

go swimming with the sharks.

...as in Sydney, they will warn you about the dangers of swimming in unprotected waters. The sharks, they will tell you, are ferocious—and they bite.

I am as frightened of sharks as the next man. But I don't believe in accepting too much on hearsay, you're liable to miss a lot of fun that way.

I have known people who were nervous of swimming in the open sea round New Zealand, though I have never heard of a shark taking anybody there. In Tonga last May many of the people, particularly the Europeans, told us we were mad to swim away from the reefs.

Yet we had no trouble and, as far as I know, no live person has ever been eaten by a shark in Tongan waters, at least for 20 or 30 years.

So when Dave and I rigged the sail on Leda's nine-foot dinghy one morning in preparation for a day on the Suva reef, we hardly gave the subject of sharks a thought. I was thinking of the shells I hoped to collect. Dave was probably thinking of the fish he was going to spear.

The weather was glorious. A gentle breeze, which would take us straight out to the reef and back again without any zig-zag business, bright sunshine and a clear blue sky.

Pleasant

TO me there are few things more pleasant than warm, dry, comfortable sailing on a day when nearly everybody is at work. In an hour we were over the reef.

It was full tide, and we carried on to a deep false entrance in the reef about a mile south of the entrance proper to Suva Harbour.

No need to drop the sail. There was little enough wind and the dinghy lay comfortably to her little anchor, which looked round a giant mushroom of brain coral 25 feet below the surface. Dave and I put on our flippers, face masks and snorkel breathing tubes.

We would spend about an hour in the water and then have some lunch, we said.

Dave took his spear. I had a small haversack for the shells I was going to dive for.

Shell gathering is quite a popular business in Fijian waters. White and mottled cowrie shells and the pale-hued spider shell fetch between 1/ and 3/ each. Conches are worth 16/ to £1 and, by the time they have been cleaned and made into reading lamps, they sell for anything from three to 10 guineas.

Cowries

THERE is always the chance that you will find a pink or orange cowrie, which may fetch anything from £15 to £100 a pair. Indeed, one pair is said to have been sold for £300.

The water, as usual, was clear and warm. Swarms of tropical fish milled round us and we coasted slowly along side by side, only the tops of our snorkel tubes showing above the surface.

Dave swam outside in the 30-35-foot level where the water was actually often so deep that you had no hope of seeing the bottom. I kept in the 20-25-foot level, which is about my class.

Dave speared a cod weighing 5.6lb. He broke his spear tip on his next fish, but the fishing was little better than we have found it anywhere in the tropics, so

he wasn't missing much. I found a few shells, but no rare cowries.

Most of the time the two of us spent simply looking at the sights, swimming along the surface for a while and then diving down 20ft or so among the teeming coral fish and great coloured branches of coral.

Cold

WE were both cold when we climbed out into the dinghy again, but it was not surprising for we found we had been in the water for nearly two hours. A quick lunch and we pulled up the anchor and sailed out to the channel entrance and then south along the outside of the reef.

We thought both shells and fish might be better in the ocean proper.

Arriving at a suitable spot we anchored in 30ft about 75 yards from where the surf was breaking on the coral. We had soon swum quite a long way from the dinghy.

Once when I lifted my head to see how far we were from the dinghy I saw a barracouta, perhaps a quarter-mile off, suddenly leap out of the water. He was at least three feet long, probably more, yet he flew over the surface with the speed of an artillery shell for 100 yards or more.

No help

HIS presence, though at a distance, did nothing to help my peace of mind.

We reached a deep, 20-foot trench in the coral and were swimming up it towards the surf when Dave suddenly touched my arm and pointed. Down in holes in the coral I saw the feelers of crayfish.

Dave went to work with his spear, digging it into the coral caves, thrusting home and then pulling it out. But the shells were too soft and the crayfish simply disintegrated and came out piecemeal.

Dave had been working less than a minute when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a big fish rolling about in the surf about 100 feet off. I looked again.

Yes, it was a shark. Five or six feet long, allowing for underwater magnification, and its ugly, protruding belly reminded me of pictures I have seen of tiger sharks. I put my hand on Dave's shoulder to attract his attention and pointed.

A nod

THE shark was swimming in an arc towards the open sea and coming no closer. Dave nodded perfunctorily and returned to his crayfishing. The shark disappeared.

About a minute later I was returning to the surface after

CORAL AND SHARKS BELOW



● Sandy Wilson (in the water), Dave Woolf, of Tauranga (in the boat)—and a conch-shell.

a dive when I glanced again along the reef. I think my heart probably stopped beating for a second or two.

Two quick kicks and I reached the surface. "Dave!" I yelled.

But the surf was roaring, he had his head under and didn't hear. I lunged across to him, put my hand on his shoulder and pointed again, though by this time there was scarcely any need.

Swimming up the trench towards us in unconcerned zig-zags, the tiny coral fish darting away from his head, was another shark. This one was a real whopper.

Palest grey above, and white below, he must have been either a grey nurse or a white shark, what some Australians call the White Death. To me, defenceless, practically naked, and feeling much as a fish out of water must feel, he seemed enormous.

On sober reflection we put his length at not more than nine or at most 10 feet. But I can tell you that looks very big under water at close quarters.

50 feet

BY this time the shark was no more than 50 feet away. Dave and I struck out at a tangent towards the dinghy,

keeping our heads below water so that we could watch the shark, and breathing through our snorkels. The dinghy was much too far away for any Tarzan sprints.

When the shark was 20 feet away he stopped getting any closer and I suddenly realized that it was the crayfish he was interested in, and not us. He nosed about in a circle round the spot where Dave had been digging out crayfish entrails with his spear, and we swam rapidly and steadily away from him.

We had gone perhaps 50 yards when I noticed that Dave was almost killing himself with laughter. By the time we reached the dinghy he was yelping with mirth. I left him to yelp, and scrambled into the dinghy.

We have not sighted any more sharks, although we have several times been out on the reef since then, but Dave says the thing to do if they get really close is to scream under water.

Sharks work on underwater vibrations and noise rather than sight or smell, he says. That's why they came round so quickly when he speared the crayfish.

Well, screaming will be no trouble to me, but I don't hope for any shark to get any closer than the last one.