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GIANTS

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Seeing great white sharks in the wild has to be one of life's unforgettable experiences, but add great visibility and the experience goes off the scale. Seasoned shark diver **MARK TAYLOR HUTCHINSON** made the pilgrimage to Isla Guadalupe to witness the magic for himself

Photographs by MARK TAYLOR HUTCHINSON



Slowly the cage submerged leaving a bubbling froth in its wake. Muffled noise was immediately replaced with that all-too-familiar quietness other than the noise of inhaled and exhaled air. Yellowtail jacks were already starting to buzz around the cage as we gradually descended into the deep Prussian blue. The cage shuddered and clanked as the cable winch abruptly halted at 9m. We had reached our assigned depth. Dave Valencia (Divemaster) stamped on the hessian bait bag and immediately, raggedy bits of fish detritus spilled into the surrounding water and the jacks ambushed each morsel as it drifted from the cage and swirled in the water column. Shimmering and flashing, hefty yellow fin tuna - another stunning fish - darted in and out of the fish crumb cloud on individual sorties.

Despite the incredible 30-metre visibility, the seabed was not visible such was the depth. Lying just off the continental shelf, the waters around Guadalupe shelve to over 3,600m. Then from the deep shadows there was no mistaking this lamnid heavyweight. A bulky torpedo shape of counter-shaded sheer muscle glided into the arena with gentle flicks of a well-defined caudal keel. With a grimacing smile and girth, this prototype of nature's perfection passed just below the cage floor, moving sideways temporarily to glance at the occupants inside with a rotating eye firmly seated in a black cavern. This is what we had come to see. We had been in the cage all but ten minutes before this leviathan showed up. Heart-thumping magic!

OFF TO SHARK HEAVEN

Leaving the Ramada Hotel at San Diego by coach, we headed for the Mexican border to the bustling port of Ensenada. The Nautilus Explorer, complete with shark cages, was already waiting quayside. One of the guests, on first witnessing the skyscraper of tethered shark cages at the stern, immediately started to hum the theme tune from Jurassic World, much to the merriment of the group. We were finally here with the collective aim of seeing the 'shark of sharks' in as near a natural encounter as safely possible.

Having been welcomed with a Margarita onboard, in no time we were embarking on the epic 400 kilometre journey southwest through the vast Pacific heading for the rocky outcrop known as Isla Guadalupe. This natural outpost is now a designated marine park and has been a pin-niped sanctuary since 1975. Formed by two volcanic eruptions resulting in a series of high volcanic ridges, Isla Guadalupe is 22 miles long and six miles wide. Average mean surface temperatures vary between 18-22 degrees Celsius.

Apart from colonies of Guadalupe fur seals, elephant seals and Californian sea lions peppered along the shoreline, the island is otherwise uninhabited, with the exception of a few seasoned fishermen and a weather station manned by a small contingent of Mexican Navy personnel at the southern tip. Landing on the island is strictly forbidden, so operators anchor offshore on the western side.

The crossing is usually bumpy, but the wave action, comparatively speaking, was somewhat modest on this occasion. Besides, the Nautilus Explorer - being a heavy stabilised steel vessel - is adept for such an undertaking. The journey took 25 hours.

Berthed in the lower deck, the waves smashed against the porthole window, causing a rhythmic shudder with each passing swell. The sink did not appear too happy and started gurgling in unison chorus. However, we soon drifted off with gleeful anticipation for what was to come.

Waking in the morning we were still journey bound, but it gave time to become familiar with the ship and each other. The Nautilus Explorer consists of a lower deck, main deck, dive deck, hot tub deck and upper sundeck. The crew introduced themselves formally and we received a lecture in cage etiquette. Then it was time to relax, prepare camera gear and take in the 360 degree sea views. Kevin Barnes, my cabin mate, started to prepare his Go-Pro homemade rig, which was genius by design.

If feeling exceptionally sharky, there are plenty of shark videos and similar themed books to wile away the time in the salon. Such is the size of the Nautilus, you can easily find a quiet corner.

As we edged ever nearer, the craggy pinnacles of Isla Guadalupe shrouded in low cloud appeared. It was like finding Skull Island from King Kong. The only noise intrusion was the bleating of seals on the shoreline, which carried to the boat on the wind. Fortunately, it was not accompanied by that yeasty pong typical of seal colonies.



The shark cages stowed on the dive deck



Getting ready to dive



The Nautilus Explorer at Ensenada Harbour

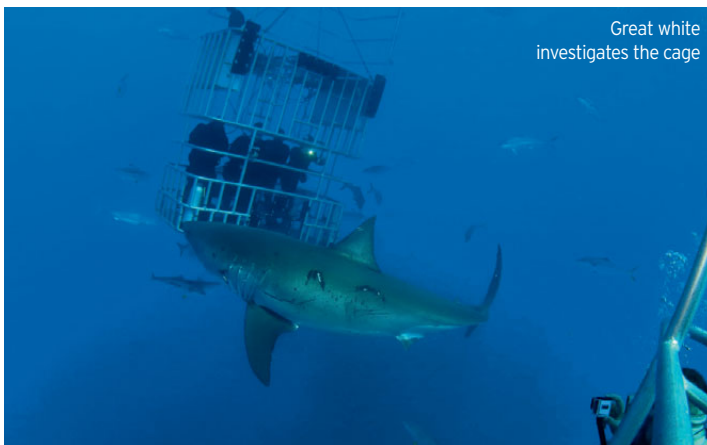
The smaller male great white sharks start appearing at Guadalupe in June and the females, or 'Big Mommas' as they are affectionately known, arrive late October onwards, which unfortunately tends to coincide with more unpredictable weather. Talking of which, we were receiving reports of the strongest hurricane in history hitting the Mexican coast, which was not quite the start we were hoping for. However, it seemed to be moving away from our vicinity thankfully.

It is not absolutely clear why the sharks arrive at Guadalupe other than to feed on the various pinnipeds and rich game fish, or to partake in courtship. Given some of the mating scars visible, both theories are contenders. Researchers have been collecting data from the island and as divers we were strongly encouraged to contribute to the research by uploading any shark images we obtain so the numbers can be monitored. As it stands, 171 different sharks have been recorded at the island to date, with many repeat visitors. The sharks leave the island from December onwards, favouring deep water towards Hawaii in an area called 'the Café'.

Gazing at the electric blue water, it looked so tranquil and yet it was hard to square that giants lurked beneath us - literally! Inspecting the dive rota we were second up for the deep cage dive. Such was the palpable tension, breakfast was a blur.

The first group was eagerly donning gear and hugging cameras as they descended the ladder into the cages. In no time the cages disappeared into the ocean and resurfaced. No close sharks!

Great white investigates the cage



Hints and advice

Dive kit: For cage diving, a 5-7mm wetsuit is recommended due to being stationary in the cage. Some divers even opt for drysuits. You are also heavily weighted to avoid floating about in the cages. Gear can be hired onboard if necessary.

Camera kit: Wide-angle lens is a must. Watch out for Go-Pro sticks invading your shot.

Cage tips: Make sure you equalise quickly as the negative descent is quick given you are overweighted.

Nautilus Explorer: The crew are attentive and professional. David Valencia (Divemaster) was always on hand to share photography tips, and the food is excellent onboard.

Accommodation: The meeting point is the Ramada Hotel at Point Loma, San Diego, which offers a preferential rate for Nautilus divers.

Another close pass from a leviathan



"A bulky torpedo shape of counter-shaded sheer muscle glided into the arena with gentle flicks of a well-defined caudal keel"

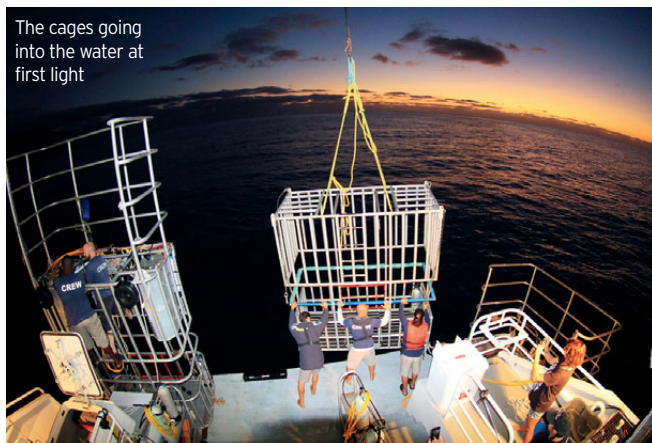
Now it was our turn. After ten minutes at 9m, the first graceful beauty appeared. Not all gnashing teeth and chaos, but refined beauty. These sharks have nothing to prove, their length and girth does the talking. They don't waste energy. Most of the time they were relaxed and inquisitive, but also cautious as any predator worth its salt is. Great whites are the perfect ambush predator and looking vertically below is where you are more likely to see the sharks originate. I am no stranger to great white shark encounters, having seen many in South Africa, but here the visibility is second to none. When you see these creatures in the raw, you cannot help but become a bit giddy however much of a shark veteran you are. There is something almost mystical about great white sharks that is hard to define, but most of the people who have dived with them succumb to that same sort of feeling.

Forty five minutes feels like ten minutes down there, but we had now christened the waters and seen our first four-metre shark - not a giant

in great white terms, but hefty nonetheless. On surfacing, most people immediately hopped straight into the surface cages. The deep cages are rotated by number of guests. Typically, this involves three scheduled dives per day for 45-minute durations at varying time slots. The two surface cages operate on a first-come basis, but there is ample time for everyone to have as much bottom time as they like in the surface cages. Surface air supply is a hookah-type system. Word of warning though, when entering the cage, hold onto your mouthpiece, particularly when other divers enter as it is so easy for a diver to stand on your hose and yank it unexpectedly from your mouth when descending the ladder. In each cage corner is a bail-out cylinder.

Each dive yielded more sharks and they became bolder. Interestingly, when a specific shark appeared, they tended to stay around for the day. We still noted visitations from different sharks each day. On some dives we had up to four different sharks.

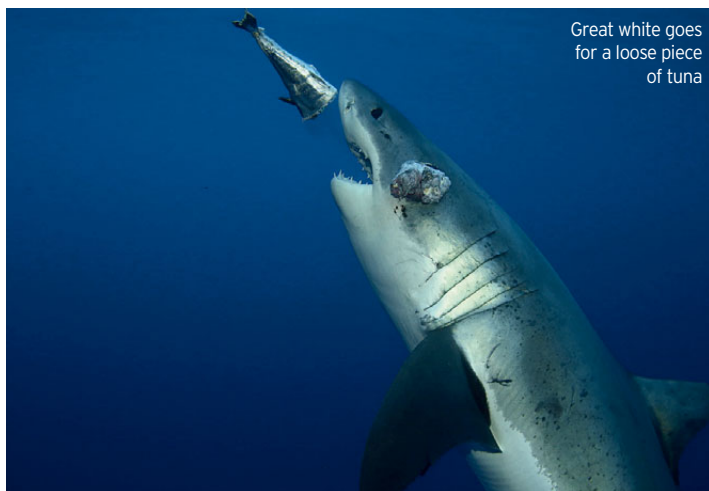
The cages going into the water at first light



Great white cruising past the deep cage



Great white goes for a loose piece of tuna



"Back on board, shark fever was in the air as everyone talked through the day's events and eagerly inspected camera screens hoping for the killer shot"

Mark Taylor Hutchinson

Mark Taylor Hutchinson is a wildlife artist, photographer and self-confessed sharkaholic. You can see some of Mark's work at: www.wildinspiration.co.uk

In the cage, the corners are good locations, as you then have two angles of view, but the sharks are transient and it is pot luck where they will appear. After a few dives you become more accustomed to behaviour patterns and this is when you tend to get better shots. It is so easy while focused on one shark not to see another spring up on your blind side. Using as many camera presets as you can is also prudent, especially when faced with multiple sharks. There is just not the time to fiddle with controls when presented with such jaw-dropping interactions. Oh, and when housing your camera, don't forget to take off your lens cap. No further comment!

At the Divemasters' discretion, you can clamber onto the open upper top of the cage, however, purely from a photography perspective, this is not necessarily the best place for images as the divers' bubbles from below can obscure views.

Back on board, shark fever was in the air as everyone talked through the day's events and eagerly inspected camera screens hoping for the killer shot. Meal times gave further opportunity for shark chat. On the upper sun deck as the night sky swept in, the stars glowed, accompanied by the omnipresent ghostly seal cries wailing from the darkness, which was both eerie and beautiful. One of the crew even gave us a midnight yoga lesson, and two guests entertained us singing songs with ukulele accompaniment, including a strange rendition of Guadalupe Skies.

Sunrises were spectacular, and in the afternoon do not be alarmed while in the cage when sudden darkness hits like an eclipse as the sun descends behind the craggy rocks of the island.

On our last day, guest David Gussman managed to pluck up the courage to launch his drone. All was going well until it ascended into the jet stream and escaped to the island at speed. The Captain had to turn about ship temporarily so it would come back in range. But it was worth it and all ended well, including some nice aerial footage. Great calibration, Dave!

Diving in submerged cages is so much better than surface cages for photography, as you do not have to contend with the clanking of surface swells and risk smashing your dome port. Another strength of the Nautilus is that the cage viewing areas are spacious.

On every dive we had sharks ranging from four metres to five metres plus. These heavyweights are showstoppers and one cannot but gaze in awe at these perfect predators. By the end we were all very attached to the sharks and noted the differing personalities. On one dive, two sharks went for the same piece of fish, resulting in one shark nipping the other like two puppies fighting over the same feeding bowl. Both re-emerged from the blue moments later as buddies again.

If you want to see great white sharks underwater in optimum visibility with reliable encounters, then Guadalupe has to be the best location in the world to do so. So until next time! ■

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ISLA GUADALUPE, MEXICO



HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways fly direct to San Diego, and from there the Nautilus Explorer takes care of transfers to the harbour in Mexico.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

A valid ESTA as you are travelling via the USA, and a passport with at least six months to expiry.

CURRENCY

US dollar (£1 = US\$1.50).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The Nautilus Explorer serves up a delicious array of food on board, and there can be few places more inviting than the upper deck to relax with an evening beer.

VERDICT

Isla Guadalupe is, without doubt, the premier hotspot to see great white sharks. With unparalleled visibility, you will log encounters not possible anywhere else.