

Busan Beat

A Stroll through the Shark Tank

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A Beat correspondent goes deep into the Busan Aquarium.

By Andrew Cranston

Photos courtesy of Scuba in Korea



Try this on for size: a 3,000,000-liter tank of water (roughly five times the size of my house), filled with sea turtles, stingrays, some really pretty fish and oh, yeah, eighteen sharks. You'll be going in unarmed, just walking around and hanging out with what are probably the most deadly and efficient predators on the face of the earth.

Sounds crazy? It's not really: of the 350 or so known species of sharks, only a small handful are dangerous to humans. The Lemon Sharks and Sand Tiger Sharks at the Busan Aquarium are not among the known man-eaters, but at lengths approaching three meters, certainly look like they could be if they wanted to.

Still, we signed all of the waivers that say we wouldn't indict anyone if, as a result of doing anything inane, we lost part of our torso or something, as well as a medical questionnaire that was full of great words with wonderful vowel sounds, like "pulmonary embolism."

SHARK FACTS

- Shark's teeth are normally replaced every eight days.
- Sharks can generate about six and a half tons per square inch of biting force.
- The Shortfin Mako Shark is probably the fastest fish in the ocean, clocked at about 60 mph.
- Great White Sharks can go as long as three months without eating.
- Dried sharkskin (shagreen) was used in the past as sandpaper. In Germany and Japan, sharkskin was used on sword handles for a non-slip grip.
- Some species of sharks can shed as many as 30,000 teeth in their lifetime.
- Whale Sharks have approximately 300 rows of teeth, with hundreds of tiny teeth in each row.
- The young of the Sand Tiger Shark are known to eat each other in the womb.
- Shark's eyes have a lens up to seven times as powerful as a human's.
- Sharks have no bones. A shark's skeleton is made up of cartilage.
- More people are killed each year by dogs, pigs and deer than by sharks.
- Most sharks don't appear to be especially interested in the blood of mammals compared to fish blood.
- Sharks can sense an increase in your heartrate underwater.



I gasp my last breaths of real air for a while and shove the thing into my mouth. Victor has since disappeared under water, so I quickly duck under and find myself face to face with a spotted black grouper that makes the other look like a baby by comparison. It's staring at me and hovering right over our ladder, it's belly brushing the rope. The thing is so big I can't see around it. My whole field of vision blocked by one damn big fish. How long has this thing been sitting right next to my left knee and what the hell do I do now?



A Sand Tiger Shark swims up to the divide, hesitates for a moment, and then is gone. I'm spellbound – the most amazing light is down there, in the water and all around, a translucent blue that is beyond beautiful. It seems to have no source, but comes from everywhere, shimmers and ripples through the entirety of the tank. Shadows of some inhabitants slide uneasily across the floor. Am I really going down there, into all of that?



Other than vision, my senses are gone. I can hear vague sounds – mostly drowned out by my own breathing. I look at my hands but can't tell how far away they are; I'm not even sure they're mine. Fish swim up to me and past me. They're completely silent. I could swear I am dreaming, but for the six meters of water on top of me. I look up and see it's brighter up there, but can't see where it ends.



We begin walking, and it's an effort at first. I'm straining, leaning forward and trying to stay on the ground. My steps are ludicrously slow, like when Bugs Bunny was on ether. I see small explosions of sand that drift up when my feet touch the bottom and to my right a shadow glides over the floor. It isn't a shadow. It's a Lemon shark, but a small one. I figure I can take him, if it came down to it.



Onward we go, and other sharks swim up to us and around us. We wait and let them decide where they want to go and then proceed. We clamber down over a rocky ledge, kneel down and stay a while, watching everyday life swirl around us. There's too much to take in. There's motion everywhere you look – one big silent movie done in the most vibrant colors. I want to scream to hear myself and make it real. Instead I clutch my camera and feel the reassuring plastic in my hands.

Michael and Victor are gesturing wildly behind me. I spin to the left and my nose nearly touches the black tip of a pectoral fin of one big Tiger shark. She's hovering next to me, just above my head and is she looking at me?



There's something magnificently beautiful about the way her barbed expanse of teeth is set into that soft, white, marshmallow-like tummy that gives her a greedy, twisted smile. It seems I'm standing next to her for an eternity then a deft flick of her tail sends her forward and out of my field of view. My head finally clears and...*what the hell am I doing down here?*



Schools of fish gather above us, circle, disband and come together again – erratic yet rhythmically. Ahead giant stands of seaweed wave silently and a large turtle zooms by overhead. Unlike their land-dwelling cousins, they're surprisingly fast, but don't have good brakes.