

Soap's wild thing

# There's no taming her!

Emmerdale's Nicola Wheeler is crazy about her Caribbean friends. By Steven Smith

**A**s Emmerdale's scheming Nicola Blackstock, actress Nicola Wheeler is no stranger to wild behaviour. But when Sunday took Nicola, 30, and sister Penny Palmer, 31, for a luxury break in the Dominican Republic, the local wildlife had the bad girl quaking in her boots.

Nicola was on a visit to Ocean World when she got the chance to swim with and feed sharks.

"The Jaws theme tune was playing which had me quite worried," laughs Nicola. "When I saw the sharks in the tank it did nothing to calm my nerves!"

"Once in the water, a shark was brought to me and placed on my lap. I mean, can you believe that I let them do that? And the sheer force of its body as it takes fish off you is just awesome!"

The luxurious hotel she stayed at is a far cry from Nicola and Penny's humble upbringing. Their parents toiled hard for them and their brother.

"Mum often worked 10-hour shifts at the factory," says Penny. "Dad worked equally hard. So we became quite independent."

But later their parents split up. Penny recalls: "We were left quite poor. But nobody was more resilient than our Nicola. Small as she was, she had two paper rounds and,

for good measure, worked in an Italian restaurant."

Life didn't get much easier for Penny once she had a family of her own, either.

"Once she was so broke she had to raid the motor," says Nicola. "She has three children now – and her ability to smile through any situation, no matter how bad, inspires me."

Penny adds: "Nicola was born premature and, because she was so tiny and covered in white down, I nicknamed her 'Monkey' until her body hair dropped off."

Nicola got her first big break playing Melanie Tindel in

**"Nicola can be a handful"**

Coronation Street in 1999.

"I was so proud when I first saw her in it," Penny declares.

"People often ask if she is like the bitch she plays in Emmerdale. Well, she can be quite a handful if you get on her wrong side! But I couldn't wish for a better sister."

The feeling's mutual, says Nicola. "If I needed advice on boyfriends and babies, Penny's the first person I'd turn to."

● Nicola and Penny went with Direct Holidays – 0870 242 2404 for brochures, 0870 191 9085 for reservations, or visit [www.directholidays.co.uk](http://www.directholidays.co.uk). This summer, 14 nights all-in at the five-star Hotel Iberostar Costa Dorada in Playa Dorada, based on two adults sharing a twin room, costs from £825-£1,069 per person, children £399-£679.



Nicola at Ocean World, diving on the parrots. "Given I'll be sunbathing and find a bird chacking out my handbag," she says.



At Paradise Island towards the High Dories, Nicola got the chance to become a mum with a pelican. She says: "The turquoise water and the shorebirds are just breathtaking."



"After chacking out three parrots, I tried my luck with the sharks," says Nicola. "Really! Don't mess with the Caribbean! Back home in Emmerdale!"



Nicola and Penny enjoy a paddle as they lap up every minute of the Dominican high life. "Scarborough was never like this," says Nicola.



"Bonding with the dolphins is an amazing experience," says Nicola. "As well as hugging and kissing this adorable baby at Ocean World, I even got to dance with her. It was low and, believe me, I didn't want to say goodbye. The Emmerdale lot can keep their kippers."

"The white water rafting in Jarabona has to be tried to be believed," says Nicola. "It makes the ups and downs in Emmerdale seem as smooth as a pint of Yorkshire's finest! It's hard work, though. You're expected to do your share of the rowing and, trust me, you end up with muscles you never thought you had. Ouch! Great for adrenaline junkies."