

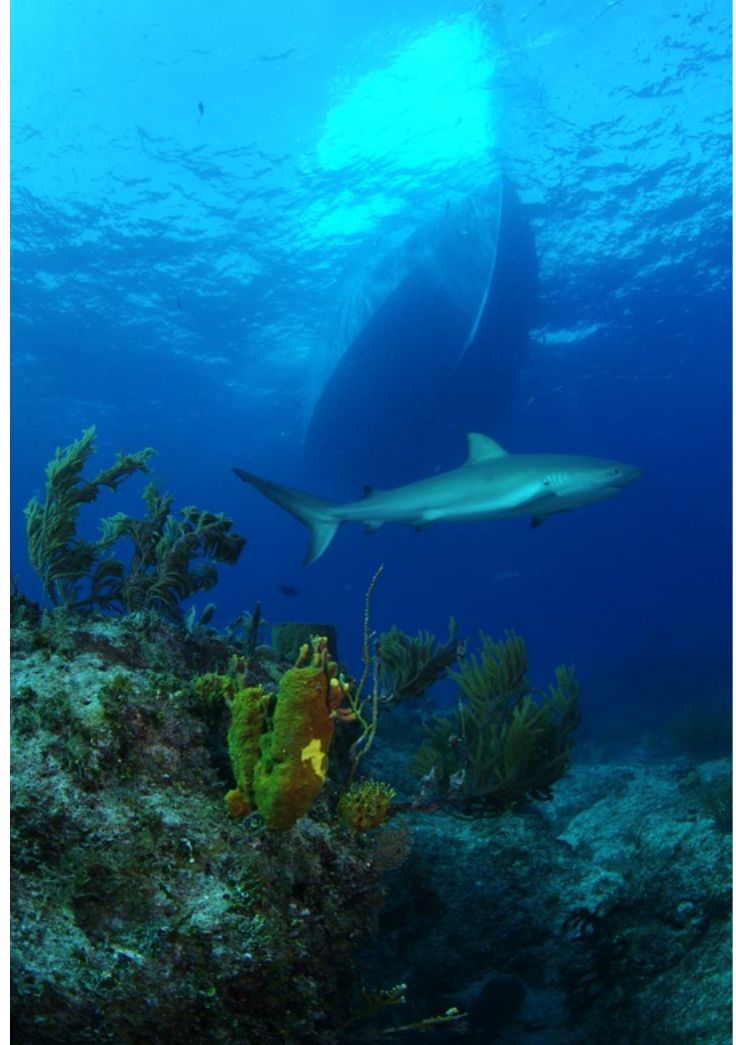


# Dancing with Tigers

Text and photos by Peter Symes



I felt apprehensive heading out to Tiger Beach where I was supposed to enter open water in the presence of some big, wild apex predators, without any protection other than holding up my camera as a shield in case I was singled out as a snack. Before the week was up, I could not get back in the water fast enough, moving around with growing confidence amongst several of these huge but most graceful sharks and having encounters and interactions that left a deep and indelible impression, which will stay with me for the rest of my days.



Tiger Beach is not an actual beach but a location along the western rim of Little Bahamas Banks.

The trip started off on a somewhat chaotic note. The marina in West Palm Beach, our point of embarkation, was temporarily undergoing construction making the vessel, *Dolphin Dream*, difficult to locate. A couple of the other guests did not show up before our skipper, Scott, finally conceded defeat, after waiting all evening, and proceeded to set a course for the Bahamas. As we were also in for a rather windy and bumpy ride across the Straits for Florida, I felt as if all the bad omens were piling up and that I would surely come home missing a limb or two.

A week later when I had the

benefit of hindsight, all those sentiments, probably fuelled by all the compounded stresses and worries from my everyday job piling up, all seemed quite laughable, but at that juncture, being thrashed around in my cabin, I did question the sanity of what I had now committed myself to.

After clearing Bahamian customs in West End at some desolate pier with nothing in sight, we went for a short test dive on the reef along the nearby coast. There were no sharks, but having listened to briefings about constantly keeping an eye out for sharks sneaking up behind made me somewhat

watchful for what may suddenly appear out of the shadows, yet nothing did—no big monsters with sharp teeth, at any rate.

### Shark fin soup

The next morning I woke up to find the boat being berthed on Bahamas banks in what at first glance seemed like the middle of nowhere. I could not see any land. What I could see, aft of the stern, was a dozen shark fins cleaving the still choppy surface and the outlines of agitated shark bodies jetting here and there—lemon sharks, I was told. Still pensively clasping my morning coffee, the realization



A congregation of mostly lemon sharks hung out behind the boat at most times. They didn't seem to care much for divers or snorkellers.

No land in sight on Little Bahamas Bank

sunk in that I was supposed to soon jump into the middle of that bar fight. Hmmm.

The clutter of shark fins looked like the opening of a cheap horror movie from the 1980s. Nevertheless I kitted up, reminding myself that tour operators would probably not have been able to build up and sustain a stable operation for decades if their customers came home some limbs short. Murmuring "Morituri te salutant" (the Ancient Roman gladiators' traditional greeting: "Those who are about to die, greet you").

I took a giant stride and made my way through the shark tussle to the sandy bottom under the boat. The lemon sharks seemed to largely ignore my presence and just kept on doing their business of swimming around.

I could not get my head around what attracted them to the boat, because while there were a few bait boxes out dangling after the boat, I don't think there was anything in them at that juncture. The sharks did not come across as one bit interested in us bipeds either. It was more like they congregated just to hang out among themselves, although that is pure speculation on my part—however, that was my impression, in this instance.

The lemons are quite graceful, having a very smooth and hydrodynamic body. They don't really interact much, they do not seek out contact, and they don't seem to look much at you as they just slide by looking for... whatever.

At any given time, there were probably around 30 lemon sharks swimming leisurely about in smaller groups as if they had all the time in the world. Perhaps it was







"Aw, shoot... I am dinner."

exactly what they had. It was not the last time I would wonder what went on in the head of a shark that week.

A smaller number of reef sharks were seen patrolling leisurely at the perimeter as if they preferred to keep the shuffle right under the boat at fin's length.

The reef shark stands out as the archetypal shark, like an ignorant cartoonist would likely draw them with their sleek and perfectly shaped bodies. They too seemed rather oblivious to our presence, except they did not fancy being approached too closely but keep their distance. Yet they also seemed keen to keep an eye on what was going on with all this commotion.

### A tiger in the din

It was not until after the first dives, during a coffee break, that we got word that a tiger shark had now shown up at the scene. That got everyone's attention.

During the initial briefing Captain Scott went over some safety rules and recommended practices while diving with tiger sharks—first and foremost, to stay in front of them and keep eye contact. It was also impressed upon us to always watch our six and check if there were any sharks behind us. Apparently tiger sharks have a mischievous streak and like to sneak up behind inattentive divers. And we wouldn't like to be nibbled, would we?

Back in the water, I could not immediately see any tiger shark. Apparently, it was seen over at the next sandy patch behind a fringe of reef. Making my way over there pushing my big camera rig against a bit of current, I kept down low, going over the reef, so I could get my back up against a boulder or coral head if necessary... as if that would make much of a difference. And then I caught my first glimpse of it.

Majestically, she appeared out of the din, slowly passing by at some distance, as if she was vetting us. Later, I came to understand how some of these individuals have been traumatized encountering other and less appreciative specimens of homo

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Checking out the party. Having it right under the boat made it real easy.

what kind of biped I was.

I could of course, like so many before me, just have fallen foul of anthropomorphism—attributing human characteristics or behaviors to animals—but the tiger sharks do instill a sensation of contact and communication from the onset. Whether it is indeed the case, who can really say? Looks can be deceptive, and it is easy to jump to conclusions.

But in so many other contexts, we have learned to interact and to some degree communicate with animals. Any pet owner will testify to that.

Once we get to know animals, we can read their body language and their state of mind. In so many other cases, we can tell whether an animal is relaxed and pleased or upset and a possible a threat. And while a tiger shark is surely neither a purring kitten or a snarling dog, sharks too have body language that gives away their state of mind.

It is obviously quite possible, to some extent anyway, to read them.

should read into them. Where is the point where we are just making unfounded inferences, and possibly making a mistake? When chimpanzees, the species closest to our own, seem to grin, it is not because they are amused, it is a sign of fear.

The tigers were, however, never agitated or excited in our presence but moved about calmly and gracefully. At first, they cautiously kept a bit of distance as if they needed to get a feel for this particular bunch of bubbling bipeds before moving in any closer, but after a while, they gradually seemed to overcome their initial apprehension and moved in closer while eyeballing each one of us, big time.

Why did they find us so interesting? Were they just hoping for a snack being handed out by somebody? That couldn't be it. For one, they were not one bit pushy just... inquisitive, it seemed.

sapiens who left them scarred by hooks and disfigured by bang-sticks.

At that juncture, however, I was still not quite rid of the notion I had that one of these rather huge apex predators could label me as lunch.

**Emma and Smiley**

It turned out our first tiger sharks were both old acquaintances. Well, not of me, personally, but they were the very same individuals that had been featured in some other tiger shark features in our magazine in past years. I did not know this fact at the time, though.

As far as I was still concerned I was now out in open water face-to-face with a big wild animal, with nothing between us except perhaps my camera rig. I could not hide; I could not retreat.

However at that point, I no longer wanted to. Instead I found myself mesmerized by this other creature, which had materialized right out of the blue. It swam by quite slowly appearing not to size me up but

more to seek out eye contact as if to assess

Maybe we were just providing them with some entertainment.

**Touched!**

The tiger sharks have these big and expressive green eyes, which leave a strong, lasting impression of a sentient and pensive intelligent being. During the following days my confidence and appreciation of the many encounters only grew. I was never complacent or over-confident as we were repeat-

The question is more about how much we could and

"I don't think we have met. Your fellow bipeds call me Emma"





"Now sit!" PJ Dunick interacts with the tiger shark known as Emma. Notice her bulging belly. Apparently, she is pregnant.

BELOW: "Expecto Patronum!" A GoPro on a stick may not be much of a Harry Potter wand, warding off dementors, but Smiley seems to prefer to keep some distance regardless.

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edly cautioned that these sharks also have a mischievous streak and like to sneak up on inattentive divers from behind. But I arrived at a point where I felt comfortable and at ease among these big fish, which in return gradually also permitted me to come still closer.

Had anyone, prior to my trip, told me that I would some day find myself in open water facing a couple of big wild tiger sharks and not only remain unfazed but also touch them, I would probably have looked back at the perpetrator with utter disbelief. Yet, that was exactly what I was now doing, and I was having a blast too.

As one of the tigers swam leisurely close by me, I was gently stroked by her body sliding by. Her skin felt like smooth leather on top of toned

muscles.

I have frequently been mulling over their behavior ever since. They are free roaming wild apex predators, yet they chose to interact with humans in so many ways including allowing our dive guides—who were amazing—to handle them physically, rolling them over and stroking them.

Both their initial cautious approach and their curiosity are telltale signs of an analytic capacity. In nature, injuries that are not necessarily fatal in themselves may render an animal vulnerable to attack or unable to feed

and must be avoided at all costs.

Yet curiosity and the ability to learn from experience is also a trait that

improves the chance of survival, and the sharks seem to be balancing these opposing urges all the time.







**The Dolphin Dream**

Back on the boat, we had long since settled into the usual routine: dive, look at photos, dive,

eat and look at photos, dive, eat... etc. The vessel is a converted shrimp trawler, and at first sight, I wasn't overly wowed, I must admit, but as it turned out, she was both a very stable and comfortable ship and the interiors were well laid out, with a spacious salon. The cabins below deck were on the smallish side, not very fancy and clearly just a space to retreat for some shut-eye. However, I did not find it mattered one bit, as one would spend time in the salon going

over and working on images or just chatting with other passengers, perhaps even forging a couple of new friendships. In the salon there was a drink bar with a refrigerator full of soft drinks and juices, coffee maker and lots of snacks, cookies and fresh fruit. Being an espresso junkie and overall coffee-snob, I did not take fancy to the standard brew, but I was pleased by the selection of quality teas, which were actually quite excellent for a refreshment between dives, along with a biscuit or two.

**Fodder**

On a related note, I can also report that the home-cooked meals on board were both delicious, varied and healthy and made from fresh produce. Good food is simply a requirement on a live-aboard and the cooking aboard *Dolphin Dream* was no exception to this golden rule. I noted small but important details (to me anyway): there was quality Greek yogurt, fresh berries and muesli available for break-

fast and the vegetables at dinner were really good. I could not help having a little chat with the cook about her food shopping principles and was pleased to learn how picky she was in selecting the right stuff

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Waiting in line without shoving and pushing; The *Dolphin Dream*; Dinners were varied and healthy; Smoothies

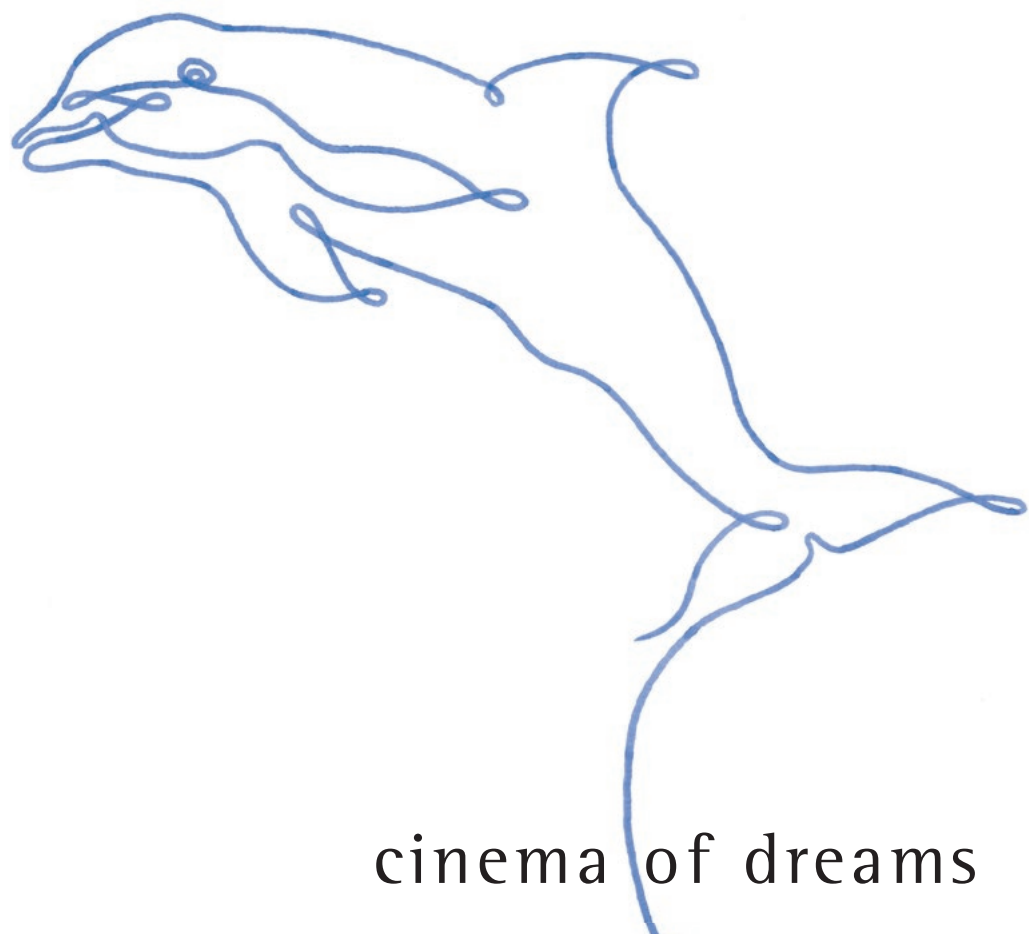


and cooking meals that were also healthy and varied. There was always good meats and various seafood as well as yummy snacks. Did I mention the raspberry smoothies in between dives?



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A pod of Atlantic spotted dolphins showing off their swimming prowess

### Dolphin treat

One early evening as I was sitting in the salon quietly relishing the goodness of life sipping a cup of hot tea after an already long day packed with several great dives, some commotion was suddenly heard from the deck outside. A pod of dolphins had been spotted and Captain Scott came out of the wheelhouse to ask the esteemed assembly if we would care for an extra treat. Ask a silly question.

Faster than a six-year-old could nod yes to an ice cream, we were all up for a sunset swim with the dolphins. In no time, as the captain revved up the boat and sped off to get ahead of the travelling pod, we slipped once more into our wetsuits, closed our camera housings and congregated on the dive deck, focused and poised to

enter the water on cue.

Like paratroopers we peeled off the boat in rapid succession and found ourselves bobbing around in the open ocean as the sun started to hang low on horizon.

We were over a completely featureless white sandy bottom some 10-12 meters below. The visibility was generous with no discernible particles in the water, which in combination with the soft and light, created an almost cathedral-like ambiance without shadows. Then the dolphins appeared on stage, moving at great speed.

There were some 20 to 30 dolphins in the pod, their exact number difficult to estimate as they were going all over the place, breaking up into smaller groups, in pairs, in fives, joining and splitting up again, darting in and out of visible range before coming racing







The side dishes to this trip comprised a dolphin encounter of the third degree and a reef dive on the first day.

ter with these gregarious mammals stood out in contrast to that of the sharks. Where the sharks were apprehensive and swam about almost sedately, the dolphins were all over the place from the onset, energetically performing all sorts of high

speed maneuvers as of they were showing off.

Like the sharks they were also interacting, though not pausing to take a closer look, but observing us in the passing. It was impressive but also a less intimate experience. Whether it was also down

to the lack of a latent fear factor or just another case of comparing apples to oranges, I cannot quite say. The two experiences were both very aesthetic, but where the tigers sharks had a more majestic presence, it was the agile elegance and energy that defined the dolphins.

Also in the presence of sharks, it was all about moving with deliberation, mostly sitting on the sand while regularly checking your six, but with dolphins around, we were swimming freely without scuba gear, struggling just to turn around fast enough to keep them in focus.

We made it back onto the boat just as the sun set over a perfectly flat ocean in an intense display of orange and purple hues. As a perfect day was coming to an end, tranquility settled inside me as I pensively watched the spec-

tacle, clasping yet another mug of hot tea.

### Reflections

My journey was about to come to end in more than one sense. We, guests on the boat, had not only now spent our five days on the Bahamas bank but also undergone a transformation in our understanding and appreciation of some of the most majestic and enigmatic wildlife on our planet. The world would surely be a better place and in healthier state if politicians and captains of industry could have these insights, but that's just wishful thinking.

The diving is technically quite easy, with depths mostly in the range of only 10-12m (33-40ft). Decompression limits and decompression illness (DCI) is hardly a concern, and one can enjoy a leisurely, lengthy dive, mostly dic-

tated by meal times. These trips are clearly mostly for wildlife connoisseurs with or without cameras and/or scuba kit.

There is little or nothing for macro-photographers. Technical divers will miss the point entirely, and families with smaller kids would

be better off leaving them ashore with the grandparents. Everyone else will most likely have a very enriching experience. Would I like to go again? Yes, I would. ■

*Peter Symes was invited by Dom's Dive Advice and Dolphin Dream.*





*A Conversation With*  
**Wolfgang Leander**  
*—The Eye of the Tiger Shark*

*X-RAY MAG: Tell us about your journey and the transformation of understanding about sharks through which you have gone, from your first to your latest encounters.*

WL: The first time I saw a shark was in 1968, in the Caribbean (Virgin Islands). At that time,

I was both extremely excited and quite apprehensive. Back then I thought that sharks were extremely “dangerous” creatures and my knowledge about them reflected the general then prevailing perceptions of sharks.

Now, with decades-long personal experiences diving with sharks under many different

circumstances (e.g. while spear-fishing), I know that sharks are not at all what people thought and still think they are. Sharks are basically shy and sensitive animals, non-aggressive, intelligent, fast learners, inquisitive (or you might call it curious as most people and animals are). This is true of all sharks, and

we can safely include the “most dangerous species”—the great whites, the tigers and the bulls.

Accidents occur, but they are, compared with incidents related to other animals—wild and domesticated, extremely rare.

*X-RAY MAG: How do you read and understand a tiger shark's mood and behaviour?*

WL: Very simple—by observing them very attentively in different circumstances. You can tell by the way they swim and swimming patterns, in what mood they are. You will see if they feel comfortable being around you, also if they are wary.

I am firmly convinced that sharks also read and understand our body language. If you feel relaxed in their presence, they will feel likewise. Erratically moving divers will make sharks nervous.

*X-RAY MAG: What do you think they comprehend?*

WL: As I said—our behavior. They can tell a sensitive, respectful diver from someone who has no finely tuned feelings for animals. Sharks are highly intelligent animals with a remarkable memory. Tests have shown that sharks learn 40 times faster



than cats, and that they have a memory which enables them to “store” information up to one year—much, much better than my capacity to memorize things!

*X-RAY MAG: How do you think they view us?*

WL: That's hard to generalize, I guess. But they, too, have their own schemes of seeing us, depending on their own experiences.

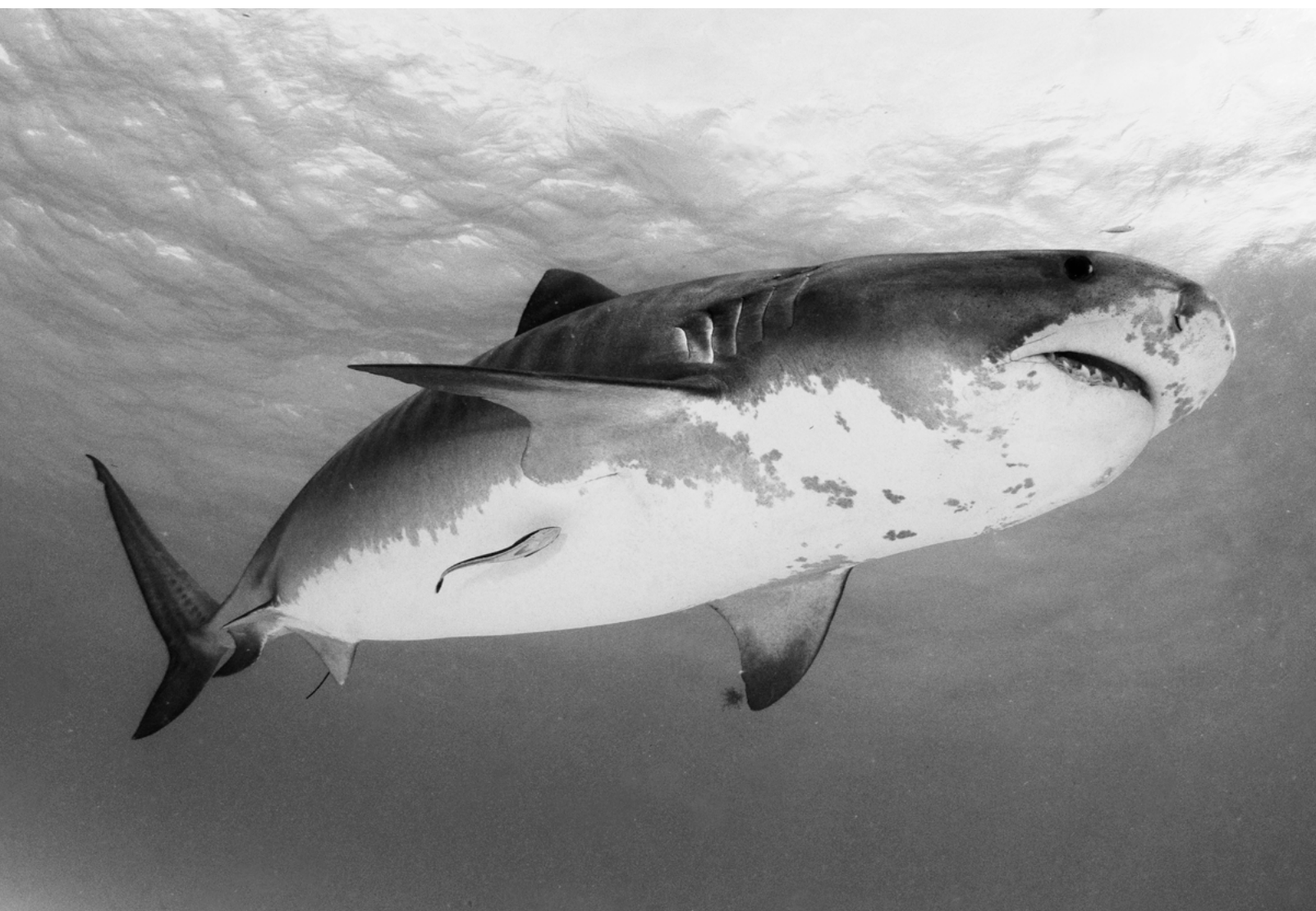
Sharks have different personalities, just like any other animals and people. Again, you

realize this by observing them, ideally in places where the sharks are territorial and where you can see individual sharks over and over again.

Emma and Smiley of Tiger Beach have been there for many, many years. I saw Emma in 2007 for the first time—she is still around—a large and VERY serene shark.

I have witnessed Emma “test biting” a friend of mine. She had his whole torso in her mouth, and the “bite” was so gentle that she didn't even leave tooth marks in his wetsuit!

With her crooked jaw, Smiley is easily recognised. Her jaw was presumably damaged by being hooked.







Once she had my calf in her mouth; I didn't feel anything and as I was busy photographing another tiger. I didn't even realize what had happened. A diver who was next to me told me afterwards, how Emma was "playing" with me.

Tiger sharks tend to be gentle even when they take bait. Before biting hard or swallowing the bait, they

usually mouth it carefully.

Caribbean reef sharks can get easily into a frenzy when there are wounded fish and will bite indiscriminately, without any good table manners, as it were. I am more apprehensive of agitated small reef sharks than I am with 14ft tiger sharks.

Large tiger sharks are, in general, extremely gentle; "Doc" Samuel

Gruber calls them "buddha sharks".

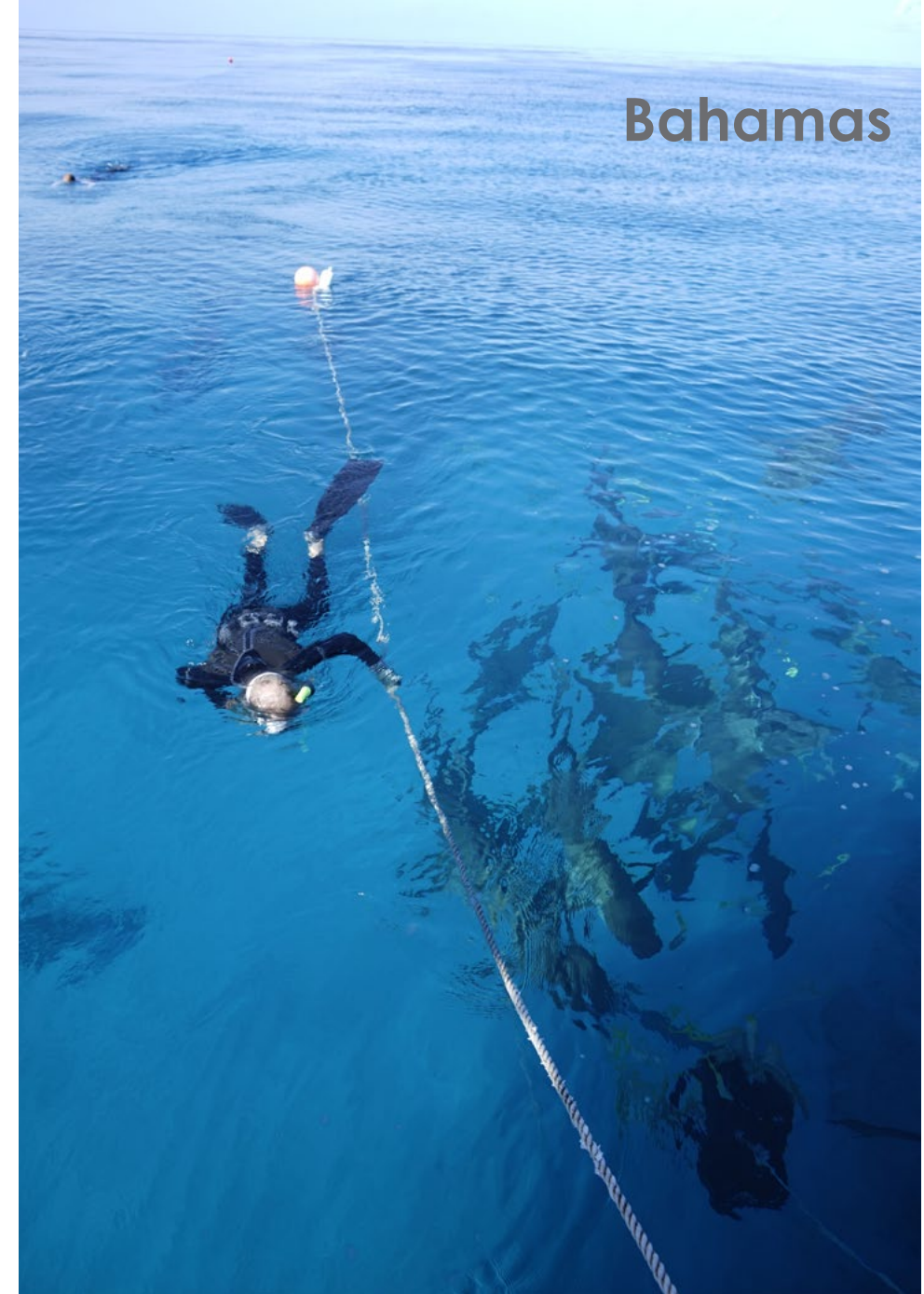
*X-RAY MAG: The individuals we encountered at Tiger Beach are clearly habituated to humans. Is this a good or bad thing? Can these individuals be considered representative for the species or will other specimens encountered elsewhere possibly react in some*

*very different ways and require other precautions?*

WL: I think it is very good as it shows that "the mindless eating machines" who are used to interacting with humans almost behave like dogs. Every diver who has been to Tiger Beach falls in love with the sharks, and many become ambassadors for

Smiley on one of her first wary approaches. Only gradually did she come in closer to the divers. Her apparent apprehension is understandable. Just above her gill arch, a depression in her body can be made out. This is a big scar from a wound allegedly caused by a 'bang-stick'—a specialized firearm used underwater that is fired when in direct contact with the target.





Despite her brutish appearance in this shot, this massively muscular predator was patiently waiting for her morsel.

the cause of protecting them afterwards.

Some people say: "Leave the sharks alone." I cannot share that view. As long as you don't harm the animals, it is good to interact with them. It helps you understand yourself much better—that is, basically, how getting and feeling close to shark has profoundly transformed me as a human being.

It was through sharks that I developed deep feelings for all

animals, large and small. This made me humbly recognize that no life is more valuable than another life.

Wild sharks who are not used to humans behave differently, but, again, once they realize that people are not a threat to them, they will definitely develop into Tiger Beach types of sharks. Experts, such as Ila France Porcher (*X-RAY MAG* editor), were able to prove this quite scientifically.

If I were to sum up what my special relationship with sharks is, I would say without hesitating one second: I just LOVE these animals—pure and simple. Yes, that is what I really think. To understand sharks and be able to relate to them, you must love them. ■

TOP RIGHT: Wolfgang Leander keeping an eye on the action below. RIGHT: The sleek lemon sharks were much less interactive but also took quite an interest in the going-ons.

