

10 HAUNTING WRECKS + BECOME A RESCUE DIVER

P26
**BEST
SAFETY
GEAR**
of 2017

SportDiver

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PADI DIVING SOCIETY 

The Adventure Guide

50 CAVES, WRECKS, SHARKS,
TRAINING COURSES
AND MORE



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017 VOL. 25 NO. 1

State of Diving

North Carolina

Historic wreck dives come with a side of toothy shark encounters off the eastern U.S. coast

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BRANDON COLE

If looks could kill, we would be hard-pressed to last 10 seconds in this rough company. Each beast appears more menacing than the next. Slack-jawed, snaggle-toothed and beady-eyed, there are at least a dozen of the bruisers crowding around us, 100 feet underwater in the shadows of the hulking *Atlas* shipwreck.

The sheer scale of elasmobranch biomass is daunting.

But rather than rip us to shreds with their diabolical dentition, the sand tiger sharks calmly hover alongside and lazily drift underneath and (most disarmingly) overtop us. They seem content to mind their own business, thinking who knows what kind of strange shark thoughts in their ancient shark brains. So rather than overanalyze the situation or flee in fear, I screw up my courage and line up the shot with my camera as a big one slowly approaches dead-on, pointed nose followed by mesmerizing maw ... and then glides right on by, right over my shoulder.

I flinch, of course, a puppet pulled by the strings of primal instinct. Turning about, I do my best to recompose myself as well as the picture, framing a photo emphasizing the shark's long, scythelike tail fin as it smoothly disappears into a cloud of baitfish. The shimmering school all but obscures a jumble of wooden timbers, metal plates and ribbing, the skeleton of this 450-foot-long ship, an oil tanker that sank in 1942 during World War II. Unarmed and in the wrong place at the wrong time, the *Atlas* was torpedoed by a German submarine off North Carolina's Cape Lookout.

I quickly decide to follow the shark through the curtain

DIVE IN

If you seek WWII wrecks and purpose-sunk ships, then **Morehead City, North Carolina**, should be your headquarters. You can dive there year-round, but summer is peak season for warmer (70 to 80 degrees), clearer water (30- to 100-foot viz), and generally better weather. atlanticsharkers.net



of scales, drawn by what lies in wait beyond. But before I can dive into the silver cloud, the minnows scatter, making way for a squadron of sand tigers. They are stacked up and out, 15 or 20 strong. One 9-footer hovers into view above my head, close enough that I can see the shark's sensory pores, the freakish copepod parasites on its snout and, of course, the unruly tangle of dagger-sharp recurved teeth. My eyes go wide and time stops.

My partner's flurry of strobe flashes breaks the spell. I hurriedly raise my camera and begin shooting too.

The rush lasts long after the sharks pass out of sight. Hanging on the line high above the wreck, our safety stop has turned into an extended chimping session. My buddy and I relive the dive's highlights, passing cameras back and forth, the glowing LCD screens full of sinister, toothy grins.

BOTTOM: ISTOCKPHOTO. OPPOSITE: FROM TOP: BRANDON COLE (3); ISTOCKPHOTO

TRIP TIPS

Fort Macon State Park History buffs should jump at the chance to tour this site, which played host to pirates like Blackbeard, multiple Civil War battles, and much more. ncparks.gov



Carolina Coastal Lighthouses If you're willing and able to climb the many steps, stunning views are the reward at the lighthouses at Cape Hatteras and Currituck Beach.



ITINERARY

1) *Atlas*

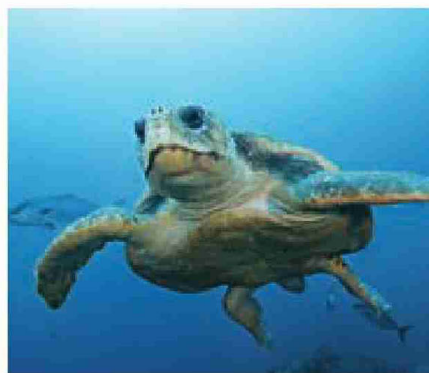
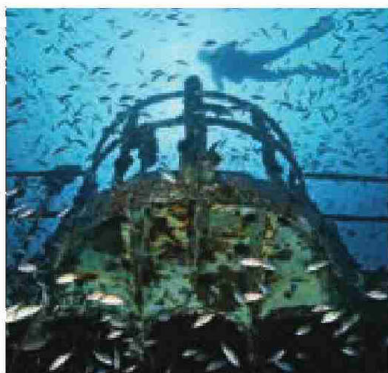
With the ship 90 to 120 feet deep, nitrox is a smart choice, within limits. It's long been a hot spot for large sand tiger sharks. A big school of curious spadefish often parades overtop. Visibility varies from 20 to 80 feet.

2) *Aeolus*

Purpose-sunk 25 miles offshore in 1988 as part of North Carolina's artificial-reef program, *Aeolus* is a great intermediate-level dive from 90 to 110 feet. Explore the "keyhole room" between decks where sharks often aggregate overtop red gorgonian sea fans.

3) *Spar*

This 180-foot-long U.S. Coast Guard cutter is a crowd favorite. Not only is the wreck intact and easy to navigate, but it also offers numerous penetration options and hosts sharks, barracuda, amberjack, the occasional butterfly ray, and schooling grunts.



Clockwise from left: Sand tiger sharks are the main attraction off North Carolina as they patrol the many nearby wrecks; a loggerhead sea turtle drifts off the Atlantic coast; a diver fins over the wreck of the *Spar*.



Wright Brothers National Memorial Stop here to take a tour of the exact site where the famed Wright brothers solved the mystery of flight, and explore models of their camp and test gliders.

Coastal Helicopter Tour See the Outer Banks from a different perspective, with views of lighthouses, wrecks and marine life in store — and be sure to plan the tour accordingly to avoid DCS risk. obxhelicopters.com