

The Tigers of Africa

by Tobi Bernhard

Big five, big fish, big adventure.

South Africa should by now be well and truly established as the shark capital of the world. The breaching Great whites of the cape region have been well documented and photographed. The Dusky sharks and Bronze whalers feeding frantically in the annual sardine run have been elevated to immortality by Doug Perrine's award winning images. Toothy Sand tigers or Raggies (odontaspis taurus), as the locals call them affectionally, have been a staple on subtropical dives. Their ability to hover motionless in the water has taken them into the heart of photographers.

And since the dive industry has established itself in Mozambique good sighting reports of whale sharks are coming in on a regular basis. Over the top on the adrenaline scale however must be the tiger shark diving at the Aliwal shoal South of Durban. No cage, no bottom, no fear (my foot).

From the small town of Umkomaas Walter Bernardis at

African Watersports has taken adrenaline junkies, shark lovers, photographers and the chronically curious out for five years now to dive with these spectacular creatures.

Tiger sharks appear on the Aliwal shoal seasonally around May. No one knows much about their migration pattern the rest of the year or why they come to the shoal. The tiger encounters have evolved from a more cautious approach of feeding them on the reef, carrying defensive weapons to the current mid-water drift encounters (where no one carries so much as a dive knife).

Walter redefines nonchalance when it comes to, what I had to date considered beyond the limit of the safely possible.

His fearlessness stems from an intimate knowledge of tiger shark behavior gained by experience. I think, Divers who are accustomed to have their safety taken care of in a PADI sort of way should realize that they are the only one responsible for their safety on this dive and have to base their decision to participate on that, rather than succumbing to peer pressure. But with a healthy respect for the animals, close attention to the sharks behavior and common sense, it



Tiger shark motion portrait/ Nikon F90, 18mm, Subal housing, Velvia 50, f11, 8th/sec, 2 x Nikon SB 105, full power

is possible to meet these magnificent creatures close up. It's your wit vs. the sharks and the opportunity to photograph one of the most beautiful predators of the sea, makes this dive easily the most exciting wildlife encounter I had in 20 years.

Any apprehension I might have had about jumping in the water with a bunch of big tiger sharks was displaced momentarily by a look at the sizable surf the inflatable

have to cross to get to sea from the beach. There are no sheltered bays or harbours on the KwaZulu/Natal coast and all diving is done from trailered RIBs. Reassuring to know that Walter and his son Mark are surfies and know how to read a set. >From my own open ocean shark feeding experience here in New Zealand with maco and blue sharks, I expected a long wait. But it never took more than 20 min. before the first tiger showed up. Their



Tiger shark portrait/ Nikon F4, 16mm fisheye, Subal housing, Velvia 100, f11, 125th/sec, single YS300 Sea&Sea strobe 1/2 power

strong tiger-like markings, boxy snout and fold on the corner of their mouth make them instantly recognizable.

Walter uses a stainless washing machine drum on a steel cable as chum bucket, because the plastic containers got chewed up every time. The bucket drifts five meters down on a float with the current i.e. you drift in mid-water with the sharks circling the bait. The fact that people encounter tiger sharks in this way now, questions seriously the scary myths surrounding this species. I have no problem to admit that this was right at the edge of

my comfort zone though. Especially when the viz got below 5 meters. The tigers cruise sluggishly for the most part, but they do try it on as they gain confidence the longer you spend with them in the water.

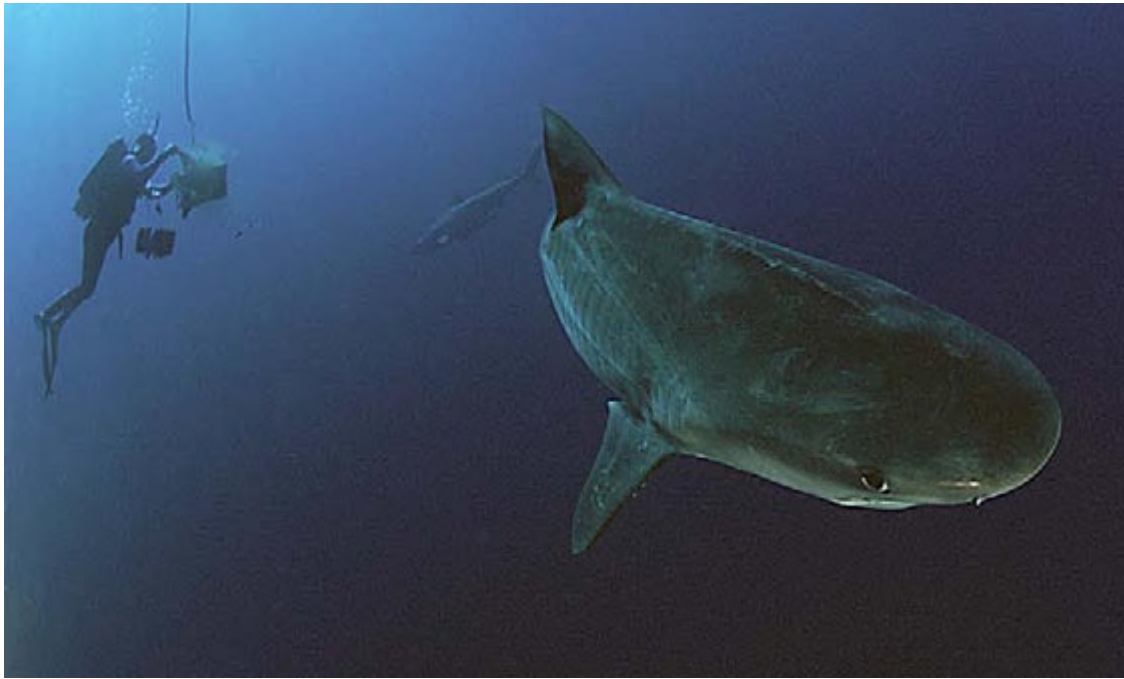
Constantly torn between curiosity about your edibility and fear of injury or wasting precious energy, they sneak up from behind or underneath you and only turn away when you face them and exhale. The Latin name "galeocerdo(cuvieri)" translates to weasel not because they are small and furry. So long as there



Tiger shark, bait bucket and divers/ Nikon F4, 16mm, Subal housing, Velvia 100, f8, 125th/s, single YS 300 Sea&Sea strobe, 1/2 power -1 diffuser

are no more than three sharks and at least two divers in the water it feels reasonably controlled. Divers don't behave like pray i.e. swim away, don't smell like pray and send weird signals like bubble noises to confuse the sharks instincts. What the sharks can't know is that we are actually bad shark nutrition. Too many bones, too little oil, too many indigestibles like rubber and steel. They might also think we are just another animal feeding on the same bait. Their eyes are very lively and move constantly compared

to other sharks which makes them appear more calculating. On the whole they do not seem to behave much differently from other sharks I have encountered. When you see every-one's camera intently pointed your way don't flatter yourself, turn around and look down. With five sharks competing for handouts it did get a little hectic. Another similarity to most sharks I dived with is that size and confidence seem to be directly proportional in tiger sharks, but behavior varies individually



Nikon F4, 16mm, Subal housing, Velvia 100, f8, 125th/s, single YS 300 Sea&Sea strobe, 1/2 power -1 diffuser

too, given equality in size. They nibble cameras occasionally, but surprisingly don't apply pressure and let go again quickly. Easier on the gear and their teeth. I felt a bit sorry for the guys hiding behind matchbox-size digital cameras (until I remembered the \$ 600.- excess luggage bill from Quantas) and I did wish for my Mamiya 6x7 housing at times for added comfort. Any contrast, like colorful dive gear or aluminum wings on video cameras seemed to attract their particular attention. I never understood why underwater camera housing manufacturers aren't

painting their products black for stealth and non-reflectiveness like land cameras. On several occasions a small pointy nosed whaler shark (poss. carcharhinus brevipinnas) swam between the tigers at apparent ease. The Shark Board tags are a bit annoying for the pedantic photographer and probably the shark as well. This organisation has taken it upon itself to net the swimming beaches of Natal.

Life sharks caught in the nets are tagged and released. More often the sharks drown before the nets are checked and the dead sharks are

dissected for scientific research. The lab is open for visitors with a stomach for a shark stomach. Things like dietary habits and reproduction cycles can be learned from dissection, but I think you learn infinitely more about this fish getting intimate with it in its own element. Over several days I could recognize some of the same sharks and their individual behaviour towards the divers.

Walter Bernardis's fearlessness and love for these sharks is an inspiration and instrumental to introducing divers to this unforgettable underwater wildlife encounter .

And there is no better place like Africa to meet a tiger.

Tobias Bernhard

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