

Shark Whisperers

Whether it's tiny jawfish or "Pavlov's sharks," divers are guaranteed nonstop action in the Turks and Caicos Islands **BY SCOTT JOHNSON**



The Caribbean reef sharks are circling, as they always do here on French Cay. They circle the boat, they circle the divers, and they circle the pyramid. I position my back to the mysterious metal pyramid, frame a cluster of sharks in my viewfinder and fire away. The weak electrical impulses generated by my strobes occasionally prompt the sharks to bump into me; but I don't mind, because the underwater world of the Turks and Caicos is exactly where I want to be.

Capt. Amanda Smith of the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* knows what to expect as she sees me enter the salon. It's been the same routine the handful of times I've previously been on board. First, the obligatory greetings — then we get down to business: "How often will we use the magic pyramid?" "Did you see any jawfish with eggs last week?" Smith, a renowned underwater photographer in her own right, appre-

ciates my passions. The pyramid always brings the sharks, but only God understands the hit or miss reproductive cycles of those mesmerizing jawfish.

Piers Van der Walt, Smith's former boss, constructed the original triangular lure about 10 years ago, in order to attract sharks without actually feeding them while divers are in the water. The pyramid was a big success and has been a guest favorite

since. Van der Walt never told me exactly what was inside the metal casing; Smith has not only continued the practice but also added her own specialty of finding male jawfish incubating eggs in their mouths. Too bad she hasn't yet figured a way to have the eggs spontaneously appear (like Van der Walt's sharks).

Heck, it doesn't really seem to matter where they deploy the pyramid. Good shark and jawfish spots are scattered throughout the archipelago. Believe it or not, guests get so used to seeing Caribbean reef and nurse sharks during a charter that they often go in search of a nice spiny lobster or a hawksbill turtle to entertain them instead. We divers can be a fickle lot.

FROM TOP: SCOTT JOHNSON; MAURICIO HANDLER



Clockwise, from bottom right: a yellow-head jawfish on Northwest Point; the embedded anchor off West Caicos; French grunts at Thunderdome.

DIVES OF THE TURKS AND CAICOS

Diving in this archipelago of 40 islands and cays — of which only eight are inhabited — is fun, but it's also easy: Mild to no currents, warm water and 150-foot visibility are the norm.

The Turks and Caicos are predominantly encircled by shallow-water, spur-and-groove reefs. Follow a groove away from an island, and it will lead you to a dramatic drop-off and the tranquil blue of open water. The walls can be breathtaking, in part due to the clarity of the water but also the evident health of the reefs.

Though the highlight of the islands' diving is the marine life and reefs, it's home to an unusual wreck on the main island of Providenciales (aka Provo) that doubles as one of the best night dives in the Caribbean.

On Provo, Thunderdome represents the remains of a French TV game show called *Escape from Pago Pago Island*, filmed from 1992 to 1993. The steel structure that was once the centerpiece of the set now lies twisted and partially disassembled. You'd have to dig in the sand to make it past 30 feet, so there's plenty of bottom time

SCOTT JOHNSON (3)

NEED TO KNOW



» **WHEN TO GO** Diving and weather are consistently good year-round. Hurricane season runs from June 1 to Nov. 30. Check Aggressor's storm check policy, aggressor.com/news_storm_check.php.

» **DIVE CONDITIONS** Water temperatures range from 75 to 84 degrees F. Up to 150-foot visibility is common.

» **OPERATOR** The *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* is a state-of-the-art, 120-foot dive yacht offering nine staterooms for a maximum of 18 guests. Amenities include nitrox, a hot tub on the spacious sun deck, a digital saloon (entertainment system, computers) and chef-prepared meals.

» **PRICE TAG** A seven-night cruise on the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*, including 5.5 days of diving, starts from \$2,495 per person.

for examining the area. It's not a wide-angle dive, though — you'll want to keep your eyes peeled for secretary blennies, Pedersen's cleaner shrimp and skeleton shrimp on the steel frame. Spotted drums, schoolmasters and large morays frequent the interior of the most intact section. The site also makes a very nice night dive, though brazen blackjacks can be a pain, because they often try to use divers' lights to hunt for dinner.

West Caicos and French Cay are uninhabited islands. About all you'll find on land are birds, insects, lizards and scrub plants. Life beneath the surface is a different story. The neon-colored fish, gorgonians and sponges are welcome contrasts to the starkness of the land. Underwater flybys are a common occurrence at West Caicos, located about 10 miles southwest of Provo. I make it a habit of scanning the blue water in case a manta ray, spotted eagle ray or sea turtle is cruising above the wall. If you're lucky, you might encounter a blacktip or Caribbean reef shark cruising on deeper sections of the walls.

Sites that are worth exploring off West Caicos' west coast include Everett's Abyss, Tons of Sponges, Elephant Ear Canyon — named for a sizable orange elephant ear sponge that once was found here — and the Anchor, where you'll find an encrusted anchor embedded in a crack in the wall at 70 feet.

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LIVE-ABOARD

5 REASONS: TURKS & CAICOS AGGRESSOR II



1 THE MAGIC

Aladdin rubbed a magic lamp to call his genie; Smith and her crew use a metal pyramid to bring on the sharks.

Turks & Caicos Aggressor II offers gourmet food, fresh linens, fluffy towels and an especially nice tanning deck.



2 THE EGGS

One of the most compelling macro shots is capturing a male yellowhead jawfish incubating a mouthful of eggs. Dive during a full moon to increase your chances.

year, the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* offers special cruises to the Dominican Republic's Silver Bank for snorkeling with massive humpback whales. This is an opportunity for families with divers and non-divers to share the adventure

3 THE EASE

A short, 90-minute flight from Miami will take you to some of the best diving in the Caribbean.



4 THE COMFORT

A floating luxury hotel, the

of a lifetime to experience these majestic animals.



Among the reasons to dive the Turks and Caicos: beautifully decorated walls.

French Cay is where the wild things swim and where live-aboards rule. (Strong winds and waves often make the 18-mile cruise south from Provo an uncomfortable challenge for day boats.) The sites Double D, G Spot, Half Mile, Rock & Roll and West Sand Split are all similar in that they were obviously named by drunken, modern-day pirates, and because each offers sharks, eagle rays, schooling

FRENCH CAY IS WHERE THE WILD THINGS SWIM AND WHERE LIVE-ABOARDS RULE. SHARKS AND HORSE-EYE JACKS ARE EVER-PRESENT HERE.

horse-eye jacks and wary jawfish. A variety of sharks is ever-present here whether the magic pyramid is in the water or not. Nurse sharks use French Cay as a romantic getaway, congregating in the shallows each July to mate.

Van der Walt first introduced me to his marvelous invention on French Cay, where divers can still enjoy the best shark diving. The scene now is much the same as it was then. Sharks appear just below the surface near the stern deck, perhaps in response to the generators' hum. Guests pause before making the giant-stride entry, wondering what might happen if they land on a muscular, sharky back.

FROM TOP: DAVID FLEETHAM; JAMES D. WATT/SEAPICS.COM; REINHARD DIRSCHERL; OPPOSITE: ROD KLEIN

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