

An underwater photograph featuring a diver's mask and snorkel in the upper left corner. The mask is black with a clear lens and a circular dial on the side. Below the mask, a large, flat, mottled fish, possibly a flounder, is resting on a sandy ocean floor. The fish has a pattern of dark spots and streaks on its light-colored skin. The background is a deep blue, slightly hazy underwater environment.

Igor Bondar

# A DIVER'S NOTES

Book 2

*(First translation below)*

## **Cut the fin**

How long and beautiful they are! I was looking on the eve of the upcoming dive at my new meter sports fins with pleasure. Swimming with them was comparable to driving a Ferrari. Barely moving my legs, I was overtaking all the divers around as if they were "standing on the spot". And now I brought fins here, to Fish Rock Cave in New South Wales.

Beautiful predators - sharks - live near this cave all year round. Their population here varies from about twenty to sixty individuals. I have occasionally been here during their peak season, with perfect visibility. Incredible, eye-catching sight. Large individuals, from two to three and a half meters long, gracefully soar in the water column around, as far as the eye can see. They almost don't react to divers. Being absolutely confident about themselves, only occasionally they show a slight curiosity towards them. A unique place for diving, one of the few in the world where diving of this kind is still possible.

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John, the owner of the dive center, broke into a smile when he saw me. Perhaps he was overwhelmed with pleasant memories about our last trip to the pub, where I convincingly proved to him the superiority of the Eurasian liver over the Australian one.

“Hi, Igor!” He said and then looked at the fins in my hand. “What beautiful new fins you have! But they seems way too long to me, they should be shortened by twenty centimeters, mate.”

“Envious, probably,” I thought, demonstrating indulgence and benevolence towards the representative of the short-fins class with all my appearance.

My next interlocutor was dive guide Larry. His welcome speech was also half dedicated to the excessive length of my fins. The suggestion to cut them a little was no longer a novelty for me. Moreover, his finger, while demonstrating this thought, also crossed my flipper twenty centimeters from its end. “There are so many diving conservatives here!” I thought cheerfully, “any innovation immediately causes criticism from them.”

The last one was captain Simon. He tried for a very long time to fit my long fins into the usual place on board of the boat, and after several unsuccessful attempts, of course, he also suggested cutting them a little. Well, seems I will unlikely meet a different opinion about my fins in this nice town.

Diving that day started out great - small waves on the surface, bright sun and pleasant company. The only upsetting thing was the visibility under water, today it was only ten meters. However, in the cave itself, visibility has improved. Although huge flocks of fish filled this place so densely that visibility no longer played a special role here - even divers from the group sometimes had difficulty seeing each other.

One look from the inside on the exit of the cave arch was enough to understand that sharks are standing on the usual side

today and there were quite a lot of them. In general, the exit from that cave is, undoubtedly, the most exciting and beautiful moment when diving in this place. First, the pitch darkness is replaced by a light twilight, then a gap, then the purest blue. And like chic planes with ideal shapes, huge, graceful predators are circling in it. It is impossible to get used to this beautiful sight, no matter how long you dive here.

We swam a little along the reef wall, after leaving the cave, and immediately became part of this wonderful and very unusual underwater company. The sharks moved slowly in a circle here, and their route passed very close to us. Sometimes they swam so close to us that over the next twenty minutes, I could probably touch a dozen sharks if I wanted to.

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This happened at the very end of the dive. I was the first in the group and sat very close to the sharks. Trying to exchange a couple of signs with Larry, I turned sideways to the predators for a minute. At the same time, one of my long fins moved to the side and stood across the route of the sharks. Probably, for predators, it looked like a barrier placed on the way to the native cave. Then I felt a short tug on the fin.

When I looked back, no one was around. Later, from Larry and other divers, I learned that the two-meter toothy beauty first stopped in front of my flipper that blocked her path, politely stood there for a couple of seconds, and then quickly bit my fin with her teeth and disappeared into the blue. As a memory, I was left with

... a straight scratch across the fin about twenty centimeters from its edge!

It seems that the underwater local inhabitants do not differ much in their tastes from the land. Well, why didn't they all like my long fins? However, personally, I regarded everything that happened as an underwater kiss of my flipper by a predator, as a sign of respect for my diving merits. After all, sharks do not have tender lips - so they kiss by anything.

In the evening at the pub, after a couple of beers, John, Larry and Simon finally agreed with my version. However, provided that I pay for everything. Well, it's always a pleasure for me to treat these simple, wonderful Australian guys. However, I will add that from this day on, for diving in this place, I take my old, normal-length fins. It is necessary, it is always necessary to respect local traditions.

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## **Bula!**

“Igor, what do you think, why on this island I see only women, how to say it more mildly, with a slightly above average weight?” George once asked me on the open veranda of a cozy cafe located on one of the islands of Fiji.

The day before we flew here to take part in the feeding of bull sharks, which is quite famous in the diving world. This event was scheduled for tomorrow, and today my friend and I slowly got acquainted with the local way of life, and already made some first conclusions.

“Winds, George, I think the reason for this is the winds,” - I answered.

“Winds?” George raised an eyebrow curiously.

“Yes, very strong winds that often blow over these islands”, I explained my thought. “After all, the wind, as you know, carries away everything light and slender, but it cannot move something heavier.”

Friend laughed out loud at my joke.

"It makes sense", he said at last, "and I even dare to suggest that the local winds probably blow mainly towards Australia." Have you noticed how many slim women have appeared in the Gold Coast in recent years?"

It was my turn to laugh. The sun burned down beautifully in the sunset sky during our conversation, and soon disappeared

behind the sea horizon. My friend and I got up and went to our rooms to get a good night's sleep before tomorrow's active day.

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“Bula!” The crew members of the diving boat were saying the traditional Fijian greeting to the divers with a big smile, as they were boarded.

“Bula!” The arriving guests cheerfully answered and sat down in empty seats along the side of the ship.

This morning about two dozen people in total gathered for sharks feeding. After everyone arrived, the boat left the marina, and, at high speed, moved towards the reef, near which this feeding is carried out. The distance to the place was not very long, and after some time we started to put on the equipment for the first dive.

As George and I knew from fellow divers who had previously been here, several bull sharks usually come up for this feeding, quite large in size - up to four meters in length. Sometimes a tiger shark also comes here, but I'll make a reservation right away that this time we didn't manage to see it. However, and bull sharks turned out to be more than enough to get the necessary emotions.

After a short briefing, the divers jumped into the water and began to take their places at the bottom, according to the instructions of the dive guides. Several large bull sharks were already circling nearby, waiting for food. Two people from the staff positioned themselves at the edges of our group to control

the distance from the predators. For this purpose, they carried long aluminum sticks in their hands, sharpened on one side and bent in the form of a handle on the other. With a sharp end, the guides repelled bull sharks, and with a blunt end, as friends told us, they pushed tiger sharks. They did not want to disturb them unnecessarily.

Soon, two people from the staff lowered a green plastic tank with a lid, about a meter size under water and began to throw out pieces of fish from it with their hands. The activity of the sharks instantly increased significantly, and they began to swim in front of us and above us, sometimes being pushed away by dive guides. This spectacle was very impressive, since some individuals weighed about half a ton, and maybe more. We filmed everything that happened on the photo and video, and did not experienced lack of story until the end of the dive.

When the food in the tank ended, the sharks immediately calmed down and moved a little to the side. The divers moved towards the boat and soon began to ascend. Further there was an hour's rest with a light lunch on a boat, during which the guests enthusiastically exchanged their impressions. Meanwhile, George and I got to know the local dive guides. Having learned that we were their colleagues who had flown in from Australia, they told us some interesting cases that once happened here while shark feeding.

After lunch and rest, we began to prepare for the second dive. It supposed to take place nearby but in a place with a different bottom landscape. As the local instructor explained to us at the briefing, this dive site had a stone ledge about two meters high,



on which we all had to sit down. Having plunged to the bottom, we immediately moved to this place.

George and I were placed in the center by the local dive guides, apparently out of a sense of professional sympathy. Moreover, they put me with my large camera at the bottom, in front of the ledge, with my back to the stone wall. Having spread the flashes and uncovered the front lens, I quickly got ready to shoot. Then I raised head and saw George's familiar fins above my head. Good sign.

After that, in fact, the feeding of sharks began. Maybe in order to give their colleagues the best possible experience, the local dive guides started dumping fish from a plastic tank right in front of George and me, just a couple of meters away. The first three minutes of this feeding, I was trying to photograph something. However, after the huge predators quickly muddied all the water in front of me, the visibility in it dropped to a meter. I realized that my shooting was over.

However, soon I had completely different thoughts appeared. Huge tails, fins and even jaws began to flicker periodically from this cloud of dust in front of my nose. Moreover, all this was happening at great speed. For the first time in my life, I felt that I might just be knocked by mistake. There was a wall behind me, and there was nowhere to retreat.

If the local dive guides wanted to give us the most unforgettable impressions and emotions, they did it. For about five minutes I held in front of me, fortunately a very large camera, like a shield. And in general, the maximum plausible portrayed a

hard local coral. Apparently the power of thought worked, and none of the big underwater predators pushed me by mistake.

When it was all over, I looked up. George was the only one left sitting on the ledge above me. All the other divers left earlier, apparently filled to the brim with the desired sensations much faster. As my friend later told me, during this stormy feeding, he himself had to lean back a couple of times, just in case.

After this dive, local dive-guides patted me and George on the shoulder and laughed approvingly, saying that my friend and I got the maximum experience possible here. Of course, we thanked them sensually for the honor done to us.

However, in the evening, while having dinner with George on our beautiful veranda in the hotel, we, over a glass of beer, suddenly made another thought. What if it was not a sign of respect for colleagues who arrived from the Gold Coast, but a very insidious and original way with which local dive guides wanted to get even a little for all the light women blown away by the wind to Australia?

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## Frosty

It was a quiet evening, and almost all the divers on the catamaran, anchored in the cozy lagoon of one of the islands, were on the upper deck. Some of them just admired the sunset, some did it a little more difficult - with a can of beer in hand, and some had a casual conversation with other divers. There was very little time left before the sunset of the solar disk beyond the sea horizon.

Suddenly, some rather loud splashes sounded overboard the ship. The divers immediately got up from their seats and approached the side of the catamaran. The picture that appeared to their eyes is not often seen in the sea. There was a hunt of a large shark for a sea turtle in shallow water. The smooth surface of the sea from time to time was disturbed by the movement of large bodies under water, periodically, the high fin of a shark flashed and a couple of times the tail of a predator appeared on the surface. Tail over a meter high.

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Everyone called this diver Frosty on the ship - I never learned his full name during the safari. The man looked to be about sixty or sixty-five years old, with gray hair and a neat beard. Frosty was a good-natured and positive person with a great sense of humor - I never saw him in a bad mood. However, there also seemed to be something deeper in him. If I was asked: "Which person is the most suitable for the role of "man of the sea" from the people you

know?”, more likely, he would be the first person I recalled. I don’t know why - perhaps it’s just some kind of intuitive result, on the base of all the information received about him and of my own feelings.

Frosty and I met on a catamaran called Big Cat Reality, on one of its infrequent dive safari trips to the southern part of the Great Barrier Reef. Bunker Group islands and reefs - definitely not a place for mass diving in Australia. Only one small boat and our elderly catamaran bring divers here, and only a few weeks a year.

To be honest, I never understood Frosty's status on this ship - he was somewhere between staff and a regular diver here. Perhaps he just helped the team in some way and got for this the opportunity to dive in these waters on his own. Anyway, no doubt diving was very important to him. Or maybe Frosty was here as a kind of mascot - everyone loved and respected him so much.

According to divers who knew Frosty, he dived all his life - the number of dives he had reached several thousand. He was a diving instructor, a solo diver and many others in this field. It didn't take any complex reasoning to understand that this guy is madly in love with the underwater world. In the daily life of the ship, Frosty always willingly helped everyone, and did not refuse anyone. However, in his free time, he often went under water alone – a solo diver is allowed – to enjoy a beautiful silent world.

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My friend George and I booked this trip well in advance since this tour was so popular. Almost all the guests on the catamaran

were locals, which once again confirmed the interestingness of this diving safari. In fact, the local reefs were so little explored that almost every diver could reasonably feel like a kind of pioneer here. George and I, for example, found during this trip two beautiful and quite large underwater caves that had not previously mapped by dive guides.

It is also worth mentioning, that at this time there was a season when sea turtles lay their eggs in the sand on local islands for breeding. But, as is often the case in nature, this time is the high season too for those who like to eat turtles, given their large concentrations around these reefs. We are talking about tiger sharks. An adult tiger shark has such powerful jaws that they are able to break the strong shell of sea turtles. So at this time of the year in the waters around the Bunker Group divers have a real chance of spotting a tiger shark underwater.

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On one day during our diving safari, Frosty returned from solo dive a little different from usual. This time he clearly looked a little excited in contrast to his eternally calm state.

“Did you see anything unusual underwater?” The captain, who knew the diver very well, asked.

“I did, Steve,” Frosty nodded his head. “I just ran into a big tiger shark face to face on the reef.”

Everyone gasped in surprise. All the divers of the catamaran gathered around the man in a dense ring to find out the details.

“How did it happen, Frosty?” Questions came from all sides.

“Well, I'm swimming along the reef as usual, and suddenly I see a big tiger shark moving towards me. It was about four meters, or maybe even closer to five in length”, the diver answered. “I immediately stopped, and it also stood right in front of me. We stand like this for a few seconds, looking at each other.”

Everyone froze in excitement.

“And what did you do, Frosty, how did you get rid of it?” The captain asked again.

The experienced diver was silent for a second, and then suddenly threw up his hands and yelled incredibly loudly. All the divers jumped back in surprise, and some even fell to the deck.

“So, I did the same thing underwater, and after that the shark also first backed out, and then swam away.” Frosty explained with a smile, and went to take off his wetsuit.

However, everyone on the ship noticed that after this incident, an experienced diver began to take a two-meter stick with him on single dives. Perhaps, at the next possible encounter with a tiger shark, Frosty found a loud word and a stick to be still a more convincing argument than just a loud word.

*(To be continued)*

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