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The open ocean can be a lonely, forbidding place. Sometimes, in periods of calm, the water is tranquil and travelling over the seemingly endless expanses of water can be an indescribably beautiful experience. At other times, when the winds howl and the ocean roils, the experience can be quite terrifying. And beneath the surface lurk mysterious creatures, monsters to some, which inspire fascination, awe and sometimes terror.



BLUE SHARK, NORTHEAST

Sharks. Article and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

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For many people, the very mention of the name inspires feelings of fear, dread, loathing, and revulsion. For others, however, sharks remain one of the great mysteries of the ocean. And for some, sharks are viewed as one of nature's beauties...a perfect creature, a model of successful evolution and something worthy of our admiration...and protection. Regardless of who you are, chances are the word "Shark" evokes some kind of emotion...it's a rare individual that has no reaction to this creature.

Despite all the Hollywood-fueled hysteria, sharks are actually quite rare to see in the water while diving. Increasingly, divers now wish to experience these magnificent creatures in their natural element. But to do this safely, and with confidence, a shark cage is often used!

Right here in North America there are a number of shark diving opportunities where divers can encounter sharks on their own terms, all from the protective safety of a shark cage.

Let's begin our tour of these opportunities on the east coast and travel up to Rhode Island, where we will dive with Blue Sharks.

The premier shark diving operation in these parts is the "Snappa" charter boat.

In this part of the world, Blue Sharks are the most commonly seen sharks, but occasionally, lucky divers will encounter Mako Sharks and Basking Sharks.

Leaving the dock early in the morning, the Snappa typically heads 20-40 miles out to sea, extending a chum slick along the way to attract the denizens of the open Atlantic. Divers will find relatively comfortable conditions; with water temperatures between 60 and 70 degrees F. 5mm or 7mm wetsuits are just fine for this diving, although divers in dry suits will remain warm throughout the entire day. Visibility will vary greatly, from 15 to 80 feet.

The action starts when the sharks show up. Unfortunately, this can take anywhere from 10 minutes to 4 hours after arriving at the dive site.

Here in the Atlantic, Blue Sharks can range in size from small (4 feet or less) to large (10 feet or more). They are one of the ocean's most beautiful sharks, deriving their name from the deep, indigo blue back which helps them blend into the deep blue water that they live in. Torpedo shaped, these sharks are fast and are perfectly adapted to their environment.

The shark cage used by the Snappa can accommodate up to three divers at a time. The cage is floated several feet below the surface and divers swim to the cage from the stern of the boat. Since this is a submerged shark cage, all divers are required to bring their own air tanks, which will be used for life support. Divers will typically get two 30-45 minute shifts in the cage when sharks are present.

This operation also offers a floating surface cage or platform designed for the non-certified snorkel diver. Snorkelers will definitely experience the same thrill and excitement the scuba diver enjoys from below the surface. They simply observe the sharks from above the surface.

The number of sharks that show up can vary, but typically it ranges from 2-4 to upwards of a dozen or more. The sharks are enticed to stick around through constant chumming, and divers will frequently witness sharks approaching within inches from the cage. Some sharks may even poke their noses into the cage.

Divers rotate throughout the day as the shark action continues into the afternoon. It is a rare day when divers don't return to the dock exhausted and exhilarated, filled with stories of their day of shark diving on the Snappa.

In the fishing and resort town of Montauk, located on the eastern tip of Long Island, the Sea Turtle dive boat runs a similar operation, exploring the same section of ocean in search of Blue Sharks, Mako Sharks and even thresher Sharks.

A typical day of Montauk Shark diving is similar to that of the Rhode Island operation, with sharks attracted to the boat through a chum slick. Again, sharks can show up within 10 minutes or they may take as long as several hours. But show up they do!

Tanks and regulators are mounted in the cage. The cage will be floated 3-7 feet below the surface depending on sea conditions. Water temperatures are similar to Rhode Island and will range from 60 to 80 degrees F and visibility 20 to 80 feet or more.

It's not uncommon to have 3 or 4 sharks in the water at the same time and some of these trips have seen as many as a dozen at the cage.

Makos become more abundant in August. Blue sharks are always the most prevalent. The amount of dive time you have depends on when the sharks show up. On average everyone will get two turns that last between 30-45 minutes each.

Although these trips, like those in Rhode Island, are intended to find sharks, sometimes other open ocean creatures will show up...after all, this is the open Atlantic. Mahi-Mahi, tuna, ocean sunfish, dolphins and whales, along with sea turtles, are all encountered on occasion. The Sea Turtle also runs a unique wreck and shark combo dive trip, where divers can enjoy a shipwreck dive in the morning, then do a shark cage dive on the way back to the dock. This operation also offers a 2-day Block Island Shark Expedition as well as shark cage diving at night!

On the west coast, shark divers turn their attention to the true apex predator in the ocean: the Great White Shark.

There are two prime locations for witnessing the most notorious creature in the sea: the Farallon Islands located 26 miles southeast of the Golden Gate Bridge at the mouth of the bustling San Francisco Bay and Guadalupe Island, a lonely, desolate island about 250 miles south of the border city of Tijuana. Great White Adventures / Shark Diving International runs dive expeditions to both locations, as do a number of other operators.

Discovered by Spaniards, the Farallon islands were given the name Los Farallones, which means small, pointed isles. The name of the islands has now been Americanized to Farallon Islands. The largest and tallest of the islands is Southeast Farallon, which rises to a height of 358 feet. These islands are home to a tiny community of research scientists who come to this lonely place to observe and study a wildlife bonanza in the cold, Pacific Ocean currents that swirl around these tiny outcroppings. Today, the Elephant Seal populations are of greatest interest as they have been absent for over a century until recently, when their numbers have been steadily increasing.

It is these animals that attract the sharks.

Each year between the months of September and November Great White Sharks, including some of the largest individuals on Earth, are known to frequent these waters hunting for the Sea Lions and Elephant Seals.

Great White Adventures / Shark Diving International operates one-day trips to the Farallons to dive in shark cages with these giants. Boats leave from the marina in nearby Alameda County for the two-hour trip to the Farallons. Once you finally arrive at the islands, you will often be greeted by foggy, damp conditions...a foreboding feeling mixes with the excitement of what might be seen below.

Here, the diving is surface supplied or "Hookah" only. Water temperature averages 52-56 degrees F. The water is not warm and a dry suit is the best option for a comfortable day in the cage.

Visibility averages 20 feet. The cage accommodates 4 divers at a time and rotations last approximately 30 minutes, alternating throughout the day. During the expedition, decoys are utilized to attract White Sharks to the surface and the cage. This method has proven very successful and is generally accepted for use inside the Marine Sanctuary. There is no chumming or baiting in this operation.

These trips typically last 12 hours or so. Because the visibility is lower here, and because it is a one day expedition, the predictability of the sharks is not as high as in other locations...although the success rate is very high for these trips, your opportunity to see the shark may be more fleeting than you might want. In fact, after a day of diving here, it is very likely that you will return to shore wanting more! Guadalupe Island provides the supreme shark diving experience in North America.

Guadalupe Island became the last refuge of the Guadalupe Island Fur Seal, hunted mercilessly to the brink of extinction in the 19th century. This species was actually considered extinct until 1926, when some individuals were found on this island. Today, the species is fully protected under Mexican law and the island of Guadalupe has been considered a pinniped sanctuary since 1975. An estimated 6000 individuals are thought to exist at the present time.

Northern Elephant Seals also inhabit this island. Similarly decimated by early hunters, a small population found refuge here and managed to survive, in part because the island was designated a Mexican Nature Preserve in 1925. Had small pockets of these animals not found refuge here, scientists believe they would most certainly have been completely exterminated by the ruthless hunting of the time.

The main anchorage at Guadalupe is in Discovery Bay, only a few hundred yards offshore of Prison Beach, which is on the eastern side of the island. This place affords divers protection from the prevailing winds and associated swells from the west. Prison Beach is named after a Mexican federal prison that once existed at this spot. The ruins of this prison, and a church that was built alongside of it, can be seen in the rocky bluffs along the shore. Today, the only inhabitants are small groups of marine mammals and occasional research scientists and fisherman who use the dilapidated shacks that have also been constructed along this beach for a rather dubious shelter. The waters alongside this island are deep and the drop-off from the island's shores dramatic. Just a few hundred yards offshore, the water is some 300 feet deep and nearby the waters drop to over 12,000 feet. Indeed, in the early 1960s, Project Mohole involved experimental deep water drilling in this water. The depth of 12,000 feet was approximately 30 times the then existing drilling record.

With terrific anticipation, divers suit up for their first dives in the warm, clear water.

Often it isn't long before the first sharks appear. Divers come face to face with large, hulking sharks measuring up to 16 feet or more in length. Appearing as quickly and silently as a ghost in the fog, the sharks circle the cage warily...eying the divers but looking for the large bait that is usually floating nearby.

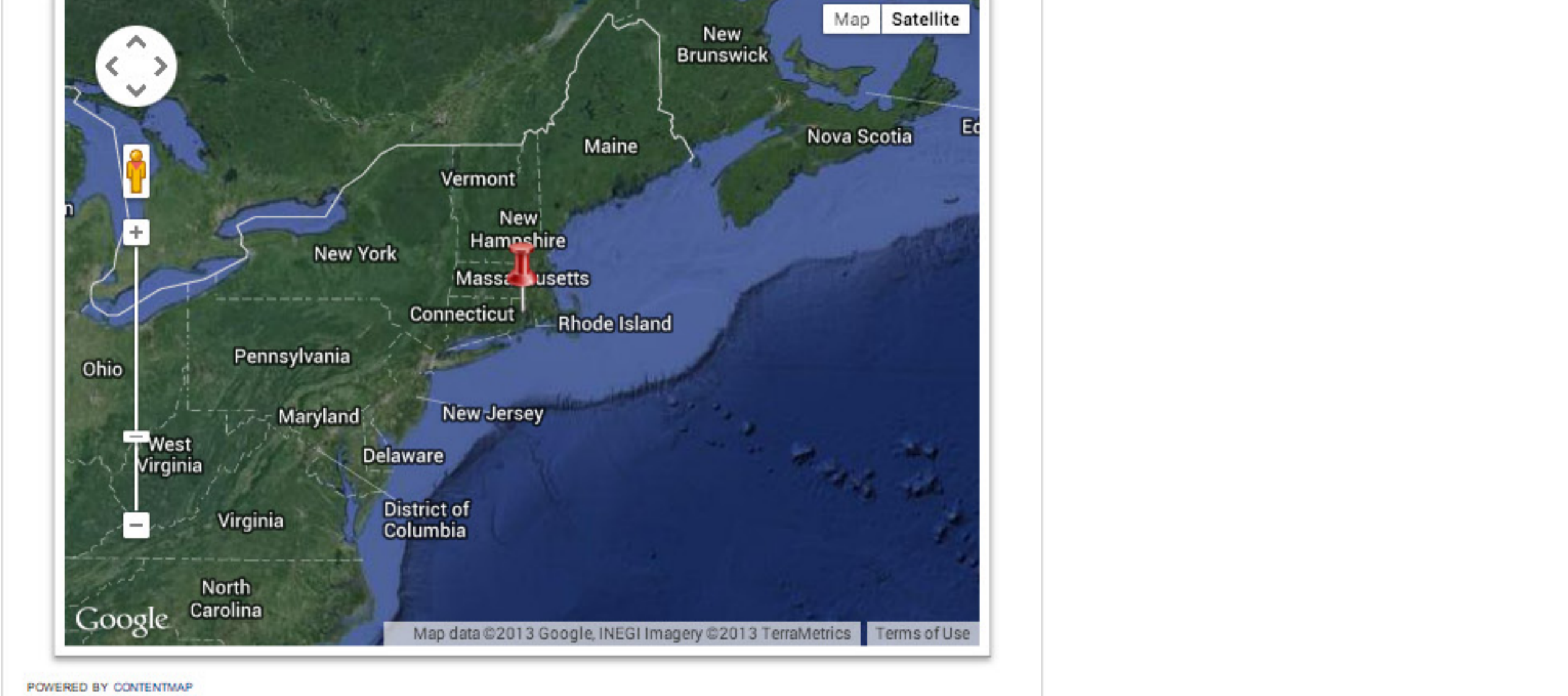
Camera shutters snap, video recorders engage and eyes widen as the sharks make numerous close passes by the cage. It is the ultimate shark experience, and it is located right here in North America.

The trips to Guadalupe are multi-day affairs, and over the course of several days, divers will experience these creatures in all of their magnificent glory. Great White Adventures / Shark Diving International operates a variety of cages, from two-tandem surface cages attached to the stern, to deep submersible cages that put divers right inside the action by dropping them down 20 feet or more below the surface. They also offer a new shark diving underwater craft called the "Pelagic Explorer". The Pelagic Explorer is a self-propelled shark cage (SPDC) that allows the serious photographer or videographer a chance to get up close and personal to Great White Sharks.

It is an experience you will never forget.

Sharks are threatened in all the world's oceans, victims of Man's voracious appetite for killing these creatures. Shark cage diving gives divers the chance to see sharks in their natural element, and in so doing, helps protect these animals for future slaughter. The economic value to local economies from tourism resulting from these opportunities far outpaces the minimal profits from killing these creatures. So, go ahead and board a boat right here in America to see the sharks of our great oceans...you'll be glad you did!

Special Thanks to Our Network Area Sponsors: Great White Adventures/Shark Diving International, Sea Turtle Dive Charters, etc.



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