

EVERY WEEK IS SHARK WEEK

WANDERLUST

Go nose-to-nose with a great white off Baja's Guadalupe Island, where shark sightings are all but guaranteed.

By Ken McAlpine

THE SILENCE OF WATER CLOSES OVER MY HEAD. My feet bump against the bottom of the cage. I gaze, jittery, into the hazy blue. It isn't fear I feel, though there's a trace of apprehension. I am getting the chance to glimpse one of the world's greatest predators in its realm.

I grasp the bars of the cage.

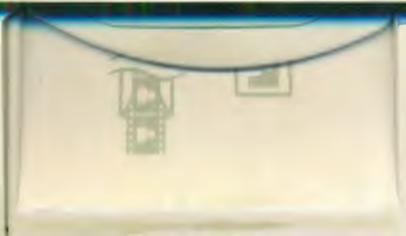
The shark is less impressed. It rises slowly, taking shape as it comes, although I know this silhouette before it appears, for no other animal so occupies our imagination. A dozen feet long and wine-cask thick, the shark passes 3 feet from me, its eye tracking us—eight burbling neoprene forms bumping about in two cages—as if amused. As if the shark is thinking, *Have a look at this.*

Then, after a few minutes, in the same measured manner in which it rose, the shark angles down into the blue, dissolving as easily as a dream.

Showtime: A 16-footer glides past the cages.



Photographs by COREY ARNOLD



In other centers of great white tourism—San Francisco’s Farallon Islands, South Africa, South Australia—shark cage diving can be frustrating. Waters are often cold and murky. Plenty of times the sharks don’t even appear.

The shark passes right in front of the cages. Its jaw hangs open slightly, allowing a peek into the signature serrated maw.

But every year, from June through November, at least 120 great white sharks gather at Guadalupe Island, 220 miles southwest of San Diego. No one knows exactly why they come to Guadalupe’s clear waters, but one possible reason is easy to hear and see: During these same months, northern elephant seals and their pups inhabit the island, filling the air with their guttural croakings and offering the sharks a blubber-rich buffet. “It might be because of the rookeries, or it might have something to do with reproduction,” says John O’Sullivan, a shark researcher with the Monterey Bay Aquarium who has been to Guadalupe Island several times. Whatever the reason, “it’s about as close to clockwork as you can get.”

It took us 20 hours to sail to Guadalupe from San Diego on the 112-foot *Solmar V*, operated by Great White Adventures. Here, on our first morning, it doesn’t take long before a massive form rolls to the surface off our port side and casually takes a football-size tuna head affixed to a rope trailing off the stern. A desultory tug and the tuna head is gone.

“They’re smart,” says Lawrence Groth, who as proprietor of Great White Adventures is making his 180th trip to the area. “They know we pull the line in to the boat when we see them coming, so they come in from under the boat to take the bait. They’re problem solvers. Four hundred million years. They survived the last five extinction periods.”

Some sharks are known to make regular return trips to Guadalupe. Groth has compiled hundreds of hours of

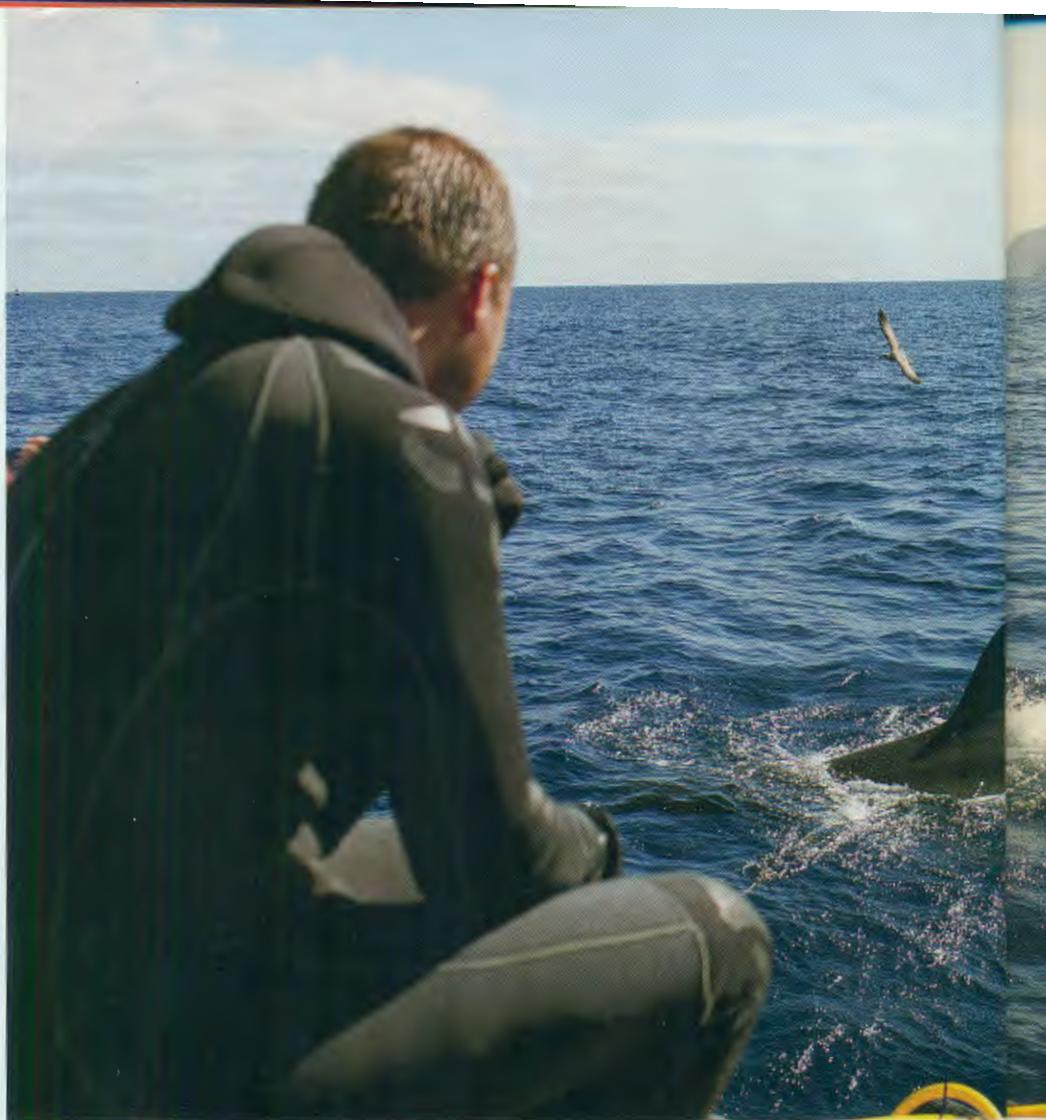
Guadalupe sees more than 120 sharks a season.

white shark film footage, currently in the hands of researchers at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. He and his crew have identified sharks, catalogued them, and in some cases named them. One, Cal Ripfin, has his own Facebook page.

Now we’re ready to see for ourselves. Given Groth’s go-ahead, we scoot crablike onto two cages affixed to the stern of the boat, their tops at the surface. There’s no need for a scuba tank. Instead, we breathe air pumped through long lines they call hookahs. We practiced this earlier, before Groth and his crew drew the sharks. “We like people to try breathing first before we throw apex predators into the mix,” he says.

We worm through the open hatch slowly, four to a cage. I go to my knees. Largely, this is functional; it keeps me from elbowing my fellow divers, though it is also, in a way, a display of gratitude. As a diver, I’ve marveled at underwater life from Palau to Belize. This is different. Beneath Guadalupe Island’s waters I get a close-up view of a creature cloaked in fear and mystery. How long do white sharks live? Where do they breed? Where do they go in their open ocean travels? We don’t know.

We turn inside the cages, looking up, down, out. I am squinting downward when one of the other cage-dwellers bumps me hard. There is an explosion of bubbles—his, mine; I can’t tell. The shark passes right in front of the cages, literally off our noses. Its jaw hangs open slightly, allowing a peek into the signature serrated maw.





It is riveting but, strangely, not terrifying. Perhaps that's because this shark, and the others I will see over the next three days, shows absolutely no interest in us as a meal. Again and again they pass by the cages with nary a bump, yet so close we can see the intricate beauty of their markings, the ragged line separating their gray upper body from their white underside like a string of low storm clouds. Their languid movements, a drift more than a swim, induce a sort of dreamy hypnosis, until they rise to the surface and the wranglers allow them a tuna head and serenity explodes in a blink-and-you-miss-it devouring: a display of primal power as inspiring as it is rarely seen.

"They are so big, so beautiful, so powerful, so majestic," says *Solmar V* crew member Danny Zapata López. "We are so lucky to see them as they are, untouched."

Groth and Great White Adventures first dipped cages into Guadalupe's waters back in 2001. He had heard stories from San Diego fishing boats that journeyed to Guadalupe to fish for tuna, where occasionally great white sharks plucked tuna from the fishermen's lines. "We weren't even settled on the anchor yet and we had our first white shark," says Groth. "Three

Anyone (with nerve) can go shark diving.

A PREDATOR-VIEWING PRIMER

MANY BELIEVE Baja's Guadalupe Island offers the world's best white shark cage diving, with clear waters and the best odds of seeing white sharks.

HOW TO GET THERE

Several outfitters run trips to Guadalupe from San Diego or Ensenada, Mexico: **Great White Adventures** greatwhiteadventures.com. **Islander Charters** (whose trip is pictured on these pages) islander-charters.com. **San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions** sdsharkdiving.com. **Nautilus Explorer** nautilusexplorer.com. **Shark Diver** sharkdiver.com.

WHAT IT COSTS

Prices range from \$2,700 to \$3,700 for a five- to six-day trip, including the boat down from San Diego. You'll get meals, drinks (including wine and beer), and on air-conditioned stateroom.

WHEN TO GO

The Guadalupe Island shark season is typically June to November. As the summer progresses, fewer, larger sharks displace the younger sharks, decreasing the number you'll see by mid-September.

WHAT TO BRING

You don't need to be a scuba diver, though a reasonable level of fitness helps with getting in and out of the cages. In terms of gear, you need a mask, full-length wetsuit (7-mm. thickness), booties, and a hood (the water ranges from 68° to 72°). Some outfitters supply gear. Others point you to dive shops in San Diego for rentals. Note: The trip to Guadalupe Island can be rough. If you're prone to seasickness (and even if you aren't), it's a good idea to consult your doctor for a remedy before you depart.





minutes. I knew that I had made the biggest discovery in shark diving history.”

Today, about a half-dozen outfitters make the trip to Guadalupe Island. In most ways, their presence is a winning proposition for sharks and man. In 2005 the Mexican government declared Guadalupe Island a protected reserve, but it is difficult to police so far from civilization. So the cage diving outfitters do it, keeping poachers, who could easily decimate the white shark population (the jaws, teeth, and fins fetch a high price), at bay.

Over the last 12 years, Groth says he’s taken nearly 3,000 visitors into his cages. He has hosted experienced divers but also novices, clients from ages 9 to 90. Guadalupe draws an especially big contingent of international visitors.

A great white’s
jaw holds up
to 300 teeth.

rises to the surface to bid us good-bye. Tonight the sharks will feed on elephant seals. Tomorrow, as they have done for 400 million years, they will go wherever they wish. ▲

Ken McAlpine’s books include *Islands Apart: A Year on the Edge of Civilization* and his new novel, *Together We Jump*.

Our trip includes a collection of machinists, software programmers, and lawyers, most of them from Russia.

Over the course of our three days, sometimes there is one shark in the water; often there are two or three. Toward the end of the trip, Zapata López takes me some 40 feet down in the submersible “cinema cage,” named for

I stand on top of the cage, with nothing between me and the sharks but water.

the dramatic view, and available only to certified scuba divers. Once set, he invites me through the open hatch to stand on top of the cage, with nothing between me and the sharks but water. White sharks are ambush predators and typically attack from beneath—so the cage still provides protection.

When the sharks, two big females, sweep toward me, I feel their menace, but they are only curious and 20 yards out veer away. They circle back again and again, sunlight rippling along their sides as they drop through the water like scythes. Zapata López, sharing the top of the cage with me, gives me a high five.

It sounds corny, but it’s true: What I am viewing is not White Death. It is White Life. There is exquisite beauty in the perfect ocean survivor.

“People come here looking for a thrill or adventure,” says Groth. “They get that, but they also see how the sharks really are. They come away with respect and appreciation instead of fear.”

The next morning, when the cages are lifted from the water and the captain turns the *Solmar V* for home, nothing