



Bite me, I'm swimming with sharks

It's funny how fear fades in the face of nature's raw glory, says **Richard Moore**

THE sun was gloriously warm, its heat offset by the regular cooling spray of white water over the shallow freeboard of the small boat as we powered across the royal blue of the Pacific Ocean.

Our motor hummed along solidly and we sat on the floor of the boat putting up with the jarring as we bounced from wave to wave.

There wasn't a lot of conversation among our group of six passengers as the Yasawa Islands' resorts of Kuata and Wayailai quickly shrank in the distance, our focus was on the adventure we were about to undertake — swimming with sharks.

Ever since watching *Jaws*, I have been wary of anything in the water that I cannot see and anything big enough to munch into me.

So you can understand why on this near-perfect Fijian day a 40-minute boat trip out to a reef in the middle of a zillion square kilometres of ocean had the brain working overtime.

The funny thing was there was no fear, just an excitedly nervous anticipation of doing something that did not sit easily with me.

Having done a number of snorkelling trips over recent days there were no worries about hopping into the warm-water home of the local sharks.

We'd been assured the reef sharks were not dangerous — although only the week before a German diver had his hand bitten when he held his camera



out within range of a mouth full of teeth.

Righto, lesson taken on board.

Another boat anchored next to us and that meant we had about 12 people swimming around at the same time. Not too many to get in the way, which can be a problem on these trips.

"Stick together," the guide said, "Don't go off alone."

Good advice, but there was fat chance of that happening with this fellow. Not until I sussed things out anyway.

Fins on. Mask glass spat in and rinsed. Time to go.

The waters looked so inviting I barely thought about what lay beneath — until I had cleared my snorkel and looked around.

Oh my Lord, it was beautiful.

The clarity was astounding and the visibility could be measured in scores of metres. Small, brightly coloured fish swam lazily along, initially wary of the newcomers with the

bright yellow and blue fins, but they would later accept us and swim right up to us for a closer inspection.

Coral coloured the reef like a well-used artist's palette, with even the white forms taking on a light blue tinge as the sun's rays were transformed by the water.

Away from the reef, which at times nearly broke the surface, the water dropped away into a 20m deep channel and that's where the first shark of the day was cruising.

It was a whitetip reef shark, gracefully gliding along only a metre or so above the sandy floor.

My first thought was I hoped the camera was working and then how to get close enough to get some good shots. My next reaction was just how handsome the creature was. It was dark grey, looked silky smooth and was about 2m long. Then another swam in, just over a metre, also hugging the bottom.

One of the guides took a deep breath and powered down to the ocean floor where he lay down near the sharks, holding on to a rock to stay steady. They swam up to and around him, checking him out before mooching away.

Returning to near me, the guide began to feed small black-striped fish that gathered in an ever-increasing school.

It was really enjoyable and if you can consider fish curious then these little guys surely were.

Then one of the sharks decided it was time for a bit of free food too and quickly surged up from below. None of my fellow snorkellers panicked or made any fast moves, like me they were relaxed and keen to get close to the creature.

It was very exciting and my mind kept telling me "Oh my God, I'm less than a metre from a shark." After its feed the creature moved off to check out new things.

TAKE IT EASY: The local whitetip shark population are very accommodating of the flailing humans who have dropped by.

PHOTOS/RICHARD MOORE

By this stage there were four or five sharks going about their business and yet it was surprisingly peaceful to float on the surface looking down at the daily goings-on of life in the ocean.

I have to confess I did not want to leave — an hour is too short a time for this — and when the guides called us back to the boat it was with great reluctance that I turned away from the sharks and finned to the waiting boat ladder.

Once settled on board we all sat — again mainly in silence — speeding over the blue swells towards the island resorts.

This time our silence wasn't nervous expectancy, but carefully setting to memory every detail of one of the most amazing experiences we had all just been involved in.

■ *Richard Moore went swimming with the sharks courtesy of Awesome Adventures Fiji and Vinaka Fiji.*