



Image 0009. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Image 0007. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

Text and photos by Nigel Motyer

Sharks and Dolphins of the Bahamas

Think back to the best animal encounter you ever had underwater. If you've been lucky enough to have had the experience, I bet that the first time you swam with a dolphin or saw your first shark will feature high up on the list.



Lemon shark. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

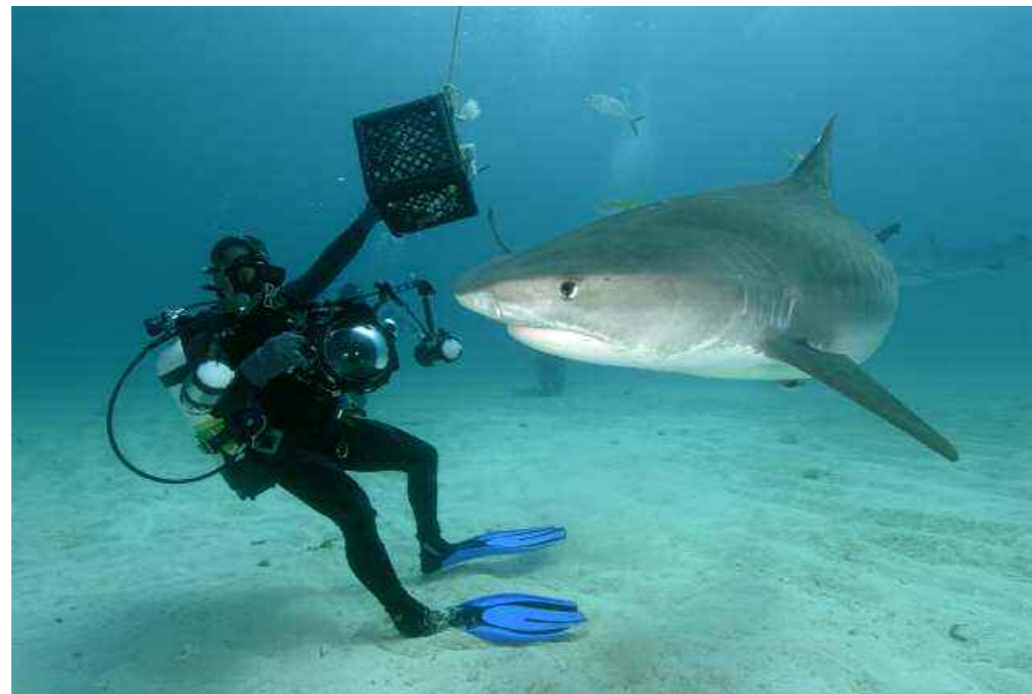


Image 0008. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Image 0014. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Group of bottlenose dolphins. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

When somebody sees a shark on a dive, it doesn't matter what else they encounter, the shark is the first animal mentioned back on the boat. There is something about being close to big animals underwater that is at the same time, both thrilling and terrifying. I still have vivid recollections of my first shark and dolphin encounters and those experiences shaped the ambitions I had for my underwater photography over the years. Most certainly I have developed a huge respect for any photographer who has managed to get a good photograph of either species because, as anybody who has tried to photograph wild dolphins or get close enough to a shark to capture a good image will attest, it certainly isn't easy.

For me, dives where you get time in the water with big animals are so rare that when they do happen it really is something special. I can't tell you the number of times I have gone to locations where big animal encounters were promised only to discover that when the dive operator said he could get me close, he really meant that I had a 50:50 chance of seeing a vague outline of the animal as it flashed through at high speed right at the edge of the visibility. I wish I had a euro for every time I've been told, "You should have been here last week" or "last month" or any other time of year except the actual time I booked, despite what I was told before I paid over the cash.

So nirvana for me is where the boat crew on a dive operation really understands what makes a dive great. If

you're a photographer, this means that when you want the animal close enough for a picture, you really mean it can't ever be too close or there too long. They must also have the motto that any time not spent underwater is time wasted! On top of that, add in clear warm water, easy flight access and animals that are as guaranteed as wild animals can be and you're all set.

So a tall order then - but I have found such a place. There is a small blue boat owned and run by a guy who I genuinely believe is the best dive captain I have ever encountered. He is a man with a true passion for the ocean in general and the sharks of the Bahamas in particular. Jim Abernethy runs the live aboard dive boat the Shearwater, which over the last ten years or so has become internationally renowned for providing the very best shark diving charters in the world, bar none. That's a big claim, but there are few who have actually been out with Jim who would disagree with that assessment. They run out of West Palm Beach in Florida and operate mostly on the reefs around the northern Bahamas where, over the last fifteen years, Jim has developed a unique relationship with both the shark and dolphin populations in the area. In doing so, he has built up a base of loyal clients who have developed the habit of coming back. I first dived with Jim in 2005 but I'm about to head back for my fourth trip in July. Honestly, it's that good.

The first time I went out with Jim I was blown away by the quality of the diving and the sheer enthusiasm that



Lemon shark at dusk. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Image 0001. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Image 0018. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Jimmy and moray. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Head of lemon shark. Photo © Nigel Motyer.



Hammerhead. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

both he and his crew put into making each trip as action packed as it can be. The Shearwater isn't a big boat, it only accepts 10 guests and has four crew to look after them, but the whole boat routine is set up to maximize your time in the water and once in the water, it's

all about ensuring that you get the very best of what can be seen at that time. If you're a diver who needs luxury, state rooms, towelling robes and five meals a day, then this isn't the boat for you. If you're a diver who wants to see healthy reefs with shark populations as they



Lemon shark. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

used to be before the shark finners started raping the oceans and decimating the remaining numbers, then this could very well be the trip you've been looking for.

Sharks populations are under extreme pressure all over the world but

the Bahamian authorities have been far sighted in offering protection to their sharks. As a result they are reaping the benefits of shark diving tourist dollars and there are still very healthy shark populations in the area. You are pretty much guaranteed to see the local populations of Grey Reef, Lemon and Tiger Sharks. Lemon Sharks are the predominant species and there are Grey Reef populations on the nearby deeper reefs but, depending on the time of year, the charters that the Shearwater offers will focus on different additional species too. Shark diving is a staple of each charter but the winter charters split their time between the usual suspects in and around the Tiger Beach area, so called because of the large numbers of resident Tiger Sharks who frequent the area, and the other species available. The winter time charters give you the chance of seeing Bull and Great Hammerhead sharks which frequent this area between November and April. The Great Hammerhead sharks really are remarkable animals, large sharks, up to 18 feet, that up until recently had been seen underwater by very few people.

Now just read that last paragraph again. That's a lot of shark on the menu for one trip. As I said at the start, I still remember my very first shark sighting. It was October 1985, 31 metres down on Ras Mohammad in the Red Sea. I got about three metres away from a Grey Reef shark for about fifteen seconds and I was completely blown away. The point is that I still remember that because, at the time, that was an amazing encounter. Now to put that into context, on the last trip I did on the Shearwater I spent on average about 6 hours a day in the water with rarely less than thirty large sharks coming in and out of touching distance. Several of those were large Tiger Sharks, not for the faint hearted, but absolutely bloody amazing and like nothing I experienced anywhere else in the world before or since.

The summer time is when the Dolphin charters take place. The water is calmer then and can be achingly clear. There are two species of dolphin who gather over the shallow sandy plateaus at the north of the Bahamas at this time, the Atlantic Spotted Dolphin



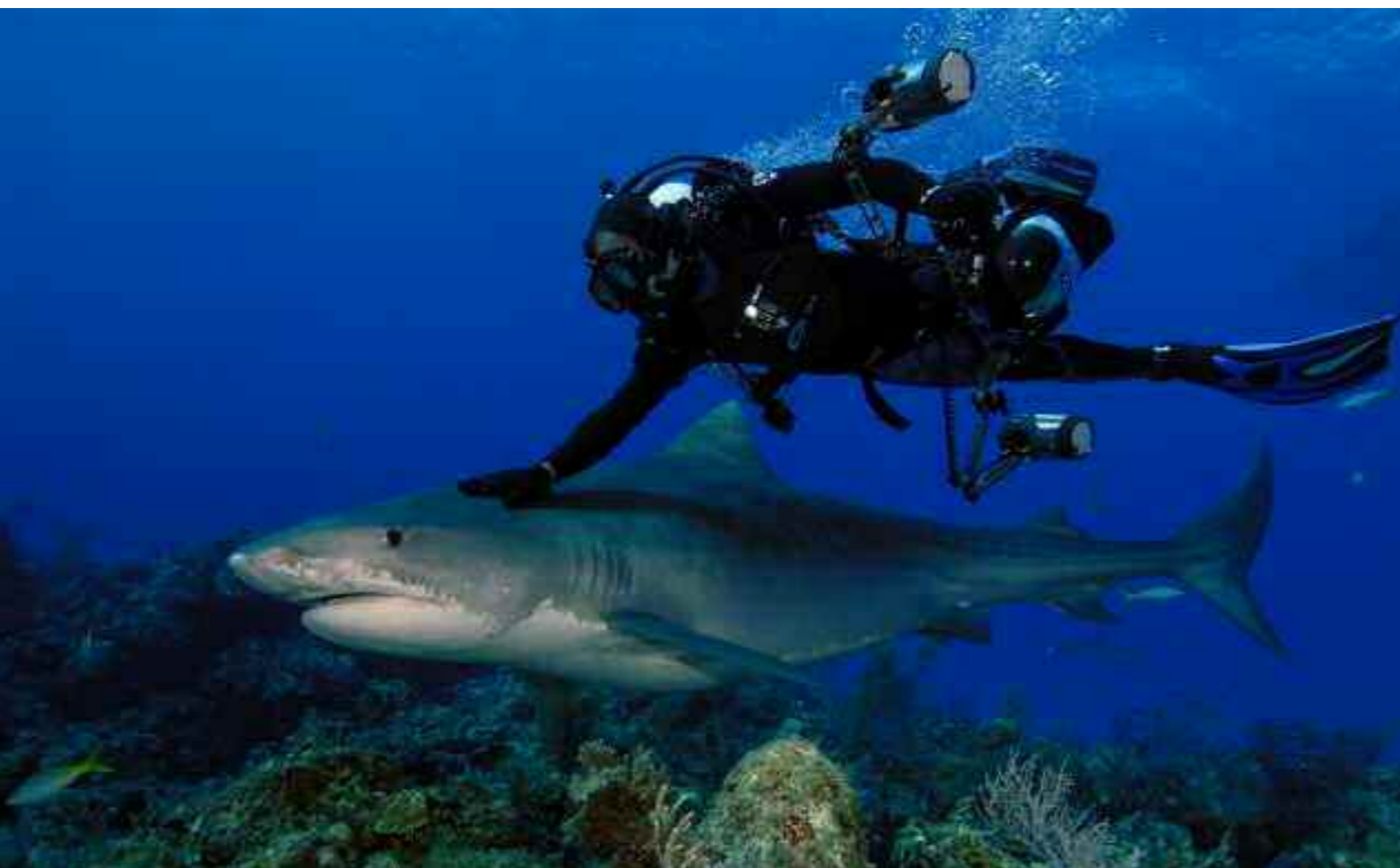
Ralph and tiger shark. Photo © Nigel Motyer.

and, on occasion, the Bottlenose Dolphin. These encounters are mostly completed on snorkel and are the best fitness workout you're ever going to get. The boat cruises up and down searching for slow moving pods who are resting in the shallows after feeding in the deeper Gulf Stream waters at night. Once a pod is located everybody gathers at the back of the boat and when the man says jump, you jump, and swim like mad. If the dolphins are in a playful mood you are in for an amazing experience. If they aren't then you'll have a great time anyway and either way you'll come home with thighs like Lance Armstrong. There is something about swimming with dolphins that just puts everybody in a good mood. On occasion the Shearwater will follow the pods at dusk as they head out into deeper water to hunt. This gives the guests a chance to night swim in thousands of feet of open water with feeding dolphins, an

absolutely unique experience that I will never forget and another story the grandchildren won't believe!

Next month I am heading back to the Shearwater for my fourth trip in five years. With me will be nine other Irish folks who I know will have an amazing experience. We'll be splitting the charter between the Tiger, Lemon and Grey Reef sharks and the dolphin encounters in the shallow sandbanks where the Gulf Stream curls around and heads out into the Atlantic. I'm already starting to think that I should have another crack at those Great Hammerheads in March 2011. So there you have it, for shark enthusiasts quite possibly the best dive destination in the world and genuinely one of the few sanctuaries that sharks have left. I really think that says it all.

If you are interested in joining me on a dive trip on the Shearwater or just want to see more of my photographs then contact me through my website www.NigelMotyer.com ■



Shark riding. Photo © Nigel Motyer.