

Simon's Town South Africa

by Gregory Sweeney

Everyone knows South Africa is a premier destination for wildlife photography: full of predator and prey dramas played out between lions, wild dogs, cheetahs, and countless other beasts. The drama continues underwater in Simon's Town with the famous breaching great white sharks of seal island, African penguins, and cow sharks: the ancient predator of the kelp forests. Unique in all the world, this is the best place to observe the thrilling natural predatory hunting behaviors of the great white shark. A giant shark launching out of the water to catch a seal is an unforgettable wild experience. I traveled down to the Cape Peninsula after leading our series of photo safaris in hopes of experiencing this behavior and capturing some topside and underwater images.

Simon's Town is a unique and appealing seaside town on the Cape Peninsula south of Cape Town. Historic and modern houses are built up the hillside and a main road lined with charming storefronts hugs the coast and continues past beaches, harbors, and penguin colonies. The fine old buildings of the town center house restaurants, shops, and cafes.

The food is outstanding with terrific fish and chips, smoked fish, and other South African favorites. The north facing orientation of the town and False Bay affords it some protection from the wind, but it can still be subject to the famously changeable Cape weather. The former British Naval base is now an active South African Naval Base.

Just as Simon's Town is an attraction for human visitors, Seal Island, an 800m granite island protruding six meters above the waves of False Bay, is a seasonal attraction for great white sharks. Large numbers of Cape fur seals occupy the island and the great whites are here to prey upon the young seals that will be heading out on their first foraging expeditions. It is thought that the sharks target the young seals because they are less skilled at the avoidance techniques learned and practiced by older seals. The great whites that visit Seal Island have adapted their hunting strategy especially for this area. Their ambush at full speed from below results in the spectacular full breaches out of the water that make this area famous.

On this day in early June we





assemble at the boat before sun up and get settled in. The 8 nautical mile ride out to Seal Island is shorter than I expected and quite smooth. The stern of the boat is dominated by the shark cage and crates of chum, but we have plenty of room to move about and a cabin for shelter and storage of topside gear.

Once we have Seal Island in sight the mood among the crew changes to anticipation and concentration. We are now just off shore of “the launch pad”; the shallow area from which seals embark to go fishing or steer toward upon their return. The crew is spotting for seals swimming on the

surface. We give special attention to small groups or individual seals returning to the island as these are more often targeted by the sharks since they may be tired, full, or less attentive. Crew members shout out at each seal sighting and we all position ourselves to watch the seal. Watching through the camera I do not lose my lock on the seal.

Just as I am ready to move to new target off the stern, the water erupts in a white foam and the great white hurls himself out of the water. I can see a full profile, jaws to tail, as his belly rolls towards us and he falls with a splash back into the water. The whole event is over in seconds



and I collect only a few frames of the incredible sight.

On this occasion the seal seems to have escaped the jaws. Others are not so lucky and fall victim to attacks from underwater executed without a breach but the blood in the water testifies that it was a success. We counted over 10 incidents of natural predation including that great breach. All events that we spot are recorded and added to the boat’s detailed records.

Next we deployed the decoy seal behind our boat. The rubber seal is constructed out of a child’s wetsuit and is towed a short distance behind the boat. The photographers take

up positions in the stern and it was not long before “(Justin) Bieber” the decoy fell victim to a massive strike and a full breach.

I have packed two cameras to use: My Canon 5D Mark II with a EF 70–200mm f/2.8 IS with and without the +1.4x teleconverter for use topside capturing the breaching, predation, and seal island. Underwater I used my Canon 5D Mark III in a Nauticam housing fitted with a EF 16-35mm f/2.8 lens

As the morning faded and the pace of the hunt typically slows, we prepared the cage and chummed the water to attract a great white to the cage for underwater observation.



After a time a monstrous female gave us some wonderful close encounters.

The excellent crew with their knowledge of the sharks and the area made this a truly unique and exciting experience. To see the predators breach from the water is a magnificent sight. These excursions and our photographs give great white sharks a value alive where previously their only value was their fins, jaws, and as fishing prizes. The 3 companies running the shark boats do so with the greatest amount of respect for the sharks and are contributing to our knowledge of the sharks and their ecosystem.

A much calmer but still exciting

attraction in Simon's Town is the penguin colony at Boulders Beach. In 1985 a colony of African penguins established a rare land-based breeding site at Boulders Beach just a few kilometers to the south of Simon's Town. Small coves with white sand beach and calm shallow water are interspersed between huge boulders of smooth weather-worn Cape granite. There is no record of the birds having lived here prior to 1985 so their decision to settle in an area already well utilized by humans is remarkable and a very happy occurrence for numerous photographers. Their nesting season peaks from March to May so when coming for the Great



White action in June, nesting is still active and the penguins are easy to locate and photograph.

The park has been modified to protect the nesting and allow easy viewing. A long walkway leads from a visitor's center down to a large platform with a view of a nesting beach then traverses along the hillside over to the swimming beach. Many nest sites can be spotted from the walkway. Down on the swimming beach it is easy to encounter groups of 1 - 4 penguins emerging from the water then walking across the sand, right past me, under a boulder arch, and up the hillside to their nest under foliage. Even the parking lot has great

views of traveling penguins, nests, and their water access points. To photograph the penguins I used my EF 70–200 lens and added the 1.4x teleconverter when photographing from the viewing platform.

Penguins are all around town in the evenings. Going to a bayside restaurant you will often see them outside in the parking lot, under the cars, crossing the roads, and even ambling up the steps and into the restaurant.

After a morning of flying great white action, the perfect activities for the afternoon are a nice plate of fish and chips followed by a shore dive with the seven-gilled cow shark.



Several dive operators in town take guests to a beautiful cove just 5 minutes out of town. Here the wave action is gentle and the kelp undulates on the surface between rocks. Seven-gill cow shark or spotted cow shark is a prehistoric apex predator and king of the kelp forest Little is known about cow sharks because they spend most of their lives in the deep, cold oceans beyond the reach of divers. This site is one of the few places in the world where you have a great chance (85% as stated by the local diver operators) of diving with this rarely seen shark.

I am rigged with my Canon 5D MKIII in a Nauticam housing with a fisheye lens and just one strobe, for a pop of light only if the

visibility is good. No chumming or baiting is needed due to the shark's natural confidence and curiosity. The sharks readily approach me to get a closer look and pass at arms length before turning at the last moment and continuing to glide through the channel. Ready access to this marine reserve and the beautiful underwater setting make this dive a special event.

I have enjoyed several days of wildlife and thrills in Simon's Town between the penguins, great white sharks, and the cow sharks of the kelp forests. The many accommodations in town are top notch and there are many fine restaurants to choose from. Exploring the Cape of Good Hope and the nearby wineries yielded

spectacular views, ostriches on the beach, character villages, and much more. This was the perfect end to a wonderfully exciting and wildlife filled trip to South Africa and is not to be missed by any photographer. As always I can't wait until I return with my next safari group.

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Gregory Sweeney is a Wildlife Biologist and professional photographer. He has spent many years as a Naturalist/Park Ranger. Now he shares wildlife and photography through his photography tours and workshops. He believes in promoting a healthy attitude toward marine life through education and public awareness.

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