

Getting Chummy

Luring hammerheads with "The Sharkman" makes for a messy play date



story by Jennifer Chesak • photos by Mark Rackley & Christopher Ross

I

drain my Corona until the lime falls forward hitting my lip. A local, dining at the Conch Café in Marathon Key, catches my sheepish look and says, “If you can’t be yourself in the Keys, where can you be?”

Shooting the breeze in the mangroves with my new friend, “Larry,” uncovers the fact that he knows Manny “The Sharkman” Puig and Mark Rackley, the reasons I’ve just coasted down the Overseas Highway. Turns out Larry once had a diamondback take over his tool shed. Fearful of snakes, Larry called Manny. By the next day, Manny, being his calm and cool self, had returned the emptied shed to its rightful owner and secured a new belt in the process.

However, my interest in Manny and Mark (a daring photographer and videographer who never misses an adventure with Manny), is not to yield such an accessory. Morning finds me in Little Torch Key eyeballing the guys’ Trophy 2503 Center Console. “It’s fast, it’s dependable,” says Manny, loading up wetsuits and spear guns. “We are very happy to have this boat.”

Manny has been interacting with sharks since childhood. He’s hand-fed, been eye-to-eye with, and ridden on numerous species, including hammerheads—today’s goal. Manny and Mark’s encounters with creatures of the deep have appeared on the Discovery Channel and MTV.

We start out slowly in the Trophy, heading from gulf to Atlantic, and I’m entranced by the way the roots of the mangroves appear to cling to the sea. Then, just as Mark pushes the throttles of the twin four-stroke Mercury Verado™ outboards, the realization of what I’m about to be a part of chomps through my brain clutter, kicking up a spurt of adrenaline.

“We haven’t had a day like this in a long time!” Mark shouts, when we arrive at a reef. “Wait, don’t get in the water without me,” he says to Manny and John Buckheim, a spear fisherman and free diver. Manny, Mark and “John B.” assure me, they’ll keep me safe from all things sharp-toothed, so I slip over the side, too.

I duck my snorkel-clad head under the blue-green water and watch Manny dive, carrying his self-designed, handmade pole spear. It’s his scepter, and he is Poseidon, god of the sea. He impales a hogfish, pulls it off the spike and poses for Mark. Mark swings his underwater camera in John B’s direction just in time to catch him pulling the trigger on his spear gun. It discharges, and a yellowtail goes limp. A parrotfish swims into my peripheral vision, so I flounder after its perfect blue until it darts into a



cave and my lungs suggest I might be turning blue myself.

As I surface, my heart lurches into my throat. I’m staring directly at some very sharp teeth. I’d momentarily forgotten that Manny and Mark have some pretty menacing custom graphics on their Trophy. My heart stays in my esophagus when John B. swims up and tells me to flipper my way around to the ladder next to the Verados because a hammerhead’s in the distance. “But stay in the water,” adds Mark, joining us. “We want you to see this.”

Manny whips out his handmade knife and grabs the skewer full of freshly caught hogfish and yellowtail. While remaining underwater, he begins shredding, creating a chum slick around us. Manny slices faster, and I begin to twist my head in every direction in rapid concern a hammerhead might determine I’m the nicest chunk—a tall piece of winter-white flesh. Manny’s created the shredding frenzy to trick the shark into thinking we are creatures having a feast in the water ourselves. “That turns on a shark’s appetite,” he says later. But despite the friendly dining atmosphere we’ve provided, the hammerhead fails to make an appearance at our all-you-can-eat buffet.

John B. ventures off and spears another hogfish. A grouper eyes his bloody catch, so he offers his stringer to the black giant and bayonets the grouper just as it clutches the victim. Back onboard, the sight of the grouper placed in the cooler with its bait still in its mouth provides an in-my-face-and-nostrils reminder of the predator-prey dynamic and conjures



It’s his scepter, and he is Poseidon, god of the sea. He impales a hogfish, pulls it off the spike and poses for Mark.



fears of much larger jaws. And while sharks aren't looking to dine on humans, they can become aggressive if you try to interact with them, which is just what Manny and Mark do.

"A shark will just be swimming over there minding his own business," says Manny. "And we start doing stuff to get him to come over and mess with us." As for preventing the shark from messing them up, Manny says, "You use blocks and the right size bait and feed it at the right angles."

Manny and Mark study the different actions and reactions of each species they attempt to encounter, add the info to memory and try to get a little closer each opportunity. "The first time I rode on a great hammer-head, I put my hand on it really gently and slid it down from his neck until my hand caught his dorsal. And when he started to swim, I was riding on him."

The Sharkman and daredevil photographer do not lure these fierce predators of the sea to kill them. "The adventure for us is in education—for us and hopefully others as well. The best stuff you could ever take home is what Mark shoots. Without it, it's in the wind," Manny says.

A new location puts us at a hot spot for barracuda. I'm not in the water for ten seconds before Manny spears one with Mark hot on his flippers capturing it all. John B. borrows Manny's more primitive spear to poke an octopus. He tosses the creature, still alive, onboard, and it begins suctioning to the aggressive-grip textured surfaces, trying to escape. Mark stabs it dead, and John B. turns its head inside out, just in case, and throws it in the cooler next to the remaining bottles of Gatorade.

I enjoy more snorkeling with yellowtail before they meet their demise at the hands of John B. Manny waves me to the surface with his knife and says there might be a bull shark off in the distance. He heads off to investigate. A little crazy? Sure. One might say that about guys who do this sort

of thing—guys who hold their breath longer than most commercial breaks to chase fish and spear them in the hopes of luring ominous sea creatures. But I prefer the word "wild." Maybe "free." I slip back under for a better view of all that lurks, making my way back to the swim ladder. I'm greeted by a nice looking 'cuda, and I give him a wink through my goggles to pay homage to Larry, who was very right about the Keys. You can be yourself, whoever that may be. If you're a shark, Manny and Mark will accept you, and they expect you'll return the courtesy. Maybe it's a little wild to swim with sharks and expect not to get bitten, but if you can't be yourself in the Keys, where can you be?



(Above) Manny hitches a ride with an unlikely tour guide through the reef. (Left) Hanging low, Manny free dives, looking for ocean predators. For more on the 2503 Center Console, see page 12 of the catalog section.