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Sherri Gardner Howell: Sharks didn't take a bite out of family beach time

It was Shark Week for the annual Howell-Melendy beach trip.

It's always Shark Week when we go to the beach, thanks to the Discovery Channel, which has been running a week of shark-infested television shows somewhere around July 4 for 28 years. The difference this year is that we paid attention.

The weeks leading up to our annual combined families' beach trip to Holden Beach, N.C., were filled with terrible stories of shark attacks very near our beloved beach. The coup de grâce was a well-circulated photo of two fins-up sharks in very shallow water just off our actual beach area.

After that, there was just no avoiding it. This was the year we weren't going in the water — at least not like we usually do.

The change had the least effect on me, except for the great photos I didn't get of the children riding the surf. I'm a beach-gazer, not an ocean-swimmer. The children, ages 5 months to 9 years, were just as happy to be at the pool playing Sharks and Minnows.

Although no one grumbled, I think it was the older "kids" who missed body surfing, riding the waves and holding on to their sons' hands as they jumped the surf just as their fathers had done with them.

Holden Beach did have some gifts for us. Dave and Diana discovered a sandbar just down from our rented house that made a terrific "beach pool" when the tide went out, so the kids did get some saltwater dips to go with their sandy play.

My new grandson — the incredible 5-month-old King — squished his toes in the sand, studied the experience with what is an all-too-familiar look for his Gigi and decided he liked it. The waves of nostalgia rolled over me as I remembered the exact same look on his father's face on the exact same beach 35 years ago.

The rest of the trip was vintage vacation. We ate like royalty, enjoying once again the culinary expertise of our children. We played games, watched bad movies, read good books, let Brett win a Hearts game or two and thoroughly enjoyed adults and children alike. When the major complaint is that the week is too short, it's a good week.

I think we all hope that next year the water temperature or fishermen chumming the water or dummies shark-fishing off the pier will go away, and the sharks will return to the deep recesses of their home so we can feel safer in the water. But, swimming in the ocean or not, the lure of Holden Beach remains the same for me. It's friends and family set against the endlessness and sameness of a beautiful place.

That, my friends, is blessings aplenty.

Sherri Gardner Howell may be reached at gardners@tds.net.

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