

Shark Bridge

This is a remarkable, anciently-constructed grey-brick bridge with concrete mortaring that crosses one of the series of sea-bed fissures known as “The Clawmarks”, in the Kachayan Ellenge Province. It lies about 30 kilometres (20 miles) north-northeast of Ellenge town, and some 560 km (350 miles) off the nearest coast of Errynor in northwest Alarius. The sea-bed nearby is about 500 metres (1,650 feet) below the sea’s surface, which means the Bridge and its surroundings are in permanent darkness, as being well below 200 m of water (about 660 ft).

The top of the Bridge is level with the adjacent sea floor, and runs west to east over the fissure. It rests on a gigantic, similarly brick-built, semi-circular arch, constructed into the fissure’s sides to a distance of almost 460 m (1,500 ft) below the Bridge’s surface. The fissure where the Bridge crosses it is about 920 m (3,000 ft) wide at its narrowest point on the sea-bed’s surface. The maximum depth of the fissure is unknown. By comparison to these measurements, the Bridge itself is remarkably slender, at just 12 m (40 ft) wide.

The bricks must have been manufactured on land, judging by their neatly-rectangular forms and nature, although by whom, when and why remain mysteries. The sea floor slopes down from the general level for about 2-3 km (1-2 miles) to either side of the fissure, yet it shows no sign of any similarly-constructed surface habitation, nor is there any trace of a road or trackway leading to the Bridge. A second, nearly identical, brick bridge crosses another of the Clawmark fissures around 180 km (110 miles) northwest of Shark Bridge. Both are in good repair, yet show no evidence of maintenance to their structures since they were built.

Shark Bridge though has had some recent additions made along its upper surface, where the Kachaya have built three *circa* 75 m (250 ft) tall Watch Towers, one in the centre, and one each halfway between this Tower and the Bridge end. The middle Tower was set-up first, then the West Tower, followed by the East one, which latter is still being worked upon.

Below the base of the arch are two sets of caverns used as strongholds by the Kachaya. The West Caverns are the larger, and have been in regular use for longer. Although often considered a single place by the folk of Ellenge Province elsewhere, in reality the two sets of Caverns are more like neighbouring villages, with the Bridge and its Towers as a “military way” between, for all their relative physical separation. The group of settlements is run on nominally military lines, although the discovery of important gemstone deposits in both sets of Caverns has begun changing the dynamic more recently, as the populations have increased to exploit these. In turn, this has brought in more agriculturally-knowledgeable Kachaya to help improve the self-sufficiency of the settlements. Currently, the West Caverns are largely controlled about equally by the miners and the military, the East Caverns by farmers and the military.

There is also believed to be Something Unknown in the depths of the fissure somewhere fairly nearby. It seems to be held in-check currently by some unidentified force, but is the main reason for the building of Watch Towers along the Bridge.

The three Towers and the West and East Caverns are each detailed by separate maps and descriptions in the Community Atlas. This Shark Bridge map depicts three aspects of the Bridge and its surroundings, each of which is discussed separately below, after some general comments regarding the Kachaya themselves.

The Kachaya

Kachaya are of a generally humanoid form and Human-like size, thus have a body with four limbs and head, all of which are scaled, with hands and feet also similar to those of Humans, but rather larger, with sharp claws instead of nails, and webbing between their fingers and toes. Roughly 1 in 200 is born with four usable arms instead of two; typically, they grow to be taller than the average. Males and females are physically similar, though females are more commonly magically proficient. All have small control fins on their arms, legs and back. Their heads are ruggedly square by Human norms, their faces flattened, with large, dark, forward-facing, fish-like eyes, a mouth full of robust, sharply pointed teeth, and spines around the edges of their faces which can look like horns, partly hence their common name of "Sea Devils". They are all able to breathe freely above or below the water, though they can breathe air for only quite short periods. They prefer to live in deep, quiet waters, which is where they are more liable to be encountered, and hence their own name for themselves means "The Quiet-Water Folk". Their communication is largely telepathic when undersea, within eye-to-eye range (they have a normal vision range even in the darkness of the deepest oceans, albeit seeing only in black-and-white unless some light is present), or vocal speech in air, though they can use either at any time. They have a bioluminescent patch above each eye that they can show or hide at will too, which can be used to communicate over greater distances in the dark. They are also able to use a sonic attack when in water from time to time, over typical hand-to-hand combat distances. They pair-bond and maintain loose family structures, giving birth to live young that mature to adult forms in 8-10 months, young that are able to feed and look after themselves independently from birth. While social standing can be determined by heredity, aptitude and forcefulness are more important, because although adults can live to be 50 or so, most die younger, often by violence or accidents. Although a few favour a wandering, nomadic lifestyle, most Kachaya prefer a more fixed existence. Their seafloor settlements are normally of domed buildings with round access-points, the whole sometimes concealed within natural features such as fissures, reefs or caverns. These settled Kachaya carry out some fish and coral farming, but like the nomads, they frequently supplement this by raiding other undersea settlements and surface vessels. Kachaya leaders tend to be physically and/or magically strong individuals, and although they have an aristocracy of sorts, their leaders do not necessarily come from it. Such leaders usually survive only as long as their strength and success lasts. (The Kachaya are loosely similar to the Sahuagin of D&D.)

Shark Bridge Fissure Area Map

The top segment of the map provides a detailed overview of the sea bed for some 8 × 6 km (5 × 4 miles) around Shark Bridge and its fissure line. The fissure is a very deep, elongated, narrow, sea bed fracture line. It runs roughly north to south in a gentle arc hereabouts. It extends for another *circa* 11 km (7 miles) off this map's southern edge, and nearly 30 km (20 miles) off its northern side. The sea bed slopes down from its typical

level nearby towards the fissure, rather more steeply on its eastern side than to the west, before descending in near-vertical cliffs to whatever depth it finally attains.

Apart from the line of the Bridge itself and the locations for the two sets of Caverns cut into the fissure's sides below the Bridge's arch, a number of other local items are illustrated. Black symbols show living creatures, while red symbols indicate fixed physical features.

Creatures

Corals: Although more cold-water corals are present close to the Kachayan Shark Bridge settlements (for clarity, not shown on this map), the one marked area near the southwestern brink of the fissure is simply a natural reef of its type. Its main longitudinal mound along, and sometimes over, the edge is around 30 m long and up to 12 m high (roughly 100 by 40 ft). Smaller mounds are scattered on the sea bed nearby, further from the fissure cliffs. The corals are of relatively low-growing forms.

Eels: Swarms of eels commonly congregate along the southern side of Shark Bridge from time to time, taking advantage of waste and nutrients stirred-up into the water by the activities of the Kachaya. The Kachaya sometimes hunt the eels for food in return.

Fish: Shoals of ordinary, edible, fish sometimes use the northern part of the mapped fissure line as a spawning or resting ground. Again, the Kachaya use them as a huntable food source, when they find them.

Giant Sharks: These great beasts like to collect in groups on the western slopes not far from Shark Bridge on occasion, encouraged by the Kachaya, who deliberately feed them, given they also catch and use the sharks as beasts of burden at times. Such sharks remain essentially wild, so cannot be regarded as altogether reliable, however.

Glass Sponges: A number of the living creatures shown here are large enough and fixed to the sea bed in quantities sufficient to count as useful landmarks in the often otherwise featureless sea floor plains. Glass sponges have a variety of tubular, columnar forms, often cylindrical, vase- or barrel-shaped. All commonly grow to at least 40-50 centimetres tall (16-20 inches), with a diameter ranging from a few centimetres/inches up to a metre/yard or more (for the barrel forms only in this latter case). They are often translucent to transparent, and have an internal silica skeleton, which can remain in place long after the creature itself has expired. Three such "groves" are present on the map, two southwest of the fissure line, one northeast of it.

Hydrozoans: Like the glass sponges, these are another form of sedentary, filter-feeding animal that can be noted in groups obvious enough to be considered a handy landmark. Numerous vaguely plant-like individual growth forms can occur, some like miniature trees (an "ornamental" kind with a single stalk "trunk" with tentacular "branches" at the top, or a fern-like form with "branches" extending from the stalk at levels up the whole stalk), others like huge quill pens (the largest type commonly found). The creatures are protected by hard calcareous or horn outer casings. Three hydrozoan "copses" are apparent, all on the west bank of the fissure. The two more southerly are of the "ornamental" type,

reaching up to 20 cm from the sea floor (8 in), while the northern group are of chiefly the “quill pen” sort, which grow up to 50 cm tall (20 in).

Jellyfish: Although two areas are marked for these by the central eastern and western map edges, groups of such creatures may be encountered equally at times on any point along the line between the two symbols, including around Shark Bridge, which is also on that line. Even if not met with directly, their blue bioluminescent displays may be spotted at some distance from where the creatures are.

Killer Fish: Two places where shoals of carnivorous fish are more frequently present are marked towards the southern edge of the map. They are otherwise similar in shape, pale colouring and form to the ordinary, edible fish shoals found elsewhere. Some of the Kachaya believe that catching and eating such fish will increase their physical and magical powers, so they too may be found nearby hunting - or hunting for - these fish.

Nautiloids: Groups of hunting, coiled-shell nautiloids up to 30 cm (a foot) in diameter are often encountered to the southwest of Shark Bridge, drawn here by animals attracted to the activities of the Kachaya. While relatively harmless to human-sized humanoids and larger creatures, their numbers can be a distraction or a nuisance sometimes.

Squids: On the opposite bank of the fissure from the nautiloids, groups of squid commonly congregate, for similar reasons to the nautiloids on “their” bank. Individuals among them can reach 50 cm long (20 in), and occasionally they may be joined by - or rarely, the group may be composed entirely of - the near-transparent deep-water squids, which are commoner below about 450-500 m, 1,500-1,600 ft. These deep-water forms have only small light-reflecting patches - often over their eyes and coating their livers - to give away their presence visually. They can be of similar size to the squids normally encountered here higher in the water column.

Water Elemental: A thinning of the veil between the plane of water and the normal physical plane occurs in this minor valley head west of the fissure, which sometimes allows a lesser water elemental to slip through into the ocean here for a time.

Features

Caves: Not far below the western rim of the fissure where indicated, are openings in the cliff-face leading into a number of unoccupied caves - or at least, ones not currently occupied by anything obviously inimical. So far as the Kachaya are presently aware...

Fossil Humanoid Footprints: The unshod walking footprint tracks of several, probably adult, humanoids cross a section of flat basalt rock by the southeastern edge of the fissure. The tracks pass over the surface in various directions, some as if in small groups. details are vague, and the nature of the creators cannot be identified. At least one set of tracks passes below more basalt rock. This raises a number of points, as the tracks must have been made while the rock was still at least partly molten, and as the rock was almost certainly created very anciently on the sea floor, the creatures must have somehow walked across it with the gait and pressure more usually associated with creatures only on land.

The tracks do not seem to continue on the opposite, western, bank of the fissure, although the coral mounds there could conceal some.

Vertical Section at Shark Bridge

This to-scale cross-section through Shark Bridge shows the physical size of the Bridge's arch, and the relative locations of the features built or used by Kachaya on and around the Bridge, including a single access tunnel that leads directly from the nearby sea floor surface at Bridge top level to each of the West and East Caverns below the base of the arch. Some say it is this view of the Bridge's arch that gave it its name, the arch being supposedly like the curve of a shark's mouth.

Plan View of Shark Bridge and the Cavern Strongholds

A more detailed overhead view of the Bridge-top constructions, and the relative positions of the Caverns far below compared to the Bridge. The constructions and Caverns are mapped and discussed separately. The Bridge is 40 ft wide, and drawn to-scale here (12 m).