

Daily News

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OUTDOORS

'cara a cara'

The attorney strokes the white belly of an 8-foot reef shark. This is not a lawyer joke. I'm 70 feet deep in the clear blue Caribbean water off Roatan Island with a half-dozen scuba divers from Anthony's Key Resort. We're at a dive site called "Cara a cara," which in Spanish means "face to face."

We're *cara a cara* with 20 gray reef sharks. The biggest are 9 feet. The sharks glide by silently, swimming slowly past schools of smaller fish that seem unafraid.



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Remoras attach and reattach themselves to the sharks. They're not parasites — the remoras count on the sharks' sloppy eating habits and dine on scraps of fish the sharks miss.

Sergio Tritto, our dive master and a former lawyer from Italy, is the one petting the animals. It's a case of "Do as I say, not as I do," as he warned us before the dive not to touch the sharks. He also said, "Don't wave your hands." The sharks might mistake a hand for a fish and bite it.

Tritto said he had been unhappy in his job as a *legale* in Naples and was searching for a new career. A friend told him about the sharks that congregated at a spot off the windward coast of Roatan, an island in the western Caribbean popular with scuba divers. Tritto decided to make a business out of leading shark dives.

In the pre-dive briefing he told us to descend the anchor line and form up at a sandy patch with our backs against a coral wall so the sharks can't sneak up on us.

Divers go "face-to-face" with sharks in Caribbean

Like Spitfire pilots in a school of Messerschmitts, we protect our 6 o'clock. If everything is right we will get to swim with the sharks before the feeding frenzy, said Tritto.

Tritto has brought a white plastic pail full of fish to feed the sharks. He's wearing a pair of chain mail gloves, as a shark once bit his hand. So much for professional courtesy.

Tritto signals us that we can swim freely with the sharks. Seeing the reef sharks slowly circling around us is something none of us will soon forget.

We line up again in front of the coral wall. Tritto opens the fish bucket and the feeding frenzy is on. The sharks are especially aroused by the sound of jaws snapping on fish and there is a lot of snapping going on.

One shark gets his head stuck in the bucket. Tritto grabs the shark and tries to turn it on its back