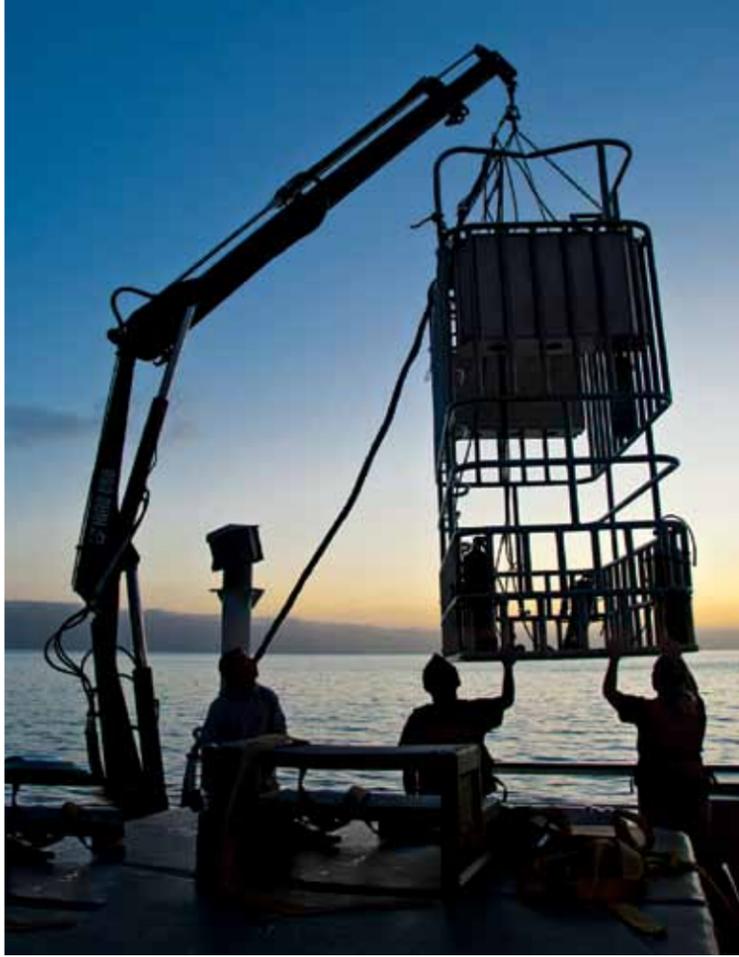


A close-up photograph of a shark's head inside a metal cage. The shark's mouth is slightly open, showing its sharp teeth. A diver's hands are visible on the left, gripping the cage bars. The scene is lit with a blue light, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere.

CAGE MATCH

➔ **WHAT'S IT LIKE TO GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH THE OCEAN'S FIERCEST PREDATOR?**

➔ **BY TERRY WARD // PHOTOS BY TODD WINNER**



CLANG CLANG CLANG.

The clamor of the boat's anchor, plummeting hundreds of feet down into nothing, echoes the pounding of my heart. The blood in my ears thunders as I attempt to process all that open water — and what dwells within it. Focused on their gruesome task, the shark wranglers thread sturdy hemp rope through the gaping eye sockets of massive tuna heads, keeping their gaze trained on the water too, where

the ocean's most feared predator lurks. My stomach churns from the stench of the coagulated blood, bone and guts crushed into a pulpy shark-luring soup that wafts from buckets on the stern. The ocean's surface is a dark, undulating blue. This is sensory and emotional overload. I want to vomit. I steady myself and remember why I've made this journey: for an animal encounter second to none in the marine world.

About a quarter mile off the east coast of Isla de Guadalupe, deep in the Mexican Pacific some 160 miles off Baja, is one of just a handful of places on the planet where you can slip into steel cages and safely interact with great white sharks in their realm. I clench the regulator mouthpiece between my teeth with a grip that threatens to scar the



A sea lion circles baitfish near a submersible shark cage; the crew packs up for the day at sunset (top left).



Submersible cages offer an opportunity for some killer images; a male great white and accompanying pilot fish cruise by (opposite.)

tough plastic. Forty pounds of lead in my harness and strapped around my ankles keep me firmly planted on the cage floor. A 7 mm wetsuit, hood, booties and gloves donned to ward off the chill feel suffocating in collusion with the weight. What if I slipped into the water, some 200 feet deep in this spot, and plummeted like a leaden anchor among them? But I am tethered to the boat for safety, so I take the leap.

The couple of feet between the boat's stern and the edge of the cage feels like a gulf between continents. The space between the bars I'm meant to push myself over, sliding on my bum into the cage, seems inadequate, vulnerable. I struggle to wrap my head around what I am about to do, but there is no turning back now.

I eye the water around me — looking for a fin.

Moments earlier, we'd had our first indicator that the pool was open. The hulking shadow of a great white shark hangs in the water several feet below the surface. It's the size of the dinghy, at least — a good 17 feet long. This is it. In a way, it feel like my whole diving career has led to this moment. But this is like no place I've ever dived before.

Who among us can't conjure a mental image of the ocean's top predator? Steely, machinelike, with flat black eyes. And teeth — splayed in bloody gums, jaws agape and extended — always, the teeth.

CAGE DIVING — How It Works

You can get in the water with great whites on scuba or snorkel and at the surface or fully submerged, depending on which operator you choose and your level of comfort. Some locations (California and South Africa) also offer day trips; to see sharks in Mexico and Australia requires a live-aboard.

➔ **ON THE SURFACE** Galvanized-steel cages rest alongside the boat with about two feet above the water. Guests jump in and either breath-hold or breathe on snorkel.

➔ **SUBMERGED** Caged divers on scuba descend to about 30 feet (accompanied by a safety diver) for around 20 minutes underwater at a time.

Many operations also actively participate in shark-conservation efforts — do your research before signing up for any trip.





Posing for the camera in the waters off Isla de Guadalupe, Mexico.

SHOULD WE DIVE WITH GREAT WHITE SHARKS?

Cage diving with great white sharks is not without controversy. Opinions vary widely — even among experts.

➔ **PRO** “Responsible cage diving allows people to see this magnificent animal in a positive and educational way. This powerful experience persuades many to truly appreciate the natural world.”

— Andrew Fox, director of Rodney Fox Shark Expeditions and the Fox Shark Research Foundation

➔ **CON** “Feeding or attracting sharks has a down side. Sharks become habituated to the offering of food or scent and then come to associate humans with handouts, resulting in changes to their normal behavioral patterns.”

— George Burgess, Director of the Florida Program for Shark Research

I shuffle across the bars and drop with a clunk into the cage, relieved that the yellow hose attached to the regulator is delivering air from an endless hookah supply — I am sucking the stuff in like a Hoover. Four others join me in the cage, with another four in the cage right next door, suspended off the boat’s stern. We aren’t looking at each other, however. All eyes are fixated on the blue. I do everything in my power to stay as far from the bars as possible, balancing in the middle of the tightly contained space. The purpose-built gap in the cage through which photographers stick their cameras seems too large — at least 12 inches from top to bottom — wide enough to invite a shark’s maw inside. A large swell rolls overhead, raising the boat and the cages with it, then slams us back into the water and shaking us around like flurries in a snow globe. I tumble to the floor, seize the bars and thrust myself back up in panic, scanning right and left frantically to see if anything has sensed the flourish of movement and risen from the deep to inspect.

A school of silvery mackerel hovers around the boat’s engines, lured by the greasy trail of fish entrails and fragrant tuna heads bobbing at the surface. The fish resemble a giant cloud of gnats, swarming around us. I’m dizzy with fear and anticipation. But there are no sharks to be seen — only a bottomless, featureless expanse of ocean the color and clarity of the mouthwash I’d gargled that morning.

IAN LAUDER

Then, from out of nowhere, a large female at least 16 feet long materializes, steaming steady and straight from just below the cage. She’s on a direct course for the tuna head on the surface. Her ambush is utterly silent. I don’t see her coming until she is 20 feet away in water that easily pushes 100 feet of viz. The shark wrangler tugs the tuna out of reach at the last moment, and the shark points her nose back down and, seemingly moving without moving, vanishes into the depths.

Aching minutes tick by before she returns — minutes during which I strain to rotate my head in the thick hood to check every possible angle of attack. Finally, just behind the cages in the shadow of the boat, she rockets from the deep. Her intent is clear. The events unfold in slow motion. I feel something greater than fear — it is pure, primal awe. I grip the cage bars to steady myself. In the seconds before she strikes the tuna head just a few feet from where I stand, her body ignites with energy — a brutal burst of speed, mouth unhinged, water churned white with bubbles as she thrashes, ripping the bait from the rope. The cage shudders and groans in the shark’s wake, and from the four of us shuffling and jostling cameras into position to capture the kill. The shark swims within inches of the bars, gulping the giant fish head in one powerful convulsion. A puff of blood bursts like a cloud from her phalanx of teeth. And I can very nearly taste it in the water.

GREAT WHITE HOT SPOTS

Four spots on the globe reliably deliver awesome apex encounters.

➔ **FARALLON ISLANDS** Elephant seals attract the big boys to this marine sanctuary, 28 miles off the Northern California coast. greatwhiteadventures.com

➔ **ISLA DE GUADALUPE** August to October is the season for great whites in the clear waters 160 miles off the coast of Baja, Mexico. solmarv.com

➔ **NEPTUNE ISLANDS** Twenty-foot-long females frequent these waters off the coast of South Australia from June to August. rodneyfox.com.au

➔ **SOUTH AFRICA** False Bay, Gansbaai and Mossel Bay are “Shark Central.” False Bay offers the greatest opportunity to see a great white breach. sharkwatchsa.com