

Adventure





A dip with the devil

Face-to-face with the Great White Shark on a cage dive in South Africa is a chilling experience, but it's also about marine conservation and a love for the wild.

Text **Stephen Cunliffe**

When the azure seawater beckons, do you ever find yourself wondering what might be lurking just below the surface? Since as far back as I can remember, Hollywood movies like *Jaws*, *Deep Blue Sea* and *Open Water* have struck fear into the hearts of beach-going, ocean-lovers the world over. Sea-goers start quaking in their proverbial flippers at the mere mention of the word 'shark', and no shark can conjure up these feelings of trepidation quite like the notorious Great White. Ever since Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* burst onto the scene in 1975, sharks have had a shockingly bad reputation. And the enduring global fear frenzy that erupted in the wake of those movies contributed to the merciless butchering of an estimated 100 million sharks per year in recent times.

A different light

But, are sharks really the bloodthirsty monsters the movies portray? During the last decade, a new school of thought has emerged depicting sharks simply as misunderstood super-predators of the ocean realm. The Great White and its shark brethren are finally being viewed in a more honest light. They are, after all, simply the tigers of the sea: apex predators in their aquatic kingdom. These awesome creatures have evolved over millennia into sleek, powerful oceanic carnivores and scavengers, and their presence is absolutely essential to a healthy functioning marine ecosystem.

Since their inception in the '90s, shark tours and cage diving have been dogged by controversy. There has been considerable debate over whether tour activities have in any way contributed to an increase in attacks, or whether the sharks' natural behaviour has been adversely affected. Shark-viewing boats use crushed sardines and fish guts to create

◀ **In False Bay, there's an island that's one of the main breeding sites for the Cape Fur Seal. The seals attract many Great Whites and some of the biggest sharks ever seen have been spotted in these waters.**

an irresistible oily chum slick that targets the Great Whites' keen sense of smell, attracting the sharks into the boat's area of operation. Thereafter, large tuna heads are attached to a rope and trawled across the surface to entice the sharks right up to the side of the boat and its dive cage.

Is this an acceptable practice? After all, when we go on safari in Bandhavgarh, we don't attract tigers with dead prey! This begs the question: should the oceanic equivalent be condoned? The answer, at least in the short-term, is almost certainly 'yes'. Shark tours and cage diving operations contribute to shark conservation by providing valuable research data and educational opportunities. By changing people's negative perceptions and fostering a better understanding of the Great White, these previously feared and much-maligned creatures will have a considerably better chance of survival.

Gansbaai: The epicentre

It was with mixed feelings that I boarded the Barracuda in Kleinbaai harbour for a four-hour boat cruise in search of my first Great White encounter. The engines gurgled ominously as we chugged away from the sleepy fishing village of Gansbaai



Apex - Chris Fallows

▲ Above: Even though *Jaws* depicted the great white shark as a "ferocious man eater", in reality, humans are not its preferred prey. It's another thing that their jagged teeth and glassy eyes can strike fear in anyone's heart.

Below: Sharks are surface feeders by nature and this ensures spectacular action right alongside the boat and dive cage.

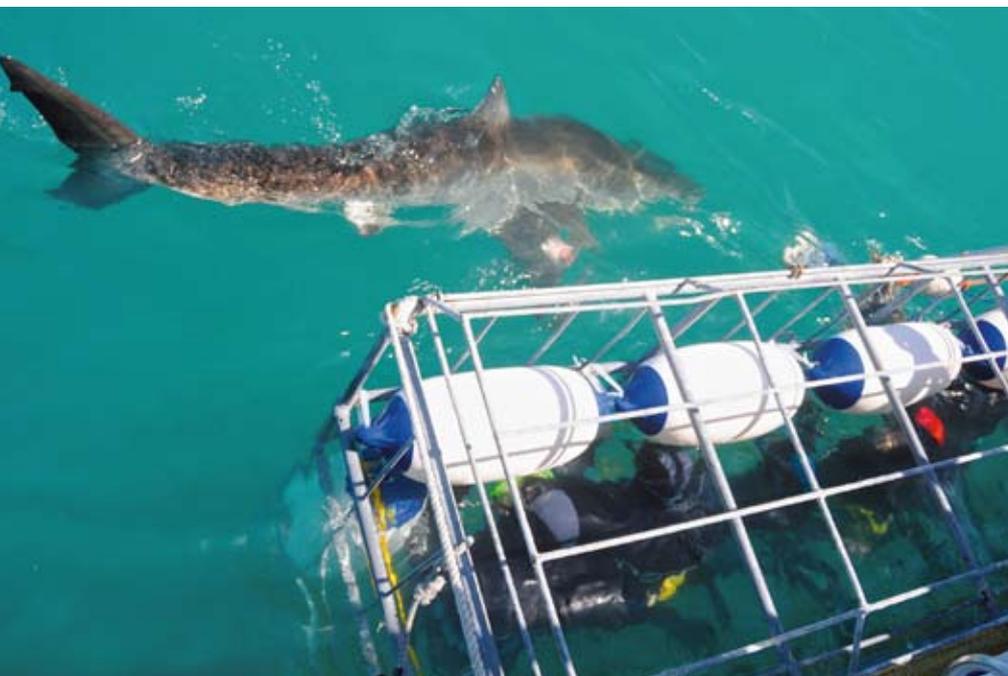
and headed into a rolling sea for the half-hour ride out to Geyser Rock and Dyer Island. Dyer Island is a major African penguin breeding ground, while Geyser Rock is home to a colony of 40,000 Cape fur seals. In between these two islands lies a shallow channel fittingly named 'Shark Alley' – a prime feeding ground for sharks that is rightly considered the Great White viewing capital of the world.

After less than an hour of chumming and baiting, the first sleek shark made its graceful and swift appearance from the murky depths. With their remarkable faculty to sense blood from over a kilometre away, it was not long before three more enormous Great Whites honed in on the enticing scent of the fishy chum slick surrounding our boat. As I watched a dorsal fin slice silently through the water towards the boat, my heart involuntarily skipped a beat. The undisputed lords of the deep had arrived.

The moment of reckoning

Mike 'Sharkman' Rutzen was running the tour and he threw out some staggering numbers, "The Great White is one of the oldest creatures on the planet. Although the average size of these sharks is 12 to 16 ft, they are capable of growing to a whopping 21 ft in length. Their massive size and serrated teeth cause many people

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GWST - Henmie Krugel



ASEC - Rob Lawrence



▲ Clockwise from above: The Great Whites ambush cape fur seals from below at high speeds, hitting the seal mid-body. The peak burst speed of these sharks is accepted to be above 40 kmph; In False Bay, shark attacks most often occur in the morning, within two hours after sunrise when visibility is poor; The Great White is one of the few known sharks to regularly lift its head above the sea surface to gaze at other objects and prey. This behaviour is known as 'spy-hopping'.

observing and photographing the gigantic sharks from the safety of the upper deck as they glide around the boat and cage.

Sharks can fly

African Shark Eco-Charters and Apex Shark Expeditions both operate out of Simonstown and offer a range of shark-viewing trips aimed at observing natural predation and breaching behaviour in False Bay. Breaching takes place when a shark launches itself out of the water in a graphic demonstration of the predator's incredible power. The most popular tour option is the five-hour excursion known as Air Jaws, which combines searching for these flying (breaching) sharks with an opportunity to try out cage diving during the course of a seriously action-packed morning.

Blue Pointer II departed the Simonstown harbour pier at some ungodly hour for the 20-minute ride out to Seal Island. There was, however, good reason for our early departure, as the crepuscular Great Whites tend to display their most intense hunting behaviour around first light. False Bay is world-renowned for offering the ultimate opportunity to observe Great White breaching: an athletic airborne-hunting tactic used by the sharks to prey on the abundant Cape fur seals found in the waters around the island.

to view them with fear and trepidation, but by the end of today you'll leave with a newfound respect for these majestic sea creatures."

Watching the gigantic sharks circle our boat, I was far from convinced. When I pulled on my wetsuit and donned my mask, I could feel my heart thumping and the adrenaline pumping. As I prepared to clamber into the dive cage surrounded by sharks, the Sharkman's final comments did little to relax me, "The first time you see all those razor-sharp teeth bearing down on you, you're probably going to be so petrified you'll wet your pants, but, don't worry, at least nobody will be able to notice underwater!"

Sharks are surface feeders by nature and this ensured spectacular action right alongside the boat and cage. A crewman threw out a bait-line with a bunch of tuna

heads attached to the end. As soon as one of the sharks approached the bait, he would pull it towards the cage, luring the fearsome creature towards us. From the safety of the cage, we listened to the onboard dive-master who kept an eye on the sharks and told us exactly when to submerge. "Hold on; wait a bit; go down now!" With my head barely half a metre below the surface, I peered into the murky water trying to pick up the approaching shark. Huge jaws with banks of vicious-looking razor-edged teeth suddenly obstructed my view. I was eye-to-eye with my first Great White.

I have to say that in the end I think Sharkman was absolutely right. Staring over row upon row of jagged teeth into the glassy eye of the ocean's most formidable predator was in fact a strangely exhilarating and humbling experience. However, for the faint-hearted, there is always the option of

Great Whites often attack their quarry with such force and explosive energy that they propel themselves and their hapless prey clear of the water and False Bay's Seal Island is the ultimate place to witness this unique breaching behaviour. When a one-ton shark launches itself out of the water with such tremendous speed and force that it clears the surface by over two metres, you can't help but feel insignificant.

The first seal hunt we observed was a heart-stopping affair that skipper Rob Lawrence aptly described as: 'an extremely compelling predatory encounter that won't be forgotten in a hurry'. I would have to agree that watching a natural predatory event is an intensely moving experience that conjures up conflicting emotions. When a breach is unsuccessful and the shark misses the seal, then the chase is on and the excitement kicks off big time. It is a game of cat and mouse of the most epic proportions. Everyone on the boat is rooting for the seal, but also wanting to see a kill. It is nature at its most savagely beautiful.

Uncharted waters

Mossel Bay, situated 350 km from Cape Town along the Garden Route, is known to have the most stable weather conditions in

South Africa, which makes for excellent Great White viewing conditions at this relatively undiscovered shark watching destination.

The appropriately named Shark Warrior takes up to 18 shark-viewing guests on a ten-minute cruise out to Seal Island. Lying roughly one kilometre offshore, the island is home to thousands of Cape Fur Seals and this rich food source attracts large numbers of Great Whites. Fortunate clients can sometimes even observe the sharks' spectacular breaching displays as they hunt in the waters surrounding the island. Traditional methods of chumming and baiting are used to lure the sharks to the boat and its five-man dive cage. The trips tend to last three to five hours depending largely upon how cooperative the sharks are being.

The bay also plays host to huge pods of dolphins, as well as large numbers of whales from June to November; however, Mossel Bay's greatest advantage is undoubtedly its seclusion. With only one shark-viewing operation based in the region, seals are White Shark Africa's only competition for the sharks' attention.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways operates daily non-stop flights between Mumbai and Johannesburg, with onward connections to Cape Town and George possible via South African Airways. Simonstown is a short one-hour drive from central Cape Town and Gansbaai is two hours along the Cape south coast. Mossel Bay is situated less than an hour from George airport in the heart of the Garden Route.

Accommodation

Cape Town has a bunch of big-name hotels, including The Taj Hotel Cape Town. Garden Route, which is one of the most scenic drives in the world, has a smattering of B&Bs, inns and hotels.

Best time to visit

Great Whites can be seen throughout the year. However, the winter months from May to September are best with June and July offering truly spectacular shark sightings.

What to take

A waterproof and windproof jacket, swimwear, towel, sun block, sun hat, sunglasses, camera and any seasickness medication you might require.

Worth remembering

Shark cage diving is an activity where hunting for the cheapest bargain does not mean you're necessarily getting the best deal. Tours limited to small numbers of clients ensure optimal shark viewing, maximum cage time, exceptional photographic opportunities, personalised attention and an all-round more satisfying experience.

Bookings

Great White Shark Tours (Gansbaai)
www.sharkcagediving.net

White Shark Diving Company (Gansbaai)
www.sharkcagediving.co.za

Shark Diving Unlimited (Gansbaai)
www.sharkdivingunlimited.com

White Shark Ecoventures (Gansbaai)
www.white-shark-diving.com

African Shark Eco Charters (False Bay)
www.ultimate-animals.com

Apex Shark Expeditions (False Bay)
www.apexpredators.com

White Shark Africa – Ocean Extreme (Mossel Bay) – www.whitesharkafrica.com

Multi-day shark safaris – Dive South Africa (False Bay, Gansbaai and Mossel Bay): www.divesouthafrica.co.za/scubadivingsafaris/greatwhitesharkexpeditions.php

For more information

Log on to www.southafrica.net

Apex - Chris Fallows

