

Catching 'Addictive Shark Diving Disorder'

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BUSAN - There are three major blunders to avoid when diving with sharks. First, a bad omen comes with putting your wetsuit on backwards. Second, giving a 3-meter-long sand tiger shark a "high-five" before feeding time is a no-no. Third, telling the ER doctor the wrong blood type while she tries to treat your severed limb can ruin your day.

Since I'm touch-typing this article, I'll let you guess which mistake I made during a shark dive at Busan Aquarium, right on Haeundae Beach. Fortunately for me, every moment in the tank was an education, thrill or both - not a trip to the coroner's office.

As a non-diver, just to be breathing underwater was a revelation. You get a vivid sense of being in another world, a large blue tinted domain, and you're reliant solely on your wits and gear to avoid drowning. Though I had complete confidence in the equipment, training and the guidance of our instructor, the image of the nashing of hundreds of primeval teeth was hard to shake from the back of my mind.

All this dissipated as I rappelled down a rope over the underwater tunnel and past many wide-eyed aquarium visitors. Entering this huge room, I felt like a guest in a distant relative's home - there was something uncomfortable yet familiar there. It was like the most undomesticated swimming pool I'd ever encountered, and for good reason.

As we walked around the perimeter of the tank, we kept our hands hidden to avoid setting off a mealtime frenzy, since the sharks are hand fed. At a depth of about 5 meters, we observed hundreds of kinds of fish, octopuses and massive groupers. We peered in at animals hiding in the artificial coral and walked by huge stocks of seaweed. Above us, the 2-3 meter-long sharks cruised overhead, and we had to push the bellies of the sea turtles to keep them away from our masks and regulators.

Canadian Michael Jones, a PADI divemaster and instructor, organized and led this shark dive. The program gives everyone, Koreans and foreigners alike, a chance to learn more about marine life, both inside and outside the main aquarium tank, with 250 species totaling 35,000 marine animals.



A behind-the-scenes view of the main tank (above). At right, PADI instructor Michael Jones cleans up his gear after the dive.

As an open water diver, Jones used to look down on aquarium dives. However, while diving in the Philippines he watched the diversity of shark species in the area plummet in a matter of months due to overfishing. He realized that these kinds of aquarium dives are crucial to educating the public about the needs of these marine animals and how humans are their biggest enemy.

"It's like 'first contact' for many people," he said, describing the program. "I have been on hundreds of open water dives and I've seen lots of sharks. Yet here, it's just like the first time I saw one. I smile from ear to ear."



The image of the nashing of hundreds of primeval teeth was hard to shake from the backs of our minds.

Currently the aquarium holds eight adult lemon sharks brought in from Taiwan and 11 sand tiger sharks from South Africa. The sand tiger sharks look ferocious with their three rows of narrow, curved teeth, which are easily seen since they often swim with their mouths open. But unless provoked, they are quite harmless to humans.

Aquarist Puk Scivyer, who has a master's degree in aquaculture and is a rated commercial diver, had the following advice for us. "These are wild animals, so please don't touch them. If a shark moves toward you, just stand your ground. They'll always turn away."

"Sharks are like dogs, they know exactly what time it is," said Jones, adding that if you throw fish in the tank before the normal feeding time, they will not touch them. This was reassuring, since we went in just before feeding time. In fact, he gave stronger warnings about the sea turtles, which are quite aggressive and will swim up looking for a piece of your head to chomp on.

Before we even saw the tank, Jones, who is also an emergency first response instructor, gave us a thorough 30-minute rundown of diving theory. He went through the equipment and hand signals and only then showed us how to operate the gear in a small pool just outside the main tank.

We needed to practice how to clear our regulators and masks, pop our ears to adjust to the pressure of the water and how to operate our buoyancy control device, to give us the wherewithal to handle any eventualities, however unlikely.

When Jones was satisfied we would be able to handle ourselves, we went in groups of six experienced and novice divers. This was to ensure a high margin of safety - a ratio of one experienced diver to two non-divers - as well as to avoid stirring up too much sediment that would

obscure the view of the hundreds of people watching us on the other side of the massive tank windows. Most importantly, he wanted to ensure the animals are not agitated.

Oceanis Australia, a major owner and operator of aquariums in the Asia Pacific region, and the Busan city government completed this state-of-the-art facility in late 2001. Over 1.5 million people have visited since it opened and it draws as many as 15,000 tourists a day during the peak summer season.

Scivyer explained that the main tank contains 3 million liters of seawater, which translates into 3,500 tons. Amazingly this entire amount is circulated every three hours, through the latest in physical, chemical and biological filters.

Visitors get a first-class view of the main tank through 6-centimeter-thick acrylic windows or from the 80-meter underwater tunnel. There are also 40 exhibits featuring penguins, piranha, jellyfish and more. The displays are small but accurate replicas of numerous salt and fresh water ecosystems, including rainforests, wetlands and a 7-meter-deep coral reef.

There is even a computer fish identification system for kids. If you see a fish you don't recognize, you can input the various characteristics to reveal an answer.

What really drove home what we had done came after a shower and a closer look at the other areas of the aquarium, where I could see the impressive size of the tank and how our afternoon had struck people who had watched us incredulously.

We all met for dinner across the street from the beach and Jones wondered aloud why the lemon sharks were so lively and cruising so close to the surface during our dive.

Scivyer explained, quite matter-of-factly, that they were more active that day due to fresh blood in the water. Newly introduced groups of fish that had not yet settled in were falling prey to the sharks at night.

Pass the tartar sauce.

For more information or reservations, visit the Scuba in Korea Web site at www.scubainkorea.com. Prices include aquarium admission and are 65,000 won for a certified diver, 85,000 won for a non-diver.

To simply enjoy a day at the Busan Aquarium (www.busanaquarium.com) take exit No. 3 from Haeundae subway station and walk for five minutes straight down to the beach. It is open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekends. During the peak summer season starting July 20, it is open from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. Tickets are 14,000 won for adults and 9,000 won for children.

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