

# Great White Shark adventure

by Josh Cortopassi

Technically, I embarked on my 2011 Great White Shark adventure from the Ensenada port. But my shark adventure began in the womb. My earliest drawings before preschool depicted sharks. Perhaps they were sparked by the famous tram ride at Universal Studios, or by peeking out of my room to glimpse a few seconds of “Jaws” after my bedtime. At any rate I was hooked, and it became a life goal to see — in person — one of the creatures I loved at first bite.

My “carcharodon christening” was 10 years ago with Rodney & Andrew Fox in South Australia. We set sail aboard the historic Falie, whose nets along its mast served as a hammock from which to view playful dolphins racing and jumping below. Rodney had us riveted with his mammoth bite scar and tales of survival and midget divers during the filming of Jaws. But after 5 worrisome “no-show” days at the Neptune Islands, the natives were restless.

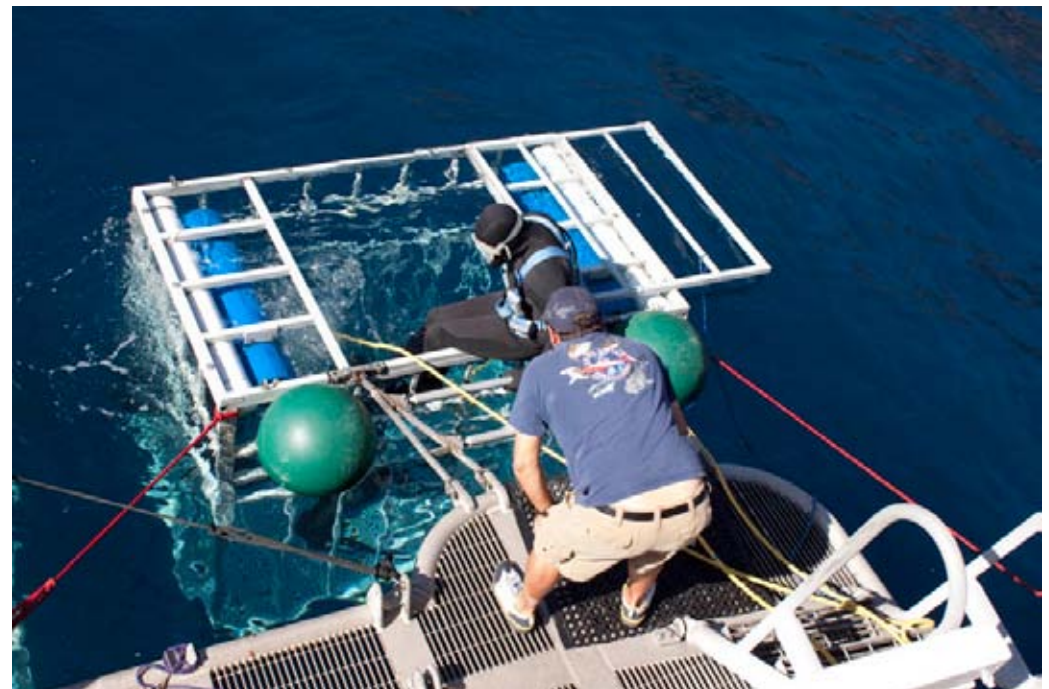
Finally, over the last two days, Lady Luck arrived in the form of three 11-to-13-foot juvenile white pointers. I vividly recall that first glimpse of the curious and beautiful hunter, which repeatedly circled

our ocean-floor cage perilously close. I’m not religious, but this I decree: When the fierce, magnificent predator’s eye locks onto yours as it glides past only feet away — it’s like a religious experience. What is it thinking? HOW does think? Has it seen a human before? In my case, all fear was replaced with exhilaration and profound awe of this primitive-yet-advanced example of evolutionary perfection.

Unfortunately, our wild guests departed before the remainder of our team could summit their Everest of dive trips. However, for those of us fortunate enough, that voyage on the Great Australian Bight with

*(Top) Unique fin notches act like fingerprints in shark identification  
Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F f5.6, 1/125, Shutter Priority ISO 400*

*(Right) Lawrence Groth assisting another safe cage entry.  
Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Canon EF 28-135mm f/3.5-5.6, natural light, f7.1, 1/200, Shutter Priority*





*Upon boarding the 112-foot Solmar V, you are treated to cold beverages and gourmet platters of fresh fruit and hors d'oeuvres.*

the legendary shark victim-turned-advocate was truly memorable.

My next endeavor came in the form of an incredible 30th birthday gift from my wife: a 1-day Great White Shark excursion for the two of us. Destination: Farallon Islands. Documentaries on these massive sanctuary sharks had me drooling at the prospect. Unfortunately, the luck of nature was not with us that day, for we returned sharkless. Farallons visibility is practically nil, so I'm not convinced we would have even seen one if present! Shark or no shark, this still ranks as my most meaningful birthday present ever. Best wife ever.

But this photo essay is not based on Australia or San Francisco. My sights were now set on Mexico. Great White Adventures boasts a 100% success rate at Guadalupe Island. An air conditioned charter bus safely escorts you from San Diego to



*The business end of an apex predator*

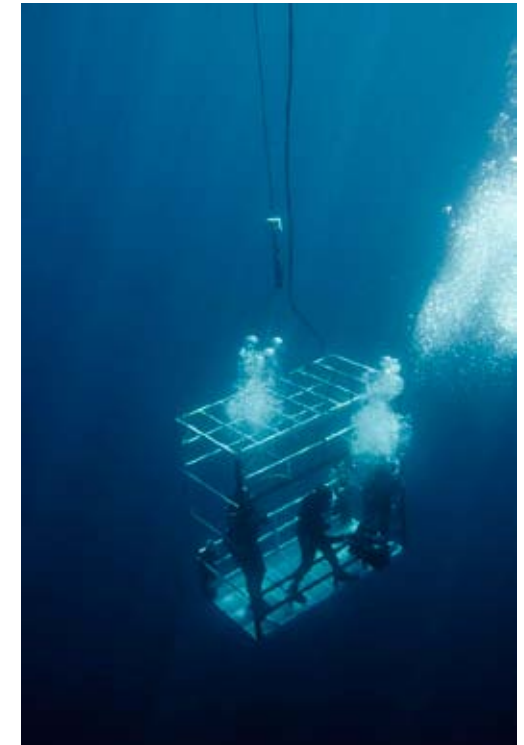
*Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F f8, 1/125, Shutter Priority ISO 400*

Ensenada, where you are greeted by GWA owner Lawrence Groth.

Upon boarding the 112-foot Solmar V, you are treated to cold beverages and gourmet platters of fresh fruit and hors d'oeuvres. The luxury yacht's interior is trimmed with beautiful wood finish and glass etched with murals of marine life. The cabins are tight, but the bunks are comfortable; anyway, you'll spend most of your time in the cage or in the dining cabin eating fantastic food and

editing your photos over a margarita. There are plenty of 110 volt outlets to charge your gear.

You can spend your outgoing voyage in a variety of ways... read a book, prepare your camera gear, take a nap... or in our case, enjoy free-flowing margaritas while rocking out to your iPod on the top deck! The journey is 18 hours, but fear not... you'll arrive an hour after awaking to the smell of bacon and huevos rancheros the following morning.



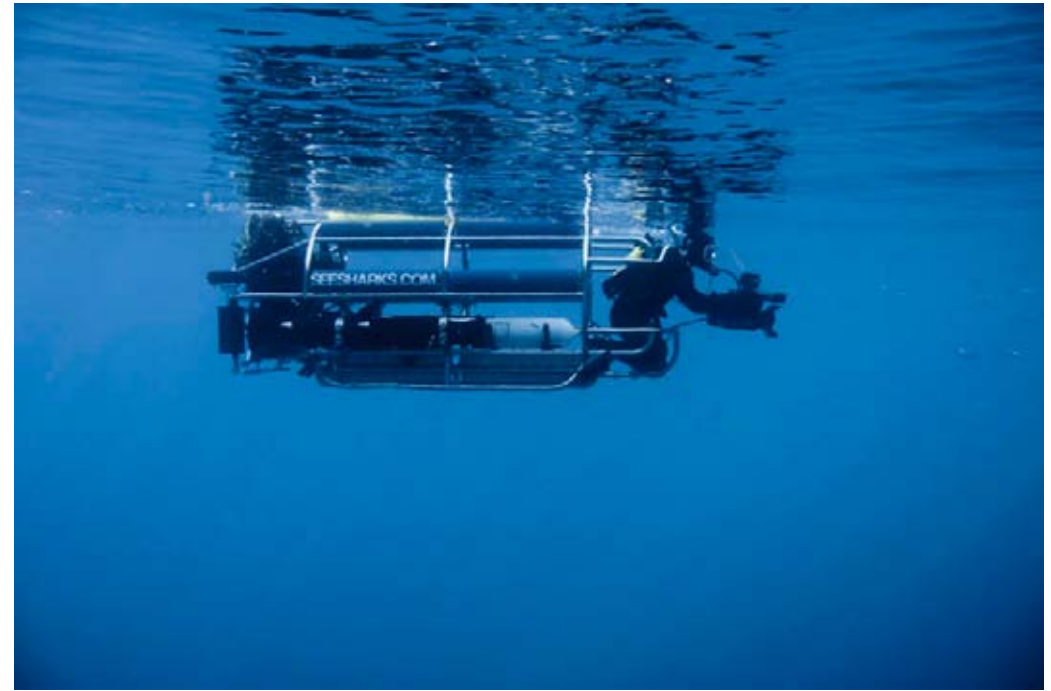
*The 40-foot submersible offers peaceful, up-close encounters*  
*Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F f8, 1/200, Shutter Priority ISO 400*

After a safety briefing, into the water you go! There are two aft 4-person surface cages and one submersible cage, in which a divemaster escorts two certified divers to a depth of 40'. Air is supplied to all cages via hookah.

Certification is required only



*Post-breach bubble streams emanating from the eyes and snout*  
**Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F f8, 1/320, Shutter Priority ISO 400**



*The Pelagic Explorer sub in action*  
**Canon EOS Rebel T1i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F f5.6, 1/125, Shutter Priority ISO 400**

for the submersible, and by all means, bring your C-card since this experience is a must! At times, we found ourselves surrounded by 5 to 7+ different sharks, coming and going at various depths. In previous years, the cage was wide open. Hypothetically, a shark wanting to “investigate” might have a diver dodging behind one of the four support bars. This year, the cage is closed, but the top flips open if you are feeling adventurous enough for the makeshift “observation

deck”... and you certainly will.

I was constantly on the lookout for sharks... above, below, behind... after all, these are stealthy ambush predators. That said, not once did I feel threatened by one of these goliath sharks, especially 40’ below, where their behavior is entirely different! At the surface, they exhibited more aggressive behavior towards the bait. Down below, they curiously cruised by the cage to investigate, yet never made a threatening move toward the

divers.

Great White Sharks, I believe, may be less likely to approach you for a “test bite” if they know you are aware of their presence. As ambush predators, they aim to surprise their victims (perhaps an unsuspecting elephant seal or large wounded fish). Choosing prey with their backs turned maximizes the potential success for a meal. Perhaps our calm body movements and always facing the sharks contributed to our seeming

mutually respectful encounters below. Still, I don’t possess the “huevos” to free-dive with White Sharks any time soon.

Two “shark wranglers” bait the surface throughout the day, while crewmen affix weights and assist divers in safely entering and exiting cages with any camera gear. A cinematographer also documents the action, and from this footage, professionally edited DVDs are available for purchase by the time you

reach shore.

Did I mention how fantastic the food is? From fresh, hot Mexican tortilla soup upon exiting the cage, to a filet mignon dinner on your return voyage. The crew hustles the entire trip, so tip well!

Lawrence also operates a custom-built, steel-caged submarine which he personally captains with his cinematographer to document up-close encounters away from the boat. Currently it is restricted to crew use, but I'm hoping the sub will become available to guests in the future.

Last year, a playful Guadalupe fur seal spent much time frolicking at our cages, flirting with divers and of course, stealing a nibble from the bait. And in the company of roughly 17 individual sharks during our visit, what a brave soul was he. "Sammy", as I nicknamed him (after Davis, Jr. — his eye looked fake!), would follow sharks 3 times his length down into the abyss. So long as he flanked them behind the mouth, sharks had no interest in wasting energy on the quick and agile pinniped. This opportunistic predator conserves energy in the absence of a "sure kill". It was stunning to watch the two species interact as they may have since long before human existence.

Also fascinating is the behavior between the sharks themselves. Two individuals would approach

one another either head on or along converging paths, until one would give way in an apparent exercise in dominance. Their body language is also evident in their "aggressive" posture, featuring an arched back and lowered pectorals.

Shark enthusiasts are aware that scientists identify individuals by dorsal & pigment patterns, scars and other markings. But it was interesting for a spectator such as myself to become acquainted with, recognize and look forward to seeing specific sharks the subsequent year.

It may sound ridiculous, but sharks actually do seem to have unique personalities, as much as a big fish is capable of. A large female known as "Lucy", for example, has a crippled tail. Slow, cautious, and inquisitive, she settles for the scraps, but wears a fearsome face that demands respect. "Cal Ripfin" earned his monicker by his shredded dorsal fin, and is a real player who seems to have boundless energy. Then there is "Zapata", who is so bulky that one of his eyes appears to be inset, making him identifiable even with his dorsal above the surface. Yes, with time you actually recognize sharks by their faces!

The sharks are also resilient healers. A pancake-sized bite hole in the side of Zapata's head is all but closed up a year later!



*A battle-scarred great white begins her silent, rapid descent into the abyss*

*Canon EOS Rebel T7i, Sea and Sea RDX - 500D, Canon EF-S 18-55mm, natural light, F8, 1/125, Shutter Priority ISO 400*

Multiple times we witnessed a shark fully breach the surface. During one instance, I spied the shark 50+ feet below. It peered up slightly at the bait, and with a few massive caudal kicks, shot up and out of the water in a spectacular display of raw power! The entire event transpired in less than 3 seconds. Had the target been a live meal, its death would have been instantaneous.

Knowing the importance of

a shark's energy conservation in between occasional meals, I had mixed feelings about the practice of baiting once I saw this breach event. Like it or not, chumming affects shark behavior. Their time at the boat could be better spent pursuing real food. On the other hand, many sharks have recurred at hotspots for a decade or more despite the presence of dive operators, and are obviously thriving (bar fishing nets, bonehead



*Nothing satisfies like a savory Mexican BBQ after a hard day's shark dive!*

sport fishermen, and callous finning operators). And for struggling nations, the shark tourism industry is a viable fiscal alternative to finning. Until evidence dictates that baiting is definitively detrimental to the species, I will continue to be drawn to them by the same force that's pulled since I could walk.

Last year, I rented a camera system consisting of a Canon T1i in a Sea & Sea RDX housing. The strobe spent 5 days in its Pelican case, since I was able to get an exposure with acceptable noise levels in available light. Besides, I prefer underwater subjects in natural light to those with

flash... unless it's at a depth where absolutely necessary. And sharks are no exception — their skin looks stunning in the diffuse light at 40' afforded by the submersible cage!

The T1i and RDX were simple to use and performed well. The camera shoots 1020 @ 24fps or 720 @ 30fps. I opted for full HD at the expense of fps, and the quality was fantastic. The SanDisk Extreme III SD cards never hesitated while shooting HD video or RAW & JPG.

One gripe with the housing: the camera mount did not provide clearance for the battery door. Consequently, swapping spare

batteries required unscrewing and replacing the mount each time. Consider that the battery might last 2 hours with aggressive shooting and shot review, and you are in the water most of the day; that's a lot of battery swapping. So the issue becomes a minor annoyance.

This year, I housed my Canon 5D Mark II in a Sea & Sea MDX - PRO. No battery door clearance issues, and the system performed great. Last year I had trouble getting the full shark into frame, so I bought a Tokina 12-24mm lens for the trip. Since Sea & Sea doesn't offer a zoom gear for this lens, I followed an online tutorial to "MacGyver" one using PVC pipe and industrial grade velcro. The \$15 solution worked like a charm, saving me over \$200 by way of Backscatter's custom-machined zoom gear. Both housing rentals were from Hollywood Divers, who I highly recommend.

Unfortunately, 1 day into the trip, my brand new Tokina failed! A backup 28-135mm Canon lens saved the day. Though not as wide as desired, it performed well. To be honest, 12mm is perfect for close encounters, but so wide that you often need to crop in extensively. Next time I may try a happy medium with Canon's 16-35mm.

Photographing sharks underwater has a learning curve for amateur or intermediate photographers. You're

dealing with fast, unpredictable animals, backscatter, operating controls through neoprene gloves and much more. Having picked the brains of several experienced photographers, my image quality improved a bit this year, and I hope to learn and improve on future trips.

To sum up Guadalupe: When it comes to service, food, 100' visibility, and tons of sharks... Great White Adventures deliver the goods!

**Josh Cortopassi**  
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