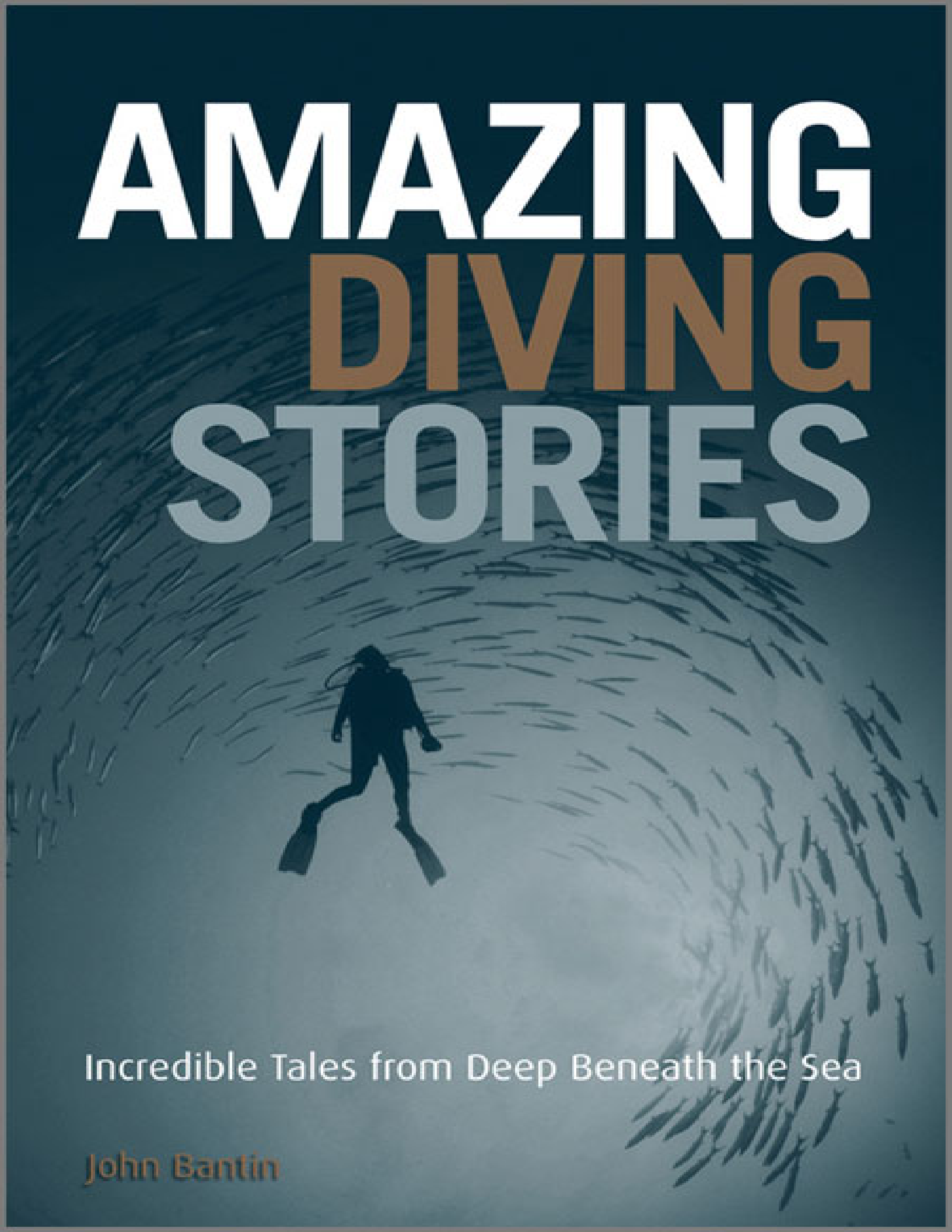


AMAZING DIVING STORIES

The background of the cover is a deep blue-grey color. In the center, a diver in a black wetsuit and fins is swimming away from the viewer. The diver is surrounded by a massive, dense school of small fish, which appear as a swirling, textured mass of light blue and white lines, creating a sense of movement and depth. The fish are concentrated around the diver, filling most of the lower half of the image.

Incredible Tales from Deep Beneath the Sea

John Bantin

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Amazing Diving Stories

John Bantin

WILEY  NAUTICAL

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INTRODUCTION

The world under water is every bit as complicated as it is on land. However, relatively few people get to witness it. Many dive locations are by necessity in remote and out-of-the-way places. Often it's as much of an adventure to simply get there. Every diver comes back with a story, so there is no shortage. Dive sites and dive boats ring loudly with the anecdotes told, each better than the last. By the very nature of things, most of what happens under water is seen by very few and like fishermen's tales they can get changed or exaggerated. Some of those involved have differing recollections long after the event. More than twenty years as a full-time diving journalist has exposed the author to many strange experiences. All that happened in most of the stories collected here, was witnessed either first-hand or told to him by the protagonists very soon after the event. In some cases, people have preferred to remain anonymous. Many of the stories, or elements of them, first saw the light of day in *Diver* magazine.

PART ONE

Animal Encounters

CLOSE CALL WITH A HUMPBACK WHALE

Rarely will a mother and calf be seen without an escort male that takes responsibility for shepherding the pair safely, but woe betide the diver who dares to annoy the escort with aggressive behaviour.

During his Navy diving days in 1971, Bret Gilliam had worked collecting data from fast attack nuclear submarines. It was in the superb visibility afforded by the waters off the US Virgin Islands. During the long underwater decompression stops required, he had often seen humpback whales. He became an enthusiastic humpback spotter and this eventually led to 20 annual trips to the Silver Banks, an area between the Dominican Republic and Grand Turk. It's now an area well-known among divers for encounters with humpback whales and their young calves.

“Standing on their tails and bobbing in the gentle evening sea, they positioned themselves with their heads turned, to present eyes the size of hockey pucks that seemed to look right through you. At that point, the experience of swimming with our military's subs seemed pretty pale by comparison.”

It was common to see pregnant females disappear and reappear a day or so later with a calf in tow, but nobody has ever recorded a mother whale giving birth. Where they go to and how the birth is accomplished, is still one of life's big mysteries.

It was February 1993. The weather was not too good and it was extremely windy. Diving out in the open ocean was out of the question and “for want of anything better to do”, Bret left the boat and went alone for a shallow dive in the lee of a coral reef, swimming among the coral pillars that

punctuated the sandy bottom. Even here he could not escape the whales' presence, with their haunting songs flowing over and around the underwater landscape and filling his ears as he swam.

He was very surprised indeed to round a coral head and come face to face with a mother whale and her calf. "I was fewer than 3 m (10 ft) from them," he recalled. What an opportunity for an underwater photographer!

The whales were resting with the baby lying under its mother's watchful gaze. It was the smallest calf Bret had ever seen at around only 2 m long (6 ft) and 110 kg (250 lb). In fact, he remembered thinking it was about the same size and weight as him.

"My mind was racing. Was this a newborn calf? Had I nearly stumbled on what every photographer in the world had sought for decades? Certainly, the calf was the right size and clearly was so young that he couldn't hold his breath for more than few seconds. I cradled my camera and began to line up the shots.

Sure enough, the pair were waiting for me as I eased around the massive coral buttress into water that was now barely 5 m (15 ft) deep.

It was surreal to see this leviathan mother some 15 m (50 ft) in length easing herself over the smooth sandy bottom. Her massive pectoral fins gently grazed the sand leaving a trench marking her trail, while the baby rode the pressure wave just above her head. The depth lessened even more and her belly barely cleared the bottom. I moved to the coral head and clung to an outcrop to let them pass, all the while firing away with my wide angle."

As the mother's 6 m (20 ft) tail fluke filled his lens from only inches away, Bret began a slow pursuit but all the while wondering why there was no escort male supervising the pair. Maybe the rambunctious males were simply too

cautious of the shallow water that might have stranded them?

Bret was suddenly aware that the bottom was no longer 5 m (15 ft) below him. His fin tips hit something solid when he kicked and he looked down thinking he'd let himself drift onto the coral head.

"Wrong! The male I had been speculating about was directly below me, having been masked in the gloom before. He had now set his sights on moving up to place himself between his new family and me. He had accelerated his slow swim and I now found him about to surface directly between my legs!

To my left were the jagged coral branches of the reef top and Mr Big chose that moment to raise his pectoral fin to just clear the hazard. His fin soared over the coral head like a stunt airplane turning around a course pylon. That effectively killed any escape in that direction. A quick look behind confirmed that the whale's back would make contact with me in seconds. I gulped a breath and dove over his head with my chest massaging his widow's peak on the way by. Finning to give us each some space I ended up about 1 m (3 ft) off the bottom and under his right pectoral fin.

Okay, this isn't so bad, I thought. He'll just glide over me and then I can come up. Wrong again! He chose that exact moment to stop and simultaneously dropped his pectoral fin neatly pinning me to the sand. I had always wanted a close encounter but this was ridiculous. There I was, flat on my back with several tons of deadweight pectoral gently anchoring me. I never even thought of struggling. I lay quietly and played dead. Rather aptly, I thought.

From my constrained view I could look the big guy in the eye from about 1.5 m (5 ft) away. He articulated his gaze back to me and sized me up. After about 30 seconds he eased up his pectoral fin and moved ahead. I put one hand up and fended myself off his belly as he moved over me at a

snail's pace. Finally, the tail passed overhead and close enough to let me count the smallest barnacles. I gratefully hit the surface for some much needed air.

While I was taking an inventory of my own body parts and mentally calculating if I qualified for hypoxia-induced brain damage, all three whales came at me from the shallows. The male led the mother and her baby deftly through the reef and then waited for them to exit to the deeper water. We regarded each other without malice as he ended up once again on the surface right next to me. I fired off a few frames and then he moved gradually away into the blue with his charges.”

WHITE-TIPS AT NIGHT

Often described as “inoffensive” and “not aggressive”, white-tip reef sharks are the species of shark most often encountered by divers and probably the least often written about.

Night-time at Manuelita Rock. It was dark, very dark. Richard Skepper lowered himself quietly into the inky black water with his video camera safe inside its marine housing. At what seemed to be a very long way below him, he could see a dim green glow. He dropped through emptiness, slowly rotating round as he went. The beams of his video lamps picked up nothing but plankton and the occasional jellyfish, and although powerful, were blocked by the foggy underwater conditions. No fish were evident.

He headed towards that green glow. As he got closer he could see it was the light of another diver who had entered the water before him. He was hovering over a seabed of coral rubble, rocks and sand and looking at a large green turtle that he had disturbed from its slumbers. It stared back, bleary eyed, into the beam of his light. It was lying on the sand, not moving.

Both divers then became aware that all around them were hundreds of pairs of white eyes, glinting hungrily from the darkness. A pack of wolves? No, these were the subaquatic equivalent – hordes of sharks, revving up for a night of frantic hunting. Something was about to die!

No wonder all the fish had gone into hiding. This was not a safe place for the small and vulnerable. Only a few large, evil-looking black jacks flitted excitedly in and out of their lamp beams. It seemed that they were goading the sharks into action in the hope of picking off some unfortunate prey that might escape the throng.

The lights attracted other animals now. An eagle ray almost crashed into them. It was like a cross between some giant demented moth and a creature from Harry Potter. More than a metre (3 ft) wide, the divers got a flash of its white underbody and black top with spots. It flapped its wings and returned into the darkness as quickly as it came.

The two divers swam slowly together at 18 m (58 ft) deep. The seabed below them quickly cluttered up with grey cigar shapes. The sharks seemed to be taking advantage of their lights. It became a crazy cross between the Pied Piper and two huntsmen whipping in the hounds. But were the divers leading or were they being led? These wolves were on a mission.

More sharks joined the hunt. They hugged the bottom, checking every cluster of rocks. No hiding place went unexamined. The seabed, now lit in joint pools of light, was solid with grey bodies, purposefully moving as one, and with one intention – the destruction of the weak and ill, and any small creature unfortunate enough to cross their path.

How many sharks were there? Fifty? One hundred? Two hundred? More?

The occasional marble ray, a not inconsequential animal, hugged the sand closely as the horde passed over. Lobsters scuttled quickly back into their holes. The night belonged to the sharks, their white eyes glinting. Then it happened.

Something must have revealed certain vulnerability. A shark darted after it, into a hole. Another followed. Then there was the scrum. The scrum was without rules. It was a scrum that was a tussle of 50 animals trying to get into one small crevice. It was a scrum that bit and gouged and writhed desperately to deliver death. No longer wolves hunting, it had become a snake pit of slender grey bodies, a grim demonstration of unyielding determination. The mob ruled.

Richard hovered over it with his camera at the ready. Only a couple of feet above the action, he made sure he didn't sink any lower. These animals may not be man-eaters but at this moment they would bite anything that moved, including a hand accidentally extended to steady on the rock below. The fight went on.

Remarkably, a large lobster escaped unscathed but not unruffled from the intended carnage. It darted to another hideaway. Richard recorded about 30 minutes of this action, his video lamps lighting up the affray, a turmoil of thrashing tails and boiling sand. The sharks were not distracted from their mission. It was a mission to eat whatever revealed the weakness that denoted its role – that of the prey.

Then one shark escaped with the remains of a small red fish hanging from its mouth. It made a dash away into deeper water. There was a brief lull as some sharks gave chase and the hunt resumed. The divers swam onwards, their lamps lighting up the seabed, solid with grey cigar-shaped bodies, purposefully moving as one, and with one intention ...

Richard had travelled to the lonely outpost of Cocos Island, which lies 350 miles from the coast of Costa Rica in the Pacific, to video the hammerhead sharks that were known to school there. Cocos was used as the island from which King Kong was captured in the original movie. It prompted Robert Louis Stevenson to write *Treasure Island* and Michael Crichton to write *Jurassic Park*.

It was not the hammerhead sharks that revealed to Richard nature red in tooth and jaw. It was the little white-tip reef sharks.

Usually seen singly or in small groups in daytime, resting on the bottom while they pump water through their gills (something few other sharks can do), they can be recognised easily by the large white tip on their first dorsal fin and the upper lobe of the tail. They mature at 1 m (3 ft)

in length but can vary in size from a couple of feet to more than 2 m (6 ft). They are very flexible in movement and are almost able to turn back on themselves and touch their tails. They have tough skins, which allow them to squeeze into small openings and hunt aggressively among the rocks and coral. They can be encountered in large numbers hunting at night in places such as Maya Thilla in the Maldives and Sipadan Island, but nowhere can they be seen in such grotesque numbers as Cocos Island, in the eastern Pacific.

They eat a wide range of prey, often octopus and small molluscs. They are not normally considered dangerous to man but they hunt at night, every night. For Richard, it was a dive that he would never forget.

LORD TEBBIT AND THE TURTLE

Lord Norman Tebbit learns to dive and gets injured in the process.

Norman Tebbit was first a flyer with the RAF. He distinguished himself by walking away from his burning Meteor aircraft after crashing it on take-off from RAF Waterheath. He then went on to become a pilot and navigator with the airline BOAC and took a prominent role with the British pilots' union, BALPA. Away from work, he became involved in politics. After being elected as a Member of Parliament in 1970, he became one of Margaret Thatcher's right-hand men.

After a career in which he was blown up by Sinn Fein/IRA in the Grand Hotel in Brighton, and broke the power of the coalminers' union led by Arthur Scargill, he was elevated to the House of Lords as Baron Tebbit and made a Companion of Honour. He had become a legitimate member of "the great and the good".

During this later time, he took to writing a column in the *Mail on Sunday* and on one occasion he reported his experiences of white-water rafting in Colorado.

"Goodness me," he wrote, "I'll be taking up scuba diving next!"

The owner of *Diver* magazine in the UK immediately invited him to learn to dive and at the age of 68, he became the subject of a feature in that magazine. Eventually, Lord Tebbit's own written feature resulting from this experience made three whole pages in the *Daily Mail*. It was entitled "The day my life turned turtle".

He wrote, "Diving is not like swimming. It is more like flying, more like being in a small airship able to adjust buoyancy to stabilise at any chosen depth."

His diving instructor recalls, "Lord Tebbit was easy to teach because you dive with your brain rather than your muscles. However, I was ever aware of the enormous responsibility for my trainee and didn't want to achieve what the IRA had failed to do. I was very careful with this very important gentleman."

After initial pool training in the UK, they travelled together with Lady Margaret Tebbit to Barbados in order to make those initial open-water dives in easy and benign conditions.

"He seemed a little frail and I was scared stiff that he might get injured jumping for the first time from a boat while carrying heavy diving equipment, so for that first dip into the sea I chose to walk with him into the water from the safety of a beach close to our hotel."

It wasn't a regular dive site and as soon as they were submerged, the instructor started to regret his decision. There seemed to be absolutely nothing to look at apart from a few mooring blocks for some boats and acres and acres of boring-looking sand as far as the eye could see. One of the most important aspects of a novice diver's first sea dive is to make all the effort seem worthwhile.

Here the report from the great man seems to conflict with that of the younger instructor's contemporaneous magazine article. Lord Tebbit recounts it as his second dive when in fact it was his first trip out into the sea.

Notwithstanding that, the instructor remembers struggling to find anything interesting to show his lordship until, as luck would have it, two large green turtles appeared out of nowhere. Not only that, but they swam directly towards the two divers and the instructor readied his underwater camera in the hope of getting a turtle in the same shot as the British baron. A close encounter with a green turtle in Barbados is a very rare event indeed. What neither man knew was that these turtles had originally been rescued from fishermen when small, and regularly hand fed by

locals, so consequently had little fear of humans. This was unusual.

Lord Tebbit continued in his own article, "Imagine something the size of a small sheep flying around your head, pushing and shoving as it importuned for food, and you have got the idea. Nobody told me that turtles are greedy, have poor eyesight and sharp beaks. Being a little slow to react I finished up streaming blood from a bitten finger, my only diving injury so far – and subject of great hilarity to my companion."

The instructor had mixed feelings. First, he had recorded some marvellous close-up pictures of a peer of the realm in the close company of a green turtle, with which he was elated; but at the same time his responsibility to keep this important gentleman safe from harm seemed to have been jeopardised within the first minutes of being in the water. Later, he discovered he had recorded the very moment of the bite and this was reproduced at nearly full-page size accompanying his lordship's newspaper feature. Thankfully, the great man took it in good humour and spent the rest of the trip enjoying less eventful experiences under water.

Lord Tebbit later wrote in the *Daily Mail*, "We set out with some bags of fish to feed some local turtles, which had given up the work of hunting and now lived on welfare provided by tourists like me." That was a sanitised version of events for public consumption in the national press.

In fact the turtles, expecting food and finding none, simply attacked the man as he tried to fend them off, biting one finger badly in the process. It didn't help that the locals had named the turtle that did the biting, Arthur. Arthur Scargill had been the union leader taken on by Norman Tebbit during an infamous coalminers' strike.

THE AMAZING FROGFISH

Frogfish can consume prey bigger than themselves, but usually they are themselves quite small.

Strange frogfish exist in most tropical and subtropical seas. They lead a sedentary life, stumbling around the reef on modified pectoral fins that function as flabby legs. They are masters of camouflage and able to mimic precisely the colour of the favourite sponge they sit on. At first glance they are nothing more than a featureless blob. Unless you know where to look, they usually go unnoticed. In fact they are so ugly and shapeless, they hardly look like fish at all.

A member of the family Antennariidae, which includes other anglerfishes, they lie in wait for the unwary, dangling a lure above their mouths that has been developed from a modified dorsal spine. It looks like a little fry or a worm and entices any fish that likes to eat such small delicacies. It's at this moment that the frogfish strikes.

Frogfish tend to be quite small. Normally, one could sit comfortably in the palm of a hand. Because they are able to call upon a vast repertoire of colour schemes, they make popular subjects for divers armed with extreme close-up cameras, and dive guides around the world tend to know where they hang out on the reef.

Divers seek out frogfish and the waters of East Asia can provide plenty of encounters. The Lembeh Strait in North Sulawesi is famous for the weird and the wonderful, if not macabre marine life, and the frogfish found there come in many different varieties, including the fantastic hairy frogfish. However, there is one place much closer to Europe that can afford a memorable frogfish encounter.

The Gulf of Aqaba is an extension of the African Rift and has deep water close to the shore. It also has some pretty

coral reefs that are home to the full gamut of Red Sea marine life. All the usual suspects are there. There are millions of anthiases and glassfish and dozens of lionfish and grouper that prey on them. Eagle rays pass by and electric rays dodge about the sandy patches. Taba is at the Gulf's most northern point, at the border between Egypt and Israel. What makes underwater Taba almost unique though, is its population of giant frogfish.

Frogfish feed on almost anything that moves, but these Taba frogfish are unusual in that they prey on lionfish. Yes, you read that right. These are not the little frogfish in pretty colours more usually encountered elsewhere. These frogfish are big enough to swallow a lionfish!

That's probably why one example often seen, looks so green. Well, you'd feel a bit green if you'd swallowed a fish that's famous for its poisonous spines, wouldn't you? It gives a new perspective to the image of a bulldog that's swallowed a wasp. Frogfish are able to swallow prey fish that are actually bigger than they are. They have rubbery flexible bodies that can encompass almost anything they can suck into their cavernous mouths. The voracious lionfish is tempted to dart in and grab the frogfish's dangled lure. The joke is on the would-be hunter though.

The frogfish is quicker than the unfortunate lionfish. It gulps and in a moment the in-rush of water has dragged the unsuspecting predator-turned-prey into that cavernous interior. It does this in one of the fastest movements of any animal recorded. A frogfish has been scientifically photographed at such a high speed that it's thought to take only around 1/6000 of a second to grab a meal. That's fast food!

Although frogfish are able to change their body colour and texture to mimic their surroundings, these Taba frogfish are quite cocky. They are almost flamboyant in the way they pose magnificently in colours that contrast nicely with their

surroundings instead of adopting the colour of the sponge or coral they sit upon.

They walk about on their modified pectoral fins, using them like flexible feet. At around 30 cm (1 ft) long and more, they are easy to spot and if you see one, you're bound to see its partner somewhere nearby, although it's probably wearing a totally different colour scheme. Not only that, although giant frogfish are normally easy to approach, these frogfish actually approach divers.

During one dive at Taba it was reported that a large dark green frogfish, an animal with an appetite bigger than its belly, even came and sat on a diver's head. It must have thought him to be a suitable vantage point and his head a bit of sponge to perch on. When Hugh Watson, the manager of the local diving centre was told of this, he immediately recognised the one described. He recounted how he had been doing an introductory dive and was routinely kneeling on the sand with his trainee, when he spotted the creature bouncing along the featureless, sandy seabed, a long way off from where he was. There was no reef nearby. It bounced purposefully up to him and attached itself to his chest. The trainee diver with him was taken aback, but ever the calm and unflustered Welshman, Hugh was relaxed. It's the sort of thing that happens under water at Taba.

THE AMOROUS ELEPHANT SEAL

The rule about diving with wild animals is never to interact with them, but rather to let them interact with you – however, things can go horribly wrong.

The Sea of Cortez near Mexico, is a temperate sea with the biggest range of water temperatures of anywhere in the world. At the height of summer, the water can be icy cold or it might be comfortably warm. Who knows?

There is little in the way of coral in the Sea of Cortez, but the ever-changing water temperatures and copious amounts of sunlight combine to produce at times, plankton levels that support massive amounts of marine life. Whale sharks, manta rays and even grey whales are quite common.

That's why Jamie Curtis left the UK, set up a dive centre there and made a new life for himself in this part of Mexico. Jamie was after some much needed publicity for his venture, which is why he soon invited a British diving magazine photographer to visit.

But it's not that easy to find the stars of the show and to dive with them. They are pelagic animals, forever wandering the vast emptiness of the ocean. You need good luck to enjoy an exciting mid-water encounter. So with no coral reefs to speak of, where are the territorial animals that form the reliable and permanent attraction that would make a diver happy to spend valuable vacation time here? Jamie fondly recounts this tale.

Los Islotes are 80 km (50 miles) from the town of La Paz. Some ragged rocks towering from the water, a rough red cake capped with guano like icing-sugar. And what's that noise? Los Islotes is a California sea lion colony or “rookery”.

Diving close to California sea lions can be a heart-stopping experience. The females behave like ladies. A graceful,

young female quickly investigates what she clearly thinks is a strange air-bubbling creature. She appears in a moment. A pirouette, a brisé, two arabesques and she is gone. There's hardly time to get a successful photograph. The pups behave like naughty children, but the bulls act like angry fathers.

A successful bull will breed with as many females as he can and enthusiastically guards his harem. It has been known for one male to service 40 females. It all depends on his size and strength. Each bull has his own clearly defined territory for which he has fought off other bulls. The males seem to devote most of their time to maintaining a dominant position in that territory. They are large and powerful and will aggressively defend their harem against incursions from other males. That's what all the barking is about.

During the first year that Jamie was set up for diving, an intruder joined the sea lions' rookery. Bigger than any of the massive sea lion males, a solitary young elephant seal had opted to move in with them. He wasn't in any danger from the sea lions but he was obviously very lonely. No doubt they had frequently told him to go off and seek his own kind, but he was looking for love.

The female sea lions may have rejected his amorous advances but he found other more compliant partners in the unsuspecting scuba divers that came to visit the sea lion colony at Los Islotes. The magazine photographer heard about this phenomenon and chose this as his major: it made the perfect photo opportunity.

Photographers can make terrible buddies. The anonymous buddies that chose this photographer to go diving with, probably regret it to this day.

"I would go in with an unsuspecting buddy because I knew exactly what was going to happen," the photographer recalled later. "The elephant seal would position itself above

the chosen diver, then wrap its flippers around them. And what do you do if an elephant seal wants to mate with you? Well, there's not a lot you can do."

Naturally, he was partnered with a different unsuspecting buddy each time. There were few that wanted to repeat the experience. Then it nearly went horribly wrong.

As had become usual on each dive, he watched fascinated as the enormous animal stealthily approached its target diver from above and behind, lining him up. However, this time the animal simply swam closely above the other diver, mirroring his movements.

"I was all ready to get this marvellous picture and everything was lined up for the shot. The other guy's swimming along, oblivious to what's happening, and the elephant seal is hovering above him getting ready to grab and do its best. I'm ready with my camera - and then, to my amazement, the elephant seal opens its mouth.

It opened its mouth wider and wider. The animal had teeth reminiscent of piano keys. It then plunged down and encompassed my buddy's head in the voluminous opening.

Instead of taking the all-time, award-winning natural history picture, I resorted to hitting the huge animal as hard as I could with my camera. It was like hitting a sofa with a paper handkerchief. It didn't seem to make much impression, yet it had the desired effect. The elephant seal released his victim, looked at me reproachfully and swam off offended."

Later, at the surface, the other diver asked what happened.

"It suddenly went dark down there."

There are some things that are better left unexplained.

GALAPAGOS WHALE SHARKS

Whale sharks are huge but harmless, and in the Galapagos, a park ranger must accompany you if you want to scuba dive with one.

The Galapagos Islands are volcanic and recently formed. They are by no means to be considered pretty. Most are uninhabited and form a national park, although at the equator 966 km (600 miles) from the coast of Ecuador, the water around these islands is somewhat cold. The archipelago lies at the confluence of two major cold currents from the north and south, which cause a pressure effect that keeps the warmer Pacific water from the west at bay. The climate is therefore equable and quite untropical.

Diving in the Galapagos is a matter of great variety. Nowhere else can you swim alongside tropical species like Moorish idols at the same time as penguins. If you love the rare and unusual, there is the red-lipped batfish or the flightless cormorant. You can snorkel in the shallows with marine iguanas or teams of friendly sea lions. On land, each island, or even each part of an island, offers unusual or endemic terrestrial species, none of which seem to be afraid of man. If your joy is to dive with big pelagic marine life in the Galapagos, I could sum it up in two words: Darwin Island.

This is the most remote and northerly extremity of the archipelago. Darwin himself never made it to the tiny island named after him, but it provides the most spectacular dive site of all. Many divers would be happy to spend a whole dive trip there and nowhere else in the Galapagos.

The solitary dive site is marked by some rocks topped by a natural structure about the same size and shape as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris – Darwin's Arch. The ocean current