

South African Shark Adventure

On a previous visit to South Africa Editor Jack Morrison was fascinated by that creature of almost mythical status - the Great White Shark. He returned recently to the country and here he retells the story of a dramatic cage diving experience ...



words/pictures

JACK MORRISON

"FROM YOUR right Anthony, watch the bait." 22 pairs of eyes turn to scan the murky green water to the right of a hefty chunk of not very fresh tuna on the end of a rope. From nowhere a dark shape appears. As the shape nears the surface Anthony very gently and slowly pulls the bait closer to the stern of the boat. The thing morphs into the familiar shape

of a shark - a great white shark.

About three metres long "this is about average" says Leon our shark wrangler and spotter. Closing in on the bait the shark becomes more distinct and clear, it is unmistakably a great white, the pointed nose, which makes sense of why they are sometimes called white pointers, the white underside and the black

soulless eye.

The shark glides gently past, its snout brushing against the bait. As it passes the boat it rolls slightly as if to see who and how many 'aliens' are watching. A couple of minutes later it's back making another pass at the bait. On the third pass it makes an attempt to grab the bait but Anthony is too quick he knows this behaviour well and has already moved it closer to the boat. The open mouth with its razor sharp teeth glistening is empty as the shark passes and slides under the boat.

In no time it's back - moving quickly from below and making a more determined effort to get the bait, but again Anthony is quicker and the jaws close on water. And

so it gives up and has gone for good - so we wait in the hope that another shark will be attracted by the chum slick and the bait.

The crew put the cage into the water and secure it to the side of the boat. As we are waiting Leon gives us a briefing on cage etiquette: "Once inside I don't want to see any hands outside the cage. If I do you will be out of the cage and won't be allowed back in again, OK."

He also tells us how to get in and out safely and that the lid must be closed at all times when someone is inside. By now I have my wetsuit on - I am the only one who has brought my own, a Lomo Tsunami 5mm kindly supplied for a trip to the Red Sea last year that was aborted at the last minute. Amazingly it still fits I can't have put that much weight on; it is easy to don, very comfortable and with the water temperature at 14 degrees this should be a fair test for it. I make the mistake of being first into the cage this puts me at the end away from the bait where all the action might be, too eager - will I ever learn?

I knew from the surface that the water was a bit murky but I was not ready for the fact that the viz was about a metre. From my end of the cage I can't see the other end and it is only two metres away. So much for underwater photography - I would be lucky to get anything in this,



above: the cage; & top of page: "it's huge, the tail must be almost two metres"



lining up to take you to the Great Whites

it's like the Clyde on an average day. Ah well, nothing I can do about it, I'll take pictures of course but I don't expect them to be any good.

In Leon's briefing he explained why they don't use aqualungs, apparently the sharks are scared away by the bubbles and they have better encounters when the divers are simply in a wetsuit with a mask and a weight belt. It is certainly more comfortable and given that the sharks don't hang around for very long it makes sense. I am joined in the cage by three others, the lid is closed and we wait. The girl next to me has no diving experience so I show her how to stop her mask fogging up and we wait.

Eventually after what seems like ages but is really only about fifteen minutes, we are told to get ready. I can hear the people on deck getting excited with words like that's huge then Leon shouts "get down!" and we all push ourselves under. I can see nothing but can feel the cage moving, we are being tossed about a bit and looking straight ahead out of nowhere the tail of a shark batters into the side of the cage in front of me.

It is huge, the tail must be almost two metres high - this shark must be twice the size of the first one. Later when I see the video I find out what happened. The shark held on to the bait and started



the Great White Shark has a distinctive pointed nose

shaking its head from side to side but the rope caught in the cage which is why we got shaken around a bit. I have to admit it was very exciting and great fun.

For Leon and Anthony though it is not fun - they care about the sharks and try very hard to stop them colliding with the cage as they might damage themselves, the sharks that is. Meanwhile, having seen a shark, two of my fellow divers leave the cage and another comes in. We don't have to wait long before the next shark comes along; it

makes several passes at the bait but comes nowhere near my end of the cage so I don't see it.

The other two leave the cage and now it's just me and I can get to the other end where the bait is. It would have been alright if the viz had been normal but there had been a storm over the past few days and now we had big spring tides to churn up the sand. This sandy bay the sharks migrate to during summer is only about 12m deep and the swell today is at least 2m so you can understand how easily the water gets churned up and reduces the viz.

All this is going through my mind as I bob around in my lonely cage feeling a bit more vulnerable now I am alone. I am of course perfectly safe and before I have time to think there is another shark at the bait.

This time Anthony is on the ball and suddenly before my eyes the open mouth of a 3m long shark appears. The viz may be like Loch Long but the resident marine life is quite different, how many of us would venture in at Finart if these fish were going to appear out of nowhere.

After an hour and a half I decide I've had enough, it's been about 20 minutes since the last shark and although I'm not cold, I am hungry. The boys ask if we've had enough and to be fair everyone is sitting around talking, eating and drinking and it's clear we will all be happy to head for the shore.

Back in the great white house after watching Lindsay's video of today's

adventure, Leon tells me we have seen maybe 14 different sharks, a pretty good day. Some of the other boats have not seen any and I am glad I booked with Marine Dynamics.

When I knew I was coming to South Africa and to this part of the country I asked everyone I knew who had been out here and they all said go with Marine Dynamics. They have the best reputation and the best success rate for seeing sharks. Maybe it's the chum, maybe it's the bait, I think it is more to do with the quality of the crew.

These guys care - they care about their customers and want them to have the best experience, but most of all they care about the sharks. You could be cynical and say their livelihood depends on their customers seeing the massive fish, but when you talk to these guys you quickly realise they still enjoy observing sharks and they know a lot more about them than most. Like fishermen the world over they have to know their prey and how to find and attract them. It would be easy for them to just let the sharks



Cage, bait and ... shark!

take the bait, but they know that would only lead to the sharks becoming conditioned and lazy.

Controversy surrounds cage shark diving - has it led to more attacks? No, there have always been shark attacks and I've checked the figures and there are no more now than there were before cage diving started. In fact given that there are now more people using the sea to surf etc, statistically there are probably fewer attacks.

Marine Dynamics pride themselves on the conservation work they do, not just for sharks but for the penguin colony on Dyer Island. They are also involved with many other conservation measures along this coast.

While I was out on the boat talking to Anthony the skipper, he mentioned there was a company trying to get a license to set up a salmon farm. When I told him what the impact of fish farms was over here he got on the phone to another skipper who was leading the campaign

Shark Adventure

to have it stopped. I gave him a few websites to get ammunition for his arguments against the plan.

Charcharodon carcharias to give them their proper name may have lived unchanged for thousands of years, but they won't survive if we allow fish farms to be set up in the area, nothing will. Research into the great white is difficult, they are a nomadic species. Recently one was tagged with a radio tracker and over a three month period it swam from South Africa to Australia and back again, truly remarkable but maybe commonplace for great whites. Shark cage diving gives us the opportunity to observe and monitor this magnificent creature.

Marine Dynamics are at the forefront of research and conservation while at the same time giving us the chance to have the experience of a lifetime.

Visit Marine Dynamics at www.marinedynamics.co.za

Photographs: top right - too close for comfort & right - surely this fish supper's got my name on it



THE
DIVING
CENTRE
L I M I T E D

The best secure internet shopping • Worldwide mail order • Best diving site on the net

www.thedivingcentre.com

**We DO Stock the largest range of
diving equipment in the UK**

Tel: 0191 232 7983



41 Bath Lane, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE4 5SP
E-mail : Sales@thedivingcentre.com

