



DIVER'S COMPASS: Delta, American, and Continental Airlines fly from the US to Panama City; fares start less than \$700 ... Hertz, Avis and major car rental agencies are at the airport ... Herbie can arrange transportation (\$180) or take a bus or a combination of bus and taxi (five to seven hours on mostly paved roads) from the Terminal Nacional Balboa, a full-service tourist facility, 45 minutes from the airport. Bus fares are \$25 to Santiago or Soná, where you change to the Santa Catalina bus or get a taxi for \$60.

Buses vary from converted US school buses with open windows to 24-passenger liners with restrooms, A/C, and DVD player up front ... US dollars are interchangeable with Panama Balboas and in small towns and Santa Catalina cash is the only currency; no credit cards ... Scuba Coiba charges \$60 for two tanks, \$70 with rental gear; 3 tank trips to Coiba are \$140, minimum four divers. Night diving is done only in Coiba with a 2- or 3-day overnight trip staying at the Coiba Ranger Station (\$330 pp for a 2-day package; \$360 with equipment). Scuba Coiba has rental equipment for eight divers and can handle 15 with their own equipment. No Nitrox or shore diving ... Viz averaged 50 feet on local dives; 75-100 feet on Coiba dives ... Nearest recompression chamber is in Panama City via helicopter ... Herbie emailed me that he now has a six-passenger, 25-foot boat, with an 80-hp Yamaha outboard, tank racks, radio, GPS, fishfinder, cell phone, medical O2 and a ladder ... Check www.scubacoiba.com for specials that include lodging. Sol y Mar (\$40/per night double occupancy, catalinaluis@hotmail.com); "Grocery" are three walls with canned and boxed goods and maybe fresh fruit, veggies, eggs, bottled water, milk ... Breakfasts - eggs scrambled with tomatoes and onions, tortillas and coffee with canned milk - \$1.50 at the restaurant a half block from Scuba Coiba. Lunch and dinner - chicken, pork chops, beef stew or seafood, with white rice and beans and fried banana: \$2.50 to \$4. Jammin' Pizza (\$3-\$7) and Vianca's, a seafood restaurant (\$5-\$8) ... I ate everything without consequence; Lonely Planet says Panama's water and fresh produce are ok.

Guadalupe Island, Baja Mexico

searching for the great white

Dear Reader:

Visions of great whites breaching out of the ocean to gorge on helpless northern elephant seal pups captured my imagination, so I was thrilled when a group of friends decided to dive with great whites off Isla Guadalupe, Mexico, a 175-mile boat ride from San Diego to the island west of Baja California.

On the second day, when a crewmember shouted "We've got shark!," it was a welcome cry. We had been skunked our first day. My first view was a 15-foot female who cruised by the cage without the least bit of interest. But, I still found it thrilling as I endlessly clicked my camera shutter.

Owners and captains Shane Slaughter and John Conniff turn their 80-ft. fishing boat, the MV Islander, into a shark diving craft between August and December. They run five-day diving charters -- using up two days in transit -- primarily for Patric Douglas' Absolute Adventures, whose trip we had joined.

After we boarded in San Diego and were directed randomly to cabins, Captain Shane introduced the seven-man crew and gave us an unusual safety briefing. He cautioned about walking around the deck after dark. Should a "man overboard" emergency occur, immediately toss debris like coffee cups and other garbage to create a chum drift line to direct the boat back to the overboard passenger.

Other Guadalupe Trips

The Nautilus Explorer, an excellent live-aboard dive boat that covers British Columbia in the summer – we gave them a good review in October 2004 – and visits Mexico’s Socorro Island in the winter, voyages to Guadalupe in September and October. The owner/captain, Mike Lever, says on his website: “While our past white shark sightings have been excellent and continuous all day long, these are wild animals and there is no guarantee that all future trips will have the same number of sightings.” Prices for either a four night or five night trip run \$2150, \$2550 or \$2950 depending on whether you want dormitory, stateroom or executive suite accommodations. Phone 01-604-657-7614 or visit www.nautilusexplorer.com

Lawrence Groth runs **Great White Adventures** and says he has led more than 400 great white trips since 1998. He uses the *Searcher*, but also runs “luxury trips” on the *Solmar V*, a good live-aboard that normally runs out of Cabo San Lucas. It’s \$2595 for Searcher trips. Solmar trips run \$2895 for five days and there’s a seven-day trip for \$4195. They offer certified divers the rush of being lowered 25 feet in their topless, submersible two person cage. Want that “open water” thrill sitting on top of the cage with circling great whites? The Solmar trip includes a night in a basic San Diego hotel and a two-hour bus ride to Ensenada, which shortens the boat ride. www.greatwhiteadventures.com or 866-352-7075

San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions, run by “Doc” Paul Anes, visits Guadalupe Island on two different craft normally used in California diving. The *Horizon* has eight cabins with open berthing and daily room make-up. The *Odyssey* has one carpeted air-conditioned berth room with daily room make-up. Both boats have two shared restrooms with hot showers and the *Odyssey* has a hot water deck shower. Five-day trips on either boat are \$2550. Anes also charters the *Nautilus Explorer*. www.sdsharkdiving.com or 1-888-SD-SHARK

We then motored 23 hours, an endless rock and roll, with several divers suffering degrees of seasickness. Just after sunrise, the waters settled as the 98-square mile island, rising to 4200 ft., came into view. Colorful red volcanic layers are reminiscent of the Grand Canyon. Freshwater springs support a community of trees and plants – and goats, brought by early settlers, who no longer live here. The crew lowered two 4x10 ft wide cages with an electronic boom near the stern, three feet below the surface. A pump chummed fish meal into the water, quickly attracting scad mackerel and top smelt. They floated two six-pound skipjacks on buoys on each side of the cages. Shark master Luke Tipple explained that they keep the bait away from the two-foot camera aperture around the cage. “The sharks will come close and eyeball you, but we don’t want them coming directly toward the cage for the bait.” Yet for three days the sharks, in 100 ft. visibility, hardly came in for a close-up view. When sharks were around, an hour seemed like minutes; otherwise, waiting in the cage got boring and cold. And no hot shower after the dive. We were asked to use the frigid freshwater shower on the starboard side to conserve water.

After being skunked the first day, I awoke to cloud cover and rolling seas the next morning. The 69-degree water was warmer than the air. Swimming gracefully, a 15-foot great white female with mating scars circled the boat. Then a smaller male appeared. My adrenaline rushed, but they had little interest in us. They continued circling until one launched into high gear to grab the skipjack. We all had the thrill of seeing four great whites on this day.

To join the expedition, no dive certification is required, and no gear other than a mask, booties, and 7-mil wetsuit with hood. But, it takes some

bravery, since one must jump from the boat through the four-foot open ceiling of the bouncing cage in the presence of great whites. Several experienced divers were badly bruised and one injured a foot after smashing into the side of the bucking cage opening.

Four divers, in two shifts, were assigned to each of two cages every hour. We breathed surface-supplied compressed air through Scubapro regulators and wore harness-type vests pocketed with up to 40 pounds of weight so we could stand or

sit in the cage. Exiting the cage was awkward, perhaps unsafe. I balanced on metal steps of the rocking cage before precariously stepping on top, then made a giant stride onto the boat, with the assistance of a wrist grab. Don't get out of the cage without their help, lest you fall into 200 feet of water dressed in a 40 pound weighted jacket, with no emergency release. If a shark breached the cage, they advised us to drop weights (how?) and exit through an emergency door opened by pulling a yellow cable, though I never saw the escape route on the other side.

The MV/Islander carries 30 passengers in two or three bunk cabins. The Absolute Adventure web site says the craft features "private air conditioned staterooms and washbasins, plus every other diving amenity you or your groups will need. . .If you're looking for comfort, attention to detail, corporate incentive, and or a unique meeting/strategy space this is the vessel for you." Baloney. The small, basic, musty cabins, without bathrooms or closets, had insufficient space for two divers to stand at the same time. The bunks were stacked so tightly I couldn't sit on the bed. The small washbasin had inadequate light for shaving or inserting contact lenses. No soap, no waste basket, no housekeeping. And, you had to bring your own towel -- or find someone who brought two. A flight above the cabins, two bathrooms with temperamental hot-water showers that overflowed were shared by 17 divers plus the crew. Droppings on the staircase were evidence that we had a rat in the house.

On the top deck, the padded compressor covering could be used to stretch out, or one could read in one of several deck chairs. Divers were welcomed into the well-equipped wheelhouse. A noisy compressor ran all night to fill the next day's tanks. When the boat was running, the automatic pilot beeped continuously on the starboard side of the salon, interrupting the sleep of those in nearby cabins.

Four leather-covered booths seated six passengers in the salon. Paul Grebetz prepared abundant, hearty and heavy cuisine, usually topped with rich gravy or garlic or butter. Several vegetarians who had made their restrictions known beforehand were unhappy that he served no protein options. When a diver requested his steak rare on the first night, Grebetz said "I have too many sick people to do individual preparation." But he soon became cordial and jovial. And, he baked a mean rhubarb and strawberry pie, fresh fruit turnovers, and bread. Mid-morning snacks were coffee cake or chocolate chip muffins, while late afternoon it was hot dogs with the works or pot stickers.

Guadalupe Island, Baja Mexico

Diving (<i>Expert</i>)	★★
Diving (<i>Great White Shark Lovers</i>)	★★★
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	<i>not recommended</i>
Accommodations	★★
Food	★★★
Staff	★★★
Money's Worth	★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide scale

...If you're looking for comfort, attention to detail, corporate incentive, and or a unique meeting/strategy space this is the vessel for you."

Guadalupe Island



Last October, Guadalupe was designated a biosphere preserve to preserve the great whites, whose jaws sell for \$10,000 a pop on eBay. According to Shane, fishing boats were arriving with makeshift cages. Divers were swimming

DAN or Your Computer? When to Fly after Diving

When you decide to fly after you dive, if you follow the advice of your computer, you may be erring on the side of bends.

Divers Alert Network (DAN) recommends that after making a single no-decompression dive on air or Nitrox, a diver should wait at least 12 hours before flying. After making multiple dives in a day or diving for several days, DAN recommends waiting 18 hours. Since there is little data about flying after dives that require a decompression stop, DAN says that waiting "substantially longer than 18 hours appears prudent." These restrictions don't apply to puddle-jumper flights below 2,000 feet.

Their recommendations stem from a study presented at a 2002 workshop. More than 500 subjects participated in experiments at the Duke University Medical Center hyperbaric chamber, simulating depths of 40, 60 and 100 fsw, with dive times near the recommended recreational limits.

Following the dives, participants spent four hours in the chamber at a simulated altitude of 8,000 feet, the maximum cabin altitude allowed by the FAA for

pressurized commercial aircraft. Although participants showed no symptoms of DCS (decompression sickness) before flying, DAN recorded 40 subsequent DCS incidents, of which 21 were moderate, 18 mild, and one serious.

Bruce Wienke, Los Alamos National Laboratory scientist and the father of the Reduced Gradient Bubble Model (RGBM), told *Undercurrent* that different computers calculate time to fly differently. They peg their calculations to specific tissue compartments that represent the hypothetical modeling of nitrogen absorption. The fastest tissues saturate in 25 minutes, the slowest take two and a half days. Wienke said that some computers may allow shorter surface intervals before flying, depending on which tissue compartment they use in their calculations. These include some or all models of Suunto, Mares, Dacor, Uwatec, Zeagle, HydroSpace and Explorer computers, plus decompression software from Abyss and GAP. Other computer models, such as Cochran, just tack on a set number of hours.

If your computer permits you to fly sooner than DAN recommends, abide by DAN. Even then, warns DAN, "The recommended preflight surface intervals do not guarantee avoidance of DCS. Longer surface intervals will reduce DCS risk further."

and photographing sharks outside cages. The Mexican government, wanting to protect the shark, put regulations in place. Fishing is no longer allowed. The government allegedly does not want sharks to associate diving boats and cages with people.

Our final day, viewing, as usual, began at 7:30 a.m. A single great white appeared at 10 a.m. For most of the day he swam aimlessly under the boat at a depth just out of camera focus range, a real tease.

Having waited 25 years for the experience, I was excited to finally see great white sharks, though few and distant. Undercurrent readers have reported much better viewing on other trips and on other vessels, so whether the whites weren't present, weren't hungry, or our boat chased them away, I don't know. So, unless your life isn't complete until you see a great white underwater, you may be disappointed, not only in the action, but, if you're on this boat, in the entire trip.

— G.S.



Divers Compass: Patric Douglas of Absolute Adventures runs several 5-day charters late summer and through early fall. The trip is \$2500 and you'll need to overnight in San Diego before and after the trip ... The Holiday Inn Bayside offers a free shuttle from and to the airport and while it's across the street from the dock, it provides shuttle service so you don't lug gear ... Special rates are around \$100/night ... You can rent dive gear and wet suits from the Martin Graf Dive School for \$50-\$100. They pick up and deliver to the boat. Arrange in advance ... Our group of 17 was joined by

a father and son, a former Everest climber, and two lovebirds from the Bay area. Absolute Adventures: www.sharkdiver.com 415-235-9410 or 888-405-3268