

8 PULSE- POUNDING DIVES

BY TERRY WARD

Is there any dive in the world more heart-pounding than a cage dive with a great white shark?

BRANDON COLE

Some dives you'll remember for a while. Others fade into the blue. And then there are those moments of ecstasy you're absolutely certain to never, ever forget.

You know the dives we're talking about — the ones where you can't get the reg out of your mouth fast enough at the surface to whoop it up with your buddy. The rush of adrenaline is a very powerful thing, and an invitation to never leave well enough alone when it comes to pushing the spectrum of diving's possibilities.

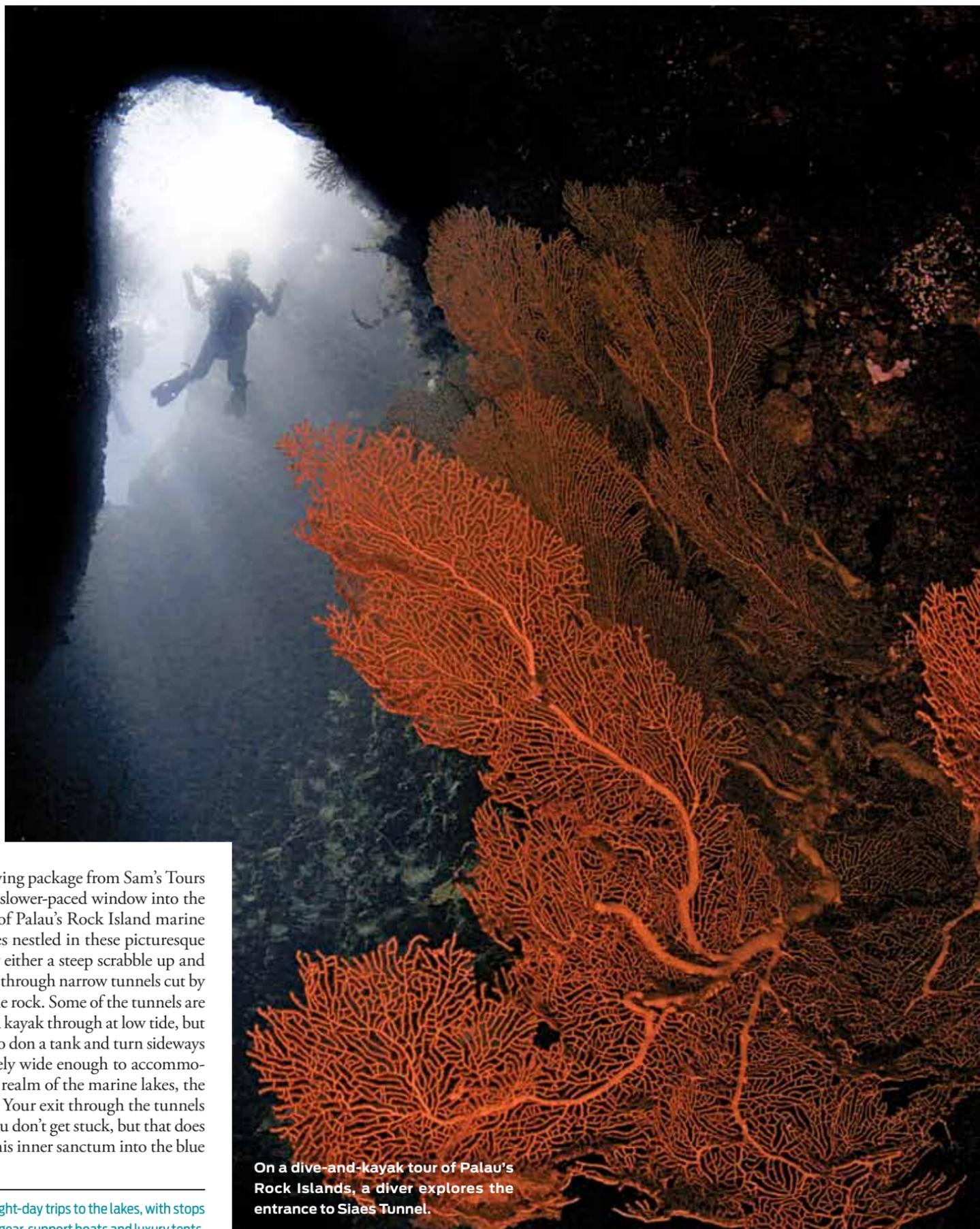
Once you've felt the buzz of a serendipitous encounter with schooling hammerheads in the Galapagos or flown through a passage flanked with mantas, sharks and dolphins in Tahiti's Tuamotu islands, only one question remains: where to score you some more of that good, good stuff. We've scoured the planet for diving's top adrenaline-pumping moments — it's up to you to keep your pulse and air intake in check so you can soak it all in.

ROCK ISLANDS TUNNELS

Palau

A new kayaking and diving package from Sam's Tours and Planet Blue gives a slower-paced window into the rarely seen ecosystems of Palau's Rock Island marine lakes. Many of the lakes nestled in these picturesque islands are accessible by either a steep scabble up and over sharp limestone, or through narrow tunnels cut by eons of tidal flow into the rock. Some of the tunnels are wide enough to paddle a kayak through at low tide, but others will require you to don a tank and turn sideways to ease through submerged, hidden passages barely wide enough to accommodate a single diver. Once you've entered the inner realm of the marine lakes, the chance to dive in waters few ever see is the payoff. Your exit through the tunnels will be carefully timed with slack tide to ensure you don't get stuck, but that does nothing to diminish the rush of emerging from this inner sanctum into the blue waters of open-ocean Palau.

► **Make It Happen** Sam's Tours (samstours.com) offers eight-day trips to the lakes, with stops at outer-reef sites, from \$4,500 per person including meals, gear, support boats and luxury tents.



On a dive-and-kayak tour of Palau's Rock Islands, a diver explores the entrance to Siales Tunnel.

KERWILK; OPPOSITE: DEBIEHNSHAW

SHARK FEEDS

Bahamas

There are few greater — and more accessible — thrills than finding yourself surrounded by 40 Caribbean reef sharks out for an easy meal. The shark dives at Stuart Cove's, on New Providence Island, are highly controlled. That doesn't mean your eyes won't widen with wonder. You'll make an introductory dive around the surrounding reef at Ray of Hope at Heineken Wall trailed by several expectant sharks. Your second tank is at the shark-feeding arena — a circle of small boulders in about 35 feet of water. The shark feeder descends in a full chain-mail suit and plucks tasty pieces of grouper from a metal box as sleek sharks circle close and lunge in for lunch. The sharks are used to divers and will come within inches of your mask; don't be surprised if they shoot the narrow gap between you and the diver right next to you. Up to 20 sharks circling is a normal day here, but sometimes as many as 50 gather. Until you've seen the ocean's apex predator launch into feeding mode inches from your face, you've hardly dived with a shark.

► **Make It Happen:** The Sheraton Nassau's Shark Dive Adventure with Stuart Cove's (stuartcove.com) is \$915 for three nights plus a two-tank shark dive for two people.



A chain-mail-clad feeder readies the feast for a school of hungry sharks.

GRAVEYARD OF THE ATLANTIC

North Carolina

Some 2,000 shipwrecks looming like ghosts in the waters off North Carolina give this stretch of coastline its name. And while the water temps won't give you goose bumps during the warm summer months, the experi-

ence of diving on World War II casualties that fell to Hitler's U-boats as you're surrounded by schools of sand tiger sharks almost certainly will. Few dive destinations bring such heavy history and heady animal encounters together on the same tank of air. Keel up in the sand at 120 feet, the wreck of the *Papoose* — a 412-foot tanker that met its demise via German U-boat in 1942 — is threaded with between 15 and 20 tiger sand sharks on any given day. And seeing hundreds of splayed-every-which-way teeth attached to 11-foot-long sharks emerge from a dark recess in the wreck's shredded metal is nothing short of exhilarating. The *CaribSea*, a WWII freighter torpedoed in 1942, is gathering ground for the sand tigers — if you don't see them on the wreck itself, check the shadowy surrounding waters, where they're likely to be lurking. You might get lucky and see a bull shark, hammerhead or dusky shark patrolling the graveyard wrecks too.

► **Make It Happen Olympus Dive Center** (olympusdiving.com) in Morehead City offers full-day charters with two dives to see the sand tiger sharks from \$125 per person.



Off the North Carolina coast, a sand tiger shark patrols the wreck of the *Spar*.

MICHAEL GERKEN (2)



Sunk by the CGC *Icarus* on May 9, 1942, the *U-352* now sits 110 feet deep.

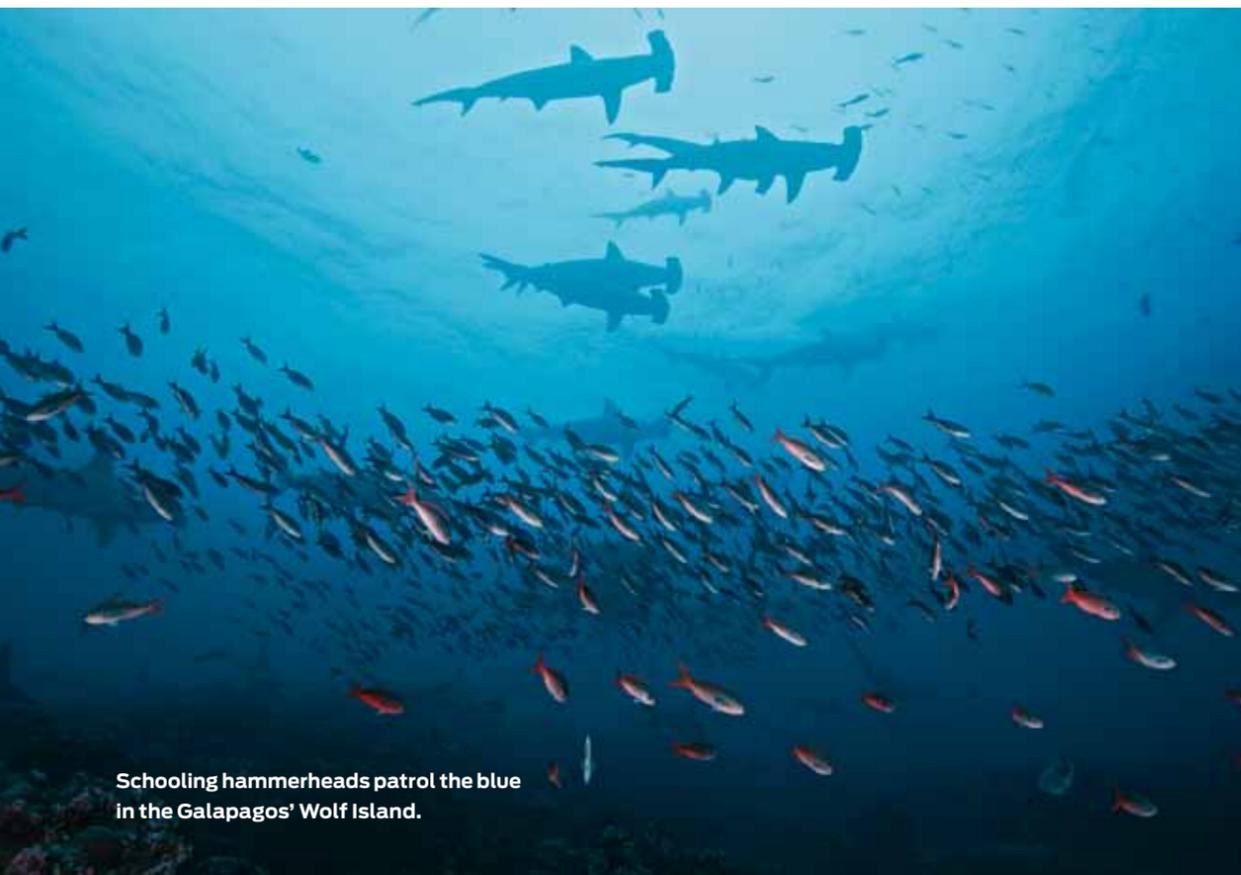
SCHOOLING SHARKS

Galapagos

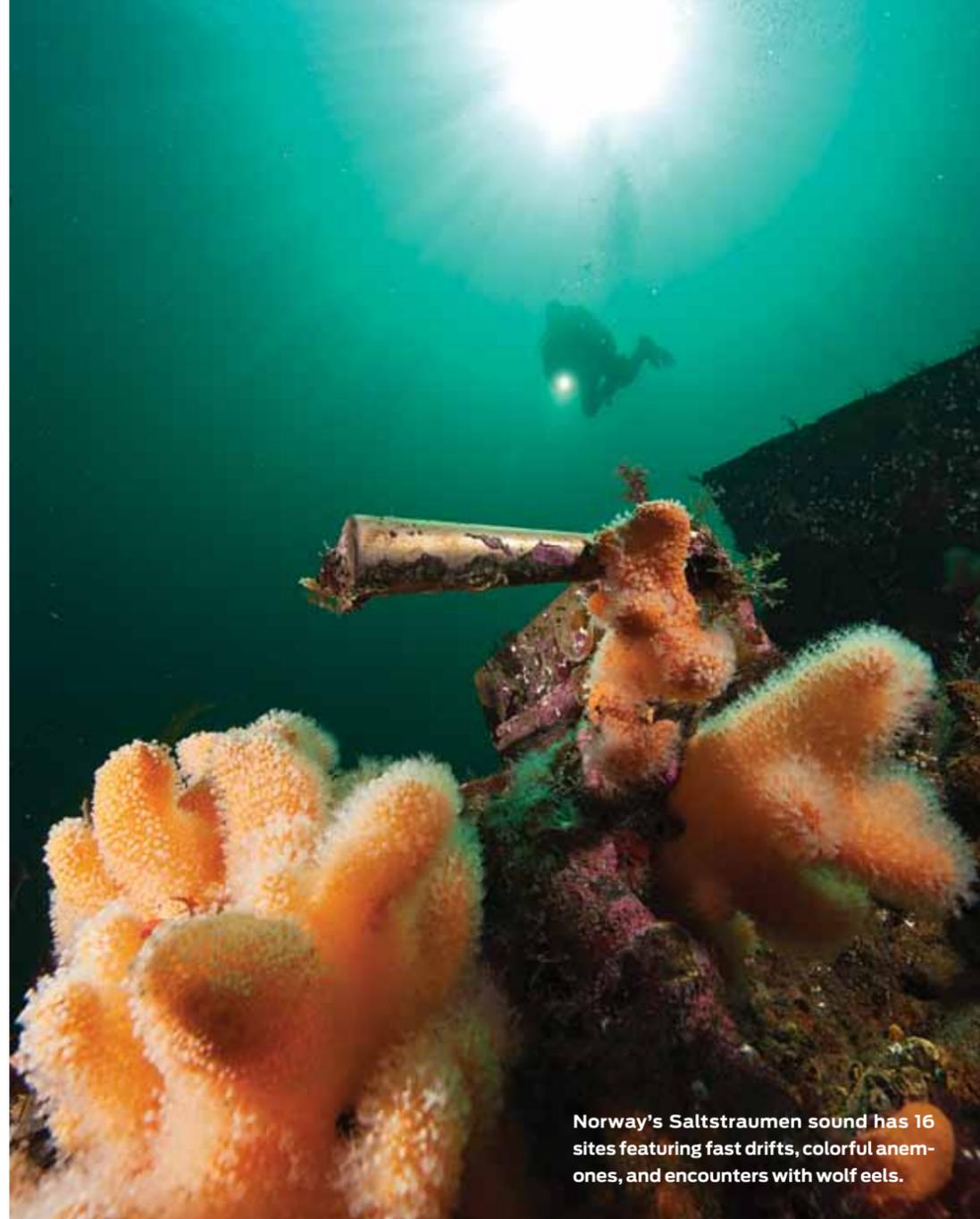
Some 580 miles west of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, the Galapagos is one of those magical destinations with an equally dizzying range of biodiversity both top-side and below. And the chance to gaze upon scores of schooling and scalped hammerheads is among the biggest thrills here for divers. Predominantly open-ocean animals, the hammerheads are often seen schooling around iconic sites like Darwin's Arch and Wolf Island. And while hammerheads are present year-round, you'll see them gathering in the greatest numbers when the water is warmer and clear. Schooling scalped hammerheads are often encountered between 40 and 90 feet at one of the Galapagos' most electrifying sites, Wolf Island, which is located about

62 miles north of the main island chain. And a four-hour ride farther north delivers you to Darwin, with its iconic arching rock formation that feels like a gateway to another universe — especially when upwards of 100 hammerheads are schooling in its deep blue shadows.

► **Make It Happen** The best time for hammerheads is December to May; sadly, the whale shark season is the exact opposite (June through November), but hey, you can't have it all. The Aggressor Fleet (aggressor.com) has two live-aboards — *Galapagos Aggressor I* and *Galapagos Aggressor II* — stationed in the Galapagos. Seven-night trips, which include a maximum of three dives daily, start at \$4,495 per person.



Schooling hammerheads patrol the blue in the Galapagos' Wolf Island.



Norway's Saltstraumen sound has 16 sites featuring fast drifts, colorful anemones, and encounters with wolf eels.

EXTREME TIDAL CURRENTS

Norway

The chance to dive the home of the world's strongest tidal current is enough to persuade many a tropical diver to don a dry-suit and make for the hinterlands of northern Norway.

The world's most powerful maelstrom is found in the Saltstraumen, where a fjord sound dumps into the sea through a passage that's only 492 feet wide. The current is divable for only one hour on either side of high and low tide — outside that, the currents rush as fast as 30 knots (too much adrenaline, indeed). To experience the swiftest currents, request to dive the Canyon, where you'll rush along one by one after the dive guide through a narrow, rocky canyon that leads to an area surrounded by curtains of kelp waving in the watery rush. The Sundstraumen is another rollicking drift dive where you speed on the current through the canyon and enter a hole in the mountainside that dumps you in a calm backwater — only to catch the current back around and do it all over again.

► **Make It Happen** The summer months are warmest, but plankton blooms can reduce visibility. For the best visibility, dive here from February to mid-May, and August through October. Dive packages with Saltstraumen Dykkesenter (saltstraumendykkesenter.com) include six nights, eight dives and all gear, and cost about \$918 per person.



BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE: VEBJORN KARLSEN (3)

EXTREME DRIFT DIVING

Cozumel

The drift-dive capital of the northern hemisphere, Cozumel owes its fast-paced diving action to the channel that separates it from Mexico's mainland.

Famous for down-drafts, Barracuda Reef is widely considered one of the best drifts in the world, with lush and little-visited coral mounts, and a seascape of valleys and mountains that fly by beneath you like some psychedelic conveyor belt. On the main reefs inside Cozumel's marine park, you'll find the swiftest currents at sites like Paso del Cedral. Santa Rosa Wall is another rush; here, a sloping mountain turns vertical halfway through the dive — the currents start flowing at precisely the same moment you find yourself marveling at how the wall drops infinitely into the blue. Sensory overload at high speed, to be sure.

► **Make It Happen** Scuba Du (scubadu.com) has two-day, two-tank dive packages with one night dive for \$195. Packages that include a pool-view hotel room at the InterContinental cost \$518 per person for three nights and two days of diving.



Cozumel is considered one of the world's best drift-diving destinations.



A great white comes in to take the bait off Gansbaai, South Africa.

GREAT WHITE CAGE DIVING

South Africa

Cruising the waterway between Dyer Island and Geyser Rock, you get an uneasy feeling for the frolicking African penguins and Cape fur seals. These animals are why great white sharks are found here in massive numbers, but watching the entree bask in the sun in ignorant bliss brings a sudden heart-stopping realization of just who might be on the dessert card. Once in the cage, expect juvenile sharks almost immediately, but don't be fooled if your heart rate doesn't soar right away. That *Jaws* theme is sure to play in your head as soon as the first adult cruises in, and soon after the bait is set, you're guaranteed a nonstop show of full-body cage slams and fantastic close-ups of jagged-edge teeth. — *Mary Frances Emmons*

► **Make It Happen** Marine Dynamics (sharkwatchsa.com) believes bubbles from scuba or hookah scare off the sharks; instead, divers duck underwater on cue from spotters when sharks are present. Prices start at about \$200 per person.

FROM TOP: EDDY RAPHAEL; BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE: REINHARD DIRSCHERL/AGEFOTOSTOCK



A diver swims inside a ball of barracuda on Rangiroa's Tiputa Pass.

PASSAGE DIVING

Tahiti

As you fly in over Fakarava and Rangiroa, in French Polynesia, look down for wide passages snipped like incisions in the coral atolls below. These cuts allow natural access to the interior lagoon, and it's in these cuts where you'll soon be flying by a menagerie of sharks, mantas and schooling barracuda. It's all about drift diving on these two paradise atolls, home to Tahiti's most famed passage dives: Tiputa Pass and Avatoru on Rangiroa, and Tetamanu Pass on Fakarava. The Rangiroa lagoon is often brimming with water pushed by windswell from the south, which makes predicting the incoming tide tricky even for seasoned divemasters; but when you nail it right, you'll be suspended in a blue world watching walls of barracuda and schooling gray sharks before shooting along the current for a roller-coaster ride into the interior lagoon. And while Garuae Pass gives high-speed thrills and an unrivaled density of fish life, Tetamanu Pass on Fakarava's south side starts with a wall of hundreds of sharks before finishing on a reef where you can finally pause to catch your breath.

► **Make It Happen** Five dives with The Six Passengers (the6passengers.com) on Rangiroa cost roughly \$432 per person, and include all gear, tanks, weights, nitrox and hotel transfers. TOPDIVE-Bathys (topdive.com/fakarava-diving.html) on Fakarava offers six dives to the passages for about \$518 per person, including all gear, nitrox and hotel transfers. **SD**