

GUADALUPE ISLAND, AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE GREAT WHITE SHARK

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PHILIPPE LECOMTE**



Last October 2012, one of my dreams came true. Since February 2012, my friend Nicolas and myself prepared ourselves for the longest trip of our lives in order to see one the most amazing creatures, the Great White Shark. Fascinated by sharks in general, approaching and observing this species was one of my much anticipated goals. We carefully planned this trip by choosing the best spot in the world in order to see the Great White in the best conditions possible.

My choice came down to Guadalupe Island (Mexico). Guadalupe Island is the top destination for great white shark encounters. This small volcanic island stretches 30kms in length and 9kms wide located in the Pacific Ocean, 240kms (150 miles) off the west coast of Mexico's Baja California peninsula, it is rated to outperform both South Africa and Australia with shark-seeing consistency and viewing conditions. With more than 3000m depth all around the island, Guadalupe Island can boast shark sightings in beautiful clear blue water with 20m to 40m visibility and on top of that, scientists boast that it's a guarantee to encounter them at this destination.

In 1975, the island was declared a marine sanctuary and a Biosphere Reserve in 2005 as well as being a sanctuary for several other species of mammals, plants and fish. The natural beauty of Guadalupe Island combined with its magnificent animal and plant life makes this Mexican Biosphere Reserve both a wonderful and important place worth protecting.

My trip started from Abu Dhabi (UAE), direction toward San Diego (USA) via a stop

in Chicago. It took us 25 hours door to door to reach our hotel in San Diego, the Dolphin Motel.

SOME FACTS:

San Diego is the eighth-largest city in the USA and the second-largest city in California. The city is located on the coast of the Pacific Ocean in Southern California, immediately adjacent to the Mexican border. The birthplace of California, San Diego is known for its mild year-round climate, natural deep-water harbor, extensive beaches, and recent emergence as a healthcare and biotechnology enclave. The population is about 1,301,617 people. Well known for a big fish destination, it has become the best stopover to start a trip on to Guadalupe Island.

The day after we arrived, we only had the half day to visit a bit of the harbor and areas close around it before putting our dive bags on the Islander, a boat of 27m long that took us to our final destination. We departed at 10pm with a priority stop in Ensenada (Mexico) in order to proceed on to the Mexican immigration border and check point to get our permits for Guadalupe island.

It only took 30 minutes for the police check and then we were off and headed southwest for a further 140 miles, toward Guadalupe Island. The sea conditions and first night on board were both good.

During the day we got to see whales, flying fish and sometimes groups of dolphins would play with the boat. On board, the two cooks were always busy preparing delicious meals even if the sea got a little choppy.

During the night, the scenery was splendid. The sunrise lapped the clouds with an orange light and the twilight slowly covered the rocky side of the mysterious Guadalupe Island. We had reached our final destination.

As soon as the captain had released the anchor, the crew prepared the cage that would allow us to safely observe the amazing Great White Shark.

The boat stopped in a bay where the sharks are usually seen. These creatures stay here during a period of 4 months (August to November). The sea temperature is around 22 to 23 degrees and the visibility is up to 35 meters. Four tuna heads are attached at the rear of the boat in order to keep the sharks around. Sardines and yellow fin tuna are already under the boat and after about 10 to 15 minutes, one of the dive masters of the crew spotted our first Great White. This shark is beautiful. My first vision of a Great White was amazing. He swam so gently and slowly. Sometimes they try to catch the bait but miss and instead attack the cage. On board, the crew try to avoid losing the tuna heads in order to preserve some. Bait is counted on board.

In the movies and other documentaries where they portray the sharks' aggressive behavior, constantly biting and eating everything in sight now becomes so unreal. With 16 people on the boat, we each take turns in groups of four with 30 minutes per group in the cage at a time. When everyone had was finished preparing their gear and cameras, the first group would jump into the cage. Being out of the cage can also be rewarding because,

DIVING DESTINATIONS

sometimes, the Great White breaks the surface with its huge fin and dives back again into the deep blue. One of the guides told us that this creature spends most of its time deep in the blue, waiting for pray to swim on the surface such as seals, dolphins or whales. On the beach, we can hear and see some Northern Elephant Seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) and Guadalupe Fur Seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) sunbathing on the warm rocks and stone beach. This is one of the reasons this kind of predator is around. Food and maybe mating. Biologists from Mexico are trying to study this shark, especially here around Guadalupe. They tag them and follow their movement with a receiver that is on the bottom along the bay. Mauricio Hoyos, one of the GWS specialists collects the data every year and translates it to his database. They have collected data from more than 120 Great Whites since 2009 that regularly come to the island.

We had planned to stay 6 full days in the bay in total, but due to bad weather coming from the west, the captain of the boat advised us to leave the island before the end of our time. Wind had already picked up and staying longer would have been very dangerous to go back to Ensenada. We ended up deciding to leave at the end of the fourth day. We were very sad to leave sooner than expected and to leave this amazing creature so soon. Spending time in the cage in order to observe and see this shark was definitely my best souvenir to date. Sometimes dreams do come true.

