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† On board with LEONARDO FERRAGAMO

Thirty metres below.

One fish.

One spear.

One hunter.

ONE BREATH

Daredevil superyacht owner
Chapman Ducote and writer *Shayne Benowitz*
brave the Bahamian depths to discover why
spearfishing is increasingly luring
adventurous owners overboard



PHOTOGRAPH: JAN BRUCE MILLER





IN SPEARFISHING, THE ACTION HAPPENS FAST...

I'm swimming next to Chapman Ducote at a spot known as Silver Hole in the Bahamas' Cay Sal Bank. His dive buddies Ian Miller and Rodrigo Franco circle us. The water's deep and the visibility isn't as good as expected. I can see for maybe six metres but the ocean floor is another six below that and then the blue hole (a deep sinkhole) drops hundreds of metres below that ocean floor.

When Ducote dives, I dive too, practising what he's taught me about prepping my breath, clearing my ears, taking a straight-down approach and counting my kicks.

The ocean reveals itself in layers. I spy the sandy sea-floor and a patchwork of coral heads along the edge of the abyss. Shafts of light refract through the cloudy water to where the bottom falls out. Maybe I'm nine metres deep. I hang for a moment and watch Ducote continue his free-dive into the hole on one breath, his three-metre Riffe pole spear in one hand. He looks like a toy diver in a child's aquarium. I dolphin kick to the surface and look down at the action below.

A school of snapper with brilliant yellow tails shimmers past us, then there is the whistling of a weapon fired underwater and the shock of the fish dispersing. Franco has a fish wriggling at the end of his spear.

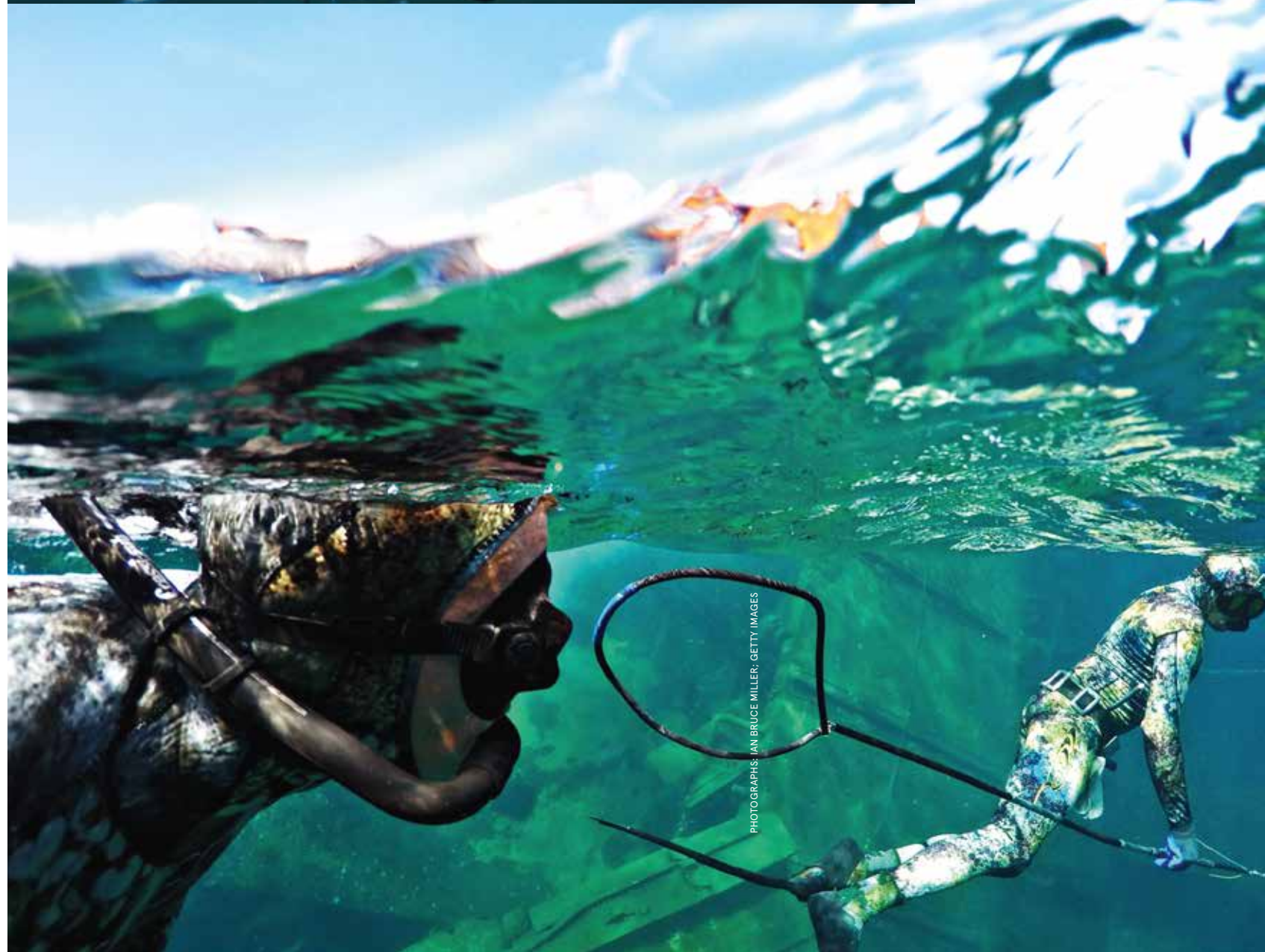
In an instant, the bull sharks are on us. Three of them, big - two or three metres long - dart at Franco like torpedoes. I hang back with Miller, manoeuvring myself around him, trying to keep my distance and stay calm, repeating, "OK" through my snorkel like a mantra.

Ducote swims into the fray as Franco forfeits his fish. One shark circles back aggressively at Franco's feet and he kicks at it repeatedly with his fins as another shark buzzes his side. On the shark's next approach, Ducote is there with his spear and hits it square in the nose, bending his pole. I peer above the water and, blessedly, the boat is right there. We hoist ourselves on to the teak platform of Ducote's Delta 54, unscathed and out of harm's way. "Is that enough excitement for you?" Ducote howls, tossing his mask and snorkel on to the platform, his bright smile beaming from the hood of his camouflage wetsuit.

These brushes with sharks don't faze Ducote and his friends, all experienced spear fishermen and free-divers who set off from Miami to the Bahamas every chance they get. And this wasn't the first or last encounter with sharks on our three-day journey through Cay



"Is that enough excitement for you?" Ducote howls, beaming from the hood of his camouflage wetsuit



PHOTOGRAPHS: IAN BRUCE MILLER; GETTY IMAGES



Above: Chapman Ducote. The rules are: one fish, one spear, one hunter. Left: in the Bahamas a pole spear must be used by law instead of spearguns



Left: loggerhead sea turtles on the march. Right: Ducote (on left) with Rodrigo Franco (also bottom right). Bottom: Ian Miller with a permit and yellow jack



Sal Bank, a largely uncharted area of 46 square nautical miles in the southern Bahamas, only a few miles north of Cuba.

The sport involves diving to depths of more than 30 metres on one breath of air, with nothing more than a mask, snorkel, weight belt – and spear. Most of our dives on this trip are in nine to 18 metres of water and the guys stay under for an average of a minute each dive. They're on the hunt for fish we can eat for dinner: blackfin tuna, grouper, wahoo, mackerel, permit, hogfish, snapper, mahi-mahi, African pompano and yellow jack.

When I ask Ducote if he has any interest in more traditional fishing, with a rod and reel from the back of the boat, his response is emphatic. "No, not at all," he says. "We don't even have fishing poles on the boat. There's too much waiting around and it's not athletic enough. You're just sitting on the back of the boat drinking beer, waiting for something to happen. I don't have the patience for that."

Spearfishing has an appealing simplicity and intensity of action. Although it has morphed from ancient hunting method to hobby, been upgraded in the 21st century with the invention of goggles and supercharged by mechanically powered spearguns, in essence it is about one fish, one spear and one hunter.

Aside from his other boat, the classic 24.69 metre Feadship *Anahita V*, Ducote's interests are as high-octane as the state-of-the-art Swedish yacht on which we're cutting through blue Bahamian waters. A decorated professional racing driver and entrepreneur based in Miami, Ducote's preferred speed is fast. The New Orleans native has been on the water as long as he can remember: he had his own three-metre Zodiac at four. Today, at 39, as Delta Powerboats' first North American distributor, he's like a kid in a sweetshop. "I always wanted to be in the boating industry, but I didn't think I'd be there by 40," he tells me.

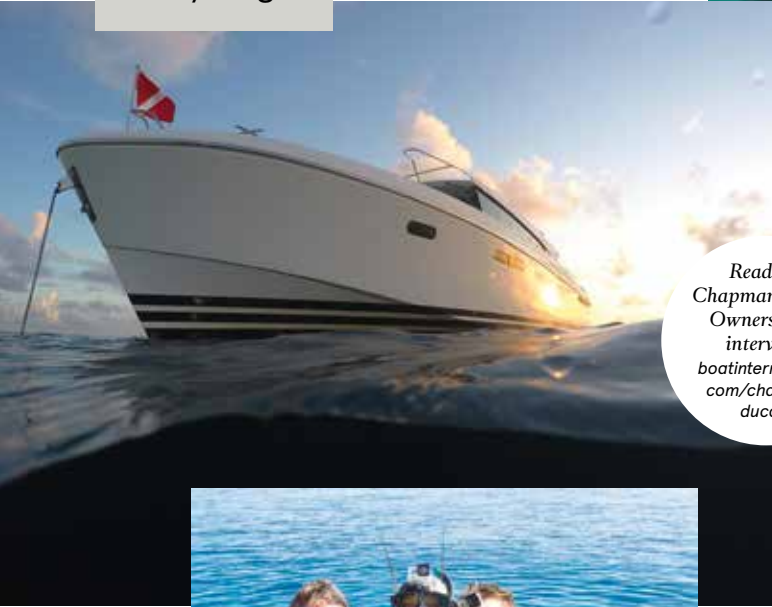
We've made our way to the western stretches of the bank and anchor near the uninhabited Cay Sal island just before sunset. The coolers are full of yellow jack, grouper, a giant permit and more spiny lobster and conch than we can count. The sunsets here are brilliant and this one ends in the fabled green flash, the denouement of the sun's disappearance beyond the horizon as an instantaneous neon spark.

We begin our nightly ritual of prepping dinner. The guys clean the fish while I chop vegetables and squeeze fresh lemon and lime juice for conch salad and yellow jack crudo. Lobster tails and permit fillets are slathered with butter and flame grilled, with Brussels sprouts and shishito peppers. Food doesn't get fresher than this.

After dinner, we climb to the cushions on the bow and gaze at the night sky. Free of light pollution, the Milky Way's band of stardust ►



PHOTOGRAPHS: IAN BRUCE MILLER



Read our
Chapman Ducote
Owners' Club
interview:
boatinternational.com/chapman-ducote



SPEARFISHING

The dos and don'ts

DO

Get trained in free-diving technique "Going at it without a solid foundation is dangerous," says Ian Miller. World-class instructors, such as 13-time spearfishing world record-holder Cameron Kirkconnell (cameronkirkconnell.com) teach the skills needed.

Get the right gear This includes snorkel, mask, fins, dive suit, weight belt and floats. Spearguns are prohibited in the Bahamas, so divers must work with pole spears or Hawaiian slings.

Know your fish It's important for conservation and sustainability, as well as ensuring you abide by local fish and wildlife service regulations, which dictate seasons and size requirements for species.

DON'T

Cower at the sharks "You have to show them you're alpha," Ducote says. "If a shark comes at you, swim towards him and assert your dominance." A person has a large presence in water. Most sharks take note.

Dive alone "It's a death wish," Ducote says. Shallow water blackouts can occur on returning to neutral buoyancy after a deep dive, when the brain is deprived of oxygen. "Only a vigilant dive buddy can assure your safety," Miller adds.

Drink and dive "Free diving is best enjoyed fully alert and sober," says Miller. "You don't need a drink to be entertained, adventurous or relaxed, just a pair of fins, a mask and a snorkel."



is clearly visible and shooting stars cross the bow. The only hint of civilisation is a glow on the southern horizon, the lights of Havana.

"We've got to stay another night," says Ducote in the morning, with his devil-may-care demeanour. The boat's cruising in 24 metres of very clear water and we can see straight to the bottom. Compared to the confused seas and wind chop on day one at the blue holes, it's flat calm now, with the rocks of Elbow Cay starboard, protruding from the water like a spine. We're the only boat in sight.

We stop to drift dive for about a mile, floating with the current and observing the world below: a giant stingray flutters along the ocean floor, a nurse shark snoozes by a patch of sea grass, a loggerhead sea turtle paddles to the surface. The water is brimming with lobster and we add to our bounty.

The Gulf Stream is with us on the three-hour journey back to Miami the next day, kicking our cruising speed up to 38 knots. After three full days in the water, the guys average about 100 dives each and the boat will have traversed close to 400 nautical miles. Franco holds the depth record at 29 metres, set while going after a giant lobster inside Shark Hole, and also the duration record at more than four and a half minutes on one breath, set while hunting lobster in a coral cave.

We come across a weed line – an accumulation of seaweed floating on the surface in a long, thick line shaped by the currents – and the guys hop into the velvety ribbons with their spears. "This is where we see tiger sharks," Miller warns me. I hang back on the deck. They're on the hunt for mahi-mahi and giant tuna, pelagic fish known to skirt the weed lines of the Gulf Stream. In five minutes, they spear five mahi, holding the electric yellow fish overhead before tossing them on to the platform.

We've been under way for only a few more miles when someone spots a pod of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. This time I squeeze into my fins, grab my mask and snorkel and jump in with everyone – tiger sharks be damned. We swim towards the pod and get close enough to dive alongside them for a few metres. Everyone comes up for air as the dolphins swim away, but our timing is perfect for the sunset. We tread water, the open ocean plunging hundreds of metres below us, and watch.

On the bow, under the night's sky with the Florida Keys glimmering to port, Miller mentions that the three bull sharks incident back at Silver Hole ranks in his top three shark encounters. So what are one and two? "Coming face to face with a three-metre tiger shark," he tells me. "And the time I shot a fish and two bulls went for it at the same time, smacking into each other at full speed right in front of me."

Lying on my belly on the bow, I can't decide if I'm freaked out, or if – as I hope – I've joined the tribe of divers who stay cool when confronted by an angry shark. It wasn't that scary, I tell myself. Or perhaps, more truthfully, swimming with sharks lurking in the shadows is scary as hell. And that's why they do it. ■