


A Look at San Salvador Island, Bahamas

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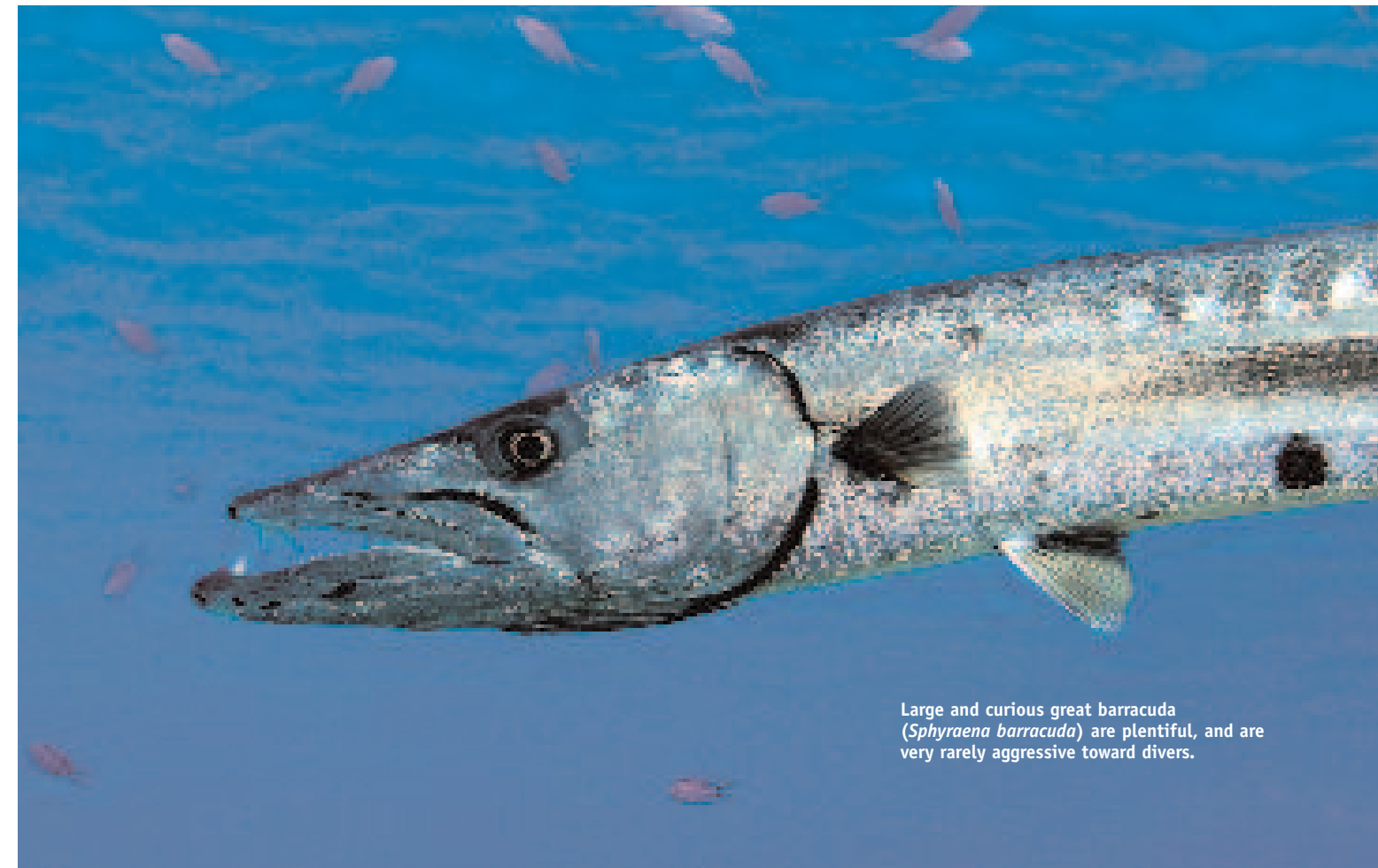
As an undergraduate geology student in 1990, I had the opportunity to take a school trip to San Salvador Island, one of the almost 700 islands that make up the Bahamas. The geology was impressive (to a geology student anyway), but it was also my first time to see a living coral reef and all its splendor. The trip literally changed my life, as I became a marine aquarist shortly after returning home, and have now written several books and a couple of hundred magazine articles on the subject. In fact, I liked it so much that I've returned for six more 10-day trips since then, simply for the diving at first, and later as a geology and biology instructor myself. Yes — I like the place, so I thought I'd share my experiences.

First of all, San Salvador Island is fairly far out, as far as Bahamian islands go. In fact, it's about 400 miles (644 kilometers) southeast of Miami. If you look for it on a map, it may show up under a different name, as it has also been called Columbus Island and Watling's Island in the past. It was called Columbus Island due to the fact that when Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, this was the very spot that he first found land. So, the discovery of Columbus Island was literally the discovery of the New World — the discovery by Europeans anyway, as there were already native islanders (Lucayan Indians) living there at the time. Watling was a 17th century pirate who operated from the island for a while, so that's where that name came from. However, San Salvador is the name that Columbus gave it in 1492 and somehow this name has made a comeback.

When I first started going to the island, the local population was a meager 400 people, and then Club Med came. The only runway on the island looked like a wide street and could only take small aircraft, but when Club Med arrived, they built a real one, capable of taking full-size commercial jet aircraft. Numerous jobs were created, of course, and the population now stands



The flamingo tongue cowrie (*Cyphoma gibbosum*) grazes on sea fans and other soft corals, leaving areas of exposed dark skeleton behind.



Large and curious great barracuda (*Sphyaena barracuda*) are plentiful, and are very rarely aggressive toward divers.