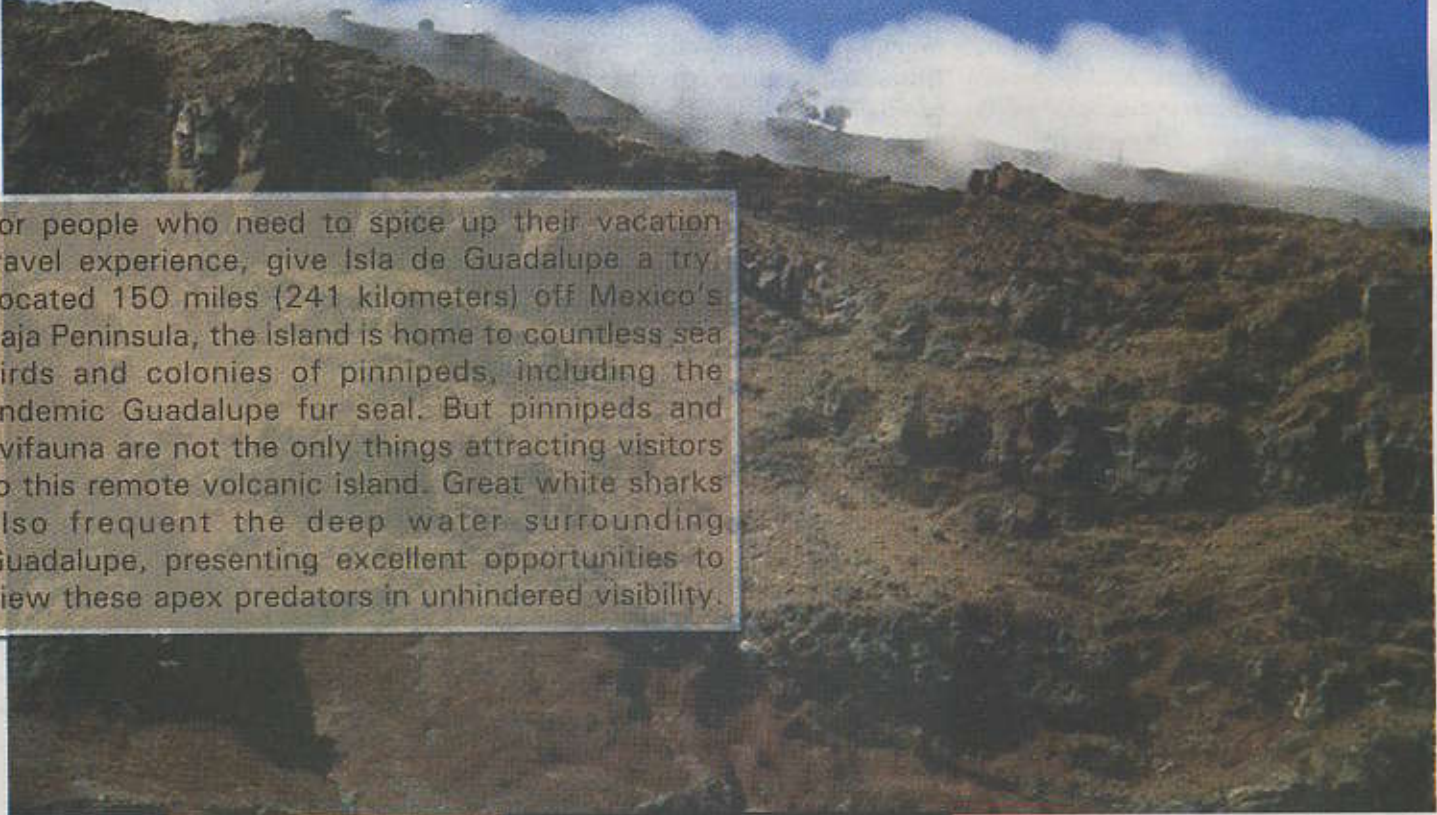


West Coast Getaway

GUADALUPE ISLAND

By Barb Roy



For people who need to spice up their vacation travel experience, give Isla de Guadalupe a try. Located 150 miles (241 kilometers) off Mexico's Baja Peninsula, the island is home to countless sea birds and colonies of pinnipeds, including the endemic Guadalupe fur seal. But pinnipeds and avifauna are not the only things attracting visitors to this remote volcanic island. Great white sharks also frequent the deep water surrounding Guadalupe, presenting excellent opportunities to view these apex predators in unhindered visibility.

My encounter was much like everyone else's with the first shark appearing head-on in the distance. With elegant grace and composure it swayed from side to side toward the cage with mouth opened just enough to boast a healthy set of triangular teeth. I kept thinking I would hear the theme music to "Jaws" any moment being piped down to fuel my anxiety even more! Like the star of a grand performance, the shark held everyone in awe as it turned slightly just in front of the cage to examine an offering of tuna. It was a huge 14-foot, 2,175-pound female. She ignored the bait and gave the caged divers a once over as she slowly swam away, never changing her pace. Peter Benchley, author of "Jaws," pegged it correctly when he referred to these creatures as "natural perfection."

Shark trips are new for the 116-foot live-aboard *Nautilus Explorer*. Four more scheduled in 2006, organized by shark diving pioneer Doc Anes from San Diego Shark Expeditions. Because of the controlled environment, dive certification is not needed, opening the experience up



to almost anyone.

Five-day excursions are offered during late September when the sharks are active and weather conditions favorable. With water temperatures of 70 F (21 C) a dry suit works best, but a 5- to 7-mm full body wet suit will also suffice. Top the attire off with a warm-water beanie cap, 3-mm gloves and a set of ankle weights and a diver will be able to comfortably endure several one-hour exposure sessions throughout the day. DUI Weight & Trim systems, each containing about 40 pounds (18.1 kilograms) are also used for staying on the bottom of the cage.

Two of the cages used are 10 feet long by 7.6 feet tall and 38 inches wide. Each cage holds four divers each. Surface-supplied air is connected to four individual mouthpieces per cage. A smaller cage is used for deeper water observation, capable of handling three viewers. Cages have openings large enough to accommodate oversized still and video cameras.

To initially attract the sharks, small
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frozen blue-fin tuna and numerous frozen one-gallon chum-cicles are brought onboard. The tuna is cut in half, tied to a rope (looks like bailing twine) and thrown into the water by *shark wranglers* who tug on the ropes, encouraging excitement. Live bait is also brought onboard for fishing while en route to and from the island.

Before I knew it I was on my fifth one-hour in-water shift and had already filled one of my camera's three 1-gigabyte memory cards. What an adrenalin rush the whole day was! Those observers without cameras gave a thumbs-up and yelled into their mouthpieces when an exceptionally large shark swam by.

"I never imagined there would be so many sharks," Mike Lever, owner/operator of the *Nautilus Explorer*, exclaimed. "I thought there would be sparse sightings throughout the day, not a shark every five to ten minutes, all day long..."

When not in the water, divers are encouraged to take advantage of the onboard computer equipment and check their video and/or digital images and footage on the boat's wide-screen plasma TV. An endless supply of food and snacks were always available.

Jessie Harper, one of Doc's wranglers for more than five years, started a white shark photo identification project four years ago. Within the last two years the archival project has evolved into a large binder identifying more than 50 individuals. Photo images are collected from visiting underwater photographers and cataloged, using scars, color patterns, dorsal and tail markings for identification. Jessie has since turned the project over to Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research in Oceanside, Calif., but continues to collect images for identification.



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"We are seeing the same individuals year after year," Doc commented. "Their personalities are as unique as their markings and they appear to be extremely intelligent."

"Sneaky Pete will actually sneak up on you," Jessie added. "Flash just flies by when he shows up and Bruce, like 'Finding Nemo's' Bruce, is very big in girth! You can't miss this guy. He also seems to smile. Several of the sharks have been tagged, transmitting important data back via satellites revealing their location and other essential facts. The sharks we are seeing in these waters have been tracked as far away as Hawaii."

As if cued, great white sharks appeared for the divers as soon as the first one entered the cage at 8 a.m. each morning. Most of the above- and below-water action was observed during the late afternoon, when the sharks went for the bait. It was estimated that we saw 12 to 15 sharks the entire trip.

Rebeca Kobelkowsky, a representative from the Mexican government, accompanied us. She evaluated the expedition to guide new regulations for commercial shark expeditions and sport fishing charters around Guadalupe Biosphere Reserve. Designated in April 2005, the site was originally established as a Nature Preserve in 1925. Rebeca even jumped into a cage to experience first hand why so many people wanted to see these sharks.

Another activity when not in the water was to go on scenic nature tours in the skiff along the northern shoreline of

Spanish Bay. Cute tiny Guadalupe fur seal pups crowded the boulder-covered beaches crying for their mothers. Farther down the beach, juvenile elephant seals could be seen practicing their fighting techniques while groups of California sea lions preferred to snooze in the warm sand in their sections. A working light house station, the remains of an old fishing shack and what is left of a church from an old prison can also be seen from the shoreline.

When I was finally able to focus on something other than sharks, I noticed a pelagic realm of gelatinous critters. Thousands of tiny undulating iridescent life forms floated by, making me crave a macro lens.

Even *Nautilus* crewmember Bob Crawford received an opportunity to don

his 1940 Morse abalone hardhat and suit for a round in the cage. All together his gear weighed 159 pounds (72 kilograms)!

Although the sharks appeared curious and responded to noises like recycling strobes, the clanking sound of Bob's boots seemed to attract them as well.

Overall the trip was quite rewarding. Videographers acquired breathtaking footage and still-photographers went home with hundreds of excellent action shots. Rebeca, Mike and Doc worked out acceptable shark attracting methods and all were keen on finding ways to work with Guadalupe's residents for eco-friendly future tours.

"Conservation on Guadalupe Island is a huge issue for us," explained Mike. "We are working on a plan to build a school for

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resident kids and improve the island's airstrip because there is a 95 percent certainty that we will be offering fly-in trips to Guadalupe for 2006. Regardless of whether we offer fly-in or ocean passages, we will be taking 22 divers in four cages. Each cage will be 9-feet long and accommodate three guests with bi-level wraparound camera ports (so you can shoot either standing up or kneeling with as few cross frames in the way as possible). Two of the cages will trail from over-side booms and offer a 360-degree view. We experimented with this on our second trip and I can confirm that one feels awfully vulnerable hanging out there! The other two cages will trail from the transom. There is a possibility of a fifth cage suspended at 20 feet." 🚩

For Information:

•Nautilus Explorer

www.nautilusexplorer.com
604-657-7614

•San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions, Inc.

www.sdsharkdiving.com,
888-SD-SHARK

•Guadalupe Island Restoration Project

www.islandconservation.org/guadalupe.html

•White Shark Information

prepared by Ian K. Fergusson
www.zoo.co.uk/~z9015043/gws_conserv.html

•San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.sandiego.org

•Pfleger Institute of Environmental Research (PIER)

www.pier.org

•Shark Research Committee

www.sharkresearchcommittee.com

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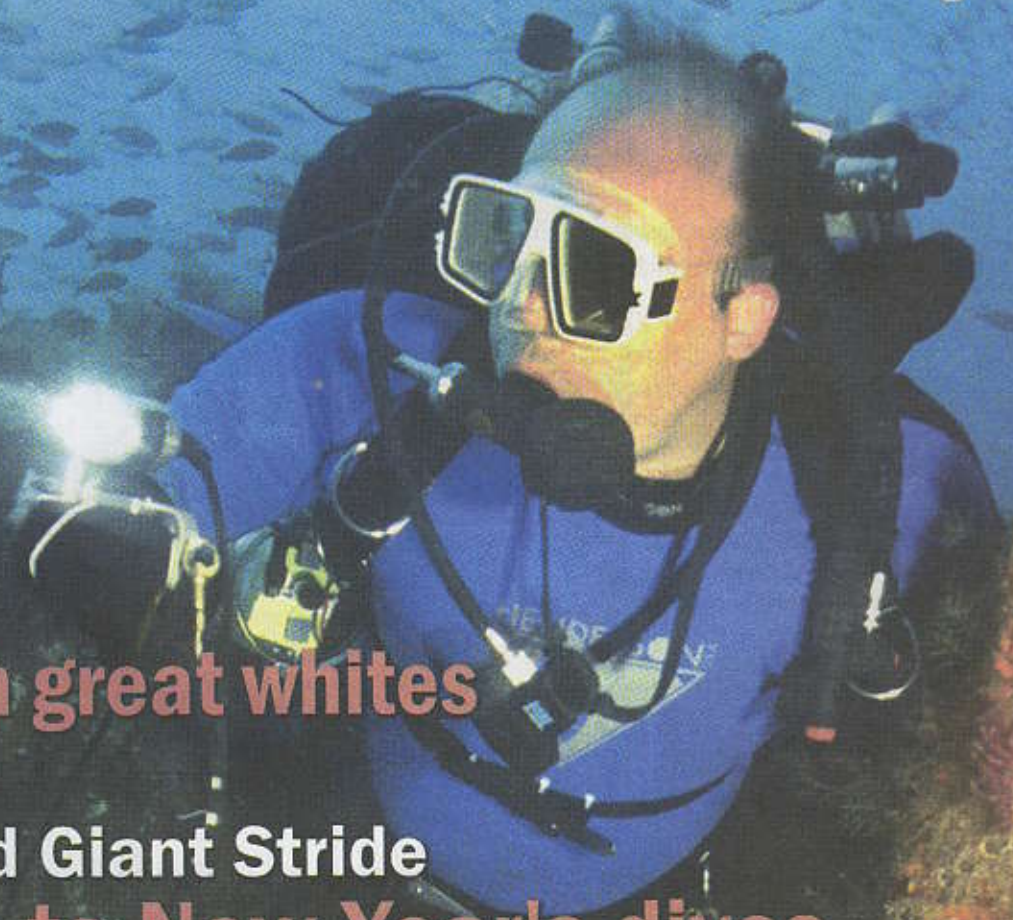
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