

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 porthole. Below it, a large, flat, mottled fish, possibly a flounder, is resting on a sandy seabed. 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

Cut the fin

How long and beautiful they are! On the eve of the upcoming dive I was enjoying the look of 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 still". Now I brought those 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 been here during their peak season with perfect visibility to see them on occasion. Incredible eye-catching sight. Large individuals from two to three and a half meters long gracefully soar in the water around as far as the eyes can see. They almost don't react to divers. Being absolutely confident in themselves only on occasion showing a slight curiosity . This is 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 when I definitely 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 seem 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-fin 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 news to 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 to criticize was captain Simon. He was trying to fit my long fins into the usual place on board of the boat for a very long time. After several unsuccessful attempts, of course, he suggested cutting them down a little. Well, it seems I will unlikely hear 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 underwater, only ten meters today. However, inside the cave visibility has improved. Although huge flocks of fish filled this space so densely, that visibility was no longer important here - even divers from the group sometimes had difficulty seeing each other.

One look towards the exit of the cave was enough to realize that sharks are staying on the usual side today and there were a

lot of them. In general, the exit from that cave is, undoubtedly, the most exciting and beautiful moment while diving here. First, the pitch darkness is replaced by shallow light, then a gap, then the pure 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.

After leaving the cave, we were swimming along the reef wall and suddenly became part of this wonderful and very unusual underwater company. The sharks were slowly circling here and their route passed very close to us. Sometimes they swam so close to us I could have probably touched a dozen sharks if I wanted to, in those twenty minutes.

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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 came across the route of the sharks. Probably for predators it looked like a barrier placed on the way to their 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 to me that the local underwater inhabitants do not differ much in their tastes from the land ones. 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 with anything.

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

Bula!

“Igor, what do you think, why on this island I only see women, how to say it more mildly with a slightly above average weight?” - George once asked me while on the open terrace 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 the day after so my friend and I had the time to slowly get to know the local way of life, already receiving first insights.

“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 followed my thought. “After all, the wind, as you know, carries away everything light and slender, but it cannot move something heavy.”

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 appeared in the Gold Coast in recent years?"

It was my turn to laugh. The sun was beautiful 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 an active day tomorrow.

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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 boarded.

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

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

As George and I heard from fellow divers who had previously been here, several bull sharks usually come up for the feeding. Quite large in size - up to four meters in length. Sometimes a tiger shark appears 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 occupy their spots at the bottom, in accordance with 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 hold long

aluminum sticks in their hands sharpened on one end and bent on the other in the form of a handle. As friends told us: with a sharp end the guides repelled bull sharks and with a blunt end they pushed tiger sharks away - they did not want to disturb them without necessity.

Soon, two people from the staff lowered a green plastic tank about a meter size with a lid under the water. They began to empty pieces of fish from it with their hands. The activity of the sharks instantly and significantly increased and they began to swim in front and above us. Sometimes being pushed away by dive guides. That spectacle was very impressive, since some individuals weighed about half a ton. We filmed everything that happened on a video and took some photos and we did not experience any boredom until the end of the dive.



When the food in the tank had ended, the sharks immediately calmed down and moved a little to the side. The divers were moving towards the boat and soon began to ascend. Then there was an hour for rest and a light lunch on a boat. During lunch the guests shared their impressions with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, George and I got to know the local dive guides. Once they realized we were in the same sphere coming from Australia, they told us about some interesting stories that once happened here during shark feeding.

After lunch and rest we began the preparation for the second dive. It is supposed to be nearby but with a different landscape of the seafloor. As the local instructor explained to us at the briefing, this dive site had a stone plate about two meters high where 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 at the bottom with my large camera right 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 my head, I saw George's familiar fins above my head. Good sign.

In a moment, the feeding of sharks began. In order to give us the best possible experience, the local dive guides started dumping fish from a plastic tank just a couple of meters away, right in front of George and me. In the first three minutes of this feeding, I was taking good pictures. However, after the huge

predators muddied all the water in front of me, the visibility dropped to one meter. I realized that my shooting was over.

However, soon I had completely different thoughts appeared. Huge tails, fins and even jaws began to flash from this cloud of dust right in front of my nose. Moreover, all of this was happening so fast. For the first time in my life, I thought they might hit me accidentally. There was a wall behind me, and there was nowhere to retreat.

If the local dive guides had wanted to give us the most unforgettable experience and emotions, they succeeded. For about five minutes I was holding my huge “lucky” camera in front of me like a shield. It looks like I tried to blend in with my surroundings like a local coral. Apparently the power of thought worked as none of the big underwater predators hit 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 having had their fill of the action much sooner. My friend later told me that 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 with a laughter of approval, saying that my friend and I got the maximum experience possible. Of course, we thanked them genuinely for the honor.

However, that evening while dining with George in the hotel, on our beautiful terrace, we over the pint 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?

Frosty

It was a quiet evening and almost all the divers were on the upper deck of the catamaran which was anchored in the cozy lagoon on one of the islands. 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. Not much time left before the sunset of the solar disk below the sea horizon.

Suddenly, loud splashes were heard overboard. Divers immediately got up from their seats and approached the side of the boat. What they saw next is very rare at sea. Large shark was hunting a sea turtle in shallow waters. Smooth water surface of the sea was distorted by the movement of large bodies under the water. From time to time, the long fin of a shark flashed and a couple of times the tail of a predator surfaced. Tail was over a meter long.

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Everyone on the ship called that diver “Frosty” - I have never learned his full name during that safari. The man looked 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 deep about him. If I was asked: "Which person is the most suitable for the title "man of the sea" from the people you know?" likely he would be the first person I recall. I don't know why - perhaps it's just some kind of intuition, based on all the information known about him and of my own feelings.

Frosty and I met on a boat called Big Cat Reality during 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 a small boat and our elderly catamaran bring divers here only a few weeks a year.

To be honest, I never understood Frosty's status on this ship - he was somewhere in between staff and regular divers. Perhaps he was helping the team somehow and for this reason he got an opportunity to dive in these waters on his own. In any case, no doubt diving was very important to him. Or maybe Frosty was a kind of lucky charm - everyone loved and respected him so much.

According to divers who knew Frosty, he was diving all his life - the number of dives he had, has reached several thousand. He was a diving instructor, a solo diver and many other things in this field. It didn't take any complex thought to realize that this guy is madly in love with the underwater world. In the daily life of the ship, Frosty was eager to help everyone without excuse. However, he often went under water alone in his free time – 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 as this tour was very popular. Almost all the guests on the catamaran were locals that once again confirmed the interest for this diving safari. In fact, the local reefs were so little explored that almost every diver here could reasonably feel like a pioneer. George and I, for example, discovered during this trip two beautiful and quite large underwater caves that were not previously mapped by dive guides.

It is also worth mentioning that at that time there was sea turtle season to lay their eggs in the sand on local islands. However, as is often the case in nature, it is also a high season for some predators, given large gatherings of turtles around these reefs. We are talking about tiger sharks. An adult tiger shark has powerful jaws that can break the strong shell of a sea turtle. 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.

* * *

One day during our diving safari, Frosty returned from a solo dive a little different from usual. At that 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 circle 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 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 really loud. All the divers jumped back in surprise, and some even fell on the deck.

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

However, everyone on the ship noticed that after that incident an experienced diver took a two-meter stick with him on single dives. Perhaps, in the next probable 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.

Amazing whales

No matter what anyone says about whales, I know for sure that these sea giants have a good sense of humor. I have witnessed this three times in my life.

I once observed the first story on this topic through binoculars, from the balcony of my room on the top floor of a high-rise hotel. It happened early in the morning on one of the islands inside the Great Barrier Reef. That day by chance, I witnessed the way a group of three whales periodically threw out fountains of water in the path of one windsurfer guy. They did it fun, no doubt. The guy wasn't intimidated and gladly took part in this unusual 'whale water park'. The whole action lasted no longer than five minutes but the obvious whales' intentions left me without the slightest doubt that they had a sense of humor.

The second case occurred a few years later on the same coast but much further south. My friends and I dived at a dive site quite remote from the coast then. I remember that day there was a complete calm, which happens here only a few times a year. Taking advantage of the good weather, we made a deep dive and upon completion we were relaxing on the boat, which was at an anchor. There was a complete silence which was not broken even by birds, given the great distance from the coast.

Suddenly, in the middle of that silence, there was an incredibly loud sound. After a couple of seconds, we were doused with the splashes of water. Everyone was in shock, and one girl even fell off the side onto the deck taken by surprise. As it turned out later,

this big hooligan whale quietly surfaced four or five meters from our boat and loudly did its wet fountain work. We decided unanimously that a whale's face must have had a wide (about three meters) smile at the moment of his prank. As for us, my friends and I regained the ability to smile only five minutes after that unusual shower.

For the third time, I witnessed not just the humor of the whales but also their curiosity and even some kind of sociality. It happened in approximately the same waters a year later. That day it was calm as well and my friends and I decided to look for whales in the ocean on my friend's boat. It was a winter month and sea giants were often swimming along the coast. Our boat left the coast for ten miles, so the depth of the ocean was about fifty meters - whales are more common at greater depths.

The captain had turned off the engines and we all began to look around through binoculars in the search for fountains. However, our program that day went differently than was originally planned. As it turned out a little later, a couple of whales (probably a family) at exactly the same time were looking for a group of sailors on a boat, for some reason. And they found us. I'm not kidding - it looked exactly like this: two humpback whales suddenly swam up to us and for the next half hour they literally circled around our boat.

We were all shocked by such a pleasant surprise. About ten times huge whales dived under our boat and swam very close to its keel. Considering that the sea giants were several times heavier than the boat it is easy to imagine our emotions in those moments as well as the wide smiles of the whales. Having played enough

with the poor whale seekers, the huge guests went even further in their contact. They suddenly began to stick their heads out of the water just opposite the rear deck where my friends and I were standing at that moment.

You should have seen the way they gazed at us! They looked at us the same way tourists gaze at unusual little animals in the zoo. I'm willing to bet that at that moment I even understood what one whale was talking about to another. Approximately it sounded like this: "Look, dear, these are the very people you asked me to show you. I agree, they don't look very good, but that admiration they look at you with!"

I don't even know how long this contact would have continued if my friend George had not suddenly come up with the idea of swimming with our guests. By the way, it was quite easy to understand him - half an hour of such close communication with these giants made them almost tame in our eyes. As a result, when the whales stuck their heads out near the rear deck of the boat one more time, my friend jumped into the water to them. However, the huge animals suddenly immediately swam away after that, never to return.

When George got out of the water and back on the deck, he looked at me with confusion.

"Igor, what do you think, why did they leave me so suddenly?"
- He asked.

"Well, it's obvious, my friend!" - I answered him. "Tell me, did our sociable whales come to you in clothes?"

"No," - George shrugged.

“Then why did you jump into the ocean without the slightest respect for the guests in shorts and in such bright ones as well? They punished you for violating the whale's dress code, mate”. - I had answered him and went to make coffee.



Remora

Sometimes, underwater you can find a fish called remora also known as suckerfish. Moreover, it does not swim alone but mostly next to a larger sea creature. This less than a meter long fish is unusual as its sucker located on the top of its head. With its help, the fish sticks to various large underwater inhabitants, for example, manta rays, sharks and large sea turtles.

The advantages of such a neighborhood for remoras are obvious - they do not particularly spend much energy on movement and are always under the protection of their big "boss". Well, besides this sometimes, remora also has the opportunity to pick up pieces from boss' dinner.

* * *

On one of my usual diving days, I was slowly swimming underwater along a pretty long reef. My partner on that dive, swimming a few meters behind me, was my wife. With a specific purpose in mind, I will make a note in advance that my wife is inferior to me in size. I will not say that on that day I was swimming especially majestically or gracefully somehow - I just swam, as I always swim in general. Nevertheless, it was specifically on this dive when a medium-sized remora suddenly came up to me from some depths of the sea.

Having examined me appraisingly, this fish slowly began to swim up towards me from below. At first, I did not understand anything at all and was only surprised. Then, it finally dawned on

me that this remora saw me as her new "boss", next to whom it wanted to spend some part of her life.

I don't even know if that remora was too young or, on the contrary, old, sick in the head or blind but for some reason it firmly decided that it would be safe, fed and comfortable in my shadow. And in confirmation of this thought, she was honestly swimming under me throughout the dive, indescribably amusing me and my wife. At times, it was clearly looking for a spot to cling to me. However, my complex underwater equipment, with different "pendants", hoses and other things apparently led the remora into some kind of confusion.

So in the end she just floated under me just a dozen or two centimeters away. It was very funny and unusual. Of course, I tried my best to live up to my new status - a sea "boss" with a personal remora - and moved under water as gracefully and majestically as possible. Well, so that the suckerfish that trusted me was not ashamed of the boss.

Few minutes later, new, unusual thoughts suddenly began to visit me. Obviously, my new companion clearly expected that I would soon get hungry and pounce on some oncoming fish and start eating it. Well, as usual, it will get delicious pieces from me scattering to the sides. I was a little embarrassed in front of my new gullible travel companion but I had completely different plans for lunch. My lunch was waiting for me on the ship, in white plates, without extra eaters around.

When our dive was beginning to come to an end and my wife and I were approaching the surface of the sea to make a decompression stop, the remora suddenly darted around in

bewilderment. It clearly did not understand why its “boss” had moved close to a surface and even assumed a vertical body position - it was inconvenient for it to swim under him. After three minutes, when my wife and I finally were heading to the surface of the water, poor remora finally realized that it was all over.

Having already resigned to the fact that her choice was a mistake, she spun under me for the last time and slowly went back to the deep reef. With all my heart, I mentally wished that it would find out there a real, huge and most voracious boss. Next to whom it will always be full and comfortable.



(To be continued)

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