



Tantalizing Tales From

Turks & Caicos Islands

Text and photos by Scott Johnson

*Sharks 'r circlin'!
Aye, mateys beware!
Peg legs a plenty,
if 'n ye hasn't a care!*

*—from The
Book of Old
Sea Folk
Cliches*

LEFT TO RIGHT: Heron lurking in flowers; diver over Barrel sponge; snorkeler walking the beach; sunset at Club Med Turkoise; Caribbean Reef shark cruising

Oh yes, the sharks are circling. Can you say 'Amen'? With an accent hinting of both Popeye the Sailorman and Quint from the movie *Jaws*, I call to alert my own mateys. It is my best and worst pirate imitation. But, it is appropriate. Aye, it is right as rain.

Piers Van Der Walt and his wife Annette, co-captains for this *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* voyage, guaranteed something special would happen this day. They certainly delivered. Within minutes of mooring at the French Cay dive site Rock n' Roll, dorsal fins began to break the water's surface.

This mouth-opening, heart-pounding, ego-busting spectacle harkened back to the days of Errol Flynn and his 1935

performance in *Captain Blood*. If we could turn this modern liveaboard into a pirate ship, find someone to walk the plank (I have a few nominees) and slip into hip Pirates of the Caribbean costumes, the scene would be complete.

Regardless, the sharks were definitely playing ring-around-the-boat and the heroic, swashbuckling Flynn never had the chance to dive with them.

As the initial shock began to dissipate,

curiosity conversely started to grow. What prompted these sharks to appear on cue?

Like marooned pirates who are rescued and returned to port, sharks are primarily driven by the need for food and sex. Since I doubt Rock n' Roll is their sacred breeding ground, food must be the answer.

Perhaps divers were feeding these sharks on a regular basis. If so, this was

a staged set, a routine animal act, which certainly tainted the magic of the moment. I wanted to know the facts.

While giving Piers the fifth degree and threatening a walk-the-plank revival, he begs for mercy in his intriguing South African accent and then spilled the beans. His imaginative tale sounded fishy, but not beyond the realm of possibility.

The only way to verify or discard his story was to suit up, jump in the water and see





for myself.

Standing on the edge of the dive platform, I waited for the next shark to swim clear. Otherwise, I risked the chance of creating a new, underwater, bronco-busting rodeo event that would likely leave yours truly branded. With ground zero vacated, I plunged into THEIR world.

Weilding a camera as a pirate might brandish a sword, I carefully located each of the patrolling residents and then descended 30 feet to begin the investigation. The first pieces of evidence that collaborated Pier's confession were the relaxed postures of the five Caribbean Reef Sharks. These hearty, six-foot showstoppers were alert, but exhibited no signs of aggression.

The second and more decisive kernels of proof were the large, integrating schools of big-eye jacks, horse-eye jacks and yellow tail snapper congregating directly beneath the boat. Apparently, these fish received the same compelling

invitation as their encircling entourage. As the progressive integration caused individual school boundaries to collapse, a dense, living cloud of eyes and fins was born.

During the interrogation, Piers whimpered something about how the continuous vibrations of the ship's motors attracted schooling fish. It sounded like a scaly version of Woodstock. In addition, the sharks supposedly associated the boat, its rockin' vibrations and the avid, swarming partygoers with a delectable smorgasbord of naturally served entries. After a preponderance of the evidence, I now

concur with the Captain. Call me a believer. I must tell the crew to release Piers, then attempt to make amends. Of course, sincere apologies and groveling could wait until after the dive was over.

Feeling more comfortable in the sharks' domain, I was hungry to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Caribbean Reef shark with Bigeye jacks; diver looking at Tube sponges; Egret on the lookout; curious Caribbean Reef shark; underside of Caribbean Reef Shark



Divers watching Great barracuda under the boat (top); Christmas tree worm (bottom)



Turks & Caicos



Variety of sponges (left inset); Coral grouper on sponge (above)

Olympic skaters or synchronized swimmers, I would've scored their performance a 10.0. Watching this action through my viewfinder, I composed and shot. Flashing strobes did not phase the sharks, so my compact flash card filled quickly.

Before I had the opportunity to ascend to change housings, Wendy McSwain, founder of Outback Divers in Houston, Texas, USA, crashed the party. Either in reaction to Wendy's neon, psychedelic suit or the splash of her entry, one of the sharks bolted up straight towards her. Clueless to the presence of her stealthy admirer, Wendy looked in every direction except to her rear. Laughing profusely while trying not to lose my mouthpiece, I gradually ascended, pulled one of her fins and pointed to the drooling

homeboy. Her shocked expression brought new tears of laughter as I rose to the surface.

After freeing a justifiably angry Captain Piers and being flogged by Annette and the crew, I painfully slipped beneath the surface to Rock 'n Roll one more time. Without totally ignoring the sharks, I decided to focus on other aspects of this dynamic site. Along with the mixed school of jacks and yellow tails, which alternately churned like a crowd of punk rockers, then stilled to utter tranquility, numerous stoic barracuda hovered as metallic mid-water sentinels. French, gray and queen angels rushed from one coral formation to another during energetic games of tag.

Underwater terrain

The surrounding seascape was

WELCOME TO TURK & CAICOS AND PRISTINE FRENCH CAY

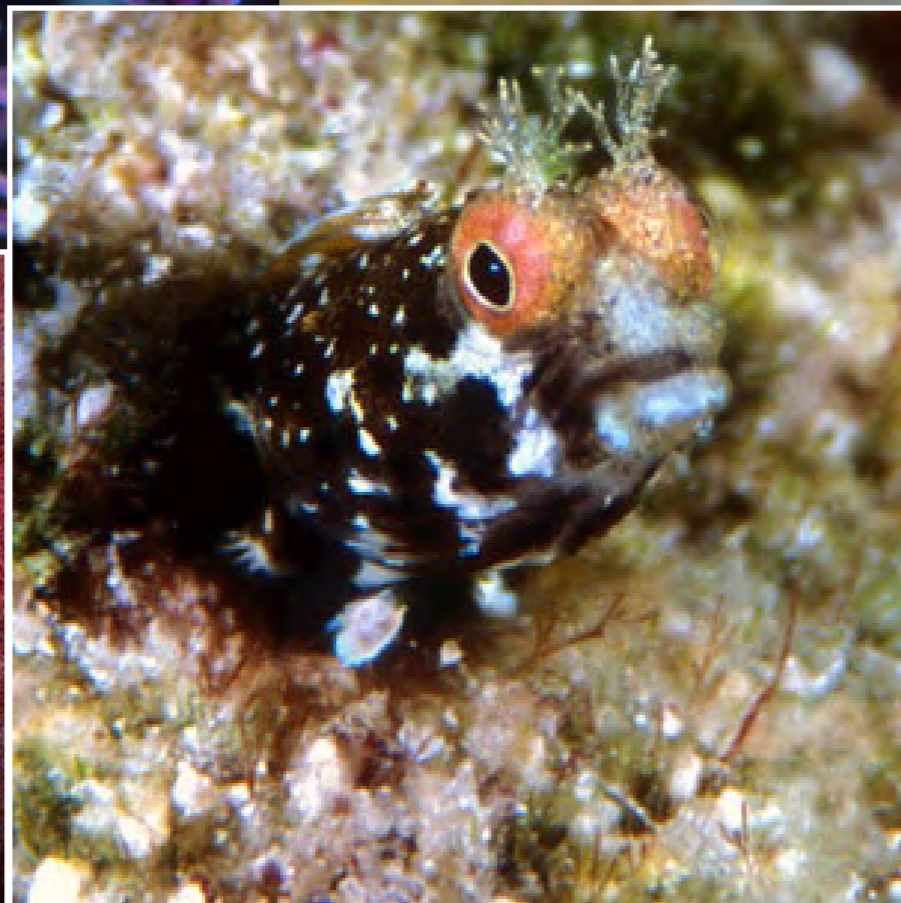
The Turks and Caicos Islands ("Turks" for the indigenous Turks Head Cactus and "Caicos" meaning a chain of islands) are located approximately 575 miles southeast of Miami, 39 miles southeast of Mayaguana, Bahamas and 90 miles northwest of the Dominican Republic. Eight major islands—Providenciales, East Caicos, Middle Caicos, West Caicos, North Caicos, South Caicos (these six are part of the Turks Group), Salt Cay and Grand Turk (members of the Caicos Group)—and numerous small cays span over 190 square land miles. The 22-mile wide Columbus Passage, which reaches depths of 7,000 feet, separates the Turks' Islands from the Caicos' Islands.

Turks and Caicos is famous for 230 miles of white sandy beaches and dependable sunny weather. Offshore, these islands feature the third largest coral reef system in the world. In addition, brilliantly colored water gradually changes from an exquisite turquoise hue in the shallows to a rich dark blue in open ocean. The healthy reefs, unlimited wall diving, abundant marine life and excellent underwater visibility keep divers coming back for more.

Like East Caicos, West Caicos and most of the minor cays, French Cay is uninhabited. Named after a 17th century French pirate, Nau L'Ollonais, who once called the island home, French Cay was designated as a protected sanctuary by the 1992 National Parks Order. Due to this extensive legislation, the Turks and Caicos Islands have more protected natural habitats than any other country in the world.

French Cay's remote location and the minimal human impact on its ecology result in some of the most spectacular diving in the north Atlantic. These waters offer divers the chance to encounter various species of sharks (Caribbean Reef, Lemon, Great Hammerhead, Tiger and Whale), whales (Humpback, Pilot, Beaked and Sperm), dolphin (Spotted and Bottlenose) and rays (Southern, Manta and Eagle). The ultimate method for exploring French Cay's amazing dive sites (Rock 'n Roll, Double D, G Spot, Half Mile and West Sand Split) and beautiful, unspoiled beaches is to charter space on a liveaboard. Even then, the opportunity to undertake the crossing to French Cay is dependent upon the weather. ■

photograph and observe these majestic inhabitants at point blank range. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, the sharks decided to check out the newcomer. Obviously, neither my bubbles nor substantial Aquatica housing system intimidated these guys. No longer circling the boat and targeting the schooling fish, the sharks were now swimming figure eight's in front of me. If they were



decorated with delicate strands of Elkhorn coral, towering formations of pillar coral, robust barrel sponges, bright yellow and orange tube sponges, luminescent rope sponges, white anemones and a vast array of gorgonians, such as sea whips, sea rods, sea plumes, sea fans, sea sprays and sea fingers. In tune with the beauty of this glorious terrain, a hawksbill turtle gracefully glided to the surface for air. Many feet below her, a broad southern stingray stirred up sand while feeding. This incredible panoramic view, a result of the 150-foot visibility, was breathtaking.

Suddenly, one of the sharks slowly passed within inches of my facemask. Caught entirely off guard, I was unable to position the camera for a decent shot. Tracking his movements in hopes of another swim-by, my eyes were drawn to a real life Three

Stooges—actually Two Stooges—comedy routine in progress.

A couple of overly eager divers, one a seasoned videographer and the other a new photographer, were swimming hell bent on a collision course as they zeroed in on the same shark. I could not help but hold my breath, wince, then enjoy another unquenchable belly laugh as the divers crashed head-on. I was sure I could hear the shark chuckling as it cruised past the stunned stooges.

While off-gassing during a much needed safety stop, I witnessed seven



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Flamingo tongue feeding; staring moray eel; Barrel sponge below the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*; Peppermint goby on Great Star coral; watchful Roughhead Blenny; two Sharknose gobies



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Tonya Streeter
examining Pillar
coral; Yellowhead
jawfish singing
opera; scorpion-
fish frowning

big eye jacks feverishly rubbing against the largest shark's flanks. Whether utilizing its abrasive skin to remove parasites or relying on gang warfare tactics to drive it away from the school, the interesting behavior added to the dive site's well-deserved reputation. Without a doubt, Rock 'n Roll was aptly named... unless, of course, it could be changed to Pirates' Rock n' Roll Rendezvous.

Topside

Captain Piers and I, now on drinking and speaking terms again, share some after-dinner rum and discuss what areas to explore over the next couple of days. Since no true diving pirate would travel to the Turks & Caicos Islands without visiting West Caicos, we decided to take our diving plunder (wonderful memories and pictures) north. The short 19-mile cruise over calm seas passed quickly.

As I gazed over the limestone cliffs and sand that outline the west coast of West Caicos, I thought about the 17th century pirates that used to ambush and seize unwary vessels in these waters. One could certainly bury hordes of looted treasure on this small island. Sand, scrub brush and more than 100 species of birds dominate the landscape. However, the limited number of landmarks would make mapping and treasure recovery challenging. Perhaps there is still unclaimed booty to be found onshore.

The land may be somewhat nondescript, but the



Beaches Resort turret (above); yoga at Club Med Turkoise (bottom left)



A WHALE OF A TALE

From January through April, almost 3,000 Atlantic humpback whales migrate along the shores of the Turks and Caicos Islands to the Silver Banks. The Silver Banks is designated as the Sanctuary of the Marine Mammals of the Dominican Republic. Located 80 miles southeast of Grand Turk, it is the most extensive humpback breeding ground in the world.

Divers in the waters of Turks and Caicos during the first four months of the year are likely to hear the whales' enchanting song. Sightings are also a possibility. However, to experience the whales interacting with one another and observe a multitude of heartwarming social behaviors, a trip to the Silver Banks is a one of a kind opportunity.

Only a few liveaboards are licensed by the Dominican Republic to venture into the sanctuary. The most prominent of these are the *Turks and Caicos Aggressor I and II* and, through an affiliation with Captain Tom Conlin, the *M/V Turks & Caicos Explorer II*. Rebreathers and scuba gear are not permitted. However, during the typical seven-day charter, guests will spend at least five days snorkeling with humpbacks ranging from newborn calves to adults weighing in excess of 30 tons.

From inflatables, highly trained and experienced crewmembers will position guests near the whales. After gently and gradually slipping into the water, guests may encounter the mating performances of males (bulls) attempting to attract females. These explosive tactics may include breaching, lobtailing and/or finning. It is also possible to watch a mother pushing her newborn calve to the surface for his or her first breath. Calves are observed feeding, being taught to breach and learning the acceptable range of social graces. Life-altering, upclose encounters can last more than 20 minutes.

To start your own whale of a tale collection, contact one of these special liveaboards today. Space is often sold out a year in advance. So, do not delay. ■



Turks & Caicos

head and lands in the sand before me. I am not used to seeing a scorpionfish advertise its presence, but this ten-inch specimen is not shy. I follow closely behind as it nonchalantly waddles across the sand. It eventually finds a new resting-place atop another outcropping and seemingly disappears.

Afterthoughts

Though this adventure is at its end, there are still many more tales to be told. In fact, the tantalizing essence of the Turks & Caicos Islands lies in the tales waiting to be born during each and every dive. Be it schooling eagle rays, breaching humpback whales, circling sharks or monolithic pillar corals, the waters surrounding these islands are brimming with imminent encounters. And, while you may not find jewel-encrusted chests overflowing with gold doubloons, the experiences you will share with your own mateys are the real treasures of Turks & Caicos. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Yellowtail snapper and sponges; Dusky jawfish startled by my Sea&Sea strobes; spreading sea fan

DIVING IN PROVIDENCIALES

The Club Med Turquoise and Dive Provo are unique, excellent operations for exploring the waters around Providenciales, Turks & Caicos. Staying at the Club Med Turquoise is an incredible experience. This adult-only resort is all-inclusive and defines fun, community, food, dancing and sports. Twin 42-foot catamarans carry divers to more than 20 reefs located mere minutes from the village. You can make two dives, snorkel, kayak and then play basketball, beach volleyball, mini soccer, softball, pool polo and/or lift weights before a massive buffet dinner, followed by dancing under the Turks & Caicos moon.

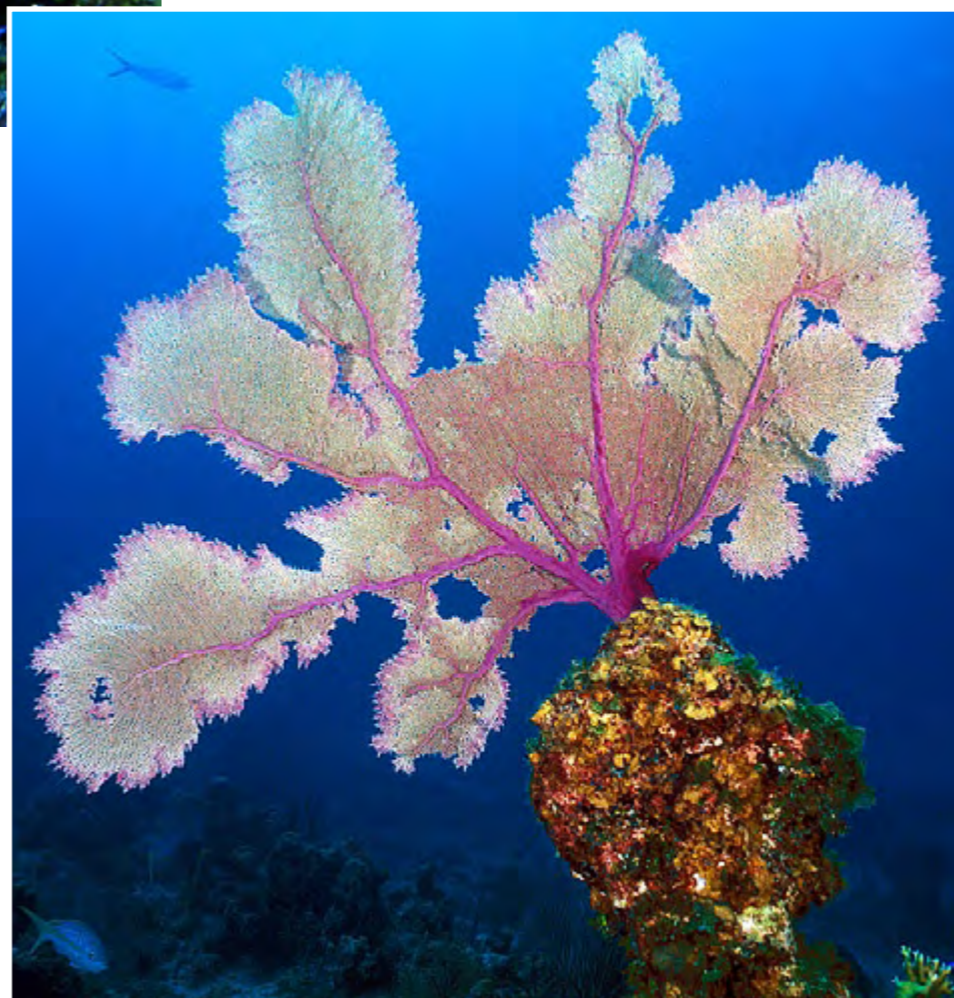
If you want more focused dive explorations, Dive Provo is the ticket. Dive Provo specializes in customized itineraries tailored to meet the needs of their guests. Professional, highly trained staff use a trio of modern boats to lead groups to the best sites in West Caicos, French Cay, Northwest Point, Grace Bay and Pine Cay. ■

underwater world of West Caicos offers radiant colors, eye-catching formations and non-stop action. At Gulley, named for the deep cut that divides the reef, I am captivated by the plentiful, large barrel sponges that accentuate the area. Their exterior texture is so intricately patterned. If you watch patiently, you will find that these rotund sponges host a wide variety of small, entertaining creatures, such as blennies, gobies, shrimp and crabs.

Whiteface

The next dive is Whiteface, also known as The Anchor. The name Whiteface is derived from the shoreline's white cliffs, while The Anchor recognizes a legacy from the past. During the time that pirates were setting new records in ship-jackings, a vessel managed to embed an anchor into the side of a crevice at 70-feet. The anchor is still there, though it is easy to overlook as centuries of growth cause it to blend into the surrounding reef.

Not to be outdone by an ancient piece of steel, a living master of disguise hops down from a coral



THE TURKS & CAICOS AGGRESSOR I AND II

The *Turks & Caicos Aggressor I* and *II* are 120-foot luxury yachts that were built for the comfort and safety of the diving community in 2003 and 2008. Accommodations include eight staterooms featuring either a queen size or two single berths, private heads and showers, air-conditioning, TV/VCRs and a port window. A ninth stateroom sleeps four. A computer station feature two Dell computers and flat screen monitors. E-mails may be sent via a satellite phone. Meals are prepared by a trained chef and served buffet style. The sun deck's chaise lounges, wet bar and hot tub attract divers like schools of fish draw sharks.

Each charter offers 20 guests the opportunity to experience tantalizing tales of their own. The focus of these seven-day, Saturday afternoon to Saturday morning, charters is seasonal. From January through March, 15-foot chase boats are used to position guests near humpback whales in the Silver Banks. During the remainder of the year, diving around French Cay, West Caicos and Providenciales is done directly from the dive platform.

For more information, visit the Aggressor Fleet website at www.aggressor.com



fact file



Turks & Caicos Islands



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK

History Until 1962, the Turks and Caicos Islands were part of the United Kingdom's Jamaican colony. Upon the independence of Jamaica, they assumed the status of a separate crown colony. Affairs were overseen by the governor of The Bahamas from 1965 to 1973. Upon the independence of The Bahamas in 1973, the islands received a separate governor. Even though independence was agreed upon for 1982, the decision

was reversed, so the islands remain a British overseas territory. Legal system: based on laws of England and Wales with a few adopted from Jamaica and The Bahamas

Geography Turks and Caicos Islands are located in the Caribbean. They are comprised of two island groups in the North Atlantic Ocean, southeast of The Bahamas and north of Haiti. Coastline: 389km. Terrain



RIGHT: Location of the Turks & Caicos Islands on global map
BELOW: Map of the Turks & Caicos Islands



Natural hazards include frequent hurricanes. Environmental issues include limited natural fresh water resources—private cisterns are used to collect rainwater

Currency US Dollar

Population 22,942 (July 2009 est.) Ethnic groups: black 90%, mixed, European, or North American 10%. Religion: Baptist 40%, Anglican 18%, Methodist 16%, Church of God 12%, other religions 14% (1990).

Language English (official)

Recompression Chamber

Associated Medical Practices
Leeward Highway
Providenciales, Turks and Caicos. 24-hour tel: 331-HELP
www.doctor.tc/dive.html

Links

Turks & Caicos Tourism
Turksandcaicostourism.com ■

Waving flags on the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* (top) sunset at Club Med Turquoise (bottom)

includes low, flat limestone as well as extensive marshes and mangrove swamps. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Blue Hills 49m. Note: In all, the territory includes about 40 islands (eight inhabited)

Economy The Turks and Caicos economy is based on tourism, fishing and offshore financial services. Most food for domestic consumption and capital goods are imported. The majority of tourists come from the US,

making up more than 75 percent of the 175,000 visitors that came in 2004. Fees from offshore financial activities and customs receipts also provide major sources of government revenue. Natural resources: spiny lobster and conch. Agriculture: corn, beans, cassava (tapioca), citrus fruits and fish.

Climate Turks and Caicos Islands have a tropical marine climate, which is sunny and relatively dry while moderated by trade winds.

Diver studying Tube sponges

