



Not every wife would jump for joy at the suggestion of a six month honeymoon in the desert, no running water being the first of many hurdles, but one womans hell is anothers paradise as **Abe Shelton** explains.

Scorched is what first comes to mind as you look over the landscape. It's the type of sun that toasts uncovered bread in a matter of minutes and wind that constantly blows, spinning in all directions as if on the plains of Mars. How could anything survive out here? But as you dig deeper and become more in tune with your surroundings, you realize that it's very much alive, even lush, fed by the turquoise ocean that pounds its shores. The red dirt and the blue water, like two contrasting jewels, the ruby and the sapphire, each making the other sparkle, both teaming with life.

NORTH

This is the latest in a good number of trips I've made into the desert, each one more laden with gear and amenities. Having just gotten married, it was my wife's request that for our honeymoon we start and end our trip here, giving us a total of seven months, could I be that lucky? That being said, Autumn thinks about free diving and spearfishing the way most guys think about footy or V8 engines, she froths. Now this has its up sides and one down side, but we'll get to that later. Having finished our two years of work we headed off on what was going to be fifteen months of travel, starting in my favorite place.

In preparation for the trip we overhauled our dive gear, new guns, masks, fins, wetties, buoys and knives. For the first time I had all

quality equipment, but still there was the matter of the pink weight belt. On my first trip I didn't have any gear of my own so my good friends Louis and Jack gave me a bright pink weight belt and a rabitech apex. The gun has since gone on to greener pastures, but the belt is a survivor. I'm a sucker for oldies and I love classics; cars, music, movies, cloths and this weight belt, maybe its good luck?

It's was a long straight drive and the hours were filled with talk of three months of camping and what the dive season would be like. This is my wife's third trip here and where other girls fall off due to no running water (no showers), no flushing toilets, no electricity, no phone or internet and no shopping, is where she just gets going. On arrival we found that our favorite spot was open, tucked away from any roads with a bit of shade (important with all that scorching going on) and ten steps from that blue beauty of an ocean, its good to be home.

We are blessed to have friends here that are keen to dive and proud owners of mostly seaworthy vessels, but we also do a fair amount of shore dives. On our second dive of the trip, before we landed a single fish we were lucky enough to see our first tiger shark. Each season we have a habit of running across two, generally large females that lumber in to take a look. This wasn't any different. I just hadn't expected to get the first one out of the way so soon. My wife had just shot a baldy(baldchin

grouper) and I spun around to see the twelve-footer circle around behind us in under five meters of water. It seemed mellow enough, keeping its distance, then ducking out of sight, but as some of you know, by the time you've seen them they've been watching you for a while longer.

We had a bit of difficulty flagging down the boat as they had a rogue plastic bag stuck in the prop and were heads down trying to solve the problem. When they finally arrived I pushed my wife in the boat and told them about the shark, but that I'd thought it was gone. Ha, probably as all of you know, nature loves to prove us wrong! The tiger came straight to the surface and followed the buoy that was being pulled in. That was my hint to launch into the boat. This brings me back to the one down side of diving with my wife, she's stubborn. She always wants to be where the action is and doesn't take kindly to me pushing her to my reef side. She always points out that none of the big fish will be there. This only happens when we come across a larger tiger, huge bronzy or the odd bull, but it still makes her frown.

Being here sharks are an everyday thing, you see them in the shore break, out in the bait schools and just about every dive. As comfortable as we get spearing around them, there is always the respect for the power that they posses. We were reminded of this on an outing to surf.



SCORCHED

The swell was up and the sea breeze had come in, so the lineup was relatively empty. There had been talk of a large white pointer in the area earlier that week. Not having been there, the story filtered through of what had happened. A boat of divers pulled up to their spot and before even getting in the water, a large pointer with an entire ecosystem swam directly up to the boat for a look. In the 25 minutes or so it hung around two more boats pulled up to witness it. After that, the mass of a shark disappeared into the deep, leaving a few photos and a good story behind. Back to the case in point, the surf day ended on a bad note when one of the lads ended up in the white water at the end of the wave and was nailed by a shark. It did a solid number, hitting him mid torso and on the right arm. Everyone around came together to help get him out of the water and into the back of a car for the long drive to the closest town. The surfer who is one of our newer friends, is a hell of a trouper and fought hard all the way along. That spirit and determination kept him going to the hospital, on a plane to Perth and is now helping him on his road to recovery. It reminds us that it can happen and by doing the water sports that we do we take that risk, especially as spearos!

CATCH IT

Before our trip we were determined to document the whole adventure. This being said I had no idea how much fun it would be! We got ourselves a few of the new GoPros with a number of different mounts. Never having done much diving with cameras I wasn't sure where the best mounting points were or which angles were the best. Fortunately for us the large option of mounts and easy DIY info made figuring it out pretty easy. We found that two cameras per person worked great, one looking back at you and one looking out at the marine life. For looking out, the head mount that comes with the camera provides a great POV angle and a roll bar mount attached to the handle provides a great gun view. For looking back you can set up a mount on the end of the gun which allows the camera to turn for easy angle change. The new Hero 3 Black looks awesome and we can't wait to get one to mess around with and test some ideas we've had for the remote control. As all the action sport cameras evolve they improve their low-light resolution from the previous models, which has been an issue for anyone documenting their dives especially late in the afternoon. I never thought I would say it but



the experience of shooting photos and video have been as exciting as shooting fish! After diving all day we found that you get a second bit of fun by watching the footage you shot. You also notice things in the video that you hadn't seen in person, but hopefully not the one thing you didn't want to see.

This season turned out to be great for diving with plenty of days with small to no swell and good vis. On one shore dive, another dive buddy and myself swam around for two hours with 25 meter vis. The first part of the dive was over reef fingers that extended out into sandy gutters which seemed like the perfect place to look for spanglies(spangled emperor), baldies or what we were really looking for, pelagics.



SUBACALHO



SCORCHED

Within the first ten minutes we came across a school of spanglies fifty strong. There tends to be a rule with them, you have about five minutes to get them to come in and have a shot before they run for deeper water. The smaller ones came straight in, but the spango horses were more leery. Exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, dive....calm and collected, know where your gear is and don't make any noise. Spanglies are skittish, if your buoy line rubs your fins, your snorkel lets out a gurgle or if you move too fast, the large ones swim into the particles, disappearing like ghosts.

This wasn't our day for them, always just out of range or just not enough time on the bottom. The middle part of the dive was void of any fish so we kept moving north until we found what we were looking for. A sand gutter that moved from eighteen meters up a three ledged reef to about five meters and the whole thing was covered in yellow tailed baitfish. As we drifted over the top there were large potato cods with rings around them where the school had given a wide birth. Three kingies went darting by, always a bit too far out and a school of small spanish mackerel hung right under us. Being that our trip had just begun I still wasn't sure which fish were sized. After chasing the kingies for a few minutes my dive buddy and I split to each take a side of the school, flank'em. Right as I lost sight of him I heard that familiar sound of a speargun being shot, maybe a kingy?

I turned to swim to him and there in five meters of water was a 20kg spanish mackerel. I dove down, waited for it to come a bit closer then let the spear fly, bam nothing like a gut shot? Not my greatest, but in the end I played it long enough on my buoy line to get a hold of it. After swimming it back to the beach with no shark interference my dive buddy told me that he had a shot at a good mackie too, but missed, thanks Kimbo!



RE-RIG

A few weeks later, having had a problem with my new speargun I took out my old trusty 1400. It had been sitting for the past two years in some pretty extreme heat and it would have been wise of me to re-rig it. But the conditions were just too nice and I couldn't bare taking more time for that. We launched the boat and headed 30 minutes out to a favorite dive spot, more reefy fingers to a sand gutter, then back to reef all around 20 meters. The water was clear and all four of us had high expectations. As the other two swam south, Autumn and I jumped in and went north, constantly scanning the bottom for fish. After reaching the northern outcropping we swung around to meet the others and heard the call, TUNA! Autumn

was already halfway down as the school of about fifteen 10 kg longtails raced past. Pop, pop, pop.....three of us let out shots. I think I heard the fish laugh at us as all the spears fell short! Within another ten minutes we had seen baldies, barracuda, a lone GT and some small spanish mackerel. But the energy was about to skyrocket! In the next instant a school of twenty-five 20+ kg spaniards came cruising straight under us. I watched my wife just miss her first mackerel opportunity as the school was already past her. In the other direction Matt took a shot and barely missed, the school didn't even flinch. I dove down, lined a large one up and shot. Through the head and out the gill plate, I came up giggling with excitement and let out a yell. In an instant that all changed as I leaned back on the buoy line and it went POP! I knew the shot would hold, did I loose my spear? My gun? What? As I raveled the line back in I could see my gun, no fish, no spear, no mono and a broken bungee. In looking at it, the worst part is loosing and in turn killing such an amazing fish. You can always buy another spear.

SHALLOW HUNTING

There were also days that the swell was too small to surf but too big to dive deep, this is when we hunted spanglies in the lagoons. The scorched earth leaves its red dust behind, transforming into sharp crags of raised reef.



Once you scamper down these you need to transverse the first shallow underwater reef that's happens to be covered in all makes and models of urchins, clams, barnacles and oysters. On the other side of that is a 2 meter deep gutter that runs parallel to the coast and where all the shallow hunting takes place. You usually see one or two nice spangled emperors right when you get in the water, if you're not fast enough, poof they're gone. After that the name of the game is spread out and wait. Spread out because the vis is never really that great in the lagoons and there's waves and current. The last thing you want to do is shoot your dive buddy. The first things that come are sweetlips and happy moments, then spanish flag and parrotfish. Patience is the key here, look behind the other fish, there is usually the ghostly grey figure of a spangly, waiting on you! Hug the bottom and lock your fins in so you don't move, line him up as he comes in then, plunk, and dinner.

TAKING MEMORIES

In the three months that we've been camping around I've seen some amazing things: I watched Autumn dive consistently to 11 meters and shoot her first few fish of the trip (one being a great baldy). She has also played the role of fish protector for the past four years, but this time has learned so much more about dealing with our hungry little friends. We came across our second tiger of the trip, just a small 9 footer and I got to swim around it for about ten minutes.

On three separate occasions we dove with dugongs, two of them hanging around for about ten minutes, seemingly as interested in us as we were in them. I'd swim down and it would swim away, but the second I'd stop moving it'd turn around and come straight up to me. I experienced for the first time ever having a whale swim directly under me. A friend and I were in 15 meters of water when a 10 meter whale came barreling underneath us. It took three tail kicks and was gone with a school of tuna and a few cobia in tow.

In all the amazement it reminded me that there would be no way to see or stop something coming that fast at you and how small we actually are in such a large pool.

One of the most amazing things is taking the time to get to know a spot. It's not about rushing in to fill the esky or tic the box on all the fish you've shot. It's about learning, enjoying and respecting where you are. With a bit more time you see the many faces and different creatures that the ocean has to offer, giving your trip diversity. Respect for the ocean and its marine life is what we all need to have. Only take what you need so there'll be fish for other people and food for other fish, in that way we can ensure that the scorched earth doesn't lead to a barren ocean.

