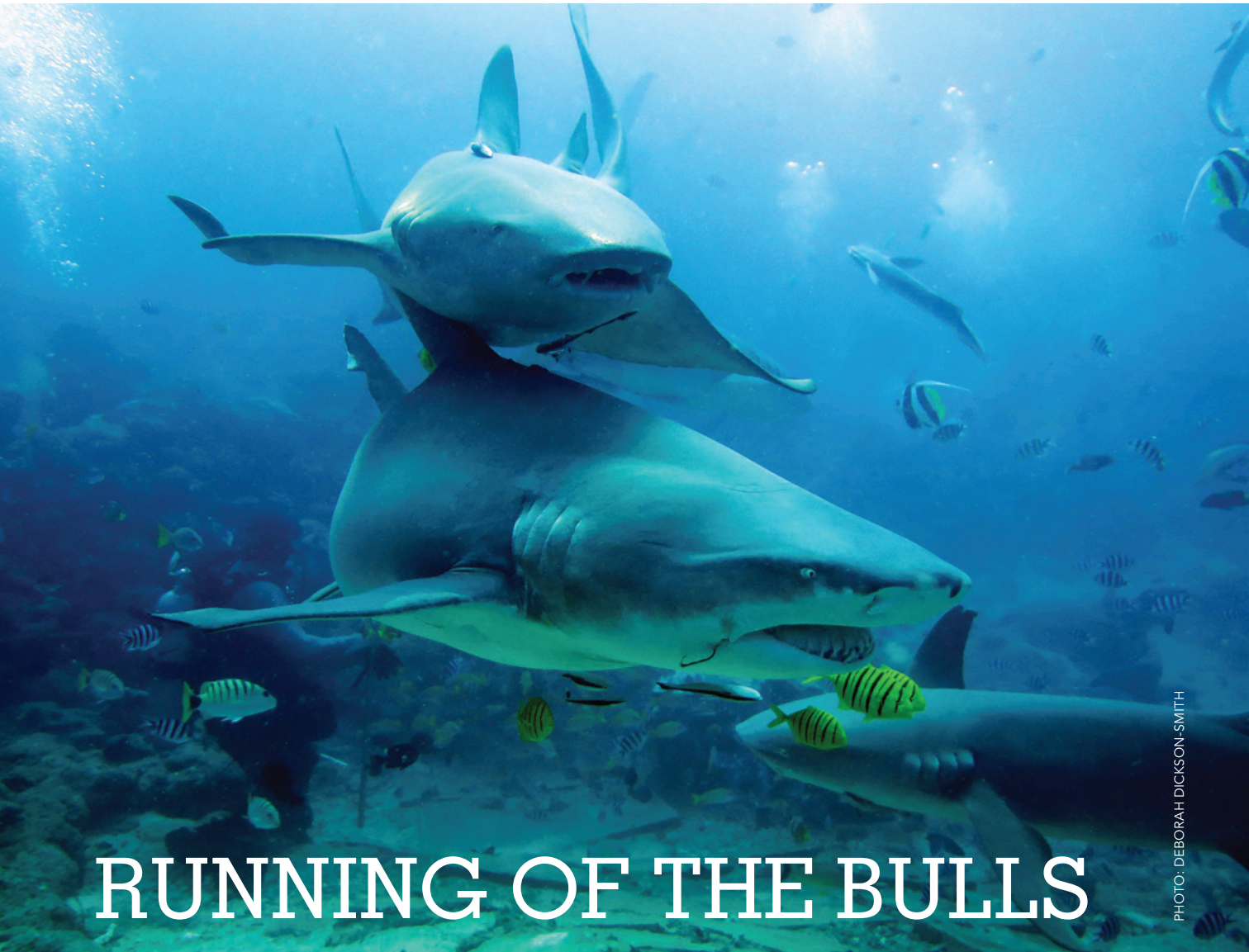


PHOTO: DEBORAH DICKSON-SMITH

RUNNING OF THE BULLS

Fiji is famed as a shark-feeding destination. Though controversial, the practice does allow you to get close to sharks – and explodes some myths.

Story by **Laura Waters**

OUR DIVE GUIDE LOOKS LIKE A MEDIEVAL KNIGHT, in a black hood, silver chain-mesh tunic and chainmail gloves. It soon becomes clear why.

Before I've finished my descent to 25m, I watch him become engulfed in a tangle of grey bodies. The sharks jostle him. No, jostle is too soft a word. They bump. The speed and force of their movement causes the water to churn, stirring particulates from the recent rainfall into a blur. He punches the predators away. My eyes widen behind the lens of my mask. Is this normal?

I've dived with sharks before, and even witnessed a few feeds, but these guys are the big time: the bulls of Beqa Lagoon. Beqa (pronounced Benga) sits off the south coast of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu. Our guide is South African owner of Aqua-Trek, Brandon Paige, who began feeding sharks here back in 1997.

Over the years, Fiji has become a hotspot known the world over for offering close encounters with bulls and other species. Experiencing the action myself has been on the bucket list for a while. Besides Aqua-Trek, Beqa Adventure Divers or "BAD" also operates shark feeds in the lagoon. BAD boasts the biggest bulls on its dives, while Aqua-Trek tends to attract more species.

Paige leads us to a low wall cobbled together from chunks of dead coral, and his safety divers briskly usher the group to kneel behind it. They jab fingers, pointing out where each of us is to go. Then they pat flattened palms downwards. *Sit. Stay.* Like obedient dogs, we do what we're told.

The brief was delivered calmly but firmly at the surface. No wandering from our posts, no reaching out with a camera, no pointing – nothing that might gain the attention of a hungry apex

predator. Watisoni “Wati” Veremalumu hovers above and behind me with a long metal crook, one of four guardians along the row of divers, ready to fend off overly curious sharks.

Welcome to *The Bistro*. Years of patient feeding has turned what was once a barren patch of ocean floor into a place that buzzes with life during feeds, which operate four times a week. In the morning’s early hours, long before we arrived, the dive operator deposited at the site two steel boxes perforated with holes and a plastic wheelie bin stuffed with scraps sourced from the nearby fish factories, Fiji Fish and Golden Ocean. For hours, the scent has been advertising to all passing traffic that The Bistro will soon be open.

I dump the air from my dive jacket and kneel on the rock-strewn sand, hard edges pressing through the padded knees of my 2mm lycra suit. I want to rest my hands on the wall to steady myself but my fingers suddenly seem far too pale and bait-like, so I wedge them under folded arms instead. After the initial kerfuffle, order seems to have been restored and I’m free to absorb the scene with a heart rate elevated from excitement rather than fear.

Less than 4m away, the hungry gather: around a dozen chunky bulls, a handful of flighty silvertips, reef sharks, and dozens of tawny nurse and sicklefin lemon sharks. I count at least 40 sharks in all before losing track in the melee. Two silver-black giant trevally dart between schools of sergeant majors, banner fish and remoras as big as baby sharks. Behind the soup of bodies a lone giant Queensland groper loiters, fat lips waiting to suck in any stray food.

There’s anticipation on both sides of the wall. Veremalumu’s staff hovers in the periphery of my vision as Paige and fellow feeder Jona reach into the bins, triggering a quickening of short,

sharp movements from the masses. Jona glances left and right, checking who’s nearby, then holds a tuna head at arm’s length. Zoom, a bull with all the impatience and attitude of the teenage male that he is, flies in to accept. He opens his cavernous mouth, the gums retreating momentarily to reveal two perfect rows of sharp triangular teeth, before sucking in the food.

The sharks twist their bodies in tight circles, pale bellies flashing and eyeballs rolling in their sockets as everyone fights for their piece of the action. But it’s an organised chaos, and the feeders are selective about who is offered a chunk. Bad table manners like pushiness results in a forceful shove and no snack.

Only the brave venture into the tornado of feeding bodies. Less-dominant sharks cruise the perimeter, including one sicklefin lemon whose pectoral fin passes barely 30cm from my face. We eyeball each other, her black pupils far too tiny for such a large body. I devour every detail, the rough texture of her skin and the ampullae dotting her snout.

The proximity is a rare treat. Suddenly it’s easy to notice the punctured pink flesh of the females – “love bites” from mating season; to watch the muscled flanks rippling under sandpaper skin; to witness water push over gills; to see the fish hook snagged in the corner of a silvertip’s mouth, trailing fishing line metres long. I observe the mottled skin and mouth whiskers of the tawny nurse, the pointy nose and protruding teeth of the lemons, and the speed of the silvertips.

Sharks are everywhere, in front of, behind, above us. The sheer size and rounded snout of a bull swimming towards me reminds me of a Jumbo Jet coming in to land. I hoot into my regulator with amazement, then duck to avoid a silvertip zooming overhead. The temptation to touch one is overwhelming, and twice I catch a finger wandering skyward before sense takes over.



SEVERAL SPECIES

Opposite: A tawny nurse shark circles above a large sicklefin lemon shark at The Bistro.

This page: A huge bull shark gulps down a tuna head in one go at The Arena, visited by BAD.

And then, entering stage right, a tiger shark. The 2m juvenile is the first I've encountered in 25 years of diving. Awe floods my veins. Veremalumu bangs frantically on his tank to alert the group, and someone grabs my forearm in a tight grip. All eyes are fixed on the beautiful striped torpedo cruising in a wide circle behind us. *Stay down!*

A chorus of banging on tanks signals that the feed is over. After 50 minutes underwater, I'm back on the boat, frothing like a shaken beer can. As the dive logs fill over the years, it's hard to find experiences that really blow your mind. This is one of them.

Of the push and shove I witnessed on descent, Paige says, "They don't normally do that. Sometimes they just get a little bit excited, but once they've had a snack they calm down." The armour he wears is purely to avoid any accidents. In the decades that he's been running these dives, there has not been one incident involving a guest.

Mainstream media usually paint a grim picture of sharks, especially bulls. They have a reputation for being aggressive, for biting first and asking questions later. But it is their habit of swimming in murky waters that increases the chance of attack by mistaken identity. A human foot in silty water could just as easily be a fish.

I too had bought into the idea that bull sharks are crazed maneaters. In witnessing them first-hand, my perceptions changed. These aren't mindless killers. They search for food like any other animal, but there is a degree of judgement before they take any bite. I've witnessed the same while cage diving with great white sharks in South Australia, where you can drag bait past the nose of the most-feared underwater predator for 10 minutes before the shark makes a tentative strike. The fact that Paige and Veremalumu can haul food from a bin surrounded by sharks, jostled but unbitten, supports the notion that humans are not on the menu.

As to whether feeding sharks changes their behavioural patterns, Paige says: "Sharks can eat 25% of their bodyweight in one session, and for a big bull that's up to 50kg. What we dish out here is just a snack. It's to keep them going so that tonight they can hunt and have a bit in their stomach."

Over the years, he's noticed more sharks turning up for a handout. While this is good news for divers, he thinks it's not such a positive sign from a conservation perspective. It may mean that the sharks are struggling to find enough food.

Paige likens the feed to shopping at a Black Friday sale. "It's chaos. Most sharks are loner hunters, so for them to turn up here for a snack is pretty desperate." Although the feeding is normally managed mayhem, several years ago a shark died from wounds sustained in the mêlée. A female bit into a fish, shrouding her in blood. Then a big bull took a blind bite, and a chunk out of her.

Of course, it may be that the sharks have simply found an easy way of getting a morsel. There's one female shark with a broken jaw that Paige believes would not survive without the feed snack. Most though will be supplementing with plenty of predation. Scientists say long-term movement of the sharks is unaffected, but any change in makeup of the population is unclear.

The threats to sharks are enormous, not just from shark fishing but also from mass commercial fishing. Industrial fisheries deplete the fish stocks that the sharks rely on for food.

In 1999, Paige helped establish a marine reserve at the reef. The adjacent village of Wainiyabia now receives a US\$20 levy for every diver. In return, the villagers agree not to fish there. It's effective, attaching an economic value to keeping the sharks alive.

Beyond the adrenaline of the feed, the surrounding reefs offer huge rewards. Fiji is the "soft-coral capital of the world," and the lagoon here is rich with them. Divers who venture further afield to Rakiraki and Vatu-i-Ra on the north coast will discover some of the most-dazzling fans and soft corals on the planet.

Of the sharks, Paige sums it up: "Have a healthy respect for them. Never turn your back on a bull or a tiger. They are curious animals. But the thing that makes one shark more dangerous than another is the level of hunger. If a shark hasn't eaten for two weeks, and you've got the tiniest thing on you that secretes a scent, such as a shell you collected, they will pick the scent up and they'll be interested."

Paige hopes that, through activities such as the feed, people will come to understand sharks more, and fear them less. For this diver, it has achieved its goal. **AD**

Practicalities

Dive

Aqua-trek

www.aquatrek.com

Beqa Adventure Divers

www.fijisharkdive.com

Stay

The Pearl Resort

www.thepearlsouthpacific.com

Uprising Beach Resort

www.uprisingbeachresort.com

Club Oceanus Resort

www.club-oceanus-resort-fj.book.direct



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