

White Shark Diving - South Africa.

with Nigel Motyer

I'll never forget the first shark I saw. 1985, 30meters down the drop off at Ras Mohamad a grey reef shark left a pack of about seven or eight sharks swimming out in the blue and cruised in to take a look at me. It passed about four feet from me. I was totally absorbed by the experience and have been fascinated by sharks ever since. Over the years since a good portion of my dive travel has been focused on seeing and photographing these amazing animals.

Of course the grand daddy of all sharks is the Great White and they had always been something I had wanted to see. At the time I first started looking into these trips Southern Australia was really the only place where tourist divers could get to see Great White sharks. Peter Gimble had put Dangerous Reef on the White shark map in his 1971 film Blue Water White Death. This was an area that had reasonably clear water and big sharks, 5 meters and more - but the cost of these trips has always been ridiculous.

When Jaws came out in 1975 and made the Great White public enemy no one, sport fishermen all over the world wanted to add this shark to their list of conquests and as the fishermen arrived sightings on Dangerous Reef became very unpredictable indeed. Even today it is not unusual to spend several thousand dollars for a week at sea and see no sharks at all.

So in the mid nineties when word started to get around on a place in South Africa that had plenty of White sharks divers started to take an interest.

Today in the small coastal town of Gansbaai, about two hours east of Capetown, quite a respectable tourist industry has



South African Coast near Hermanus Bay. A spear fisherman was taken by a White shark off this point 4 days before we arrived.....they found his spear gun a few days later !

grown up around the White Shark. The South African authorities have recognised the value of the local shark population to the economy of the area and became the first country in the world to formally protect the great white shark. Consequently the shark population here is quite strong and the number of sightings by the tourist boats is going up every year. As a bonus to the tourist diver the weakening

economy in South Africa has meant that in comparison to trips to Southern Australia, white shark diving in South Africa is now both much cheaper, and much more likely to turn up a shark. While there I met a diver who told me he had spent over ten thousand dollars in Australia trying to see white sharks with no luck only to come to South Africa and see five on his first day. On the down side though



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Geyser Rock with Cape Fur Seals - Southern Side of Shark Alley.

in South Africa the sharks tend to be smaller than the Australian ones and the underwater visibility tends to be worse....and its not a good place to go swimming either.

Speaking of swimmers, what keeps the sharks in the area is of course a steady food supply. About 10 km off shore there is a small

island nature reserve called Dyer Island. About one hundred and fifty meters to the south of the island is a rock outcrop called Geyser Rock. This rock is home to twenty thousand Cape Fur seals, a favourite delicacy of the white shark, hence the steady shark population. There are six dive operators who currently

have a licence to operate around Dyer Island. All of them launch from a small slipway in the town of Kleinbaai about five miles away from Gansbaai. Certainly some of these operators are better than others. We chose the White Shark Diving Company which has a good solid boat with a covered cabin - which we found in valuable in the conditions. I'd be happy to use them again or recommend them to others - they seemed to me to be the best operation.

The sharks are around all year but the peak viewing months are July to September. Which is a shame as the best visibility and weather is in December and January, but at that time of the year the seals are giving birth and the sharks have plenty of easy prey in the young seal pups and aren't as interested in the chum slick put out by the boats. We travelled in August, the best month for sightings but the weather can be dodgy. True to form, the day we arrived a front blew through which really stirred up



the water and dropped the air temperature below what I was expecting - bring a warm rain proof jacket if you thinking of going. Sea conditions for us on day one I thought were going to be too bad to launch. In fact we did go out but ours was the only boat to make the crossing to the island that day and it was not for the faint hearted. The swells were huge and the boat was airborne for most of the crossing. As a result the underwater visibility on that day was zero, it had been ten meters the previous week - isn't that always the way !?? We didn't even put the cage in the water.

Having said that, it was the best day for surface shark action with several sharks around the boat most of the day - at one point even biting down on the dive platform. To top it off, a southern Right Whale swam past us about twenty meters off the stern. Photo opportunities topside are often better than UW.

To give yourself the best chance of seeing sharks its best to

plan to spend a few days in the area. You get used to the routine on the boat and get to know the crew a bit better. This can be important as it is they who decide who gets into the cage first and for how long. We stayed six days in total although after the first four we took time out to fly up to Durban to dive with the Sand Tiger sharks on Aliwal shoal before returning back to Dyer Island for a couple more days. As it turned out this was a great decision as we returned to much calmer water, 14 meter visibility and loads of sharks and virtually had the boat to ourselves for the last two days.

Departure time for the boat is tide dependant, lunch and soft drinks are provided on board. The boat itself is a ten meter catamaran hull so it can handle up to ten people in comfort. It was powered by two 225 Hp outboards so travelling time to the island was half an hour or so. During our stay numbers on the boat varied from minimum of 4 guests up to 10 or 12. Not all will want to dive though and



Preparing the Chumstand well back !

some will only dive once, so time in the water is also a bit variable so it pays to get to know the crew to maximise your in-water time. I brought my own 8mm dive suit but



Film choice for underwater was Fuji Multi speed set to 400asa on all the UW shots.

suits are available on board if you want.

Once on site the boat is anchored somewhere in the channel between Dyer Island and Geyser rock - they call this channel "Shark Alley" as its here that the white sharks cruise up and down hugging the bottom looking for the tell tale silhouette of a passing seal on the surface. Anything moving on the surface here is liable to be bitten. We saw sharks biting floats, boats and bits of kelp to investigate them as a possible snack. Once anchored up there is a short briefing on the boat routine and the chumming starts. Its usually bits of frozen shark livers in mesh sacks which create a slick of oily fish bits down current of the boat. This slick can travel up to three miles off the back of the boat. Once a passing shark passes through it will zig zag up the slick back to its source. Once chumming starts larger pieces of



The White Shark Diving Company's boat - shot into the sunrise - note the cage on the back and the flying bridge view area.

shark meat are hung from the back of the boat, this gives the shark something to hold their attention at the boat.

Its anybody's guess how long it will take the sharks to turn up. For us it was anything from five minutes to four hours but we never had a day with a no show. Some

days we had up to five different sharks with three sharks at the cage at one time although we were told that was unusual. Once the sharks turn up the crew will assess their mood and see if it is likely to stay - if so they put the cage in the water and gear up the first two divers.

The cage design is the same



The 20mm was the best lens to use as it was easier to get more of the shark in the frame

for all operators - a cylinder of stainless steel with a viewing port two thirds up and a trap door lid. Ours floated a little out of the water so you could surface above water level if you needed to. I found this really useful as it allowed you check back with the boat on the sharks location, but not all operators had this facility in their cages. The cage is tethered to the boat by two ropes and takes only two divers at a time. Interestingly the air supply is fed from a bottle on deck of the boat - they say this is to allow them turn off the air on divers who won't come up when requested. I did ask what would happen if the shark bit through the hose - "dunno - its never happened" was the not very reassuring reply - either way it seems to work well.

Getting into the cage for the first time is certainly a study in concentration. That jump from the boat through the trap door on the top of the cage is not one you want to get wrong.

Once in the water you do tend to bounce around a bit inside the cage and it may take a while to get used to keeping out of the way of your cage partner and their air hose. With no fins and a really heavy weight belt you do tend to stick to the floor of the cage but there is also a small rail on the floor of the cage to tuck a foot under which helps to keep you upright. I usually had two camera housings with me which did hamper me a bit. It definitely helps to have one hand free to brace yourself against the cage.

Your field of view is in the cage can be quite restricted both from the cage itself and the limited visibility. I found I tended to stare off in the direction I last saw the shark swim but White sharks are incredibly stealthy and would often double back behind the cage so often your first view of the shark would be when you swung around to find its head is two feet from your face. Its hard to describe the adrenaline rush of seeing your first

white shark in its own element. We saw many sharks over the week but I never tired of it. The length and power of these animals is just so impressive but its the girth of the shark once they get over four meters that is most surprising. Our biggest sharks were in the 5 meter range but they do come bigger than that. There is also much more life in their eyes than is normally portrayed - you can clearly see it follow you as it swims by the cage. I did notice that a lot of the sharks adopted a routine around the cage. They would often swim a circuit three or four times around the cage so you could predict to some extent where they may show up next. This was useful as it allowed you plan your next shot to some degree.

Photographically the trip was very challenging. My surface kit was two camera bodies (Nikon F90's) one with a 24mm and one 70-200mm zoom.. If I was doing the trip again I would take a smaller range zoom - something in the 28-



135 range. I felt the 24 just that bit too wide for a lot of the shots. Remember when the shark is at the side of the boat - so is everybody else so you can be shooting through, over and around up to ten other people. Good uninterrupted views of the sharks can be hard to get. Don't be hard on your pictures, remember also that white sharks are a very photographed animal. I know I tended to compare my shots with National Geographic front covers and in fairness - its hard to better David Doubilet all the time! Remember too that August is winter time in South Africa and on cloudy days light levels can be low so it was hard to get a shutter speed that would freeze the action. Of course hindsight is 20/20 vision and having

looked at the results of this trip there are a couple of things I would do differently next time. For some of the surface shots I would have a flash on the camera set down minus two stops just to put a little sparkle back into the shots - having said that the pictures may look dodgy doing that but I think its worth a try on a few rolls. I used Provia 100 on the surface often pushed to 200asa to get me that extra shutter speed. I think I would experiment with Provia 400 on the next trip too.

Underwater I used a two housings, a housed 801 and F90. Lens choice was either a 20mm or a 16mm fisheye. I suppose the 20mm was the best lens to use as it was easier to get more of the shark in the frame - the 16 is just so wide.

Having said that I liked having the choice and the ability to alter the view of the image by varying the lens - all the slides would have looked very "samey" otherwise.

I didn't use the 24mm underwater but the next time I would try that lens too. You have to work hard keep the other cage traffic out of the frame, buddies, air hoses and yourself, not to mention the cage itself tended to wander into a lot of my frames because I tended to press the button when the shark turns up rather than check the corners of the viewfinder before tripping the shutter.

Film choice for underwater was Fuji Multi speed set to 400asa on all the UW shots. Even on sunny clear water days I was glad of the extra film speed. I had the drive on the camera set to continuous - high at all times (after all film is the cheapest part of the trip). For metering I let the camera do it but I set the meter to centre weighted as I think Matrix doesn't work well with a wide lens underwater. There is too much of a variance in the exposure across the frame and something is going to loose out and as a result I think matrix metering underexposes the frame. Maybe its just cause I never learnt to use it correctly, anyway that is what I did.

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So would I recommend it as a trip ? - absolutely. Bring loads of film and some warm clothes !!

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