

Diving with White Sharks

The Predator of the Sea

Guadalupe Island is a unique eco-system in the Pacific Ocean with one of the largest communities of White Sharks in the world. This was **Sean Dooley's** destination in early October 2006 to experience the world-renowned cage diving with these apex predators, as described in his following report ...

Our group of divers met in San Diego, CA, where we loaded onto a bus for the trip south across the border to Ensenada, Mexico, where our vessel Nautilus Explorer was waiting for us. Amazingly, when our group of 15 divers reached the border the bus stopped for a few minutes, some words were exchanged between driver and guard (assumably), and we were suddenly in Mexico. No passport inspection, not even a border guard coming on the bus to have a quick peek. A bit shocking to me, and the many Europeans in our group, considering the routine travellers have had to endure since September 11. (We were not so lucky on our return to the US, having not only to disembark and walk across the border, but also to offload and carry all our heavy dive gear with us!)

In Ensenada, we boarded and left immediately for the 240-kilometre (150-mile) open ocean crossing. The ideal time to visit Guadalupe Island is from April to October, as this is not the storm season, and our crossing was without incident.

Guadalupe is a beautiful biological paradise 35 km (21 miles) long and its width varies between 5 and 10 km (3 and 6 miles); its highest point is estimated to be 1,300 metres (4,200 ft) and some of the cliffs drop about 850 metres (2,800 ft) down into the sea. The entire island has been a protected biosphere since 1928, making it one of the oldest reserves in Mexico.

The flora and fauna on the island are made up of many endemic species; of 168 known species of vascular plants more than 50% are unique to Guadalupe. With its steep cliffs and relatively high altitude for a small island, Guadalupe has a solid cloud cover that provides sufficient precipitation to support an impressive cypress forest on its highest plateau. There is a small indigenous population, primarily tuna and abalone fisherman who still dive without cages. Thousands of goats, left by Russian whalers in the 19th century, have denuded much





of the lowlands of its grasses, but also provide an alternate food source for the islanders.

We travelled along the coast viewing the large colonies of Guadalupe Fine Furred Seal (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) and the Elephant Seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*), the primary food source for the local white sharks, which have recovered after almost becoming extinct due to heavy hunting, by humans, carried out at the end of the 19th century.

Upon our arrival we noticed two private yachts also at anchor, and later learned that one had rented their own cage and were enjoying the shark diving from the comfort of their swim platform. Permits are required from the Mexican Government for all vessels anchoring off Guadalupe and especially those diving with the sharks.

We began preparing the cages for the next morning's first dive, and this entailed launching them overboard and securing them to the vessel. The cages are extremely safe and solid, custom built of steel for these trips to Guadalupe. There were two types used: two larger cages are hung directly off the stern and two are hung from custom davits approximately 3 metres (10 ft) from the vessel, giving these cages a 360° view. All cages were top loading and surface floating, using significant flotation containers inside. This puts the diver, who is standing upright, eye level with the action of the white sharks feeding at the surface.

In our cage diving 'briefing', we were told to keep our hands and torsos inside the cages at all times, something I didn't need to be told even once. We were then shown the 'trap door' in the bottom of the cage, which was an emergency feature in the "rare" event that a smaller

white shark should get inside the cage. Given that scenario, the diver should exit the cage and head for the surface. Now they had our full attention. We considered this scenario. Since we breathe from surface supplied air (hookah) and are wearing 18 to 22 kg (40 to 50 lb) of weight that allows us to stand upright, we would need to remove the pin on the floor door, drop our weights, ditch our air source and then swim to the surface. Not an easy task, especially considering the panic we would surely be experiencing with a 'small' white shark in our cage, and needless to say the larger ones in the water outside the cage!

We had two biologists on board who were involved in a continuing study of the white sharks of Guadalupe. There is still much they do not know regarding white sharks, and a recent program of tagging and tracking them has presented many more questions. White sharks are migratory and travel to several different locations in a single year, sometimes thousands of miles apart. Their mission on this trip was to tag white sharks from their small RIB, and we would watch them from the comfort and safety of Nautilus Explorer as they chummed, teased with bait, and then hand speared sharks of equal or greater length of their RIB. They told us the record was 40 different white sharks seen in a single day by the same vessel. This is extraordinary – and the reason we were all there – so everyone was very excited to witness these magnificent creatures first hand.

On the first day of diving, the crew started chumming the water at 7 am with frozen tuna bits as well as large 'bait' tuna that hung off the stern attached to small buoys. These were the bait that the white sharks would go for, and the crew would pull on the line to lead them in closer to the boat, and us divers sitting underwater.



Dive feature

The water off Guadalupe ranges from 17 to 20 °C (62 to 68 °F), which can get very chilly since we are waiting patiently underwater for up to two hours for a shark visit. I was wearing a drysuit, as were approximately half the other divers, and those that opted for wetsuits seemed a bit hypothermic on their exits.

When we finally saw our first shark 20 minutes into our first dive, it was amazing. I had a brand new still camera housing and I was familiarising myself with it when I felt the presence of something big, then turned and saw a massive white shark swimming past. Frantically I popped off a few shots and then was trying to decide whether to stare at this awesome creature, approximately 4 metres (13 ft) in length and 1.5 metres (5 ft) in width, or try to snap some more photos. Luckily, that shark was around for about 10 minutes and I did plenty of both.

We saw our best shark action at the beginning and end of our three days of cage diving. We kept reminding ourselves that this was a 'wild' experience and that any sightings were a gift. Of course, we heard that the prior week was loaded with shark sightings, but we kept our eyes open and kept chumming. After our first sighting it was quiet for the next 36 hours as we debated different locations, chum selection and general karma.

The only way to be ready to see, and photograph, these beauties was to be in the water when they actually decided to cruise by and check out the bait. Overall

this meant approximately 10 hours of cage 'sitting' for approximately 30 minutes of shark action.

On the last day of cage diving it came down to only two of us in the cages at 4.30 pm (cages were to close at 5 pm and we would pull anchor). After my companion and I grew slightly delirious watching the small fish feast on our chum for the last 90 minutes, I tried a bit of advice passed to me by my Mexican friend on this trip. Make noise. In this case, we used a large lead weight and beat on the cage for approximately five minutes. Bang, bang, bang. Seeing nothing, we threw up our hands and prepared to exit. At that moment a huge shadow covered us as a very large white shark came flying in to see who was making all the noise in his neighbourhood. He never looked at the bait and seemed to give us a good stare, and for the first time I felt very glad the cage was as strong as it was. Several people from the boat jumped in to get a glimpse, some without wetsuits, and 'Shredder' (as he is catalogued in the Guadalupe ID book due to his splintered dorsal fin and multiple scars) gave us one last glare and a flyby as he casually returned back into the depths. Exiting the water, my Mexican friend smiled and said, "persistence pays".

Guadalupe is off the beaten path and is not a casual trip, but special moments such as these have to be earned the hard way sometimes.

**Text and images supplied by Sean Dooley
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