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Tigers, Oh My!

Few dives deliver the bragging rights of a dive with tiger sharks. Brace yourself with a safety bar — photographers use their cameras to put some distance between teeth and flesh — and drop into the shallow waters off Grand Bahama's West End to dive with burly tiger sharks that reach 12 feet long. The striped beauties muscle their way to the bait boxes while lemon sharks patrol the periphery, giving wide-eyed divers whiplash. All that toothy action is set to the backdrop of a white, sandy bottom in just 20 feet of water, giving you every opportunity to surface with the best photos of your life. Stuart Cove's Tiger Beach Safaris (stuartcove.com) runs land-based packages.

20

Reasons *we* Love *the* Bahamas

➔ Home to sharks of nearly every stripe, colorful reefs, intact wrecks and a keen devotion to laid-back living, it's no wonder the Bahamas is a go-to vacation spot for North Americans. Do these 3,000 islands and cays that lie scattered at the convergence of the Atlantic and Caribbean have it all? As divers and general lovers of the tropical good life, we say these islands come pretty darn close to scoring a perfect 10. From the electrifying shark-feeding dives of Nassau and Grand Bahama to the lost-in-time allure of the Out Islands, here are 20 reasons to love the Bahamas.

SEAN HAVAS



2 Spectacular Wall Diving

The Bahamas has hundreds of magnificent wall dives, like those off Grand Bahama's West End. Some of our favorites though are on San Salvador, the crest of a submerged mountain that drops 15,000 feet. Dive with Riding Rock Resort and Marina (ridingrock.com) to explore 20 miles of plunging walls on the island's leeward side, with visibility that often approaches 200 feet, hammerhead encounters, canyons and swim-throughs, and a feeling that all that blue is just for you.

3 Conch Salad

The Bahamas' cevichelike national dish is fresh conch loosened from its sunset-pink shell, then sliced, diced, and spiced with Scotch bonnet peppers, tomatoes, green peppers, and a healthy spritz of orange and lime juices (or some variation thereof — every Bahamian has his favorite recipe). Arawak Cay, aka the Fish Fry, on Nassau is lined with casual restaurants selling piled-high bowls of the stuff, but we prefer the roadside "tropical" conch-salad stall west of town near Compass Point Resort, where mango and pineapples make a fruitastic addition to the original.

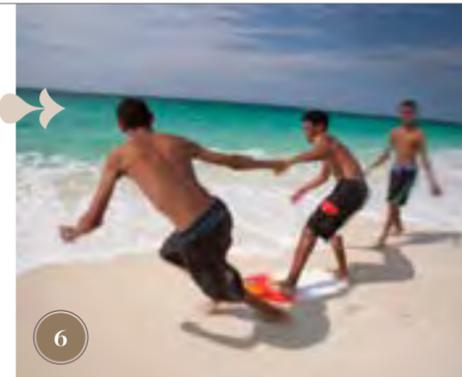
4 Diving It All

While flights between the islands are frequent enough and fairly inexpensive, a live-aboard is definitely the best way to dive all the best sites this vast country has to offer. Aqua Cat (aquacatcruises.com) and Blackbeard's (blackbeard-cruises.com) live-aboards cruise from Nassau for weeklong trips to pristine and sharky dive sites in the Exumas, Eleuthera, Little San Sal and the central Bahamas, and always include dives in the spectacular 176-square-mile Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park.

MASA USHIODA

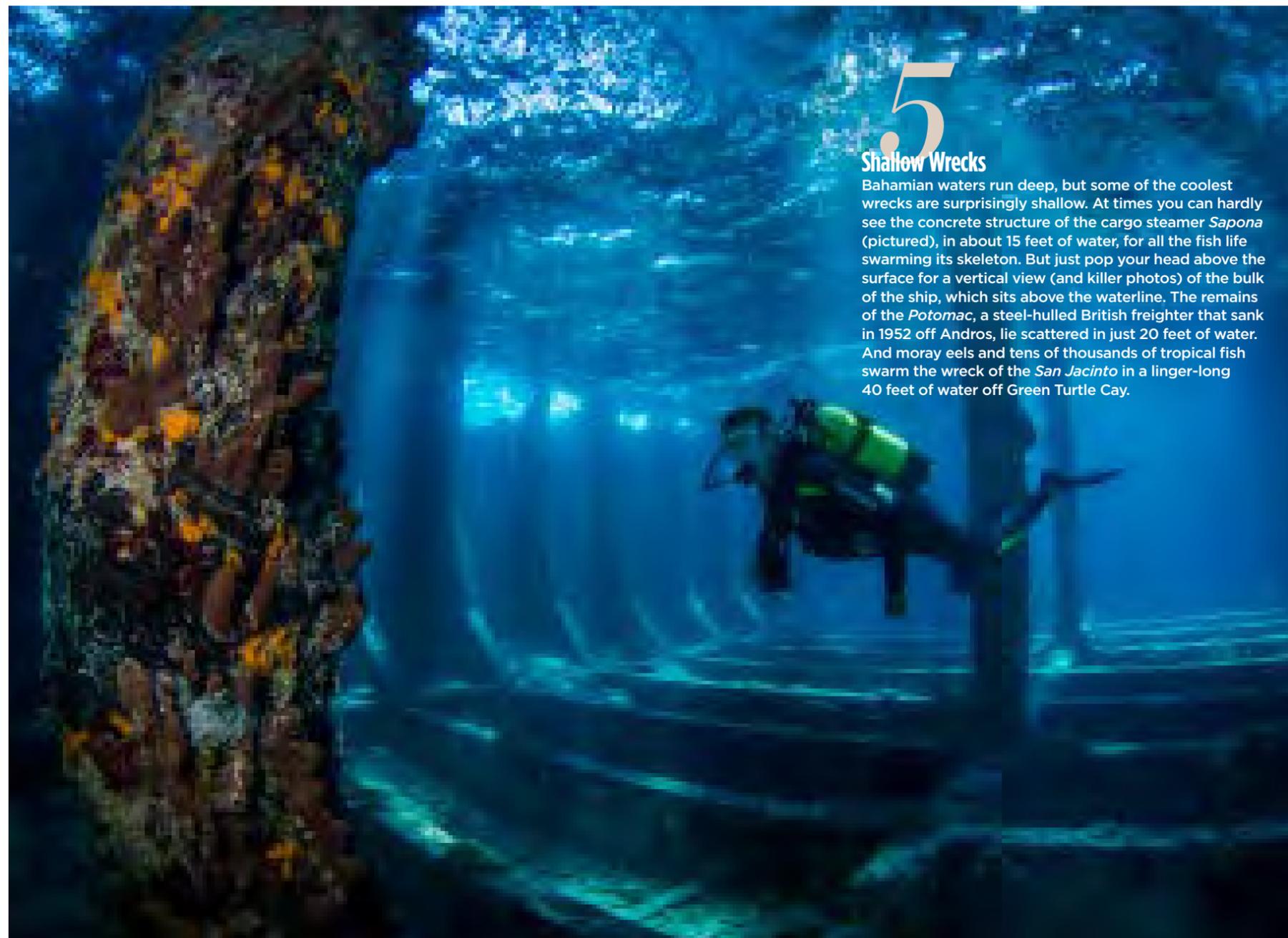
Cabbage Beach Lounging

Tourists converge on the beach in front of Atlantis, so make for the more beautiful stretch of sand next door at Cabbage Beach, a slope of golden sand that dissolves into water so blue, you'll want to gargle it. In front of the Riu Palace Resort, look for a massage tent run by a local named Colin; he offers dive-fatigue-friendly massages for a fraction of what you'd pay at other spas.



7 Great Hammerheads

Great-hammerhead encounters are one of the ocean's best gifts, and the animals show up more often than you might think in Bahamian waters. Stuart Cove's runs annual blue-water trips in Bimini to give divers (and snorkelers too) a first-hand look at one of the ocean's most impressive and elusive animals. Hearts will pound.



5 Shallow Wrecks

Bahamian waters run deep, but some of the coolest wrecks are surprisingly shallow. At times you can hardly see the concrete structure of the cargo steamer *Sapona* (pictured), in about 15 feet of water, for all the fish life swarming its skeleton. But just pop your head above the surface for a vertical view (and killer photos) of the bulk of the ship, which sits above the waterline. The remains of the *Potomac*, a steel-hulled British freighter that sank in 1952 off Andros, lie scattered in just 20 feet of water. And moray eels and tens of thousands of tropical fish swarm the wreck of the *San Jacinto* in a linger-long 40 feet of water off Green Turtle Cay.

Free-Diving Paradise

Über-clear and as balmy as a bath, Bahamian waters would tempt anyone to give free diving a go. But the world's best-of-the-best breath holders annually descend on Long Island to compete and take master classes at picturesque Dean's Blue Hole, the world's deepest blue hole that bottoms out at a dizzying 663 feet.



FROM TOP: ZACH STOVALL; JULIAN COHEN; SHANE PINDER/LAMY

Catch Your Own Dinner

Lobster season in the Bahamas starts Aug. 1 and runs through March 31. Until you've sunk your teeth into the butter-drenched goodness of a just-caught Caribbean spiny lobster, well, you haven't truly tasted the Bahamas. Using dive gear to catch lobsters is illegal in the Bahamas, but free diving on shallow reefs just offshore is a sure way to find antennas waving from crevices, veritably advertising a deliciously free meal.



10 Tongue of the Ocean

The legendary canyon starts at 120 feet and drops to more than 6,000, creating a deepwater highway for marlin, tarpon, sailfish, snapper and tuna. Small Hope Bay Lodge on Andros (smallhope.com) runs wall dives near the drop-offs in search of these pelagics.

FROM TOP: KERI WILK; DANIEL BOTELHO

11 Door to a New World

The Bahamas are home to more than 1,000 blue holes, only 20 percent of which have been explored. Andros is the epicenter for these geological wonders, which are openings to underwater cave systems. If you have cave certification, there's no thrill like descending through sulfur layers into the mysterious world of ancient stalactites and flow-stone formations within the hidden spaces very few divers ever see.

FROM TOP: JEAN-PIERRE DEGAS/H/AGEFOTOSTOCK; CHRIS CLINTON/GETTY IMAGES



13 Shopping and Liming at Port Lucaya Marketplace

The jumble of colorful restaurants and shops at Grand Bahama's prime *liming* — Caribbean speak for "hanging out" — spot draws both tourists and Bahamians for an energetic cocktail of daiquiri sipping and trinket shopping. The straw market here, at Port Lucaya Marketplace (portlucayamarketplace.com), is a good place to haggle over handmade hats and bags for souvenirs to take back home.

14 Bimini Sharks

So close to Florida (about 50 miles), yet philosophically so far, Bimini is known for serious fishing and sharks galore. Scientists at the Shark Lab have studied the animals here for decades; you can visit the facility or have up-close encounters with Caribbean reef sharks, nurse sharks and black-nose sharks on dives at Triangle Rocks with Neal Watson's Dive Bimini from the legendary angler's haven, the Bimini Big Game Club (biggameclubbimini.com).

15 Luxury in the Out Islands

Got a significant other who prefers luxurious lounging to suiting up for three dives a day? The Bahamas keep everyone happy with decadent Out Island resorts like Tiamo (tiamoresorts.com) on South Andros, where the 10 villas include oceanfront cottages with private beaches and pools. The bonus? An incredible fringing reef just 10 minutes by boat from the property's on-site dive shop. Now everyone's happy, right?

Hang 10 on Eleuthera

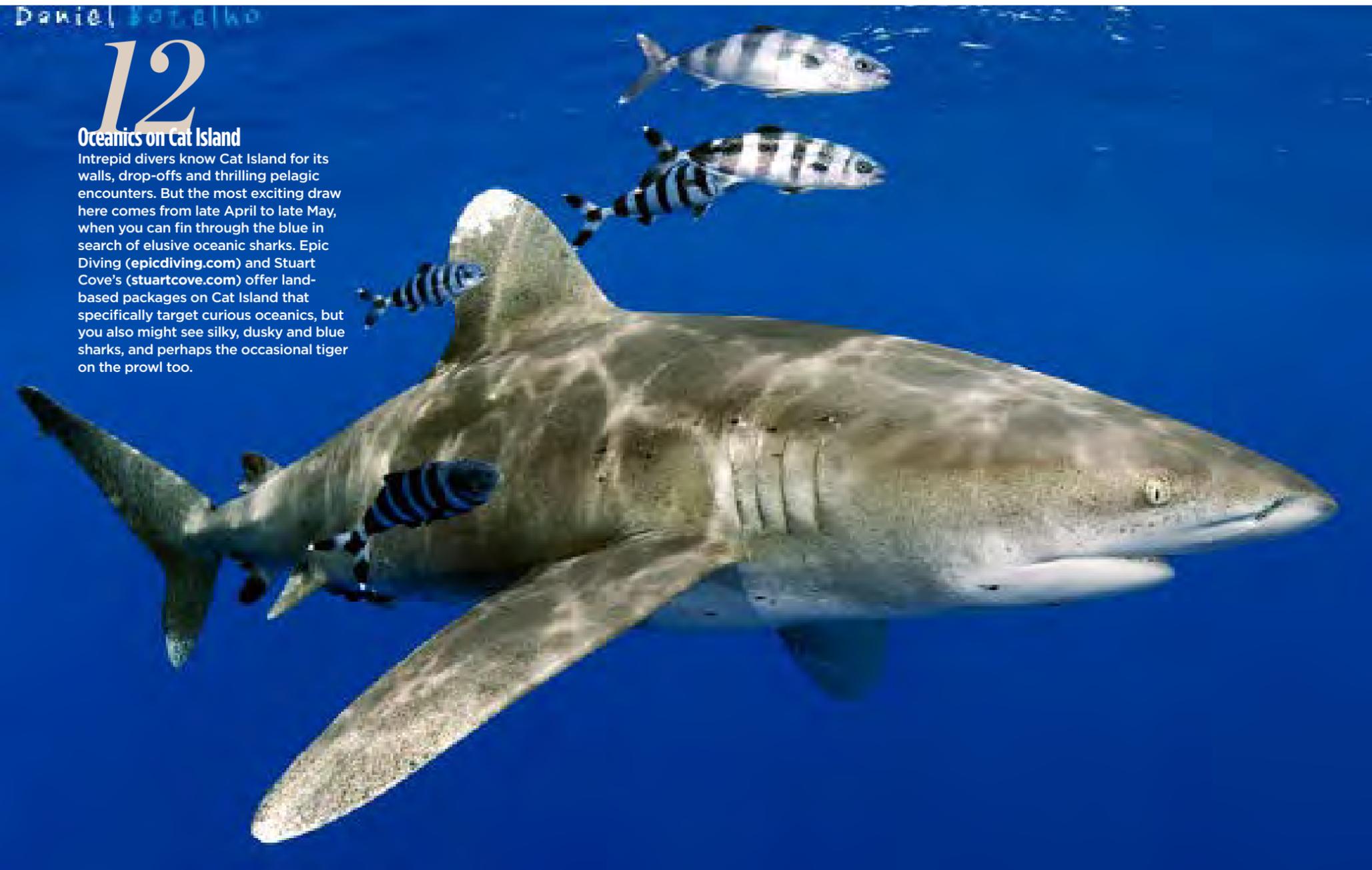
From October to April, Eleuthera's east coast becomes *the* spot for some of the Bahamas' best waves. Pockets of beach are exposed to cuts in the fringing reef, creating powerful barrels. Book a room at the Surfers Manor (surfersmanor.com), and you'll be in walking distance to check out — or paddle into — the hang-10 surf.



Daniel Botelho

12 Oceanics on Cat Island

Intrepid divers know Cat Island for its walls, drop-offs and thrilling pelagic encounters. But the most exciting draw here comes from late April to late May, when you can fin through the blue in search of elusive oceanic sharks. Epic Diving (epicdiving.com) and Stuart Cove's (stuartcove.com) offer land-based packages on Cat Island that specifically target curious oceanics, but you also might see silky, dusky and blue sharks, and perhaps the occasional tiger on the prowl too.



17

The Dolphins of Bimini

Being surrounded by the squeaks and whistles of wild dolphins as they torpedo past you and frolic in the blue is a natural high. Bimini's famed pod of wild Atlantic spotted dolphins has frequented the area since the 1990s, and you can free-swim with the animals during boat trips. The pod rolls roughly 50 deep, but there are usually between three and nine dolphins present. The dolphins often seek out human interaction, approaching within inches of your mask and showing off with corkscrewing turns. Neal Watson's Dive Bimini (biggameclubbimini.com) runs daily trips.



ALEX MUSTARD; OPPOSITE: ANDY DEITSCH

18 The World's Greatest Shark Dive

Shark-feeding dives with Stuart Cove's in the waters just off Nassau bring you within mere inches of Caribbean reef sharks as they swarm the bait box and are hand-fed by a chain-mail-clad diver. You'll notice the sharks trailing you during your initial reef dive in the area. And when you descend for the second dive into the shark-feeding arena and kneel on the sandy bottom, they come ready to rumble. Even better, spend a few minutes afterward plucking toothy souvenirs from the sand.

19 Tropical Daiquiris

Follow West Bay Street west of downtown Nassau for about 15 minutes, and keep an eye out for an open-air wooden bar near the Caves. Here, master mixologist Andy Jones keeps his generator-powered blender humming to churn out frosty concoctions.



Hollywood Stunt Divers

Channel your underwater James Bond by diving the steel frame of the Vulcan bomber from the movie *Thunderball*, and finning through various other former Bond and Hollywood film sets in the transparent seas around New Providence. The wreck of a small Cessna plane just offshore was used in *Jaws: The Revenge*, even if Caribbean reef sharks are about as intimidating as the local denizens get.

A DIVERS GUIDE TO:

BAHAMAS

AVERAGE WATER TEMP

76 to 84 degrees F

WHAT TO WEAR

shorty in summer, full wetsuit in winter

AVERAGE VIZ

80 to 100 feet

WHEN TO GO

year-round

FOR MORE

sportdiver.com/bahamas

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

Ray of Hope

New Providence site marries what divers love most: nice wreck and lots of sharks.

The Sapona Wreck

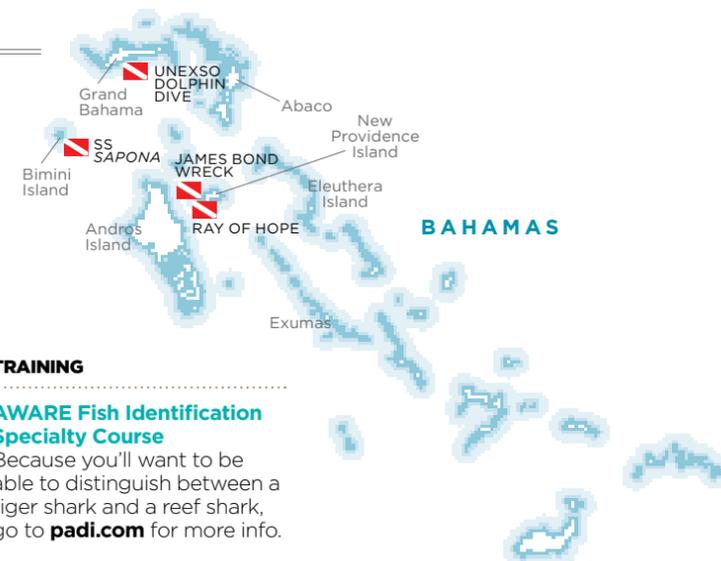
A concrete-hull cargo steamer, the *Sapona* ran aground off Bimini in 1926. The wreck sits partially exposed out of the water; with a maximum depth just 18 feet, you're in for a long, languorous dive.

UNEXSO Dolphin Dive

This guaranteed dive with dolphins off the island of Grand Bahama is as good as it gets.

James Bond Wrecks

Like 007, you too can dive the small boat from *Never Say Never* and the Vulcan bomber from the movie *Thunderball*.



TRAINING

AWARE Fish Identification Specialty Course

Because you'll want to be able to distinguish between a tiger shark and a reef shark, go to padi.com for more info.