

Divers get an up close and personal encounter with sharks at Anthony's Key Resort

Sharks of Honduras

Text and photos
by Bill Becher

ROATAN ISLAND, Honduras --- The attorney strokes the white belly of an eight-foot-long reef shark. This is not a lawyer joke. I'm 70 feet (23 m) deep in the clear blue Caribbean water off Roatan Island with a half dozen scuba divers from Anthony's Key Resort. We're at a dive site called "Cara a cara," which in Spanish means "face-to-face."



A diver swims with the sharks of Roatan

We're cara a cara with 20 gray reef sharks. The biggest are nine feet long. The sharks glide by silently, swimming slowly past schools of smaller fish that seem unafraid.

Remoras attach and reattach themselves to the sharks. They're not parasites — the remoras count on the

sharks' sloppy eating habits and dine on scraps of fish the sharks miss.

Sergio Tritto, our dive master and a former lawyer from Italy, is the one petting the animals. It's a case of "Do as I say, not as I do," as he warned us before the dive not to touch the sharks. He also said, "Don't wave your

hands." The sharks might mistake a hand for a fish and bite it.

Shark to Shark Guide

Tritto said he had been unhappy in his job as a legale in Naples and was searching for a new career. A friend told him about the sharks that con-

Roatan Sharks

gregated at a spot off the windward coast of Roatan, an island in the western Caribbean popular with scuba divers. Tritto decided to make a business out of leading shark dives.

In the pre-dive briefing he told us to descend the anchor line and form up on a sandy patch with our backs against a coral wall so the sharks can't sneak up on us. Like Spitfire pilots in a school of Messerschmitts we protect our six o'clock. If everything is right we will get to swim with the sharks before the feeding frenzy said Tritto.

Tritto has brought a white plastic pail full of fish to feed the sharks. He's wearing a pair of chain mail gloves as a shark did bite his hand once. So much for professional courtesy.

Tritto signals us that we can swim freely with the sharks. Seeing the reef sharks slowly circling around us is something none of us will soon forget.

Feeding Frenzy

We line up again in front of the coral wall. Tritto opens the fish bucket and the feeding frenzy is on. The sharks are especially aroused by the sound of jaws snapping on fish and there is a lot of snapping going on.

One shark gets his head stuck in the bucket.

Tritto grabs the shark and tries to turn it on its back to calm it, but the shark just shakes his head, bucket attached. The bucket comes off and the shark swims away.

We head back up the anchor line. On the boat everyone is talking at once about their amazing experience with the sharks.

Controversy

Feeding sharks is somewhat controversial. Opponents say it can be dangerous and that it alters wild creature behavior. Those who defend it say that

Maybe worth knowing

Tidbits

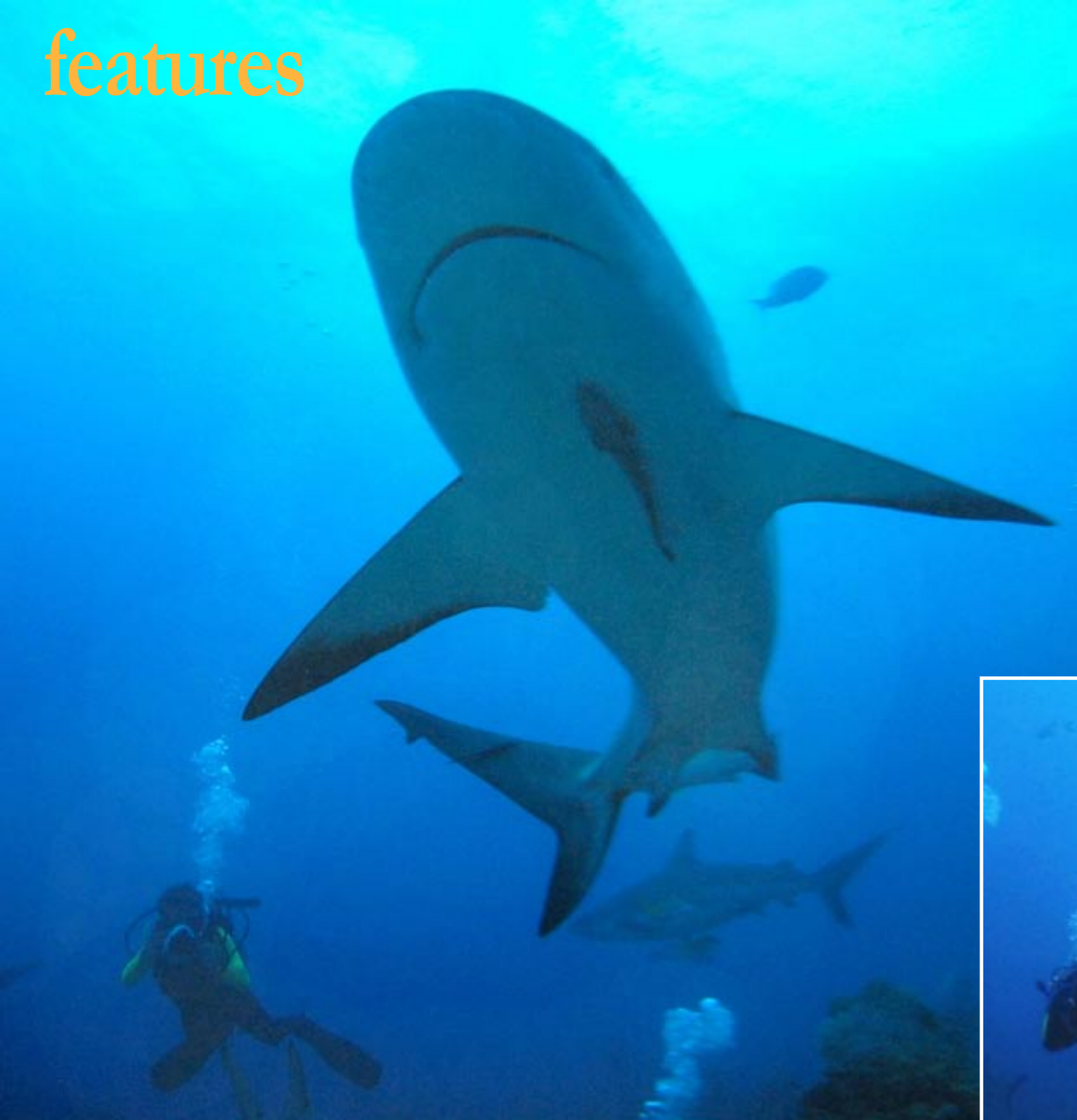


Cannon balls retrieved from ancient shipwrecks should be handled with care, they may explode even centuries later. Marine archaeologists have recorded several occurrences of the rusted iron balls spontaneously heating up and exploding after exposure to the air. In one case, at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales in Cardiff, a cannonball retrieved from a 1691 wreck heated up to a few hundred degrees after several minutes in the open air, began to glow a dull red and started burning its way through a pine table top.

Others have split open by themselves many weeks after they were pulled from the sea.

It has been suggested that the iron develops a lattice-like porous structure over the hundreds of years spent underwater that reacts exothermically with the oxygen in the air to produce massive amounts of heat. The combination of oxygen and sea salt caused rapid oxidation resulting in the balls "exploding" open and crumbling into bits.





Roatan Sharks

the shark encounters help educate people about sharks and create support for conservation programs.

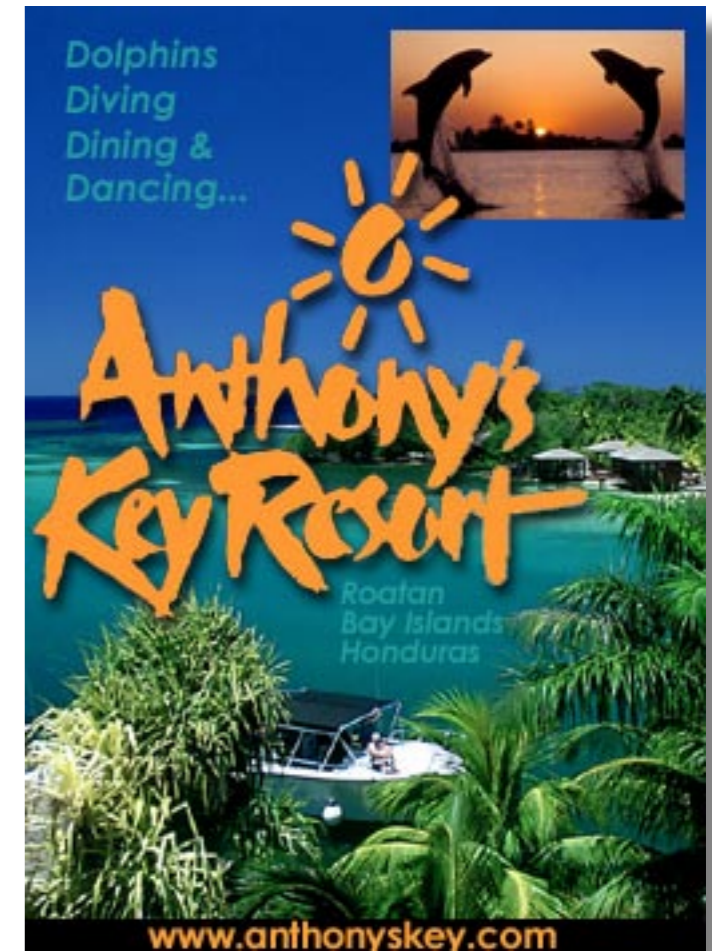
Tritto says he's careful and only feeds the sharks a small amount of food so they won't become dependent on the handouts. His feeding spot is far from any beaches where swimmers might congregate.

Anthony's Key Resort

The shark dive is one of the optional activities at Anthony's Key Resort.

There is also a Monday night beach party with crab races and a limbo contest. I divide my time between eating, diving, riding, paddling and thinking about sharks while swaying in a hammock watching the sunset.

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Remoras attach and reattach themselves to sharks so they can scavenge on scraps left over by their hosts ▲

An adult gray reef shark can be about 3 meters in length ►



fact file



Honduras



Map of Honduras

History: Honduras became independent of Spain's vast empire in 1821. A freely elected civilian government came to power in 1982, after 25 years of military rule. However, Honduras became a haven for anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist Nicaraguan Government and an ally to Salvadoran Government forces fighting against leftist guerrillas during the 1980s. In 1998, the country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which killed 5,600 people and caused \$2 billion in damage.

Government: democratic constitutional republic
Capital: Tegucigalpa
Currency: lempira (HNL) Exchange rates: lempiras per US dollar - 17.3453

Languages: Spanish, Amerindian dialects
Climate: subtropical in lowlands, temperate in mountains

Geography: Central America, bordering the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua and bordering the Gulf of Fonseca (North Pacific Ocean), between El Salvador and Nicaragua; Terrain: mountains in the interior, narrow coastal plains, has a short Pacific coast but a long Caribbean shoreline, including the uninhabited eastern Mosquito Coast, Elevation extremes: lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0 m; highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870 m; Coastline: 820 km, Natural hazards: frequent but mild earthquakes; hur-

ricanes and floods along the Caribbean coast; Agriculture: bananas, coffee, citrus; beef; timber; shrimp; Industries: sugar, coffee, textiles, clothing, wood products

Environment issues: urban sprawl; deforestation from logging and clearing; land degradation, soil erosion, farming of marginal lands; mining activities cause heavy metal polluting of fresh water sources.

Population: 6,823,568
 High mortality due to AIDS cause lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher death rates, lower population and growth rates; Below poverty line: 53%; Ethnic groups: Mestizo

90%, Amerindian 7%, Black 2%, White 1%; Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant minority

Medical/Deco chambers: Cornerstone Decompression Chambers and Clinic at Anthony's Key Resort in Sandy Bay tel. 455 1049 / 445 1003. Fantasy Island at French Key. Woods Medical Center 24 hour service Tel. (504) 445-1080.

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Participate in the Biggest Event of the Sea in 2005

Celebrate the Sea is now in its fourth year, after a successful beginning in 2002, the festival has grown to the largest of its kind in the Asia Pacific. After two great festivals in Kuala Lumpur in 2003 and 2004, we return to Singapore and the Suntec City Convention Centre in 2005. Continuing from our previous years we have as special guests some of the world's greatest underwater luminaries. Already confirmed for Celebrate the Sea 2005 are National Geographic Explorer in Residence, Dr. Sylvia Earle, National Geographic Photographer David Doubilet and Australia's own marine adventurer Neville Coleman. We will hold a series of workshops and lectures on underwater photography, exploration, marine science and the latest digital techniques. Celebrate the Sea exhibitors will include resorts and dive operators in the Asia Pacific, photographic equipment manufacturers, environmental groups and more. Award winning underwater documentaries from Antibes and previous winners of Celebrate the Sea will be shown during the festival. Our international photographic and video competitions attract entries from all over the world, finalists will be on display at Celebrate the Sea in our galleries.

Organised by:



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www.underwater-festival.com

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Venue: Suntec City Convention Centre Level 3, Gallery.
Date: Friday June 3 to Sunday June 5 2005
Opening times: 10:00-20:00 (Friday); 10:00-18:00 (Saturday & Sunday)
Visitors: 10,000 expected over three days; 250 masterpass holders in our workshop track.
Exhibitors: Dive resorts, Liveaboard operators, dive equipment manufacturers, environmental NGO's, photographic equipment and more.