



Close encounter: In Shark Alley, the writer touched his first great white shark.

# Up close and personal

Swimming with the sharks in South Africa helped one man conquer his worst fear

BY JOE FITZGERALD

*"For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lay one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all of the horrors of the half lived life."—Herman Melville*

I thought of the quote from *Moby Dick* as we motored into the kelp forest just off Dyer Island. The booming of colossal waves, nicknamed "Cape Town rollers," against the reef on the far side of the island, faded into the rising din of barking seals and screeching seabirds. Our Captain, Jackie Smit, yelled in a thick Afrikaans accent and pointed

starboard, where a group of penguins bobbed like unconcerned pond ducks. I stood on the bow, absorbing the exotic scene. I was really here, off the southernmost tip of Africa, plodding into what has been called the most dangerous piece of ocean on Earth.

It was definitely the most alive piece of ocean I had ever seen. Where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans collide, there is a wellspring of life. In addition to the estimated 50,000 Cape Fur Seals that breed on Geyser Island—literally a pile of rocks that lay next to Dyer Island—the area is home to whales, dolphins, penguins, seabirds, and big game. However, I had made this journey for

one reason: I had travelled halfway around the world to seek out the monster that had swum in the depths of my imagination since childhood. I had come to find *carcharodon carcharias*, the great white shark.

As a boy I envisioned myself an explorer, a brave adventurer. Then I saw *Jaws* and realized that the ocean was not my personal playground. Suddenly, I was vulnerable; not a conqueror, but a potential meal. There would always be that gnawing tingle on the back of my neck, warning me that in a flash, a steel-grey behemoth could rush up from below and shear me in half.

We pulled into the channel that separates Dyer and Geyser Islands, the infamous Shark Alley. As we cruised through the channel, large clusters of seals called "rafts" followed us, swimming alongside the boat. The seals frolicked a stone's throw away, while thousands more belched crassly from the rocks, squirming over each other like plump legless ants. A sudden shift of wind belted me with the stench of sun-baked excrement. I momentarily thought the toothed terror beneath us would be a welcome respite to this malodorous assault, but I quickly grew accustomed to it. I noticed a dead seal on the rocks, near the water, with a gruesome pink crescent carved into its body. I pointed it out to Eric, our burly first mate, who nonchalantly remarked: "Shark."

We anchored in the channel and began "chumming." What Jackie called his special recipe of shark bait, also known as chum, left an iridescent trail of greasy blood and tissue, which schools of baitfish savaged. Jackie threw a nylon mesh bag filled with cat-shark livers overboard and tethered it to the boat; apparently the livers are particularly attractive to white sharks. Then we waited. Two hours and no sharks later, I was hanging over the rail. The swells, the smell of Geyser Island, the chum, and the incessant cacophony of seals had me swooning in a nauseous trance.

Then the sea erupted, bolting me upright and wide eyed. At last, a great white shark. Ghastly jaws extended in front of me and clapped down, sounding like two rocks being cracked together. Gleaming white triangles gripped the

bag, the head shook, and the jaws extended again, as if the shark was trying to climb into the boat. The stink of putrefying blubber flooded over me. Finally the horrendous head sank unrepentantly into the water. Jackie turned to me. "Get your wetsuit on, we're putting the cage in."

Moments later I was naked in the cabin, trying to squeeze into neoprene rubber, my manhood flying everywhere as I stumbled with the tumbling swells. Urgency and adrenaline overrode my dignity, and as I came back onto the deck, the cage was just being dropped over the side. "Are you ready," asked Jackie.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"All right, just climb over the rail and drop in."

It sounded so simple, but my conservative, suburban, North American upbringing was saying, "Are you crazy? We're on a nine-metre boat with great

white sharks swimming around and I'm supposed to just climb over and drop in? Don't I need to take a safety course?" Apparently not, for a second later I was submerged, alone in Shark Alley. As I tried to adjust my mask, the cage slammed against the boat, and I got a mouthful of chum. The men closed the top of the cage and let out the tether. I drifted away from the boat in thunderous silence. It was cold and the visibility was about six metres. I looked out into the dim green murk, every sense heightened. I was alive.

Fifteen minutes later I was shivering and feeling cheated. I was reconciling myself to that when a shadow took shape below me. Rising from the murky depths, a full-grown great white shark swam past me, a leathery, rippling, phlegmatic bulk. It was about five-and-a-half metres long and probably weighed two tonnes. It circled the boat, searching for the source of the chum, paying no

attention to me. I took a deep breath and held it. The shark turned and started toward the cage. Sharks don't like bubbles, not even great whites. My stomach dropped as I saw the full girth of it. I backed up, steeled myself, and looked directly into its black eyes. We held each other's gaze until it nearly bumped the cage, then—whimsically, it seemed—the shark flicked its head and cruised away. In an instant of jackal's courage, I reached through the cage and touched the flank of the animal before it disappeared into the gloom.

That day we saw more sharks, 11 in all, but my mission already had been accomplished. It's hard to describe the contented ecstasy I felt as we headed back to Gansbaai. As the sun sank into the southern ocean, I stood on the stern of the boat and momentarily pondered all of the horrors that were still undiscovered before I dozed dreamily in my insular Tahiti. 🌐

## Ryan Duffy's Coleslaw

This flavourful slaw is a wonderful addition to any BBQ!

### Ingredients for Six:

- 1 - Ryan Duffy's Caesar Salad Dressing (available in Sobey's stores)
- 1/2 - head of green cabbage, chopped
- 1 - carrot, grated or shredded
- 1 - apple, quartered, cored and thinly sliced
- Salt and freshly ground pepper

### Method:

Combine the cabbage, carrot, apple and a generous amount of Ryan Duffy's Caesar Salad Dressing and toss to coat. Season with salt (optional) and freshly ground pepper.

*Enjoy!*



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