

“My adrenaline spikes. Sharks are stacked as far as I can see, long gray bodies with deadly snouts.”



WHERE: FAKARAVA
THE FIND: A SHARK ENCOUNTER

We sail up to Fakarava a few days before the shark attack, giving us plenty of time to gear up and watch it up close. First, though, we have to thread through a narrow gap in the reef to access the island's cobalt lagoon.

Scouting from the bow, I call out steering instructions to my husband, Rob, to avoid boat-crunching coral as we make our way through Fakarava's southern pass. Like most of the islands in French Polynesia's Tuamotus archipelago, Fakarava is an atoll, the remnant of a

volcano pushing up from the seafloor. The very tiptop of the crater rises just a few feet above the water, creating a narrow ring of exposed land surrounding a calm, shallow lagoon.

Once inside, we search for a sandy patch to drop anchor as the sunset flares orange. The bottom looks close enough to touch, even though the depth meter reads 50 feet.

“Look how big these fish are,” I say. “Wait. Are those sharks?!”

A half-dozen ominous gray shapes circle our anchor chain.

Rob laughs at my wide eyes. “This place is going to be awesome.”

He makes a call to set up a shark dive first thing in the morning. Butterflies start flapping in my stomach.

The southern pass of Fakarava is a UNESCO World Heritage Site nicknamed the “The Shark Wall.” On average, 200 reef-tip sharks hang out in the narrow alley between the open ocean and the lagoon.

But this wasn't just an average week. Each year on the summer solstice, the area becomes base camp for the biggest underwater feeding frenzy in the South Pacific. Thousands of grouper swim to the shallows along the island's shore to spawn. These reef fish release a terrific cloud of sperm and eggs in unison during the first outgoing tide following the full moon. Hordes of other fish swarm in to slurp up the protein-rich soup. And the sharks — including big bulls and tigers — sweep in to eat those fish, capitalizing on the easy pickings.

The next day, bright sun illuminates a small group of tourists wandering among dilapidated docks, a tiny dive shop and three rustic lodging spots. French dominates, but I pick out at least five other



languages from passers-by toting underwater cameras, snorkels and wetsuits.

Rob lopes off, eager to check in at the dive shop; I sidle up to a wood-framed window with a hand-painted sign announcing coffee. Awaiting my caffeine, I meet Francois, a 40-something former banker who quit his job to travel the world. His budget is \$5 per day.

I walk 50 feet to the dive dock. “Bonjour,” calls a tanned, wiry man, as he

wrestles tanks into an aluminum boat. “I'm Jacques, your dive master.”

On the short ride to the dive buoy, Jacques tells us Fakarava is his favorite dive spot in French Polynesia. “And it's the best in the world if you like swimming with sharks,” he says.

Heart racing, I somersault backward off the boat.

My breath is loud through the regulator. I spin around fast when something bumps my shoulder. It's a Maori wrasse, big as a labrador and just as friendly. I reach a hand toward its blue-green nose.

Jacques motions us over to the reef where exhausted grouper are draped like a carpet of fallen leaves. Up close, the mottled brown and white grouper look like birds with long feathery tails. Jacques nudges a listless female, belly swollen with millions of eggs.

We slowly descend along the reef wall.

TRAVEL TIP

For a post-swim pick-me-up, try the Polynesian take on ceviche: *poisson cru* — raw fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk.

SAYS THE AUTHOR

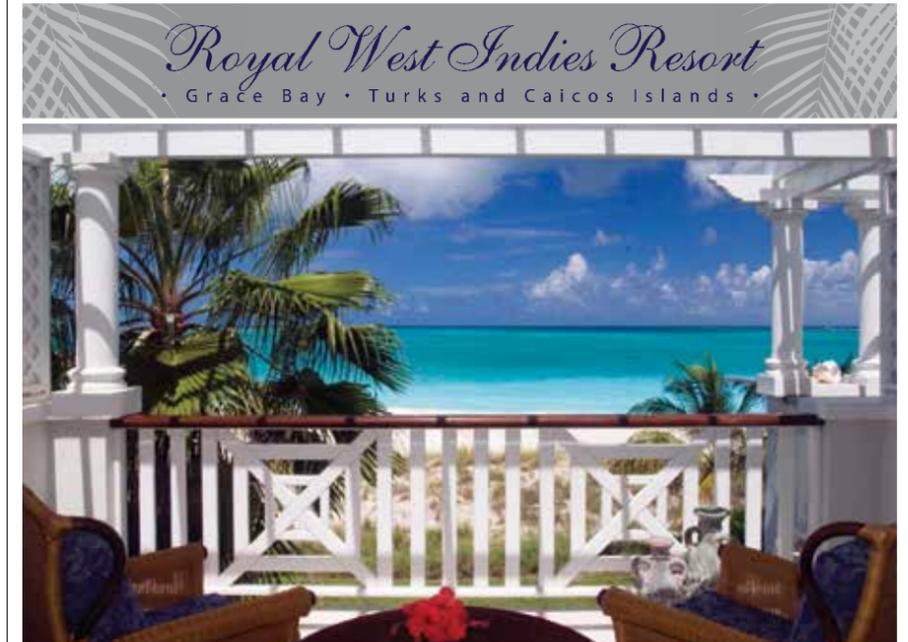
Thirty feet. Fifty. At 80 feet, Jacques signals us to swim to a rock outcrop and hold on. I peek over into the drop-off. My adrenaline spikes.

Sharks are stacked as far as I can see, long gray bodies with deadly snouts hovering just two body lengths away from me. Their big gills flare in and out. I try to slow my breath to match. Every muscle is wound as tight as a guitar string, screaming that it isn't smart to share space with these creatures.

But gradually, I relax. Their graceful movements are mesmerizing. It helps that these sharp-toothed predators aren't the least bit interested in me. They're fat and happy, full of grouper. The current picks up as the tide rushes in, shuttling us back to the dive shop's dock where we surface an hour later.

“The next dive is on the ocean side with the *big* sharks. See you in an hour?” asks Jacques.

I assure him, “We'll definitely be ready.” — Brianna Randall



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