

GREAT WHITE DAY TRIPS

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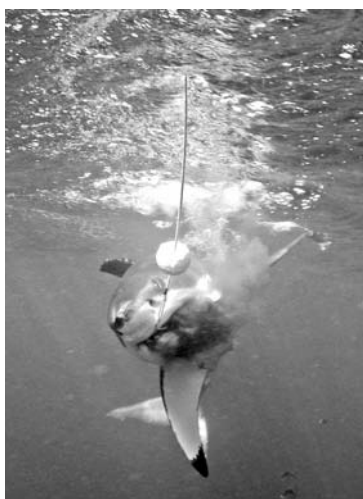
Seeing a great white shark underwater is probably the ultimate thrill for any diver. While your chances of seeing one by accident are pretty remote, the best way to view these powerful predators is by attracting them with baits and viewing them from the safety of a shark cage. And the only place to do this in Australia is at the Neptune Islands off Port Lincoln, South Australia.

Until recently you would have to spend thousands of dollars to do a liveaboard shark cage trip to view great white sharks, but with never any guarantee of a shark turning up, this can be an expensive investment. However, since 2006 Calypso Star Charters have been running cheaper day trips to view great white sharks at the Neptune Islands which have proved to be very popular, so we recently headed south to check out the action.

We booked two day trips with Calypso Star to improve our chances of seeing a shark or two, even though they informed us they have a success rate of 85%. It is an early start for the great white trips, meeting at the boat at 6.30am. Andrew Wright, owner and skipper, was there to greet us and the other 14 shark divers (Calypso Star takes out a maximum of 19 passengers).

Also onboard today was CSIRO great white researcher Russ Bradford and his assistant Di. Russ was hoping to tag a few sharks with acoustic tags and position a listening station at North Neptune Island. This station is designed to record the tagged sharks if they pass within a kilometre of the listening station, so recording their movements around the area.

After a safety briefing, a coffee and a tasty breakfast, we were on our way across Boston Bay. The trip to the Neptune Islands takes around



A great white attacks the bait at the surface.

two and half hours on Calypso Star, which is a very comfortable 17m long vessel that was originally setup for liveaboard trips. The vessel still does the odd liveaboard trip, so still has beds for those that want more sleep, the rest of us watched DVDs showing the shark action from a typical day trip.

Once we left the sheltered waters of the Spencer Gulf the seas were quite rough in the Southern Ocean, but an hour later found us anchored at the Northern Neptune Islands in calm water. Andrew then briefed us on shark cage etiquette. Four people are allowed in the cage at one time using hookah, and you don't have to be a qualified scuba diver, so this experience is open to all. Depending on the number of people on the boat and how long it takes a shark to arrive everyone generally gets 45 minutes in the shark cage.

With the cage in the water it was time to attract a few sharks with tuna frames, tuna chum and tuna oil. This lovely mixture quickly attracted lots of fish and birds to the back of the boat. The anticipation factor was running hot, with everyone crowded around the back deck hoping to be the

Helen in the shark cage, so where are the sharks?

first to view a great white. The previous week they had seen four sharks, so expectations were high.

However, the sharks were not interested today. One hour turned into two, we then had a wonderful barbecue lunch to take our minds off the sharks. Most of us then drifted into the cabin to watch another shark DVD. Then after three hours there was a call of 'SHARK'. This woke everyone up and we all headed out to the back deck. It took a few minutes, but we then saw it, a 3.5m great white rising from the depths to grab one of the baits. The first group of divers jumped into the cage, then it was a ten minute wait for the shark to reappear. It chased one of the baits across the surface heading towards the cage, before disappearing into the blue again. This was a big shark and everyone was excited to just see it from the surface. For the next 45 minutes the shark made regular appearances, but only for seconds at a time.

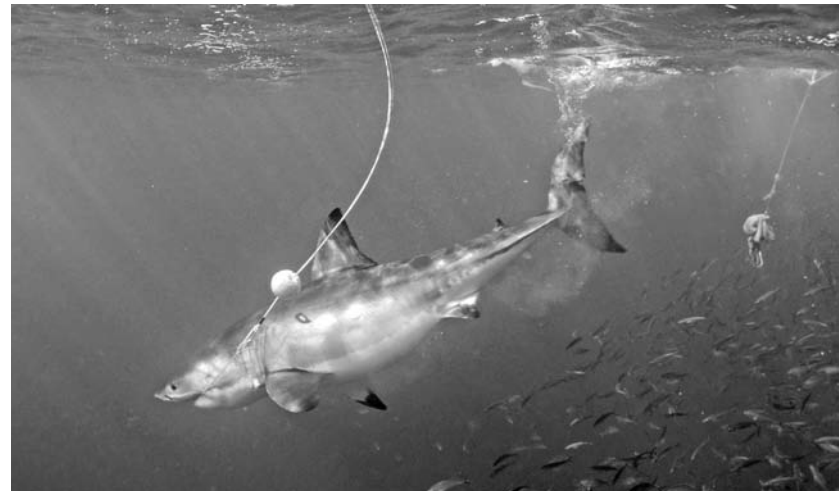
It was then our turn to get into the cage. We put on heavy weight belts and slipped into the water. The visibility was about 15m and below we could see schools of silver trevally and yellowtail, but no shark. Everyone got into their corner and we all peering into the blue. Five minutes past, nothing. Ten minutes, nothing. Where was the shark? Then we saw her, rising from the depths she was headed straight for a bait. She quickly grabbed the bait and then dived down, not even giving us a glance. We all looked at each other in amazement, sharing the moment of our first view of a great white shark underwater.

Another five minutes ticked by before we saw the shark again, this time cruising under the cage. Another five minutes went by and then BAM! She zoomed up for another bait, and was just as quickly gone. Several minutes later she did it again, but each time she was 4m or more away from the cage. This was spectacular to watch, but frustrating to photograph as she wasn't coming close to the cage. So much for those documentaries where the shark is trying to eat the cage. But as Andrew explained later, all the sharks behave differently and you never know what you will get.

After 45 minutes in the cage we had seen the shark about eight times, no good photos, but fantastic memories. It was time to get out and let the next four divers have a go. Two more teams of divers entered the cage, with the last group having the closest encounter, as a 4m long shark made an



A great white cruises passed the bait.



A great white takes a bait and dives.

appearance and smashing the cage twice. With none of the sharks coming close to the boat today Russ was unable to tag a shark, but did get to anchor the listening station before we headed back to Port Lincoln.

Our second trip started with a bang, with the first shark making an appearance after only 15 minutes. This great white was about 3m long and very feisty, taking the bait several times before it could be reeled in. With only seven divers on board today we were going to get more time in the cage, especially with this shark arriving nice and early. The first group jumped in and we watched some spectacular action from above with the shark continuing to make surprise attacks, several times even breaching. Amazing stuff!

After an hour this shark disappeared, just as we got into the cage. But after ten minutes went by, the same

3.5m shark from yesterday reappeared. This big girl was wonderful to watch for the next hour as she made repeated attacks on the baits, or just cruised up from the depths to check us out. She never came really close to the cage, although we did managed to get quite a few good images, but more importantly a lifetime of memories. We would have loved to have seen a great white in full fury attacking the cage, but at the end of the day felt fortunate to have just seen several sharks over our two days. After two hours in the cage it was time to emerge and head back to Port Lincoln.

On the way back to Port Lincoln we chatted about the great experience it had been, the shark behaviour we had seen and just how impressive these mighty predators are. Before reaching port we had also started planning a return trip as we now had great white fever.

For bookings or more information visit –
www.sharkcagediving.com.au

Skipper Andrew Wright explains the shark cage etiquette.

