

Bahamas

— *Diving the Islands*

Text and photos by Charles Stirling

The Bahamas are an English speaking island nation known to most of us, but for very diverse reasons. For many living in Florida or nearby, it's a location for a quick day or weekend break for beach or casino. For Europeans, it's an offshore financial and investment capital. To many, it's the location for films and TV programs that feature water and sea, such as the *Pirates of The Caribbean*, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, or even the TV series, *Flipper*, plus many others. For divers, we think of Blue Holes and technical dives or one of the best places to see sharks.

Dive master holds a Caribbean reef shark at UNEXSO showing it in its state of stupor

Are the Bahamas a location worth going to as a visiting recreational diver? From an English diver's perspective, with the multitude of wreck dives around our UK

coast, the Mediterranean a short flight away, the Red Sea easily accessible, YES I still think the Bahamas offer something worth going for. Of course if you are in

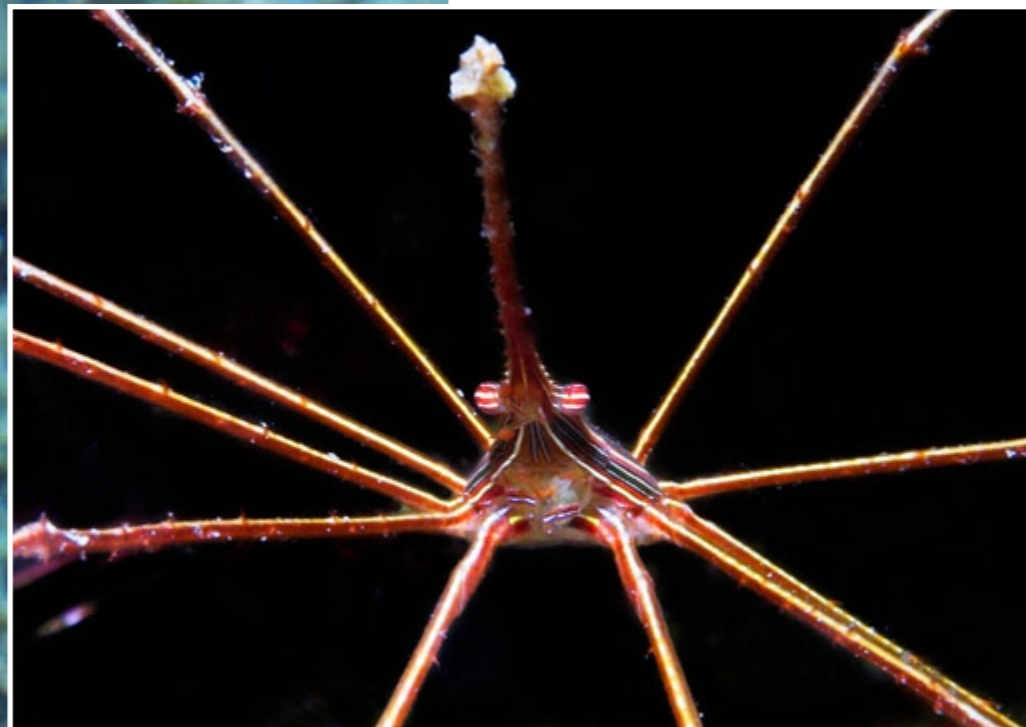
North America the yes decision should be even easier. They would be a good place to learn to dive with the family yet still offer a lot to experienced divers.

One of the reasons for the increasing use of the Bahamas for filming is of course the good diving conditions, so is that enough to attract sports oriented

divers? Without rivers visibility is excellent, water temperatures are tropical or near. The Blue Hole diving rapidly becomes one for technical or even very technical

dives with backup teams and lots of equipment, but some of this diving is possible and open for the recreational diver. Shark sighting is easily possible either naturally or





on specialist shark dives. Besides these two big attractions are the absolutely stunning great walls, many wrecks, and a big diversity in coral reefs with the world's third longest barrier reef all giving divers plenty to see. Along with this it's not overly crowded and can be very personal.

Diving in the Bahamas can of course be done from a variety of liveaboard boats often out of Florida as it's so close. This gives a good all American experience, easy multiple dives a day and depending on the trip either a single or multiple objectives. It does mean being on a boat most of the time but with some of the large luxury ones it's not necessarily in cramped quarters. Liveaboard trips also start from Nassau, Grand Bahama and Exumas. I've not done this, maybe another trip another time. I do enjoy time for exploring land based opportunities, meeting local people and having the variety that can come from being firmly planted on land even though I wasn't able to do much of this because of time constraints, but the theory is present.

Types of dives

Sharks always seem high on most diver's "want to see" list. Some consider the Bahamas as one of the world's best places to have that introduction or even an extensive

exposure. The tourism attraction benefits of sharks mean many operators offer a "shark dive" with sharks being fed. OK, we now have controversy! This is a touchy subject as many believe that divers should never interact or in any way influence any animal on any dive, while others are happy to spearfish or collect shellfish. It's the "leave only bubbles" debate. There is also the controversy of possibly altering behaviour by associating people with feeding which has produced a ban on shark feeds

and even fish feeds in some locations. How much should people "interfere" with natural system? As a diver, environmentalist and photographer I try not to disturb the environment, we are all told / trained not to touch when diving, to leave only bubbles (or spend the money on a rebreather and don't even do that). Most sharks are not going to be interested in being near divers, they are shy, we are not food, and they are wide ranging, so, worldwide, attracting them into view is done with chumming or feeding of

LEFT TO RIGHT: Nassau groupers help to keep reefs healthy by controlling smaller fish but still want a clean occasionally. One problem for these important fish is they are tasty to humans; Yellowline arrow crab; Soft corals are plentiful on some sites, often as individuals in small patches not as great masses



Shark taken along the line of divers at UNEXSO to be seen and touched (left); Shark feeding site but not a feeding dive and the sharks ignored divers (below)

site on the bottom. We were lined up kneeling on the sand shoulder to shoulder with our backs to a section of wreck, OK, an old decompression chamber, with hands kept out of the way. Once settled then the chain mail clad shark feeder opened a container of fish to hand feed one fish at a time to any individual shark that was closest. This was started first in front of the whole group, as the shark temperaments were judged as OK the feeding moved closer along the length of the line for each diver. Yes, sharks would be everywhere coming into the feed just overhead or along in front. The sharks made direct contact with the person feeding being rather gentle in taking the food from her hand.

After the food was gone she put her gloved hand on one of the smaller shark's nose which made it go into a quiescent, almost stupor like state and this animal was gently held and taken along the line for each visitor to touch on

the back. Talking to some of the divers after, all agreed this was great and one experienced diver offered the comment that the feed then touching a shark was the highlight of all his diving experiences. Previously he had been terrified by even the thought of a shark. This quiescent behaviour isn't understood but is well documented. The sharks having been fed, contacts made, the divers were free to look for sharks teeth in the sand for another 10 minutes before being led back to the surface with the safety diver. The woman shark feeder, the official photographer and I stayed down longer and in these calm conditions she was able to rest one of the larger sharks in her lap for nearly 6 minutes. Handling the sharks also meant fish hooks and sometimes ectoparasites could be removed.

So is the shark behaviour modified with this interaction? Doing a dive in the same area without the feeding some

some sort. It's a controversy that some see as very important, wanting to stop the feeding' while others see it as a tsunami in a tea cup. Whichever, it is done here.

Yes, the right dive site in the Bahamas and you will see sharks going about their business off in the distance. Occasionally if you can be very stealthy its possible to get a bit closer. Getting really close I did shark feed dives with 3 of the popular operators. First, all 3 were very safety conscious with visiting divers. They were aware of how it might change behaviour so amounts and frequency of food was limited and the food was natural, i.e. fish. None fed enough to be a significant portion of a shark's normal daily needs. One of the big things they are concerned about is the plummeting numbers of sharks worldwide and how incredibly important it is to bring this awareness

to the public. Each dive operator had slightly different approaches and methods to their shark feeds, but all had sharks to see up close. I ended up thinking these dives were a worthwhile introduction for many so I rather broke my own rules. Actually they were great fun and educational, you would really be missing a lot if not going on at least one of these dives.

Shark Dives

Sharks and fish do inevitably modify behavior when fed; they will learn the sound of a boat or divers with a pavlovian response to find food. How important is this, will it increase their chance of being caught by fisherman or be a hazard to us? Does the increased interest from divers seeing them outweigh the changes. Shark feeding in Hawaii was banned in 2002, now divers are not

aware of them as they aren't frequently seen so interest is lost for many. The cliché of "out of sight out of mind" could be appropriate.

UNEXSO wants to demonstrate that sharks are not wanton killers

The most hands on and interactive was UNEXSO, Underwater Explorers Society, on Grand Bahama who use a site called "Shark Junction". After a short boat trip a thorough briefing was given which covered safety and organisation of the dive. They then went on to place a lot of emphasis on how they want to demonstrate that sharks are not an automatic menace to divers and the need for divers to be ambassadors spreading the word that sharks are not wanton killers.

The dive starts with all entering the water about the same time to follow a safety diver all together down to a sandy





Shark encounter with Stuart Cove's (left); Small Hope Bay shark encounter with a more hands off approach still had plenty of sharks up close and personal (below)

short but still to an area away from much of the other diving, the site was again a sandy one near an area with patch coral reefs and deep drop off. After the briefing and entering the water together divers were organised in pairs behind small mounds of rocks in a circle but with space between buddy pairs. The food, fish, was lowered in a hinged lidded steel box for the shark feeder to spear out individual fish to feed to an appropriate shark. As conditions were judged safe this was then done in front of each buddy pair allowing a photographer to take pictures of a swirling mass of sharks around each pair in turn. Here sharks could easily move between as well as above the divers so close encounters were frequent and from multiple directions. At the finish a short

time was allowed for tooth hunting before the group was escorted back to the boat.

Diving this site without a feed in progress sharks were around but not interested in divers. During the feed a second boat with snorkellers was stationed a distance away but close enough for them to watch and the sharks weren't interested in this.

Different approaches, but all three operations provided a good number of sharks, predominately or all being Caribbean Reef sharks, which might be a bit seasonal, to be seen up close (one nurse shark had turned up to play with the feed tube at UNEXSO). These sites had been chosen as near deep drop offs where the sharks would normally be found and away from other activity. Feeding in these ways didn't appear to be detrimental to either the sharks



sharks were present but none would venture closer than I would have expected, i.e. they frustratingly kept their distance. It was also noted that the number of sharks which turn up at the feed varies and they are not always the same ones. So this population of Caribbean Reef sharks maintained at least a semblance of normal behaviour.

Small Hope Bay Lodge

—Andros Island didn't want to associate divers with food.

At the opposite end of the spectrum on shark feeds Small Hope Bay Lodge, on

Andros Island, does fewer feeds, does them at a location some distance from their other main dive sites and has no direct interaction. They keep the site secret, even to the point of having the permanent buoy tied below water so fisherman don't target the area. The divers are organised again on a sandy area this time in a semicircle. When all was settled with the divers a frozen ball of fish was lowered on a steel rope stretched tight between a bottom ring and top buoy so sharks helped themselves as the fish ball melted. This kept the divers at a moderate distance from the feeding but sharks would

still skim over the top and past the divers. Once the fish was gone the sharks dispersed but could still be seen around the area while the divers went looking for lost sharks teeth in the sand.

Stuart Cove's Dive

—Nassau/Paradise Island wanted divers to have a good view of sharks.

Somewhat between the first two in approach, maybe with a bit more showmanship, they wanted to have divers see sharks up close but without the interaction of UNEXSO. The boat ride was



Large hard corals can be seen even on relatively shallow dives and without a wetsuit for warmth, Pagoda Reef, Exuma (left); Sea fans near the top of the reef at Hole in the Wall, Cat Island (below)

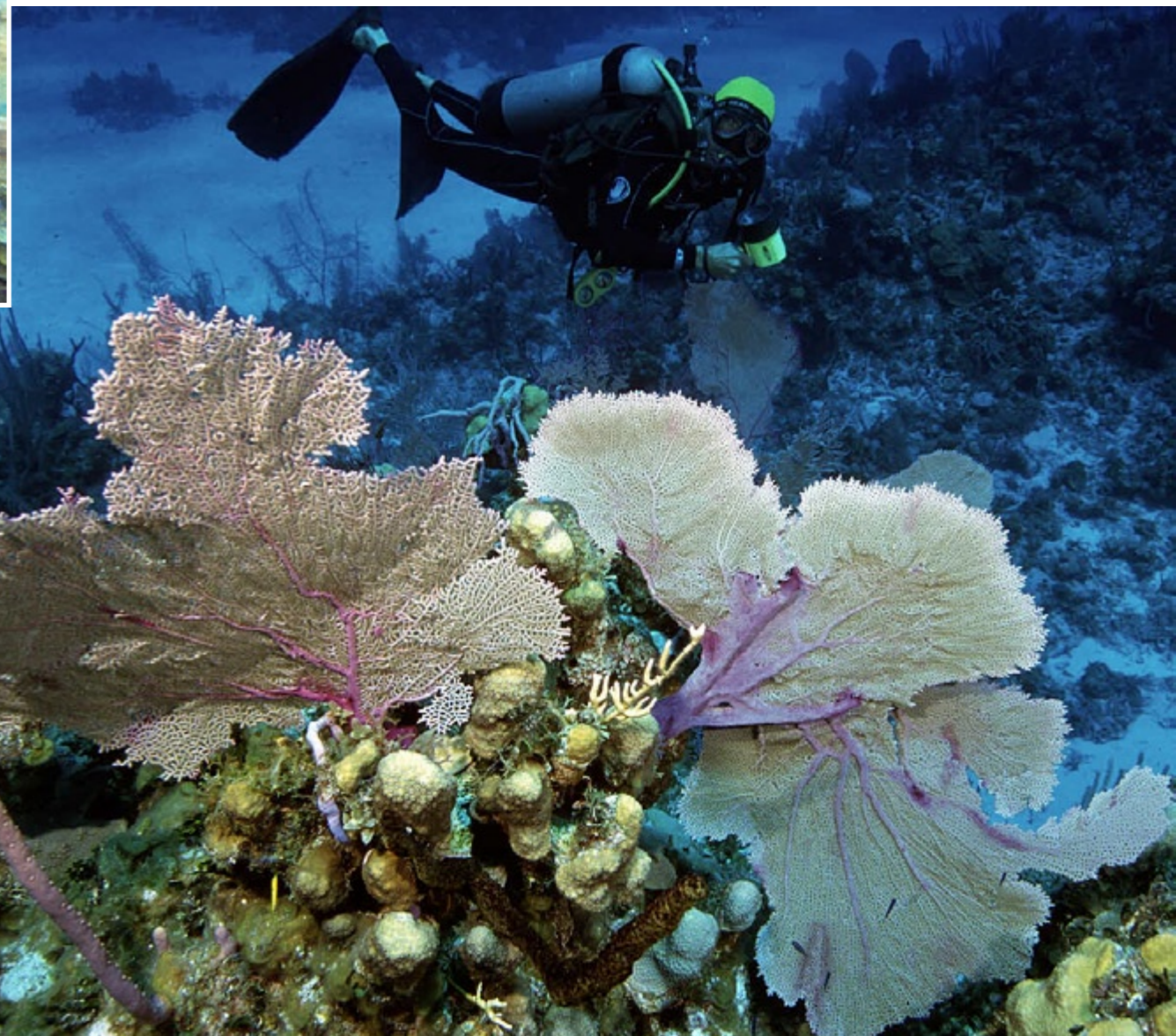
invertebrates.

As in so many other coral reef environments there are worries about both bleaching and coral disease, but here the visiting diver doesn't seem likely to find large areas of dead reef. What will be seen are patches or expanses of actively growing hard coral on the top of older coral which is becoming part of the inorganic hard surface needed for new growth. Whether the new growth is keeping pace with coral die-back can't be judged in a short visit and is more in the realm of long term research but what can be seen is good.

As so many other of our marine habitats the Bahamas have been over fished. The numbers and sizes of

fish doesn't seem as high as might be expected. What will be noticed is often the lack of larger fish though the range of species is reasonable. Different sites and even more so the different islands will show variety as would be expected considering the huge area and varying human densities covered by the country. The range of sharks present does give an indication that the reefs and environment are generally healthy as top predators need food and that food also needs to eat.

Large fish, even predatory ones such as the Nassau Grouper, have been shown as necessary for healthy reefs. Research in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park found, with protection, the grouper



or divers, more akin to putting a bird feeder out in the back garden.

Hawk's Nest

—Cat Island had fisherman attract sharks.

On Cat Island there wasn't a shark feed, but instead an impressive turnout could happen when visiting sports fisherman cleaned fish on the end of the jetty in the evening, and similar attractions occurred on Andros. Otherwise it was seeing sharks generally along the reefs on Cat Island, again at a distance but a thrill none the less. Occasionally a nurse or reef shark was seen sleeping under an overhang. On Exuma Island a shark feed was briefly tried at one location but it attracted in more sand tiger sharks so was discontinued as thought possibly dangerous for the

location. Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures liveaboard shark trips, out of Florida to Tiger Bay off Andros Island and other Bahamas locations, are designed specifically to see and dive with sharks and the variety can be good with many different species depending on location. Generally these are brought in by chumming and the trips are a favorite for photographers. At least 9 species of sharks can be seen in the Bahamas with probably the largest being the Great Hammerheads and Whale Sharks.

Coral Reefs

So, you dive or maybe you don't dive with sharks on one of these organised shark attractions, what else? Coral reefs are fantastically complex ecosystems and one of the big things

for many tropical dive destinations and it's no different in the Bahamas. On offer will be the worlds 3rd longest barrier reef, off Andros Island, other shorter barrier reef off other islands, patch reefs, small and large pinnacles and more. With tunnels, chimneys, canyons, sand shoots and of course walls all represented as types of structures within the overall systems. The corals themselves seem in reasonably healthy condition in the locations I've visited, with a diversity of both hard and soft coral species dependent on the actual site. But, corals are only part of the coral reef ecosystem and its the reef ecosystem we are really interested in when diving. That ecosystem has the hard corals forming the basic structure and providing nooks and crannies which can act as homes for fish and



Caribbean Trumpetfish (above); Smallmouth grunts (top right), often along with French grunts, were an ever present fish; Caribbean Spiny Lobster seen on many dives (bottom right)

were able to grow large. They are predating on parrotfish and others which eat algae off the reef, so at first the worry was fewer parrotfish would mean more algae smothering coral. Instead it was found the grouper predated smaller bite size fish reducing them in number but allowing some to grow beyond predated size. These larger parrotfish graze more seaweed than the larger numbers of smaller fish. Complicated, but

protection from human predation allowed healthier reefs in protected zones due to a better distribution of fish sizes. This over spilled to adjacent areas which then had both better fish to catch and better reefs. The lessons have been learned, just not acted on, as so often the case, we need many more protected zones.

Some put the blame for low fish numbers and small size on big American pleasure fishing boats



who have come in, fished to load holds with tons of fish bedded down in ice then departed to pay for the holiday by selling the catch privately back in the USA. The Bahamas government have recently, January 2007, started trying to control this with tough new legislation and catch limits. Others put the over fishing down to Bahamians who supply local restaurants on a casual basis. Protection is being provided in addition to fishing limits with several important protected areas: the Exumas Land and Sea Park and the Pelican Cays Land and Sea Park plus a few small sites. These protected locations are showing larger sizes and populations of both fish, conch and lobster. Campaigners have been working on adding other protected areas but progress seems slow according to environmental groups. Whatever,

the fish are needed to keep the reefs healthy and with time hopefully what we see as divers will improve from good to great.

Diving the reefs can be as relaxed as a shore or maybe a boat dive in a few meters depth at some locations, but most often will be by short boat trip with depths to the more usual 10 to 30 m not counting some of the walls which can be sheer with effectively no bottom. The patch reefs often have sand adjacent providing a reef friendly diver entry point which can cater for all levels of experience.

For example on Cat Island out of Hawk's Nest it can be a stroll to the beach and dive staghorn coral with schools of yellow snapper to keep you company. Or a night dive on Andros with flashing underwater luminescence on the boat ride out, then after slipping into the dark water on

site to have it come alive with more bioluminescence before finding your light attracts krill that can literally explode when hit by a nematocyst from a seemingly docile coral. Down amongst the



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coral heads the arrow crabs and feather stars are out the, parrot fish in. Maybe it's the shallow fore reef of Jean's Dream on Andros, a coral garden with a topography of hard coral columns for as far as one could swim in any direction. The columns or heads maybe a foot or two in diameter, 6 foot high a few foot apart, some acting as cleaning stations with little yellow wrasse and blue damsel fish. The blue surgeon fish, parrotfish, French grunts or smaller grouper would call in the cleaners with a flick of the tail and a vertical orientation. The hard corals having the usual Christmas Tree worms, the banded coral shrimps and other invertebrate life. Maybe you dive Duck Cay off Exuma with its sandy rivulets running between the good mix of hard corals in large bommies and the lobsters hiding under ledges.

Just a little deeper might be something like that on Caves Reef out of Grand Bahama with its deep hard coral gullies and shoals of good sized goat fish, large parrot fish and squirrel fish holding



position near the bottom, maybe a small reef shark cruising past or other sites with tube or barrel sponges. What will be seen does change with depth, the largest differences above or below the 7 to 10m depth band. The sites are numerous just to make a major

understatement and you can go on getting deeper till you drop over the edge of a wall. It can feel incredible gliding through a large archway or navigating a narrow coral tunnel to exit in clear blue hovering over 1000 m (3000 ft) of nothingness as at

Theo's wreck

the "Playground" just off Cat Islands Hawks Nest, or Turnbull's Gut off Andros. To float along a wall with with table corals, whip corals extending out, the shark lazing along above you, the turtle keeping you company gives a fantastic feeling.

Not all areas of wall will feel the same. On the northerly islands of Grand Bahama, Andros or Paradise some of the walls edging the deep channels started with the flat reef top then 50 degree sloping sandy sections with only scattered coral growth down to a deep diver depth over which much of the dive was conducted, this before dropping to near vertical and below live coral depths. These sections are not as dramatic so check the descriptions with the dive shop. This contrasted with walls at Cat Island and I gather on Long Island and others where a reef top possibly as shallow as 10 m depth could immediately change to vertical and be covered in splendid live coral for some distance down the sheer face.

Many of the areas of wall, indeed other reef areas, have been little explored on many of the island. Some of my dives on Cat Island my buddy and I were the only ones present without another boat let alone a diver seen the whole day while much of the reef on Andros hasn't been fully explored. Check out the Family or Out Islands for the unexplored. Yes, you can have great dives on coral reefs, you don't need to be a specialist in these animals to enjoy them and what they have produced.

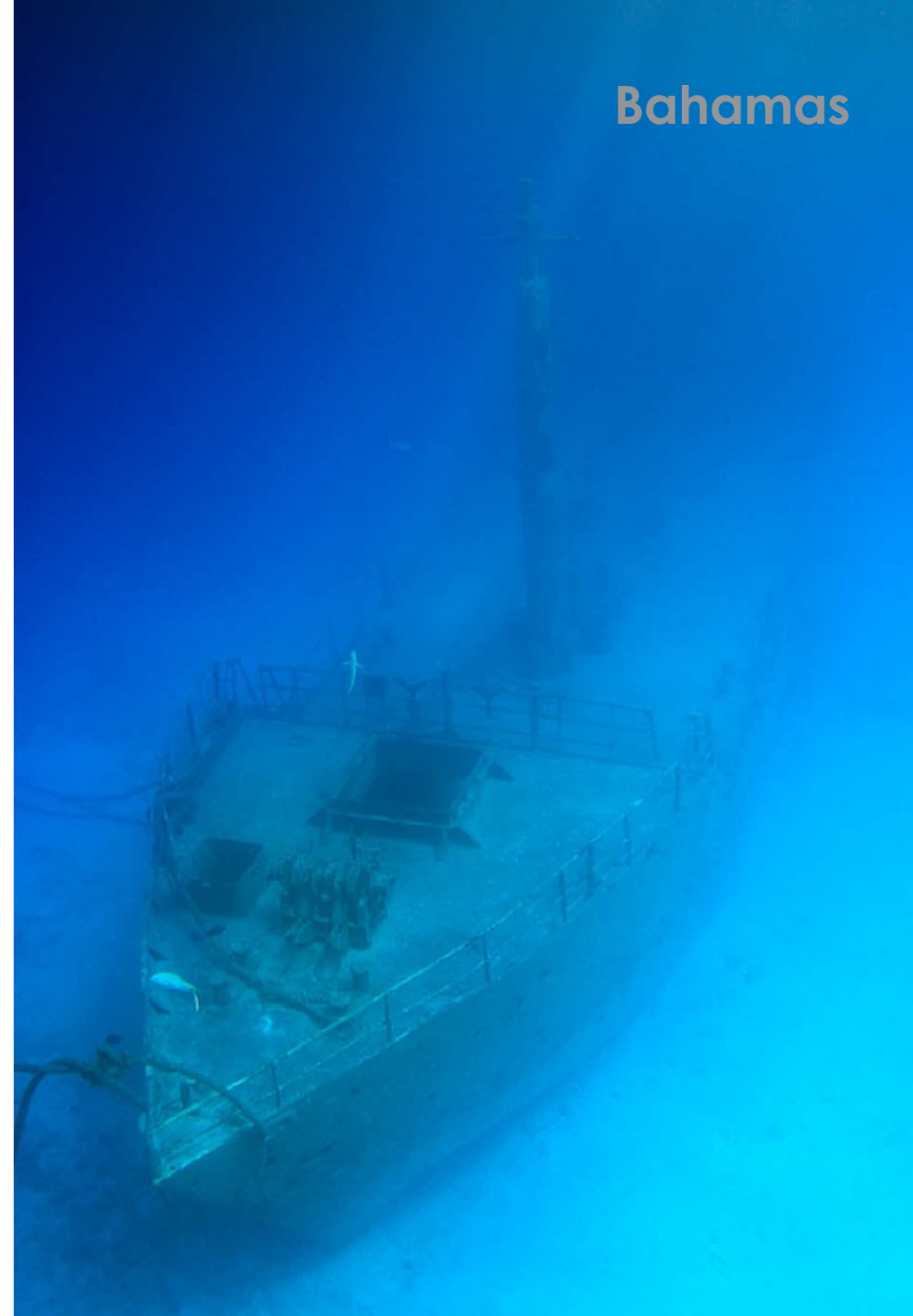
Bored with coral?

Wrecks, both ancient and modern, accidentally or purposely sunk are on many of the islands and many a diver's "to do" list.

One of two sisters

Those sunk for diver tourism are as interesting or even more so as accidental ones and offer both habitat and structure to explore. What is it that wrecks do to attract divers? A bit of adventure, often some history, a man made structure to explore in a way impossible on land, they are habitats and, hey, it can just be fun. There are way to many in the Bahamas too visit them all, I managed a few: Papa Doc and Theos Wreck on Grand Bahama, the Marion on Andros, the Twin Sisters out of New Providence were all great fun dives.

Theos Wreck Theos Wreck, a 70 metres (230 feet) long cement hauling freighter was purposely sunk in 1982 by the suggestion of Theo Galanopoulos as a gift, the first artificial reef of the Bahamas and tourist attraction for the Bahamas government. It is rated as one of the best dives of Grand Bahama by many and it is a great dive. It lies at 30 m (100 ft) in an area with some tidal currents so is treated as a dive for the experienced. The ship was built in Norway in 1954 as the M/S Logna and used for cargo sailing between Spain and Norway then bought by the Bahama Cement Company to carry sand between Florida and Nassau and Eleuthera. A refit couldn't be financed economically so it was decommissioned and Theo came up with his suggestion. Now it has good growth of gorgonians, sponges and corals with grunts, a few lobster, eels and more making it home with visits from the occasional shark, ray or turtle. It's an easy wreck to penetrate with open holds and access to the engine room with enough space so it doesn't feel claustrophobic and it looks like a ship not just a scrap yard.



Papa Doc wreck At nearly the other end of the scale from Theos is the Papa Doc wreck which is a big boat really not a ship. It came about as the original by this name was a gun runners wooden vessel now all but gone. The site was popular so a new steel vessel, 50 foot length, was added in the same location in 45 foot of water. It looks like a boat should

look, upright on its keel and small enough to easily take in, possibly with time to explore the adjacent reef as well.

The Marion Andros Island, The Marion, a construction barge with crane was commissioned to move some equipment for the US Navy AUTEK base in 1988. It happened that trying to lift a

buoy a bit heavier than its rated lifting capacity didn't quite work, it sank, giving us a good barge with a lot of interesting shapes in the crane to swim around at a maximum depth of 70 feet (21 metres) on a white sandy seabed. A fun dive with potential to explore; maybe its not going to enter the records as a classic site but instead will show you a grouper or two, French angelfish, grey snapper, fairy basslets, goatfish. maybe the resident eel and passing barracuda. While if you look hard enough invading lion fish may also be found.

Film set wrecks New Providence has remnants of film set wrecks such as the vessel Tears of Allah from 'Never Say Never Again' and the Vulcan

Bomber from 'Thunderball', the Treasure Wreck wreck built as a prop for 'Into the Blue' and sunk in 2004 along with many others which can be dived. I only managed the Carib Breeze and Tropic Breeze Wrecks site also known locally as the Twin Sisters. These are two 200 foot tankers donated by Shell and sunk next to each other in 2000 to create an artificial reef. They sit in about 70 foot on a white sandy bottom just next to a sand slope covered in garden eels. On top of the shallow plateau, up the sand slope, the garden eels attract in visiting rays and turtles browse the eel grass. Both the wrecks are ship shape in great condition giving more than enough to visit for a dive or two.

I've only had a taster of the possible wrecks on offer, maybe

one of the problems with the Bahamas, there can be too much to do and see. For a real wreck junkie it will take a bit of extra research finding which island offers the most of what you want to see then organising a specific itinerary with a dive shop before arriving, as the normal fare offers variety not specialisation. For my British cohort wreckies, the wrecks, as for most diving, are no take zones so you can't bring back the odd chunk of brass or old porthole.

Blue holes

All of the main islands of the Bahamas have blue holes as might be expected from the geological history. Blue holes generally are the collapsed roof to an underground cave

Barral sponges (left) of a number of species along with other sponges commonly seen at some locations; Divers (below) in the Great Blue Hole

which were formed when the sea level was low enough to leave the islands high and dry. These are often listed on itineraries but not always visited regularly either due to some having awkward locations, with others the technical diving requirements don't place them at the recreational level. I suspect some divers also find blue holes less interesting than first imagined as they have dived ones which can be seen as "just a clear blue water dive in a hole without much else" but this depends greatly on the individual site. Andros Island has the best known ones and is the capital for blue holes with at least 178 on land another 50 or more in the sea, more than anywhere else in the world. Some of these are classics

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of diving history both in exploration expeditions and resulting from this in filming terms.

One of the exceptional marine ones known as the Great Blue Hole or as King Kong's Cavern is visited by Small Hope Bay Lodge on a regular basis. It is the second deepest in the

Bahamas and measures about 300 foot across at the top. Its entrance region is large and diverse enough to need a number of dives just to see all the potential at this level. Most commonly one descends to the rim at 12 m (40 foot) over its edge and down an ancient waterfall chute



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: You may find Atlantic bottlenose dolphins out in the wild if you are lucky, these off Andros; Yellow sub get together; Fish meet the yellow sub

vehicles, OK there are some differences from most others. Here you have a bubble top even allowing for your hair to stay dry, glasses to be worn, and no need for any previous scuba experience. They are free ranging but tethered to the surface with a float and accompanied by swimming scuba diving safety attendants. The participants have a briefing on shore, join the dive boat and proceed to a rather good area of shallow coral reef with sandy bottom adjacent. The SUBs are winched overboard with



maybe show non diving family members some of what we see. For experienced divers it may seem a little tame, but one comment I heard was that with the bubble top they had a much wider all round view so could better understand the reef than ever with the more restricted view through a mask.

educational. The programme at UNEXSO strives to be very dolphin friendly with controlled conditions so no harassment and good conditions. Three levels of interaction are offered; standing in the water with them, swimming with them in confined conditions and swimming with them in open seas encounters. The

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Swimming with dolphins Another activity which, here in the UK really gets the controversy going with a few, is swimming with dolphins. It's an activity done in many countries around North America and the Caribbean and in the better offerings seen as fun-

before continuing along under a huge overhang effectively producing a cavern of amphitheatre proportions. Giant boulders are wedged floor to ceiling here and the dive continues, depending on air, under and among crevices of these boulders exiting in what they call the big room before returning to the waterfall chute. More specialist dives, still at the recreational level, explore other areas around this blue holes entrance and tunnels leading off it to other entrance points while technical divers could have a field day exploring deeper reaches of it. The Great Blue Hole is a fantastic site and totally blows the concept of blue holes just being plain boring holes in the ground. It does need to be dived on an outgoing tide, preferably in the morning for better light penetration, but isn't constrictive nor need lights.

As a note on the more technical side Small Hope can take recreational divers

into twin set realms with full introductions then a range of great dives that require this form of redundancy for blue hole, cave and deeper dives on walls along with helium for trimix.. They have nitrox and can mix to requirements including hot mixes. They didn't have rebreathers on offer, but can arrange supplies of absorbent.

Life is not all diving

With the tourism hat on, the Bahamas offer the non-diver some attractions which are at least approaching the realms of the diver and what we find so exciting about our special underwater world. Yes, they do have aquaria but moving beyond that are little Yellow Submarines at Stuart Cove's Diving in Nassau/Paradise Island.

Little Yellow Sub To a diver the Yellow Submarines are manned dive propulsion

the bubble top above water level where you enter it before it is lowered further and freed. The new driver heads off, maybe with a gentle crash or two with other SUBs as steering is learned, to explore along the reef at 15 foot depth and hair still dry. The attendants on scuba point out interesting features and fish then feed tiny amounts of fish feed, which brings in absolutely hordes of yellow jacks and more, in front of each SUB diver.

These SUBs seem a stunning way to



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Learn to just relax; Exploring the mangroves at Lucaya National Park on the boardwalk Not everything is diving on Grand Bahama even if it is wet at times; Dive boats weren't overcrowded, this one at UNEXSO



Topside

—Life, besides not being all diving, not all of the Bahamas is underwater Americans comment that the Bahamas are now an expensive destination, while from England I noticed it was just a little less expensive than staying at home. Value partly depends on expectations and what you do. The Family Islands (i.e. all but the highly populated main two) have small populations, relatively few tourists, a laid back lifestyle and an infrastructure which fits but that infrastructure can creak if pushed too far. Life here doesn't always depend on the clock, nor on your wallet, just sometimes, and you need to learn which applies to a situation.

human participants I talked to really enjoyed the experience, and one who had done this at another location said this one was far better as it offered more freedom of interaction both for her and the dolphin.

On Exuma I stayed at the Club Peace and Plenty, Georgetown, diving with the attached Exuma Scuba, all very convenient except ordering lunch in the hotel between dives took



only gets about 8000 tourists a year, most for the world class bone fishing. These small numbers mean a choice of accommodation is limited but there are a number of small hotels, some very reasonably priced, but not necessarily in easy reach of

friendly and helpful, at the Andros Yacht Club they hunted down a computer guy, a friend of a friend sort of contact to try putting it right. Sadly that was to no avail, the sickness continued, but Small Hope and Stuart Cove's all helped out with access to their computers, till after 2:30 in the morning on one occasion. It's the sort of friendly helpfulness which seems

endemic in the Bahamas, but you need to play your part with flexibility.

longer than the surface interval. I ended up using the local store to buy quick soup packs, at 20 cents, to heat in my room's coffee maker to save time and money. Lunch was thought of as a relaxed laid back time to contemplate life not a fast, quick snack in a busy schedule.

At Small Hope Bay the package is an all inclusive one including food and drinks (out of busy hours you are welcome to be your own bar tender, without a tab!) which gave an incredibly friendly, sociable and relaxed ambience, but cost was more than at the Andros Lighthouse Yacht Club & Marina so I stayed 3 nights at Small Hope and two at the Yacht Club. Andros Island



Small Hope which is now the only diving establishment.

With digital cameras a computer is essential, mine went sick, really sick. I found the Bahamians and other locals

is present to explore / exploit, sadly I didn't. Ideally for this your own transport would be useful. On Paradise Island I never really got beyond the Nassau Beach Hotel except on Stuart Cove's

So little time

Limited time is always a problem for divers. On Grand Bahama and Nassau/Paradise Island the shopping experience

Swimming with the dolphins can be hard work keeping up as not holding just gentle contact



Diver (left) signals OK in the Great Blue Hole; The wreck of the *Marion* (below)

oriented shopping, entertainment; hotel region adjacent to the capital city of Freeport. It does have a moderate amount going on even attracting in locals from other regions, but it can be worth exploring further afield. I did some exploration of Grand Bahama which is a nearly flat island intersected with many purpose built canals allowing the many prestigious houses to moor their boats adjacent. These canals plus the mangroves offer excellent breeding grounds for marine life. I was able to have a quick tour driving around areas in and outlying Freeport; seeing the banking and business district

through the car window, the horse riders along a beach and in the sea, the mounds of conch shells by market stalls, and other near empty beaches. These explorations did take me east to The Lucayan National Park, a 30 minute drive on empty but good roads to one of the few protected zones. Here a boardwalk trail through mangroves meanders to an absolutely stunning white sand beach deserving more leisure time than I could give it.

The Family Islands generally offer less for the shopaholic but I found they can be great for the eco-tourism, local crafts and customs and I understand also for fishing, sailing, general water sports and simple relaxation on good beaches. With Hawk's Nest I wandered up the local estuary exploring mangroves in a flat bottom boat, and I met local basket makers on a car drive both on Cat and Andros while on Andros a visit to the batik factory, which supplies most of the other islands with printed materials, was a walk down the road from the Yacht Club.

Diving is well catered for, but I still took my own kit. The internal flights don't have big baggage allowances nor offer extra for divers but flights are short so the extra charges are not completely prohibitive just annoying. I have looked at dive operations on 5 of the islands and all offered up to date, good kit for hire but official regulations are limited so check what you are hiring. The one item I would always recommend taking on any trip is your own exposure suit, in this case a 5 mm wetsuit



Bahamas

Shallow reefs with the deep blue of the Tongue of the Ocean as seen flying between Grand Bahama and Nassau

seems the most appropriate, you know it fits. People come in too many shapes and sizes for any hire shop to always have a wetsuit that's right.

Yes, the Bahamas are tourist centric for a visitor and it does take a little effort to move beyond that but they do offer some really good diving and more than enough to keep non-divers happily occupied. At least at some places, such as Small Hope, families can be catered for with child care provisions. So just a bit of added effort and more time a great deal extra could be done or maybe just learn to relax, lay back and the Bahamas can be a great place to unwind. I must give that a try sometime. ■

Interested in marine life since childhood in California, Charles Stirling tried scuba in University but the need for glasses and at the time lack of knowledge about prescription masks stopped this as

an activity. Did research on marine invertebrates going on to do PhD in Zoology emphasizing neurophysiology and electronmicroscopy. Rediscovered diving about 10 years ago when heard prescription masks were available. Did CMAS, then PADI, BSAC and TDI training before adding underwater photography. Now publishes frequently in the UK Sport Diver and other UK diving and more general magazines. Became the environmental correspondent for the BSAC Travel Club a few years ago.

Great Barracuda



pickup bus. The hotel is in a complex of interrelated hotels (OK, it was, as now being demolished for a larger more upmarket one), a casino and a couple of restaurants isolated from anything else within walking distance. No feel at all of the Bahamas will be obtained with this isolation. Previously I have stayed at the Orange Hill Beach Inn, also isolated. This isolation seems part of a modern day way to contain tourists and can be great if it's what you want otherwise transport becomes essential as there can be so much to experience.

On Grand Bahama UNEXSO are located in the Port Lucaya area and I stayed in both the Pelican Bay and adjacent Sheraton Our Lucaya Hotels. Port Lucaya is a relatively newly developed rather tourist

