

## Connie meets a shark

As our last bit of exploring the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, we decided to go to Zapatilla Keys, 2 islands on the ocean boundary of the archipelago, known for their beautiful reefs and good snorkeling. After we anchor I decide to swim the 150 yds to shore and Fred will row the dinghy in to walk on the island. I put on fins for efficiency and wear a snorkel in case there is anything interesting to see. There isn't – just sand and a bit of sea grass. Except suddenly !!! omigod !! a really big fish (5') that is, it can't be, IT IS !!! a shark . Big dorsal fin and a second one, and ventral fins and scimitar tail. Perfect profile. The water is only 6' deep and I am less than 50 yards from shore. I freeze. Oops, it is no longer in profile. It is turned to me and lazily coming straight at me. I have plenty of time to look at its mouth (closed) and eyes. Great sense of unreality -- this can't be happening. I curl into a ball, with my fins between me and it. My hands and feet suddenly feel like hors'd'ouvres. As it gets within 4' of me I start kicking at its face with my fins and I scream (underwater, in my snorkel, and have time to think how silly). It turns away and I see how really big the top half of the tail is. I rip off my snorkel and raise my head above water and SCREAM. In the small group of Spanish-speaking daytrippers about 100 m down the beach, one or two heads turn my way. Fred, about 80 m behind me, keeps rowing, apparently hearing nothing. I felt very very alone -- a million miles away from everything, except the beach which I sprinted for.

I later asked the daytrip guide if sharks were commonly seen at the Zapatillas. He didn't really answer but admired my "Panamanian" when I said the size was "un metro y pico".

The next morning on the Bocas Cruiser's Net I asked if sharks were common at the Zapatillas. None of the sailing cruisers said they had ever encountered one, but then an ex-pat said so-and-so on a nearby island liked to feed nurse sharks. All was clear. I'm pretty sure I encountered a nurse shark. They hang near the bottom over sand in shallow water or under ledges and are not aggressive.

It was memorable and if I had been with a guide knowledgeable about sharks, it would have been interesting rather than scary. But I am here (mercifully) to tell you, a shark looks a lot different when you are the only human in the water for many many miles around and there is no 3" plate glass window between you and it.