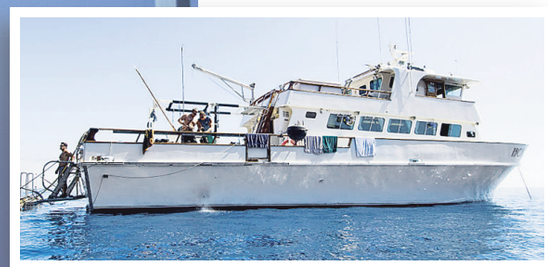
By TERRY WARD

Swimming with SHARKS

No, seriously, this is where to find great whites, tiger sharks and more

Juanmi Alemany (2)



Chris Jackson/Swell Images

THE GREAT WHITE WAY: Horizon Charters (right) offers a 19-hour journey from San Diego to Guadalupe Island, 160 miles off the coast of Baja, Mexico, to see the elusive great white shark (above).

DURING a recent trip to Bimini in the Bahamas, Anthony Robles, an NCAA wrestling champion from Phoenix who was born with only one leg, came face to face with something more intimidating than anyone he'd ever crossed on the mat.

Robles was in Bimini to film "The Current" (*makeahero.org*), a documentary about athletes with disabilities participating in water sports, and it was his first time ever in the ocean. "I grew up in Arizona, all desert, and I was nervous enough about jumping in the water to dive," he says. "The last thing I wanted was to see sharks."

But even before Robles entered the water at the dive site called Triangle Rocks, he could see dark shapes circling below — Caribbean reef sharks, five or six at least, drawn to the boat by a bait box hanging nearby.

Eyes wide, Robles went into the drink — and when he surfaced, it was with a new appreciation.

"It actually turned out to be pretty cool," he says. "The next time I went in, I still felt cautious, but I didn't have that nervous feeling in my stomach anymore."

If you're plagued by a fear of sharks, one of the cures for what ails you might be swimming with the creatures where they dwell. From spots as close by as Bimini (less than 50 miles off the coast of Florida) to the far-flung corners of the planet, here are some places to test your mettle in preparation for the summer swimming season.

SHARKY BAHAMAS

For sheer number and diversity of shark species try the Bahamas. You don't even have to leave the property at the Bimini Big Game Club (*biggameclubbimini.com*), a hotel and marina legendary among anglers, and no scuba certification is required to enter a steel cage and gaze into the pupil of one of the most intimidating sharks out there — the bull shark, with its bouncer-like demeanor and barrel-chested body. The steel cage for the Bimini Bull Run (*biminibullrun.com*), which operates a short stroll from the hotel rooms, is hung on the same floating dock where seaplane passengers on Tropic Ocean Airways (*flytropic.com*) flights arriving from South Florida step ashore.

Breathe from a hose that delivers air from the surface at the Bimini Bull Run, step right off the dock and ogle the 400- to 600-pound fish (the bull sharks have long been lured to the fishing marina here thanks to guts cast off during cleanings). "It's like a gateway drug to shark diving," says Shark Diver (*sharkdiver.com*) founder Patric Douglas of the cage experience.

Douglas also brings divers offshore in Bimini to dive with great hammerheads. And for an adrenaline rush with stripes, you can join Blue Iguana Charters (*blueiguanacharters.com*) for boat trips to dive with tiger sharks in the waters off Grand Bahama. On Cat Island, Epic Divers (*epicdiving.com*) puts you in the water with oceanic whitetips, an elusive species usually found far offshore in the open sea. And if you prefer your sharky encounters on drier terms, you can head out from Nassau with Powerboat Adventures (*powerboatadventures.com*) for shark-feeding encounters in the Northern Exumas — watch from the beach as lemon sharks, nurse sharks and reef sharks are lured close to shore to be fed (then enter the water to snorkel afterward, if you dare).

FINNING THROUGH PARADISE

The popular honeymoon islands of Moorea and Bora Bora in French Polynesia have their share of blacktip reef sharks finning through postcard-perfect lagoons. And while you're not likely to see one cruising under the glass floor in your over-water bungalow, you're pretty much guaranteed to spot the sharks on reef dives or in waist-deep water during organized shark-feeding trips. For something even more impressive, hop a flight from Tahiti to the atolls of Rangiroa and Fakarava in the Tuamotu Archipelago, where deep-water passages that send water rushing in and out of lagoons are lined with hundreds of grey sharks. You might be 80 feet below the surface looking at them, and the wall of sharks stretches to the top. At Topdive Fakarava (*topdive.com*), ask to see the photo a guest once snapped of a great hammerhead upwards of 15 feet long with a grey reef shark snack in its mouth. It's nothing short of an underwater Serengeti out here.

WHERE THE GREAT WHITES ARE

Great whites roam the world's oceans. And despite our fascination, we know little about their lives — which makes the opportunity to see them in their habitat all the more flooring. There are only four worldwide locations where you can get into a cage to dive with the ocean's true apex predator: South Australia, South Africa, the Farallon Islands off Northern California and Isla Guadalupe off Mexico. Guadalupe Island offers the clearest, bluest waters to see them. Horizon Charters (*horizoncharters.com*) departs San Diego for the 19-hour journey to this Jurassic-looking island, where the sharks gather during the late summer and early fall to feast on elephant seals and fur seals. You'll breathe through a hookah (no scuba certification necessary) inside steel cages hung off the boat's stern. But you'll surely forget to inhale when you catch sight of a 17-foot great white tanking your way like a big bad boss.

PENCIL IN SOME FUN ON YOUR CALENDAR.
YEAR-ROUND CARIBBEAN CRUISES FROM NYC STARTING FROM $429*

Carnival®

*Per person cruise fare only. The company reserves the right to reinstate the fuel supplement for all guests at up to $9 per person per day if the NYMEX oil price exceeds $70 per barrel. Government taxes and fees are additional per person and based on itinerary. Non-refundable deposit and restrictions apply. Full details on carnival.com. Ships' Registry: The Bahamas, Panama and Malta.