

# A Scary Moment



It appeared out of nowhere – blocking my way back to the campsite. At that moment, I wished I knew more about it and its behaviour. These creatures had always fascinated me. Partly because they had been the villains of the many horror stories I had read in my teenage comic books. I knew that some breeds were life-threatening to humans, whilst others were perfectly safe.

It was fifty-six years ago, but I recall wracking my brains and trying to remember anything useful about the different shark species in the Gulf of Aqaba. As the adrenalin flooded my body, I could only think of three types. Was it a reef shark, a nurse shark, or a black-tip? As far as I knew, all three were potentially dangerous to humans.

I remembered in graphic detail one particularly lurid story in 'Hotspur', in which the smell of blood drove a school of sharks to a feeding frenzy. And it didn't help that I had a dead parrot fish skewered on my spear gun - the result of my successful hunt for breakfast.

My wife, Doreen, and I had driven down with friends from Amman for a weekend snorkelling on the beautiful coral reefs near the Saudi Arabian border. Scuba divers counted this stretch of coast among the most spectacular in the world. Once you had experienced the dizzying spectacle of the reef drop-off, with its kaleidoscopic riot of colour, you would be hard-pressed to disagree. It was so easy to gain access. A gently-sloping sandy beach gradually gave way to the shallow dead coral sea bed for twenty metres. Then the magnificent drop-off stretched downwards for thirty or forty feet of technicolour cliffs and caves, teeming with all manner of fish and all the colours of the rainbow. Visibility was near-perfect in the warm turquoise water, and a diver could often see passing schools of majestic manta rays and other deep-sea dwellers.

In those days, before the six-day war, there were no border markings on the coast between Jordan and Saudi. We used to drive down from Amman, past the Wadi Rum where they shot the film 'Lawrence of Arabia', turned left when we got to the small town of Aqaba and found a stretch of beach to pitch our tents or scoop out a hollow for our sleeping bags. Seeing a couple of friendly camel-mounted Saudi border guards wasn't unusual.

We always brought basic food supplies with us, but using driftwood, we loved to make a fire and feast on freshly caught and roasted fish. Hence the dead parrot fish when this particular shark decided to swim around in the shallows, directly between me and our campsite.

It seemed like hours passed as I tried to make progress with as little noise and splashing of my fins as possible, but after a few moments, the shark seemed to lose interest and lazily swam off along the coast until it was lost to view.

I never did learn just what kind of shark it was.

