

The great white shark Holy Grail

This amazing shot shows the great white in all its glory



Isla Guadalupe is the best place in the world to observe great white sharks in clear water and hosts one of the most prolific populations of these great animals on Earth.

Text and images by Tony Baskeyfield

My first view of Isla Guadalupe could have been the opening scene from the film Jurassic Park. We had been steaming through the day and night for 20 hours and were 210 miles southwest off Baja California, San Diego. From the boat's window the sea mist had just cleared to reveal a craggy island. My heart was pounding with the anticipation of what lay ahead.

Nervously, I said to the guys: "It looks like Jurassic Park."

"No... It's volcanic, so it'd be Volcanic Park!" came a smart answer.

This trip is not for the faint-hearted. We had flown first to San Diego, then made a gruelling 20-hour crossing onboard the MV Horizon to Isla

Guadalupe in Mexican waters. All of this for three action-packed days up close and personal with great whites.

The great white shark occurs naturally in all temperate marine waters. Usually between three and four metres long, it can grow to six-and-a-half metres and weigh more than two tons. During the summer months, great white sharks feed on seals and sea lions as far north as Oregon and the Gulf of Alaska. In the autumn, they turn south and feed along the offshore islands. It is believed that female white sharks migrate to waters off southern California to give live birth. Some say that these waters offer young white sharks better odds of survival.



A diver's eye view from the cage
Below: What the shark sees!



CAGE DIVING ETIQUETTE

Cage diving etiquette is something that you acquire over the three days. This makes the hour-long session fun and gives everyone the same opportunities, especially to sit in the best spot in the cage. The outside position was the best spot in each of the cages. We all took turns to rotate into this position where you had the best view. Your position in the hourly rota was organised with military precision. If you were late getting into the cage, the door on the top was closed and you'd miss your session. Another piece of cage etiquette is not to lean out in front of your buddies too much blocking their view. I had agreed with film-maker Marty Snyderman that on two of our hourly stints we'd swap positions at precisely 30 minutes into the session. Then we'd reciprocate next time down.

As the sharks grow their metabolism changes, biasing their dietary requirements toward calorie-rich fatty prey, they then migrate to areas where they can feed upon marine mammals. Guadalupe Island is one such source of food. One of the shark researchers aboard the Horizon saw a newborn only about one-and-a-half metres long at the island. So some think that not only are the white sharks using the island as a food stop, but they may also be birthing at the island and it has become a nursery. If this were the case, it would certainly be a dangerous nursery with all the big males around.

Great white sharks in great numbers had moved in. Doc Anes and his crew was at the forefront of this exploration. The era of great white shark cage diving had arrived. Every time they visited Guadalupe Island in autumn in search of great whites, they were amazed to find these animals had once again returned. Horizon Charters are the first commercial liveaboard company to introduce eco-tour liveaboard shark diving to Isla Guadalupe.

When I planned this trip I wasn't sure how I was going to react to seeing one of the world's ultimate apex predators. Was I going to have a great time and enjoy this experience and revel in the excitement? Or was I going to have nightmares for the rest of my life. It was hard to predict how I was going to react. I hoped it was going to be a great experience, but I prepared myself for the opposite.

My first sighting of a great white will be etched into my memory; it was of a five-metre shark in the distance swimming past the cage. My heart was pounding and full of excitement as the shark disappeared from my view and into the blue. Well, I thought, 'mission one accomplished', I've now seen a great white in the water. I wanted more and I wanted it to come closer so that I could take a picture of it for my wall. A few minutes later, it came by the cage a lot closer; its tail moving slowly and powerfully – phew!

WHAT IT'S LIKE IN THE CAGE

The dive staff aboard MV Horizon brief divers and non-divers how to enjoy cage diving to the full and how to safely enter the cages and breathe from the hookah regulator system. The Horizon has two cages designed and built by Doc Anes, each supporting four divers. The four-diver cage has buoyancy cells and easy-access top entry.

At first light the cages are lowered into the water and chumming begins with fish blood and baited with tuna. Starting at 8am there are one-hour stints in the cage with a one-hour break for lunch. The hour sessions rotate and continue till sundown around 6pm when the cages are lifted on to the deck for the night. The cage gives a physical barrier between the divers and the sharks, even though there are some very big gaps for



ISLA GUADALUPE MEXICO



WHERE IS IT

Guadalupe is located about 200 miles southwest off the coast of Mexico's Baja California peninsula in the Pacific Ocean.

HOW TO GET THERE

Tony flew from the UK to San Diego, California, before boarding the MV Horizon for the 20-hour crossing to Guadalupe. The Shark Diver vessels depart from San Diego, California; and Ensenada, Mexico.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

By following Tony's lead and travelling to Guadalupe via the US, you simply complete a visa waiver form on your outbound flight to enter the US.

WHEN TO GO

In autumn great whites move south to the off shore islands of California and Mexico to give birth, having spent the summer feeding further north. Travel during this period for the best sightings.

LANGUAGE

Spanish.

HEALTH

Hepatitis A and typhoid are recommended for all travelers. Refer to your GP for the latest advice.

CURRENCY

Peso. (£1 = P19.4).

TIME ZONE

GMT -6.

TOUR OPERATORS

Divequest divequest.co.uk
Dive Worldwide diveworldwide.com

DIVING OPERATOR

Shark Diver www.sharkdiver.com

GREAT WHITE IDENTIFICATION PROJECT

Jessie, the resident marine biologist, collects images from divers and takes field notes on the markings and individual behaviour white sharks. The data is collected for the Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research (PIER) to identify, track and better understand the Guadalupe Island great white sharks. The crew have identified and named 65 different great white sharks at Guadalupe Island. During the trips they carry a binder with images of each named shark showing left, right, tail, dorsal fin and frontal views. The crew encourage guests to participate and in the evenings were handed over our shots of the sharks we had seen that day for identification. One of my shots was of a female white shark that had never been documented. Jessie said that I had the honour of naming it as I had seen her first. So it was with great pride – and a bit of trepidation – I named the shark after my wife, Cheryl. I thought it fitting as the mouth size and bite radius was about the same (ouch, I'm going to pay for that!).



the sharks to get into. If things were to get dangerous we would leave the cage. To get in, we'd cross over to the cage on a plank, enter the cage from above then walk underwater to a hookah system of surface-fed regulators on long hoses. Weighed down by 30kg of lead with a harness weightbelt, we'd drop like a stone to the bottom of the cage then walk to our position underwater and take the hookah reg. The top of the cage is closed and then pushed out two metres from the stern of the boat.

Cage diving can be boring, then become intensely exciting. Sitting at the bottom of a cage when there are no sharks around can be really boring. When you've completed your hour stint in the cage, the next four divers take your spot and wait for the sharks to arrive. It's a good idea to take a drysuit even though the water is relatively warm. It is cold just sitting there doing absolutely nothing. What's more, with no direct feed, your suit gradually loses any air it has in it and then

starts to leak. So along with the boredom, it gets cold and wet too.

During one of these boring cold moments I was looking down at my camera and reviewing the shots I had taken earlier when something made me look up. Out of the blue steaming straight at me was a great white. I physically shook with fright. Wow! That was quick, as it took a bite out of one of the hang baits and veered off just missing the cage. Everything had just changed and suddenly there was a lot of excitement. Then there were two sharks. Everyone was piling into the cage to fill up the empty spaces and the shark wranglers were working overtime.

After three days in the cage observing these mighty creatures, I formulated this opinion. Great whites are big and strong enough to swim, smash and chomp their way into the cage if they really wanted to. However, they are not stupid mindless killers that hunt and kill like in the Jaws movies. Quite the opposite is true; they feed with intelligence, and they do not want to hurt themselves when they feed. Some of the individuals we saw may have been 20 or 30 years old, so they really know how to hunt effectively and they've been successful for quite some time.

That said I was pleased to be inside the cage. We divers should always maintain a healthy respect for these awesome predators, in and out of the water. ■



A great white takes the bait