

Meet the Great White at Isla Guadalupe

The red rocks of **Isla Guadalupe** blazed in the morning sun, a clear sky welcoming us after a stomach-churning 14-hour crossing. Lapping waves and the cries of fur seals on the nearby shore were the only sounds to be heard one hundred fifty miles from the mainland. The water roiled as foot-high fins sliced the surface like a knife through cerulean silk. It was a perfect day for a dive.

"We've got a 16-footer," announced Patric Douglas, CEO of Shark Diver, the outfit leading our expedition. From beneath his shades, Douglas beamed like a proud papa as he pointed out the great white circling the cages. Not wanting to miss the action, I hustled to join the other divers, who had already scurried to squeeze themselves into wetsuits before the great white disappeared back into the cobalt depths.



Moments later, after almost getting thrown into the water by the surge, I was safe within the 100-square-foot cage, the hookah regulator looping from between my clamped teeth to the deck above. The current tossed the cage -- and us -- only slightly more gently than a washing machine.

And then it appeared. Like a phantom shadow, the shark approached from below, slowly swishing its massive tail side to side as if it had all the time in the world. This was nothing like spotting a shark confined in an aquarium's tank. With our cage dangling over the side of the 88-foot MV Horizon, my cagemates and I were well aware that we were but visitors in the shark's domain.

As the behemoth approached, we determined it was a female, and as she glided past just inches from our cage, her length was so great it seemed forever before she passed. I'd heard that great whites could reach such lengths -- and longer -- and for better perspective, I'd told myself I'd be seeing creatures roughly the length of a VW bus. What I hadn't counted on was the girth. I'd joked to landlubber friends that I was going to ride a shark, but after seeing how wide a female could grow, there was no conceivable way I could have saddled one, even had I been suicidal enough to try such a ridiculous (and illegal) feat. The six-foot-wide creature slid past, her black eye so close we could see the pupil, which made the shark even eerier than when she appeared to have two black, unseeing orbs.

When I emerged 45 minutes later, I had a grin as toothy as a great white's. Douglas slapped me on the back after helping me out of the cage and back on deck. "Pretty boring, eh?" He guffawed at his own joke as I racked my brain for an appropriate adjective. What emerged from my mouth cannot be printed in most publications of repute.



Only in the last few years have these waters, under the jurisdiction of the Mexican state of Baja California del Norte, earned fame for its white shark population. Other locations around the globe -- Australia's **Great Barrier Reef**, South Africa's notorious **Shark Alley**, and even San Francisco's **Farallon Islands** -- have long been renowned for their notorious aquatic residents, but **Isla Guadalupe** has quickly become a favorite, as much for its convenient location (an overnight sail from San Diego) as for its warm waters and astounding visibility, which can reach up to 100 feet. Such ideal conditions attract not only adventure-seeking divers such as my shipmates but also scientists in search of primo research conditions.

During shark season (September through November), at least 50 white sharks -- and possibly as many as 100 -- patrol the waters, estimates marine biologist Mauricio Hoyos, who spends several months a year camped out in a tin shack a couple yards away from a fragrant fur seal colony. He and a couple dozen lobster and abalone fishermen comprise the whole of the population of the island, a desolate red rock long since made devoid of vegetation by a marauding pack of abandoned goats.

After dinner our second night, Hoyos presented his most recent findings to a galley of rapt shark aficionados. We felt special, privileged even. Not only were we among an elite few -- a couple hundred a year at most -- to visit these waters, but we were getting a first-hand account with the most up-to-date information on sharks available.

Shark Diver provides a great deal of aid -- both financial and practical -- to Hoyos and his project. The crew has provided almost all of the research photos of the sharks, duplicates of which exist in a massive binder in the ship's galley, each labeled with the shark's name and distinguishable markings so that passengers can identify underwater visitors. Divers, inspired by Hoyos' shipboard stopovers, often go on to send donations or even specifically requested equipment. Shark Trust Wines, which has graced the table of many a Shark Diver meal, donates a portion of its profits to both shark conservation and research. The combination of first-hand encounters, freshly caught scientific knowledge, and cultured respect for the creatures we came to visit was but one of the many aspects of the trip that made it unique.



As we entered the galley our final night at Guadalupe, we did so solemnly, well aware that our once-in-a-lifetime experience was drawing to a close. It was then we discovered that our congenial chefs had taken it upon themselves to whip up a farewell meal we wouldn't forget, which included the 60-pound yellowfin tuna that had been

caught the day before. Divers and crew retold the tale of how we'd almost had two such tuna on our tables that night, and those who'd had the good fortune to be in the cages at the time shared their photos and video.

Unlike the tuna caught earlier that last day, the dinner yellowfin had been landed whole, without a shark-sized chunk missing. There had been quite a ruckus onboard -- and below -- as Melanie Marks, founder of Shark Trust Wines, began reeling in a yellowfin, much to the excitement of a patrolling white just below the boat. The occupants of the cages had a spectacular view as the great white circled slowly toward the fish struggling on the line then zipped towards its prey with astonishing speed. With a single chomp, the fish was severed just behind the gills, and Marks had no problem reeling in what remained of her catch. She shrugged, well aware that's what you get when you fish at the "sharkest place on Earth."

By Jenna Rose Robbins (Jena is a freelance writer and editor based in the Los Angeles area. She can be reached via e-mail at jenna@jennarobbins.com)

Date: 2009-01-26

Article link:

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