

SHARKS GALORE

Recently I was lucky enough to be invited on an educational trip to French Polynesia. The purpose of the trip was to demonstrate how varied the islands are – and, of course, to experience the diving in this beautiful, remote part of the world. Don't be put off by the distance – many Asian destinations take longer to get to. Once you're there, the cost of your holiday will be on a par too, though you get to fly with Air New Zealand, one of air travel's more pleasant experiences. And the diving? Well, read on...

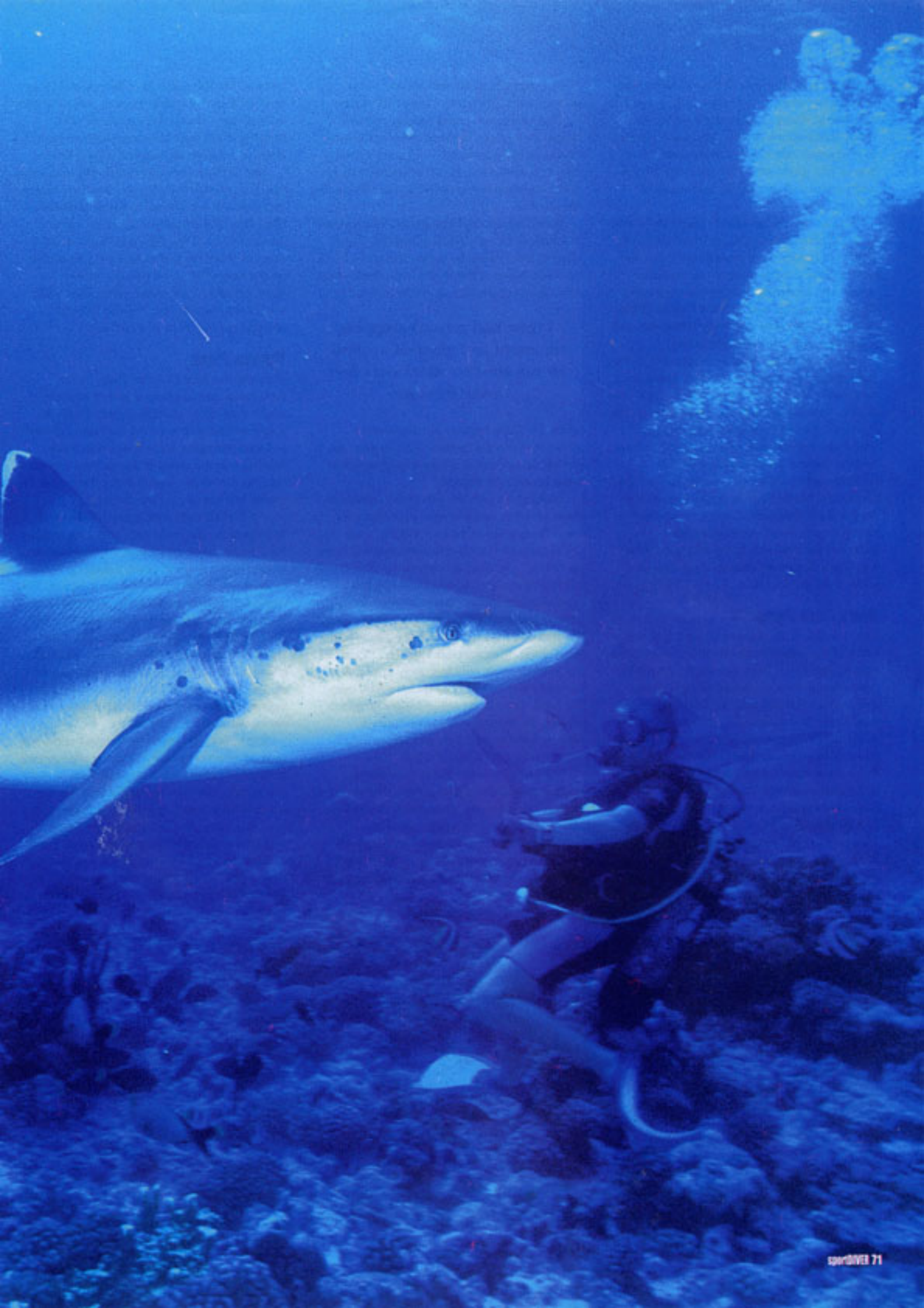
By Neil Bennett

French Polynesia is made up of 180 islands spread out over an area covering 1,200 miles from east to west and almost as far from north to south. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this area, French Polynesia is in the South Pacific. Some of these islands are volcanic with steep mountains covered in lush tropical vegetation, while others are atolls with golden sands and palm-fringed beaches. Out of the 180 islands, only ten are currently running hotel-based diving operations. The well-known names are Tahiti and Bora Bora, though on this trip we had the pleasure of diving two lesser-known locations, Rangiroa and Raiatea.

RANGIROA

Rangiroa is the second largest atoll in the world, situated 350km northeast of Tahiti and consisting of a long chain of islands and reefs creating an enormous lagoon. The lagoon is, in fact, so large it is impossible to see from one side to the other. The island only has two small towns that are separated by the small airport, providing a location that is certainly quiet and tranquil.

French Polynesia plays host to hundreds of these majestic creatures



There are a number of dive centres here to cater for what is, in reality, only a small number of divers. Unlike the Red Sea or many destinations in Asia, you are unlikely to encounter other divers in the water with you at any given site. This provides unique and personal diving in the true sense of the meaning.

For our stay on the island I used two centres, Blue Dolphin Dive Centre and the Raie Manta. Both dive centres were professionally run and were willing to tailor dives to our particular needs, also providing training and equipment hire for those who need it. Blue Dolphin Dive Centre was also able to provide nitrox, but only if you gave sufficient advance notice.

The diving at Rangiroa is mostly drift diving, regulated by the tide and currents. There are two main passes to the lagoon. As the tide rises or falls, vast amounts of water pass through the openings, creating powerful currents. The visibility is exceptional, often up to 40 metres, and the water is an incredible blue that becomes almost hypnotic as you stare out into the depths. While there is diving here for the novice diver within the lagoon, most of the diving is considered intermediate to experienced level, due to the strong currents that you will almost certainly encounter at some point on your dive.

AVANTORU PASS

The first dive of the day saw us up bright and early, taking a short truck ride to the dive centre, Raie Manta. Once kitted out we set off in a RIB large enough for a maximum of eight divers. The weather was hot and the skies clear as we headed out of the small jetty into Avantoru Pass in the lagoon. The water was a little rough, as you would expect for such a narrow pass and the mass of water which runs through it. Within five minutes we were at the dive point. A quick backward roll and we were in.

Our descent took us down to approximately 15m over a massive coral bed of hard corals that stretched out into the distance. There was an abundance of marine life, both in variety and in quantity. Without a doubt, you could spend the whole of your time searching every

coral looking at all the species and never getting bored. But we had bigger fish to fry!

One of the instructors had descended before the rest of the group to lay some fish heads for our guests. As we descended the final few metres to a depth of approximately 25m, we could see several large sharks circling ahead of us.

Four silvertip sharks of around four metres in length swam around us gracefully. These were quickly joined by a grey reef and a black-tip shark. None of the sharks were displaying any signs of aggression, and they were not put

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off by the scuba units or the electronic emissions from the camera. This allowed me to get within a practical distance to photograph these amazing creatures.

Looking through the lens of the camera at these silvertips was a unique experience for me. I have heard in the past that the shark you fail to keep an eye on is the one that will come up behind you. Sure enough, as I watched one circle past me, my attention was taken by another much closer, presenting itself for a photo opportunity. I focused the camera, took the shot and lowered the camera. I then had a heart-stopping moment as I glanced around to see another shark only feet away from me. I turned to face him and he glided gently over my head. Time stood still as I spent an age making the most of every opportunity to photograph the creatures, and before long I was running out of film and air.

The group moved off into the current, floating over the reef. The current was pleasant, not too fast, allowing me to enjoy the reef life. We next came across a large shoal of barracuda and the temptation was too great. Swimming up to them slowly, I took the last remaining shots on the film, silhouetting them against the sun.

Soon the dive was over and we were on the

surface. The RIB came to collect us and in no time we found ourselves back at base. The dive debrief was enthusiastic, everybody was buzzing about their amazing experiences, and it seemed everybody had had a great time.

Not all dives here promise sharks as close as this, but you will see plenty of them on nearly every dive. It is common to see grey reef and black-tips all the time; the silvertips were summoned from the depths to demonstrate the range of shark life that exists here. Depending on the time of year, it is possible to see hammerheads, tiger sharks, whalesharks and many more. Manta rays are also here in abundance, but alas I missed them.

TIPUTA PASS

The next day Blue Dolphin Dive Centre arranged a special photo dive to a location which they claim guarantees grey sharks in such numbers that even the hardest of divers will start trembling at the knees. We were heading into the valley in Tiputa Pass. Here the currents converge – which is good news for the sharks, but not so easy for divers!

We had an early start again, heading out into the pass. The water here was a lot rougher than before as we broke past the headland and around to the drop-off point. Kitting-up was en route so we could go straight in on arrival. This was a fast descent down to the required depth to ensure we were not swept off-target by the fast tidal flow. At 42m we were in the valley. This could be clearly seen, with the steep sides falling away into the depths on either side of us. The valley would lead into the pass of the lagoon, creating the strong flow of water that we would use to end the dive.

Soon after we arrived grey sharks appeared from all directions – we lost count after getting to 40 or 50! These were large and small, male and female. We later found out that this was not only their breeding ground, but also a natural nursery. The first few on the scene circled at a distance, but as the number grew, so did their inquisitiveness. Soon they were up close again, and this time they weren't so friendly. The old rule applied again, and I was careful to watch my back.

Many varieties of sharks can be seen off the reefs and drop-offs





Close encounters can be virtually guaranteed

Once they realised we hadn't come to feed them (and neither were we mating companions), they began to show signs of aggression. Pectoral fins folded down and their movements became erratic. However, at no time did any of them make an aggressive move toward us – unless you count my buddy's strobe diffuser, which took a hefty wallop!

With so much activity and so much to see, it is very easy to get caught up in the action. At that depth our air was consumed in no time, along with our film. We moved up into the strong current and accelerated away into the valley. This is how a spider must feel when you flush him down a pipe. The journey must have been a good five minutes and was great fun. Soon we were spat out of the other side of the bottleneck and surfaced gently to see the RIB waiting for us.

RAIATEA

This is a totally different experience to the Rangiroa, a far more modern destination with a town centre, bars, shops and restaurants – in fact, all the mod cons of western life but on a small scale! The island adjacent to Raiatea is Bora Bora, and the flight from Tahiti is approximately 30 minutes. Raiatea is the largest of the Leeward Islands, having a mountainous terrain that provides great exploring if you are not diving.

Our diving here was with the Hemisphere Sub Diving Centre, which offers a full range of training and hire, as you might expect. Diving here is considered more suitable for beginners, or those who are a little rusty and need to

brush up a bit on their techniques before taking on Rangiroa.

NORDBY WRECK

One of the main dive sites is the Nordby wreck, which is situated literally at the jetty of one of the hotels. Imagine walking out of your hotel, down to the jetty, kitting up, jumping off and finding a large wreck!

The Nordby is approximately 50 metres in length and lies in depths ranging from 10-20m. She was once a fine old sailing ship that has now begun to break up. Resting on her side, the decking has gone, which allows you to penetrate inside her. There are plenty of escape routes and ample light, making this a good starting point for those wanting to experience wreck-diving.

Around the jetty and along the reef is an abundance of macro life, and you could spend as much time here as on the wreck itself. Our second dive took us out through the pass on to the outside of the reef. As the boat stopped at the dive site, three black-tip sharks could be seen coming toward us, their fins cutting through the water like a scene from a ship-wrecked movie.

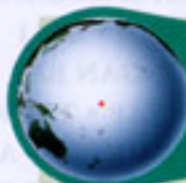
The coral here was again hard corals, but with far more colour. There was plenty of marine life to watch and keep you occupied. In comparison to Rangiroa, I would classify this as more of a macro destination.

CONCLUSION

Travelling between the islands involves flying, and consideration should be given in planning

the maximum time on land. If you are not careful, you could find your flights taking you to and from Tahiti, as this is often used as a shuttle point. If you plan carefully you can fly direct between the islands on certain days.

Due to time restraints on my trip, I was unable to explore other islands, where a different variety of diving can be enjoyed. What I did see has certainly opened my eyes to a destination that can provide a true variety of diving and big adventures. The accommodation at the locations is both beautiful and of the highest quality, the combination of which will provide you with a holiday that you will never forget.



Travel Information

Currency

US dollars or French Polynesian francs.

Language

English is widely spoken.

Tourist Authority

Tahiti Tourisme, c/o CIB Group, 1 Battersea Church Road, London SW11 3LY. Alternatively, check out: www.tahiti-tourisme.com

Tour operators

Barefoot Traveller	020 8741 4319
Crusader	020 8744 0474
Dive Worldwide	020 8400 6575
Harlequin	01708 850311
Worldwide Dives	01243 870618