



# An Explorers Log

## Caged

Barb Bsy



It's late September and I have joined 17 others for a 220-mile (354-kilometer) journey on the 116-foot luxury liveaboard Nautilus Explorer from San Diego, Calif., down the Baja Peninsula to Isla de Guadalupe. Doc Anes of San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions—the oldest shark-diving operation on the West Coast—organized our expedition. At 150 miles (241 kilometers) offshore, 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.

Shark trips are new for the Nautilus Explorer, with a sampling of trips this year and four scheduled in 2006. Because of the controlled environment in a submerged, shark-proof cage, dive certification is not needed. Nautilus uses "hookah regulators" which are cage-mounted

regulators connected to the vessel's air system. Everyone receives instruction from the crew on using the hookahs before the first dive.

"The sharks will usually go after prey about one-third their size," Bob Gladden, a videographer for the Doc's Shark expeditions, said. "That makes me about one-third the size of an 18-footer. A creature that size weighs over 3,500 pounds!"

With this in mind, I went to examine the three heavy-duty marine-grade aluminum cages. Two cages were 10 feet long by 7.6 feet tall and 38 inches wide, holding four divers while floating at the surface. The smaller cage was destined to allow observation from depth. Also onboard were a supply of frozen whole blue-fin tuna and numerous frozen one-gallon jugs of cow blood. The tuna is cut in half, tied to a rope that looks like bailing twine and thrown into the water by shark wranglers to encourage excitement. Live bait is also brought onboard for fishing while enroute to and from the island.

### Day One

We traveled throughout the day, with the trip taking 22 hours one-way. During this time everyone became acquainted, checked camera settings and watched shark videos on the boat's wide-screen plasma TV. Later in the day Jessie Harper, one of Doc's wranglers, filled us in on the white shark photo identification project she began 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 catalogued, 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.

"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 looks like he is smiling."



recorded as far away as Hawaii." Scientists from University of California, Davis, and Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research, have tagged great whites with acoustic and satellite transmitters to track the sharks' movements. Data from the transmitters give researchers understanding into movements of Guadalupe's shark population.

I'm sure sharks were on everyone's mind as they retired for the evening, in hopes of seeing "Bruce."

## Day Two

We awoke to find the remote island of Guadalupe gleaming in the morning sun with hues of bronze, red and gold on the rocky cliff face. I could only imagine how nice diving might be, but no one had any thoughts of jumping in to find out, that is, until the cages were lowered into the clear blue water. With water temperatures of 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 Celsius) I was grateful to have on my dry suit! 5-7mm full-body wet suits also worked. There were even a few who braved 3mm suits and others who jumped in for 10-minute intervals with only a swimsuit on. My warm-water beanie cap worked great, along with 3mm gloves. Doc and Jessie set everyone up with DUI weight & trim systems, each containing about 40 pounds (18.1 kilograms) so we could easily stand in the cage.

I climbed into the cage and took one of the second stage surface-supplied hookah

Of the five years Jessie has been shark wrangling for Doc she has observed and gained useful knowledge about these apex predators and was quite willing to share information.

"Many of the sharks have also been tagged," Jessie said. "Important data is transmitted back via satellites telling of their location and other essential facts. The sharks we are seeing here have been

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regulators. My camera was handed in and there we were, hanging in 200 feet of water in a mild warm oceanic current (boat was anchored). I kept expecting the soundtrack from "Jaws" to be piped into the water to fuel our anxiety. Although the cages were floating at the surface behind the boat, I wondered if a shark head or at least a few teeth might fit through one of the large openings in which I was foolishly holding my camera. Millions of yellow and white

scad mackerel bore down on the bait.

My first shark appeared head-on in the distance slowly swaying from side to side. With elegant grace and composure it continued towards the cage with mouth opened just enough to boast a healthy set of triangular teeth. 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 the 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 swam away, never changing her pace. Peter Benchley, author of "Jaws," pegged it correctly when he referred to these creatures as "natural perfection."

What an adrenalin rush! I turned to find everyone giving a thumbs up and yelling into their mouthpieces. Just as I regained my wits, a small male shark appeared next to me, heading for the bait. This time I raised my camera and began to shoot. Within minutes I blew through 36 exposures and asked for my second camera, a digital, to be handed down. Before I knew it I was on my fifth one-hour in-water shift and had already filled one of my three 1GB cards!

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

Needless to say I think fatigue hit us all at dinner. As usual the food was excellent and Mike's crew was incredible. I'm sure we all went to sleep counting nothing but sharks.

## Day Three

As if cued, white sharks began to appear as soon as the first diver jumped into the cage. Not as much eagerness today on the part of observers, probably because we saw six to eight different individuals making numerous passes yesterday.

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Today I accompanied Rebeca Kobelkowsky, a representative from the Mexican government, on her first cage dive. Mike provided a dry suit for her to wear and in we went. Rebecca had the task of evaluating and setting new regulations for both commercial shark expeditions and sport fishing charters around Guadalupe. She wanted to see first hand why so many people were attracted to the island and what the big deal was about a few sharks. Since Guadalupe's designation as a Biosphere Reserve this past April, only a handful of operator permits have been granted. The island was established as a Nature Preserve in 1925 to protect pinniped populations.

As with everyone before her, Rebecca was amazed at the beauty and sheer dominant presence of the sharks. What an awesome first underwater experience as well.

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.

Later that day Nautilus crewmember Bob Crawford donned his 1940 Morse abalone hardhat and suit for a round in the cage.

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His boots weighed 17 pounds (7.7 kilograms) each; his weight belt was 80 pounds (36 kilograms) and the helmet—45 pounds (20 kilograms)!

The way the sharks kept passing by us, it appeared they were curious and responded to noises like recycling strobes and the clanking sound of Bob's boots. After being the subject of close examination by these sharks, I can totally sympathize with other large caged animals.

## Day Four

To take advantage of the early morning soft light, we took the skiff and cruised the shoreline. Cute tiny Guadalupe fur seal pups cried for their mothers on a northern boulder-covered beach near Spanish Bay. Farther down the beach juvenile elephant seals practiced their fighting techniques. We also saw a working light station, the remains of an old fishing shack and what was left of a church from an abandoned prison.

Today "Bruce" was on my mind. I found myself trying to transmit "Humans are our friends, we don't eat humans" all day. Bruce may not have made his appearance,

but plenty of other large sharks did. Although there was little interest in the bait during the mornings, they put on quite a show above and below the water during the early evenings.

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 have worked out alternative methods to using cow's blood and all are 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," Mike explained. "We are working on a plan to build a school for 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 nine 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 have 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 More Information:

- Nautilus Explorer  
[www.nautilusexplorer.com](http://www.nautilusexplorer.com)  
604-657-7614
- San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions, Inc.  
[www.sdsharkdiving.com](http://www.sdsharkdiving.com)  
888-SD-SHARK
- Guadalupe Island Restoration Project  
[www.islandconservation.org/guadalupe.html](http://www.islandconservation.org/guadalupe.html)
- White Shark Information  
Ian K. Fergusson  
[www.zoo.co.uk/~z9015043/gws\\_conserv.html](http://www.zoo.co.uk/~z9015043/gws_conserv.html)
- San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau  
[www.sandiego.org](http://www.sandiego.org)
- Pfleger Institute of Environmental Research, (PIER)  
[www.pier.org](http://www.pier.org)
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