

ST.SOMETIMES

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Theft and Sharks

Underwater with sharks the size of my little Ford Fiesta, the car that was stolen at gunpoint right before I went shark diving!

[I figured the shark picture would get your attention before my beat up little car.]



Ever been Carjacked? Neither have I. But my friend was...with my car. Say goodbye to the Ford Fiesta. Part I

By Greg Lemoine

It had just fallen asleep. It had been a great day: going out in my new boat with Ruben and a few chicks, sushi dinner, a few drinks, lots of sun, and lots of laughs. It even started with a successful trip in my boat to get fuel. That's another story for later.

It was the end of a great day and the night before leaving on a dive trip to the Bahamas. The dive trip was my first taste of Vacation outside of Venezuela in a long while. Ruben was crashing at my place while I was going to be on vacation for a week. He

told me just to finish packing and go to sleep early while he took the ladies home (they were his friends anyway). I gladly agreed since I hadn't even packed yet and was due to leave in the wee hours of the morning.

I packed up my dive gear and a few presents before I fell asleep with season 12 of Law and Order on. During the third episode, around 11:30, Ruben woke me up and said "Greg, wake up! We have to go! Your car was stolen and we have to go to the police station!" I thought it was a joke. I

couldn't help but laugh until I wiped away the grogginess and saw how serious he was.

I threw on some clothes while he explained what had happened: carjacking at gun point! Immediately I asked him if he was ok. At that point, he was still in shock and just asked if I had insurance. Joselyn, a different friend with a police connection was waiting out in her parent's car.

Ruben was really worried about covering the car so he wanted me to say I had been

in the car with him. He said it was more likely I'd get my money back. The second reason was Ruben was worried he was going to be locked up for stealing a gringo's [my] car. He was going through worst case scenarios in his mind. But no way! I told him I wasn't going to lie to a local policeman. I'd go through everything and witness his story but I wouldn't lie. We just jumped in the car with Joselyn, her mom, and her sister. (Ruben's car keys were in my car when it was stolen. We couldn't take his car.)

On the way to the police station, I continually assured Ruben everything was ok! He was ok. He had just faced a 50/50 chance of being shot and killed. Next in order was calling our school security. It is not only policy for import teachers at our school, it was a better chance of keeping Ruben out of jail, if it came to that! Ruben called Armando, the head of our security. Armando told Ruben he would "try" but he had his kids at home. I called Armando and told him it was my involvement that required him being there. (I wasn't sure if Armando would treat Ruben - a local hire staff- the same as an import teacher. Non the less, I didn't have to find out. Armando agreed to meet us at the police station. [excellent call on that one Armando!] We arrived at the police station and only had to wait for twenty minutes before a detective could interview Ruben and file a report. I was expecting three hours minimum. The detective wouldn't let me go up and I was a little worried until Armando and another guard from our school security showed up. We spent the wait time explaining everything to Armando out in the parking lot so Armando could smoke a few

cigarettes. I felt a lot better about Ruben being upstairs when Armando arrived. Armando wouldn't let Ruben be arrested for this. (Ruben was really afraid of being a further victim and accused.) As far as I remember, I was back at my apartment by 1:30 or so. Good enough. Ruben wasn't shot, I arranged for William to pick me up at 5:30, and my dive gear was packed.

According to Ruben, the detective just wrote up a report as he interviewed him. There would be a slim chance that the police might find my Ford Fiesta, but I'm not going to hold my breath. It's gone.

The only thing I have left is to do is convince Ruben that it's not his fault and he owes me nothing. The insurance may, just may, cover the robbery. If it doesn't, then I'll just chalk it up to the experiences of being an international teacher. Sure hope this isn't the end of my car. I just bought a boat and stayed in VZ most of the summer. There isn't a lot of cash to throw into a new car.

Miami - Safe and Sound

And I still cannot simply grasp the reality while I type out this first part in the Miami hotel. Bring on the sharks. Time for a vacation! No one is going to believe this story. You hear about it all the time. Be safe. Be assertive where you go. I have maybe been pushing the envelope here, dating local women, driving all over the place at night, going to seedy areas. But this time it was Ruben, my local buddy.

Fusce ac leo

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Tiger Sharks!

By **Trenz Pruca**

As usual, I flew to Miami a few days early. I was scheduled to meet up with dad, Jeff, and Scott Munroe on Monday morning. Arriving on Saturday allowed me some time to take in the comforts of home before spending time with family and friends.

First up was a big juicy steak from Outback steakhouse. After checking into my hotel (in Spanish), dumping my stuff in the room, talking to the cleaning lady (in Spanish), and rousting a cab (in Spanish), I sat down at a bar seat in Outback. Ordered a T-bone, sweet potato, salad, and a tall mug of BudLight as the bartender laid down a menu.

I spent two days in and out of a dream state in my hotel room. When I was awake I went shopping for boat stuff and cheap clothes for school. My usual M.O. Cabs sure are expensive, but I can learn a lot of Spanish dialects. "Everyone has a cousin in Miami" - Jimmy Buffett.

Jeff, Dad, and Scott all found their way to the airport. I was first because I had to clear out of the hotel by 2pm. Airports are the best place to people watch, so I love getting to upscale airports early. I pulled up a chair at a TGI Fridays close to our gate and waited for the boys. Fridays serves tall cold beer and I had lots of travelers to talk to at the bar. There isn't enough battery on my laptop to mention all of the people I met sitting there at Fridays while waiting for dad and Jeff. It sure was great when they walked up to the bar! It was just around



Bucket O' Chum!

The bucket hangs down 10ft off the stern of the boat. Inside, frozen fish heads and skeletons from neighborhood restaurants. The bucket, together with a trail of bloody water and fish heads, attracts the sharks. Once the sharks arrive, they rarely leave.

Leo Praesen

a year since I had seen either of them! Both of them were super happy! We were going diving again!

Nothing but laughter. That's what I remember. Several hours of stories, laughs and wishing Jason was with us. A few hours later we were on a little puddle jumper with Scott and our dive gear, headed towards the Bahamas.

Scott and I had arranged for a hotel on the East end of the island. Dad and Jeff had booked a room on the West End where the dive shop was located. When we arrived, there was a driver waiting for Dad and Jeff. Scott and I had to sign out our rental car in the airport. The airport

was all but shut down except for one little lady behind a desk at the rental agency. She was waiting for us.

Have you ever driven on the other side of the road? I tried it once in England but I just couldn't do it. Everything inside and outside of the car is opposite. BUT, in the Bahamas, even though they drive on the opposite side, a lot of the cars are American. It took a bit of maneuvering but I got the hang of it. Scott mapped us to the hotel in the dark as I drove in the left driver's side seat on the opposite side of the road. Believe it or not, the roundabouts are a lot easier than street lights.

Size relative to a 6-ft (2-m) man:



Why No Research

It depends on the trip. This one I decided to be surprised. It turned out to be more exciting this way.

What I didn't Research According to Nat Geo:

Type: Fish **Diet:** Carnivore
Average life span in the wild:
 Up to 50 years
Size:
 10 to 14 ft (3.25 to 4.25 m)
Weight:
 850 to 1,400 lb. (385 to 635 kg)

Did you know?

The tiger shark's reputation as an indiscriminate eater that will swallow anything it finds, including garbage, has earned it the nickname "wastebasket of the sea."

They are consummate scavengers, with excellent senses of sight and smell and a nearly limitless menu of diet items. They have sharp, highly serrated teeth and powerful jaws that allow them to crack the shells of sea turtles and clams. The stomach contents of captured tiger sharks have included stingrays, sea snakes, seals, birds, squids, and even license plates and old tires.

As usual, I didn't research this until after the diving. Wow. What kind of idiot would dive with such fish? Three of us, I guess!



Blood, Fish Heads, 2 Lemons, then Us

That was the order as instructed. We wouldn't go down for at least an hour once we got there.

There were seven divers, one feeder, and one boat captain. We were scheduled to leave at 9am from the dock, so Scott and I made the hour drive early. We picked up some breakfast for the four of us at Burger King and drove leisurely out West. We found dad and Jeff ready to go - gear in the boat, smiling, and a bit nervous. We all were. Especially after the briefing.

The briefing was simple. 15 feet of water. Don't worry about getting your gear on just yet. The idea is to anchor inside the reef at a point where the tide is flowing out to the deep blue. The captain starts chumming the water and we wait, keep watch.

Chumming is a tried and true process. (This outfit, [Stuart Coves](#), has been around for over 25 years.) The captain anchors the boat and sets up a chum bucket. The bucket sits about 12 feet below a surface buoy 10 feet off the stern of the boat. The chum is basically fish bones and heads from local restaurants.

Once the bloody bucket is in place, the captain starts pouring cups of blood over the side. (Before we left dock, the captain put a box of frozen whole fish into a huge cooler and followed it with salt water. By the time we arrive to our dive spot, the fish had softened and all their blood had mixed into the water - a kind of raw fish stew.) The idea is the blood and fish parts flow with the tide and into the deep blue, where the sharks are prowling.

While the captain was chumming, the instructor continued the briefing. The chumming usually takes about an hour. We don't get in once the first Lemon shark arrives. It's normal to wait until two or three are around the boat. With two or three Lemons, the chance of the Tigers showing up is more likely because the trail is making it out to the blue.

Each of us is weighted down with a ton of lead. This is not really a swimming expedition. We would sit in a semi-circle several feet away from the chum bucket and to the starboard (right side) of the boat. The chumming is done on the

starboard. Divers don't want to be in the blood trail with a tiger shark the size of a small car! The fact that we were leaded down like anchors and out of the blood trail at only 15ft of water means we can stay under for a long time. The general limit is set for an hour and a half. This is the wild. There is no guarantee of seeing sharks, much less a Tiger.

Our Argentinian instructor answered all of our questions during the briefing. We certainly had time to talk. He told us he had never been "skunked" - no Tigers. Then he started talking up the chances by telling us he had been on one trip here when there were seven Tigers in one dive. (This was like saying we were going to see a humpback whale, dive with a whale shark, or see a frogfish. I've said such things to divers. But like me, this guy kept repeating the fact it is up to nature. There are no guarantees. Just possibilities.)

The instructor said he would go in and start anchoring some fish heads into the sand. When the lemon sharks arrived, he would surface and we would dive in. The key is to drop immediately. Divers making noise and motion on the surface are targets for hungry sharks. We should just drop down immediately and sit in a semi-circle armed with a PVC pipe in our hand. The PVC pipe is just to nudge a shark that might be curious enough to butt their nose into a diver.

The last bit of direction was a bit un-nerving. "If a Tiger Shark comes on the scene, forget the lemons. Always watch the Tiger, because she is ALWAYS watching YOU."

An hour later, two lemons arrived. We were all watching the captain chum while we were munching on oranges and drinking water. The excitement level skyrocketed. The instructor, who had been underwater for a while, surfaced and gave us the green light. Time to dive!

I ended up on the end of the semi-circle. I dropped down like an anchor, with my not-so-deadly PVC weapon in the left

"If a Tiger Shark comes on the scene, forget the lemons. Always watch the Tiger, because she is ALWAYS watching YOU."

hand and my UW camera in the other. Open water was on my left. Scott was on my right.

Followed by Dad, Jeff, and the other divers. The instructor was in the middle next to the chum

bucket. All eyes were on the three lemon sharks sliding around the smell of blood in the water. I could still see fish heads floating down from the port side of the boat.

It is hard to write the feelings that I experienced when I got down to the bottom. I have been around sharks before, but only a few minutes up close or from a good distance. These lemons were about 6-8ft long. We sat in our semi-circle for about a half hour in awe. Every once in a while, a shark would come close to one of us, close enough to touch. Most of the divers would just reach out with their PVC and keep some distance. I was comfortable enough just to sit on my knees and lean on the PVC like a cane in front of me. My camera was getting some great shots, but it was starting to fog up.

All at once, Scott was pointing. I watched with wide eyes as a shadow emerged closer and closer. It was growing with each breath from my regulator. It was a female Tiger shark the size of a small hatchback car. Seriously. This thing was enormous. It must have been 14ft in length and pushing over a 1000 lb.. This is no exaggeration. This is no "fish story". We were anchored down in bloody water with floating fish heads, three 8ft lemon sharks, and one of the most dangerous predators in the ocean waters. I nearly soiled myself! I nearly spit out my regulator! Looking at Scott's wide eyes, I could see the same expression.

In the midst of my awe and excitement, I was running through some horrible scenarios. This was a HUGE shark. We didn't have chain-male. We had PVC pipes this shark could swallow-even if the 3ft pipe was upright. This shark probably had a bite opening of 5ft. I haven't seen enough Shark Week episodes to have this information. Whatever! I just kneeled there in complete awe. She was beautiful.

It was easy to forget the other "small" sharks swimming around us. I watched as the tiger swam all around us for the next 45 minutes. So beautiful! What a perfect animal.

At one point, I moved away from Scott and Scott moved away from my dad. No too far. But it created an opening in the shape. The sharks started swimming between us. I moved behind Scott and Dad and got into a great position for a shot of the tiger right between the two of them. It was the best shot of the trip because my camera learned how to fog up! Ugh. Of all the luck.

The first and second dive were similar. The same sharks hung out for three hours. We only stopped for lunch and jumped right back in. I watched my dad reach out and try to touch the damn tiger shark! Does his hand insurance cover this? Does my insurance cover Tiger shark diving? How old was this thing? She had fading tiger stripes. She was enormous. How much could she eat? I have never seen a fish swim more stealthily. If I didn't keep my eye on her or lost sight of her, I'd just give a shrug to Scott and he would point her out.

One of the most interesting observations we all made down there had to do with the tiger shark eyes. If she got close enough for you to stick out the PVC, the eye closest to the PVC would throw up a shield. They don't have eyelids or eyelashes. Tiger sharks have one lid that moves up over the eye like a reinforced sliding door from the base of the eye. Fascinating!

We were all pretty hyped up on adrenaline after diving. Scott and I headed back to the hotel with plans to meet up with everyone the next morning. I think Scott and I ended up in a local bar for a few beers. (I don't really remember.)

No Guarantee!

Each dive day was \$250. Sharks or no sharks. That is understandable. But there was also a small written clause stating severe weather that sends the boat back is also a non-refundable situation. We set out on day 2 wondering how we would equal the previous day. Those feelings disappeared when we found ourselves surrounded by thunderclouds and purple areas on the radar. The weather was so severe the captain donned a diving mask to see while he drove. No sharks. No diving! No refund was the word. No one was happy!



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Leo Praesen



Days Three and Four

It is really hard to beat a shark dive like the first day we had. But day three turned out to be a rival. Like the first day, we had lemons within the first hour. All of this was the second round for us so we were all comfortable, even unimpressed with the lemons. There were only five of us on this dive, besides the feeder and the captain. Everything was pretty much the same, except for one thing: three tigers!

As luck would have it, and maybe a kind of reward for the crap day before, we three tigers showed up. The only thing more exciting than tracking the movements of a tiger shark - the size of a car- is tracking the movements of three separate tigers! The other two were not as big as the main tiger, but size doesn't always matter. We had to keep our eyes on all three of them. Basically, we paid little attention to the five lemons or the nurse shark. It is very difficult to put such feelings into words. Scared, wow-ed, excited, dumbfounded, total adrenaline rush? Day three was amazing. Too bad all shark dive days are not like the first and third. The boat had two engines. One of them was tough to start up and was making a noise. The captain decided

not to use it for the way back to port. Damn. Day four was already looking bad.

The next morning brought bad news. The owner was pulling out the “no guarantee” cards. We settled for a day of shark diving at a close by site that was basically forbidden by local fishermen. The idea was to stay close, chum, and hope to attract some sharks. The main site lies more than an hour away and the owner wasn't willing to send us out without a working motor. The mechanic didn't even look at it. Arguments went back and forth. We settled for the closer site. What a downer. This shark day produced a few nurse sharks.

Sharks Overall

The shark trip was an overall success. We ended up with rain checks for two days of shark diving. The experiences of days one and three were, for me, worth it. Once in a lifetime. Like skydiving, I am content with the one time. I will go again if it means the excitement to share with someone. The expression on a first-timer's face must be priceless. Surely mine was. It was successful because I got to share it - and live to tell about it - with dad, Jeff, and Scott!

Ever been Carjacked? Neither have I. But my friend was...with my car. Say hello to the Ford Fiesta.

Part 2

By Greg Lemoine

The Thieves



When I returned to Venezuela, a week after my car was originally stolen, Ruben had great news. My car was recovered! My car was used to steal a second car (the red one on the left). The cops in Puerto la Cruz found both cars on the side of the road. Ruben and I went to see the car immediately. The owner of the red car had arranged for both to be towed to a police station for the “investigation”. It would take a few days before the first steps of investigation were finished. Then I had to pay for both cars to be towed to a central police station. We took pictures of the car. Almost everything was taken off of it. Lights, electrics, spare tire, everything that could be disconnected quickly.

The Cops



I paid for the cars to be towed. Ruben and his contacts were busy trying to get past paperwork. The longer the cops had my car, the more likely more parts would be stolen. So I paid a lawyer and paid off the cops to get my car processed. Since they couldn't nail the thieves, there was no investigation. I simply paid to speed the process. Ruben and I went to the lawyer, then the cops, then the other cops, then more lawyers. Damn. The “regular” process time was several weeks. I paid off a lawyer to speed it up. About five weeks later, Ruben got word that my car was ready. A final payment and trip to the police for an entire morning erased my car out of the stolen car database. Officially it was recovered.

The Swamp

So five weeks later. Ruben drove me an hour outside of the city to an impound lot. He had arranged for a tow truck (on my dime) to meet us there. This impound is basically a farm with over a thousand cars strewn about a field. I paid the impound ladies a about \$150. Ruben and I waited with the Tow-truck guy for over an hour while the two ladies walked around looking for my little car. (no organization). They found it in a swampy area and used their John Deere backhoe to haul the little Fiesta to a dry area that was accessible to the tow truck. After all this, my car had been sitting in a swamp for two weeks.

The Mechanic

One of our bus drivers is also a mechanic. He's an Italian named Mikael. Once we got the Fiesta out of the swamp and back to Mikael's, a final check confirmed that even more parts had been picked off my little car. The engine, tires, windows, and basic parts were still intact. But the police had lost my keys. You may ask if any of this is worth it. I'll have to let you know. I only paid \$7,000 for it. If I can get it running again, I SHOULD be able to sell it for close to \$7,000. No, I didn't have full theft insurance! But rather than spend the time and paperwork on finding buyers for the parts, I'll go ahead and find a point of putting another \$2k into it for repair. That should get me to the resale point. It seems like to best choice. I need wheels. I'm going crazy without a car. I'd rather pay \$2k for repair and possible resale than buy a new car for another \$7-10k. Life overseas!

In Summary of a Week a week to remember!

It is truly hard to believe such a week. Starting off with a stolen car. Spending most of a night at a scary police station. Then getting on a plane back to the homeland with so little sleep.

Looking back at the pictures from the shark dives still makes me ask the question: "Why did we get in the water AFTER we were throwing fish heads and bloody water for an hour over board?"

Next time I go diving with Jeff and Dad will only be better if Jason is along. It just wasn't the same without him along. We will probably have more of the family by then. TJ, Colin, Katrina, and Mariah are all divers. Maybe some or all of them will be along next time.

As for the car situation, who knows what will happen? I might get it fixed. I might not. The important part is that my friend Ruben was not injured. He had a 50/50 chance of being shot to death. It's just a car to me. It's money to someone else. And money changes people.

A Sense of "Coming Home"

That sense of home is a weird feeling. But you know it when it happens. When I get back from a trip, get back to Venezuela that is, I always feel like I am coming home. How strange. It never felt that way in Kuwait or Egypt.



Blues!

Venezuela is the home of the blues. Polar, the main brewery here makes several kinds of beers. Solera is their "premium" beer, but I prefer the lighter version Solera Light - the blue bottle.



A poster from Scott's Classroom. I love this!

St. Sometimes and St.Somewhere Since 2001

This newsletter has been around a long time. I use it as a diary for myself. Look back through the years and see what has happened to me. Or don't. It doesn't matter to me. This is just good practice. In order to be some kind of writer, and teach reading/writing skills, I simply have to write.

Maintaining a digital newsletter also gives me a chance to hone my computer literacy skills. You can see how the earlier issues have changed. You might see how the photos have changed over the years too. It is just a matter of technology changes. Every issue I put out I try out new small tech details. This is all part of the life of this international teacher.

See you next issue.