

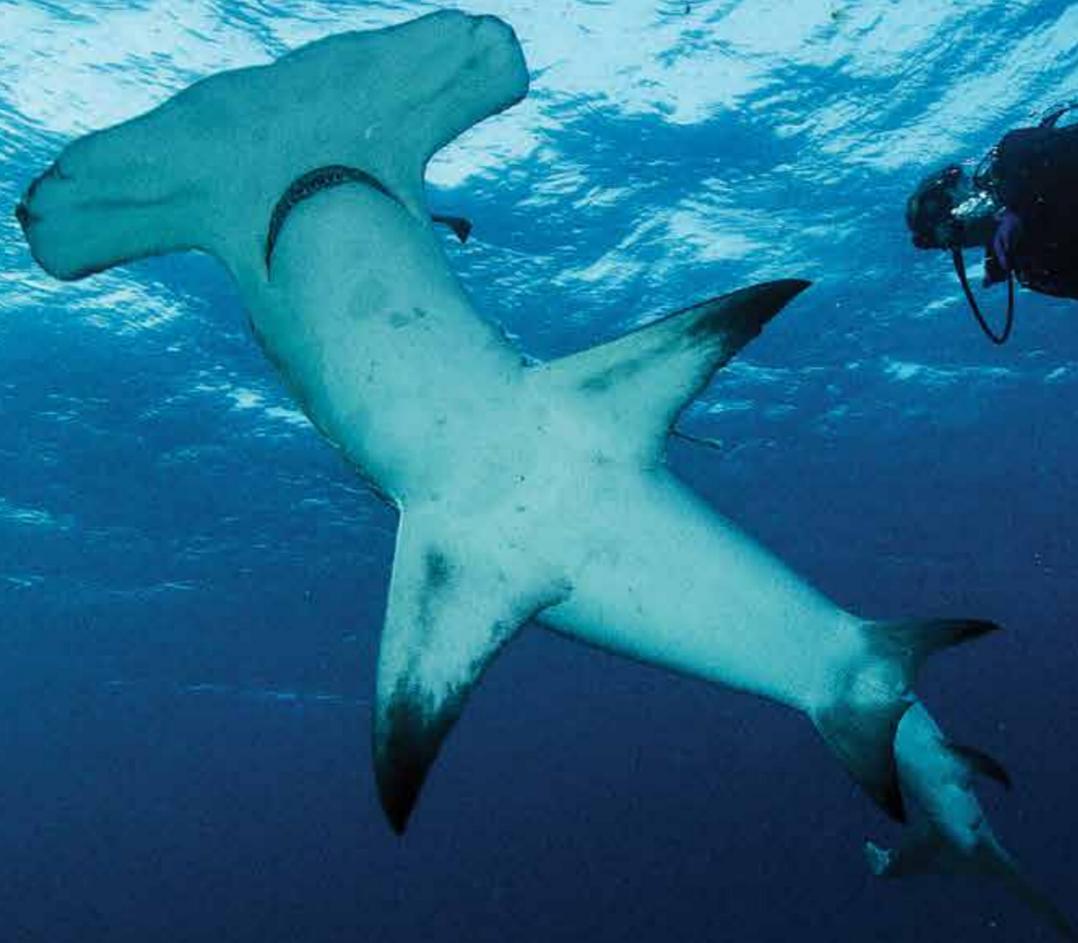


# SHARKS

DIVE, SWIM, OBSERVE, and immerse yourself in the elusive world of the ocean's biggest, most fascinating, and scariest residents.

by PAUL RUBIO

# Swimming with



All photos by Mome Hardenberg except where noted.

While most are content to limit interaction with the planet's fiercest marine creatures to HD screens and aquariums, a niche market has grown for extreme marine safaris where humans no longer call the shots. Submerged in Earth's Technicolor aquarium, all anthropogenic borders disappear, and we quickly learn that, under the sea, it's a shark's world—and we're just swimming in it. Here, six experiential encounters with the kings of the ocean. >



## WHALE SHARK

Courtesy Cancun Tourism.

### Presence

The name can be confusing, but Earth's largest living fish species is in fact a filter-feeding shark and not a whale. Reaching up to 40 feet in length (roughly the size of a classic yellow school bus) and nearly 40,000 pounds in weight (around three times an African elephant), whale sharks are found in tropical seas across the globe and follow migratory patterns.

### Access

Given their gentle nature, slow pace, and awe-inspiring presence, swimming with these giants has grown into a trendy bucket list activity, with small outfitters popping up seasonally across much of the sharks' preferred stomping grounds, such as the southern reaches of the island of Luzon in the Philippines and Útila in Honduras' Bay Islands. However, the superlative spot to float alongside these 60-million-year-old leviathans lies off the northern tip of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, when the largest-known congregation of whale sharks feasts on plankton blooms around Isla Holbox and Isla Mujeres from mid-May to early September. During this season, tour company V.I.P. Holbox Experience (day trips from

\$120; [vipholbox.com](http://vipholbox.com)) leads daily snorkeling trips into prime whale shark real estate, picking up fresh catch along the way for a post-adrenaline-rush ceviche and sashimi picnic lunch.

### Experience

Expect a mild freak-out moment at first sight of the whale sharks, at once excited, scared, and intimidated by their sheer size. Try to avoid all mental imagery of Pinocchio being swallowed alive as you come within breathing distance of the shark's gaping 5-foot-wide mouth vacuuming the proximate plankton-rich water. Don't expect to bond much with these spotted beasts. They remain rather aloof in human presence and don't like it if you get too close. Respect nature and keep a minimum safe distance of several feet between you and the shark to avoid spooking it and facing the very serious consequences of accidentally being struck by its incredibly thick, barbed tail. >

FEAR FACTOR **3/10**



# HAMMERHEAD SHARK

## Presence

The distinctive antenna-like head of a hammerhead shark intrigues and sometimes frightens. Their ethereal shape and elusive nature are hot topics among shark biologists, but for what is known of hammerheads, they travel in schools by day, engaging in complex social interaction, separating by night to hunt stingrays, squid, fish, and other fruits of the sea. Extremely shy and cautious creatures, they tend to avoid human presence though often enter shallow, warm coastal waters where humans roam. Sadly, they are endangered due to overfishing, as they're one of many shark species that compose the main ingredient of shark fin soup.

## Access

Large schools are often spotted off East Africa, Central America's Pacific Coast, and the Hawaiian coast, where the sharks' greatness is intricately woven into local folklore. Yet the best spot to swim with hammerheads and particularly the great hammerhead, largest of 11 hammerhead species, is off the Bahamas' South Bimini Island. When numbers peak from late December to February, the South Africa team at Shark Explorers (weeklong trips from \$2,500; [sharkexplorers.com](http://sharkexplorers.com)) heads to the Bahamas to offer highly personalized, by-request-only, weeklong live-aboard trips, underscored by daily hammerhead dives. For a mere dabble in the world of hammerheads, a no-skills-required snorkeling experience is achievable on cruises through the Galápagos Islands that stop at Darwin Bay on Genovesa Island, such as La Pinta Yacht's Northern Galápagos itinerary (four nights from \$3,717; [yachtlapinta.com](http://yachtlapinta.com)).

## Experience

If diving in the Bahamas, be cautious. The resident hammerheads are exceptionally comfortable with human presence thanks to regular hand-feedings off Bimini. Instead of fearful, these guys are more atypically fearless. If you plan on seeing the hammerheads in the Galápagos, prepare for difficult swimming conditions. Strong currents and murky waters are typical challenges. Dramatic swells are likely to induce seasickness, but once that magic moment arrives with the hammerheads, the chill of near-hypothermia and the fear factor quickly fade. ▷

FEAR FACTOR **5/10**



#### Presence

One of the ocean's great power couples, the shortfin mako shark and the blue shark often roam the deep, open ocean together. Members of the scientific family *Lamnidae*, makos are cousins of the great white and have earned major street cred as the ocean's fastest shark (with spurts up to 46 mph). Blue sharks are arguably the most inquisitive of shark species. Long and slender, they are named for their deep blue color sharply contrasted by their white underside.

#### Access

Because these sharks are pelagic, reaching them can be difficult. Both are found worldwide but join as an awesome twosome off the coast of California, Rhode Island, the Azores in Portugal, and off the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of the African continent. The latter provides the ultimate experience, as their preferred swaths of South African open ocean tend to be exceptionally crystalline and warm, heightening the underwater experience. Between late December and May, outfitter Shark Explorers (day trips from \$240; [sharkexplorers.com](http://sharkexplorers.com)) conducts regular "Blue Water Mako Madness" day trips, yielding an average of 20 blue shark sightings (yet ranging from 5 to 100), usually joined by a handful of makos plus a bonus of a marine posse. (Yellowfin tuna, longfin tuna, sperm whales, pilot whales, and dolphins are often spotted on these trips, too.)

#### Experience

If you didn't come to play, stay home. When humans enter the water, blue sharks teem with the excitement of kids in a candy store. In this case, you are the candy. They want to run around and touch and often taste everything. So expect a very interactive experience, one in which a shark may grab your regulator, rub your wet suit, and even bite the suit. This is normal. Just keep calm. Sharks feed off of your emotions. Oh, and don't look down too often. You might not want to completely grasp the vulnerability that comes along with swimming in water 1,500 to 6,500 feet deep. ▷

FEAR FACTOR **6/10**



## SHORTFIN MAKO SHARK & BLUE SHARK



# TIGER SHARK

## Presence

Named for its dark stripes, the tiger shark is the planet's fifth-largest shark species, reaching 14 feet in length and 1,000 pounds. Tiger sharks are known as opportunistic hunters—even scavengers—that tend to feed on just about everything under (and above) the sea, from dolphins and sea turtles to sea birds and whale carcasses. They hang out close to coastal areas, preferring tropical waters, and lose their tiger-like aesthetic as they age, taking on a more blue-gray appearance.

## Access

For shark enthusiasts, there's no place like Tiger Beach off the West End, Grand Bahamas Island, for swimming with tiger sharks. The area teems with them from September to March, lured by the presence of easy food courtesy of the dive outfitters looking to give tourists that up-close-and-personal, once-in-a-lifetime experience. Many of the sharks are even known by name (Emma and Hook are both crowd favorites). The free samples attract other sharks, too. Lemon sharks and Caribbean reef sharks are quick to take their share and circle around divers gliding on the floor of the region's shallow waters.

A number of outfitters frequent Tiger Beach through live-aboard experiences, including Shark Explorers (weeklong trips from \$2,500; [sharkexplorers.com](http://sharkexplorers.com)), which offers highly personalized, by-request-only, weeklong trips in the months of December, January, and February, with the possibility of splitting time between the tigers and the aforementioned hammerheads off Bimini. Epic Diving (weeklong, land-based trips from \$3,295; [epicdiving.com](http://epicdiving.com)) promotes regularly scheduled, land-based, weeklong trips from September to May, which include daily dives with the tiger sharks.

## Experience

If the size and tooth count of this shark don't frighten, its history might. While controversy surrounds the practice of hand-feeding large sharks anywhere in the world, at Tiger Beach it's particularly poignant since several attacks, some fatal, have been reported here and in proximate areas in recent years, with many believing that human interference prompted the aggression. So be sure to follow the detailed instructions of your guide, and don't test your boundaries under any conditions. Also, triple-check that your wet suit is well fitted so the sharks don't become curious about your exposed flesh. ▷



# OCEANIC WHITETIP SHARK

## Presence

Though not particularly large at an average of 300 pounds and a length less than 10 feet, oceanic whitetips are one of the ocean's most feared predators. They roam the open ocean for days and possess extreme curiosity (and can be prone to belligerence) upon contact with other large marine life (or humans). Massive dorsal and pectoral fins, far larger than other shark species, exaggerate their size and foster exceptional agility. Traveling great distances, they may pass several days without a meal; so when prey has been identified, a feeding frenzy often occurs.

## Access

From March until the end of May, the Atlantic side of the Bahamas' Cat Island is bar none for swimming with the oceanic whitetips through free diving and scuba diving. A handful of outfitters focus on these cheetahs of the ocean, namely Epic Diving (weeklong, land-based trips from \$3,295; [epicdiving.com](http://epicdiving.com)), which provides accommodation on Cat Island and daily exhilarating dives with the oceanic whitetips.

## Experience

Similar to blue sharks, expect an interactive, adrenaline-packed experience. But make sure you are primed beforehand on which actions are playful and which are antagonistic. These guys aren't afraid to enter your personal space and are likely to circle until they figure out your presence. Unlike the blues, oceanic whitetips have a long rap sheet. It's all part of the excitement. >

FEAR FACTOR **9/10**

# GREAT WHITE SHARK

## Presence

The ocean's supreme apex predator rules the deep blue, most populous off the coast of South Africa; Isla Guadalupe off Baja California, Mexico; the Neptune Islands in Australia; and New Zealand. Females tend to grow larger than males, known to reach up to 20 feet in length and more than 3 tons in weight, feeding predominantly on marine mammals such as seals and sea lions. The great whites possess row after row of serrated teeth, designed to rip off large chunks of flesh.

No doubt the 1975 thriller *Jaws* immortalized human fear of great whites—and sharks in general. And while less than 300 unprovoked great white attacks go on record globally (to put that in perspective, hippos are responsible for 2,900 deaths per year in Africa), it is arguably the planet's most feared animal. It seems almost ironic that two of the most recent attacks took place off Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where *Jaws* was filmed. Thankfully, no blood was shed and the two victims emerged from the water unharmed. Their kayaks ... well ... that's another story.

## Access

Given international protective status of the sharks and country-specific laws, the required permits for great white dives are few and far between. These permits facilitate swimming with the great whites via cage diving through six operators in Mexico, three in Australia, and three in South Africa. Cageless diving experiences do exist and escalate the fear factor to the max, but due to liability concerns and legalities, they are generally not accessible to the public. Professional research expeditions, film crews, and the upper crust of the exploratory shark world, however, can make concessions on a case-by-case basis.

In South Africa's False Bay, it's sharkfest year-round just 30 minutes offshore, and the experience is achieved using a scuba hookah system or snorkel. Peak season in False Bay lasts from mid-May to mid-September, when the great whites catapult from the icy water to hunt young seal pups. It's during this time that up to 30 sharks can be seen on the "False Bay White Shark Adventures" underwater day trip run by Shark Explorers (day trips from \$200; six-day trips from \$3,250; [sharkexplorers.com](http://sharkexplorers.com)). Great white fanatics should opt for one of Shark Explorers' twice-yearly weeklong scuba trips to Isla

Guadalupe, where large numbers and extreme water clarity make for prized great white photos.

## Experience

A bit of heavy chomp and gnaw is par for the course when it comes to swimming in the company of great whites. At first, they're far shyer than you'd expect and must be enticed with chummed waters and the use of a thrashing seal dummy. Curiosity then prompts the shark to investigate the waters, and that includes the shark's desire to find out exactly what's inside the cage near the bloody waters. Don't be surprised when the shark bumps and bites the cage. You'll be thrashed around. You'll be inches from those massive jaws, unveiling row after row of nearly 3,000 razor-sharp teeth as they clamp on the bars. The sharks are massive. They're impressive. Every fear of *Jaws* comes to life, yet in an instant the all-encompassing fear transforms into a newfound respect for the ultimate king of the marine world. ♦

FEAR FACTOR **10/10**