



Text and photos
by Don Tipton

The boat's four occupants were spear fishing for Yellowtail. As Mark began to ask the skipper questions, one of the spear fisherman suddenly appeared to be walking on the water shouting "White, White! Get me out of the water now!"

Mark nonchalantly looked at us and said, "Well, we have found them boys. Let's go diving!!"

Text and photos by Tony White

captions

In search of the Great White Shark

Great White



It was a beautiful clear blue day as we approached the ski boat, 4km off Cape Agulhas in South Africa.

Two of *Carcharodon Carcharias*, more commonly known as the Great White Shark, are found around the globe. But undoubtedly, the global capital for this magnificent apex predator is the Western Cape, South Africa.

Traditionally during the winter months of May to October, thousands of tourists flock to the local cage diving operators in both Gansbaai and False Bay. From the relative safety of a cage, the tourists watch these marine giants as they feed on one of their favourite dishes, the seals of Dyer and Seal Islands.

During the summer months, the numbers of sharks around these two areas drops significantly. Although the Great White is a migratory animal, up until now, nobody has really known where they disappeared to. When asked, people in the know became very vague and said, "They have gone hunting fish somewhere nearer the coast" or they joke that "It is tourist hunting season".

It wasn't just tourists who flocked to these two areas but also cameramen and

photographers from around the world. Not deterred by the bad visibility or weather conditions they waited patiently for their time to come. Many had long waits as the conditions were rarely right, and they went away empty handed. Over the years, the professionals found other areas of the world to photograph the Great White for the endless articles and programs that are produced about this fascinating creature.

Almost a year ago, in an effort to attract the reducing number of cameramen back to South Africa, a couple of visionary people decided that somewhere around their beautiful coast there must be better and more predictable conditions to dive with Great Whites

After completing a trip with a group of photographers to Aliwal Shoals and Sodwana Bay

in February 2007, I received an early morning call from Mark Addison of Blue Wilderness Diving. Excitedly, he told me he had just had a phone call from one of his contacts in the Western Cape. The Agulhas current had taken up its summer position, moving closer to the coast, bringing with it warm and more importantly, clear blue water with 20 to 30 metres visibility. They had also noticed high concentrations of sharks, particularly the Great White and, if I was up for it, we should get down there pronto!

And so it was at 4 o'clock the

next

morning, with the wagon loaded with cameras, dive gear and a bait stem, that we (Mark, me and videographer Pete Whielden) started the 1600 kilometre drive from

Durban to Arniston in the Western Cape.

The journey was long and hot, with Mark and me taking turns to drive and stopping only three times to eat and top up on gas. En route, it became obvious that we would not be able to launch the RIB from Arniston as the launch conditions were too dangerous, and we re-directed to a small fishing village. Struis Bay is some 10 kilometres away from

gave us two working days before the weather was predicted to break, with a strong south westerly stopping us dead in our tracks.

The next morning, we were up at the break of day. Adrenaline was pumping, and the weariness of the previous day was forgotten as we anticipated the day and the strong possibility of getting into the water with this awesome marine animal.

We launched the RIB easily from the slip way in the small harbour and headed out into the clear blue sea. Our re-direction from Arniston now meant that we had a 40 kilometre sea journey before us. Our local contacts were sending us to a shallow reef called Skip-Skop, some 4 kilometres from the coast.

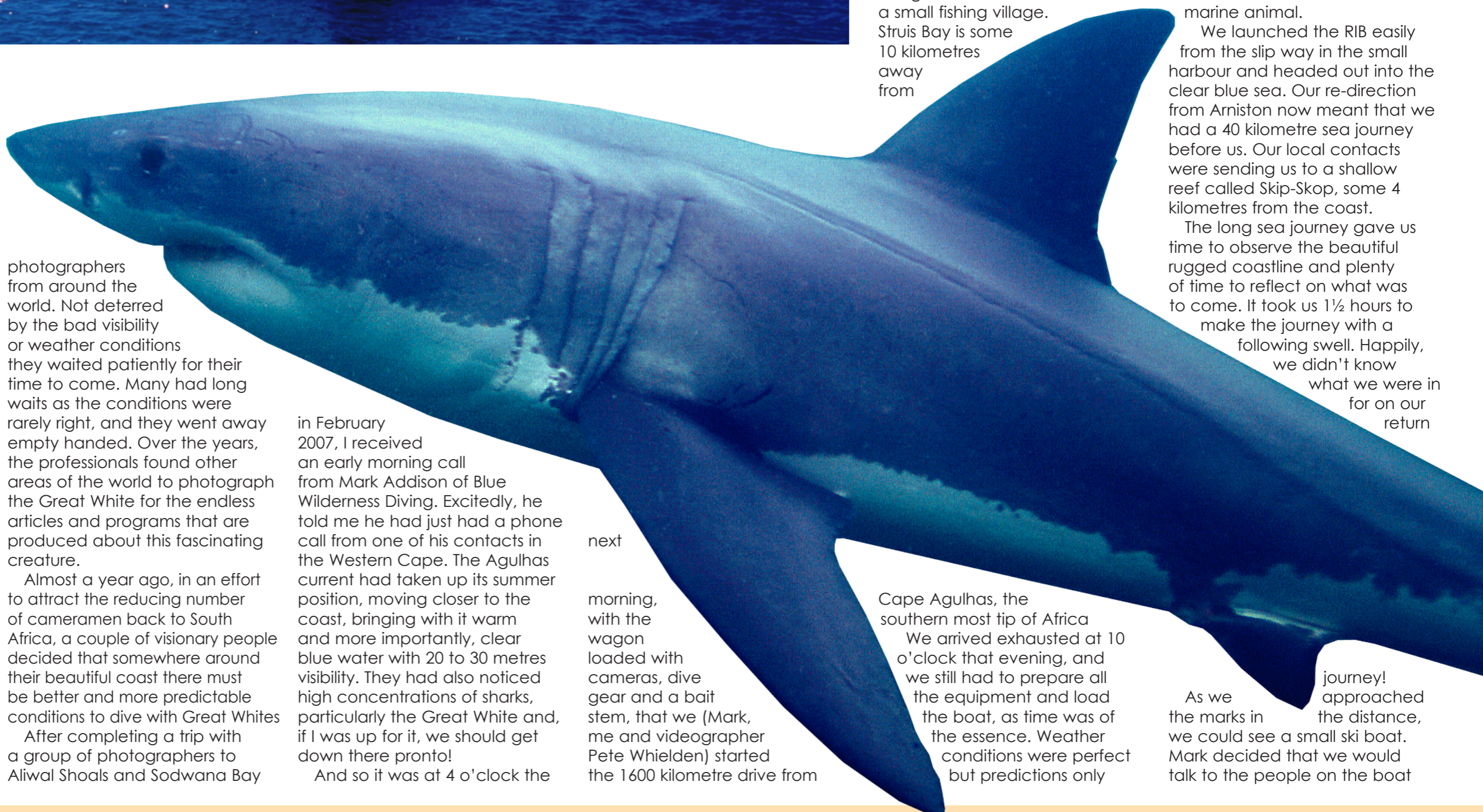
The long sea journey gave us time to observe the beautiful rugged coastline and plenty of time to reflect on what was to come. It took us 1½ hours to make the journey with a

following swell. Happily, we didn't know what we were in for on our return

Cape Agulhas, the southern most tip of Africa

We arrived exhausted at 10 o'clock that evening, and we still had to prepare all the equipment and load the boat, as time was of the essence. Weather conditions were perfect but predictions only

As we approached the marks in the distance, we could see a small ski boat. Mark decided that we would talk to the people on the boat





Preparing the bait

to see what they had seen and take it from there. On approaching the boat, we could see two men fishing with lines and another two neoprene-clad spear fishermen in the water. We had just started to talk to them when one of the men nearly took off vertically from the water, weight belt and all, shouting "White! White! Get me out of the water!" This prompted Mark Addison's now famous comment, "Well, we have found them boys. Let's go diving!"

By now, all I could see was two men almost walking on the surface of the water trying to get out of it and into their boat... and we were starting to kit up to get into the water! My mind told me that this was not the way it should be. I had figured on sitting around in the sun while Mark baited the water and after a couple



of hours to get used to the idea, I thought we would gently join the sharks as they lazily swam around us.

Not so! Kitted within minutes, Pete and I slid into the sea to find visibility of at least 25 metres. Nervously,

we edged towards where the last reported position of the White Shark had been.

Cages?

Oh, I forgot to mention that there were no cages involved in this!

Suddenly, out of the blue, approximately two metres below the surface, appeared a four metre Great White Shark. We have dived with Tiger Sharks many times in the past, so we were used to being in the water with big sharks without cages, but this shark was enormous! I definitely thought that it was eyeing us up with a view to assessing our meal potential. Luckily, Pete and I are pretty crunchy and to be fair, human beings in any form are not on any sharks' normal menu.

I have been asked many times since that moment if I was afraid and very honestly, I have to say that for a brief time, yes, I was. My fear turned to apprehension and soon I was completely at ease with the creature that was nervously circling us. It

Cape Agulhas Coastline

Great White

Well, we have found them boys. Let's go diving!"

continued to circle us for some two hours, never coming any closer than 4-5 metres from us.

All this time, Mark took up position above us on snorkel and with an empty spear gun. If the shark approached us too closely, he planned to dive down and push it off, but this was never necessary.

Eventually, the spear fishermen who had exited the water so dramatically came back into the water with us, and without their spear guns. One of them was heard to say that with these lunatics in the water, it reduced his chances of being eaten.

The ease with which we had found the White Shark and the whole encounter, was the ultimate experience in my underwater career. For two hours, we enjoyed this





Great White



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majestic creature's company until we finally we ran out of air and had to return to the RIB. We then realised the enormity of the task ahead as without the following sea, it took us nearly two and a half hours to pound our way, teeth rattling, back to base at Struis Bay.

It had taken Mark Addison over a year of never ending searching, up and down the coast to experience this day. In the past, it had been either bad weather and poor visibility or no sharks. Today, all his hard work and the relentless pursuit of his dream had come together.

Day 2

The following day we launched again at dawn. We made our way to the same reef, with the intention of dropping a bait stem to the seabed to see if we could attract the shark to the bottom, and capture rare images of White Shark against the reef instead of the predictable White-Shark-

biting-cage-bars shot.

We anchored in the middle of Skip Skop with a depth varying from 12 to 16 metres and dropped the bait stem over the side. The wait seemed endless, but after an hour or so, Mark yelled, "White approaching!" We could see the dark shape of a huge shark some 100 metres from the boat. After falling over each other to get kitted, we dropped into the water. Pete was in front and heading for the bottom, followed by the shark and last of all, me. As we got in, Mark had said that today's shark was not as big as yesterday's!! Following that shark, I could swear it was twice the size of yesterday's and a female to boot.

Pete and I took up position back to back

(obviously), by the bait stem and waited. This time, the shark only came back once and buzzed us from some 10 metres away. That was the last we saw of her before our computers told us it was time to leave the bottom. Again our return to base was exhilarating as we tried not to lose our teeth, and talked about our experiences of the last two days.

True to predictions, the weather

broke the following day, and we were unable to go out again. So, we reluctantly packed up our kit and made our way home. These two days had proved that it was possible to dive safely with Great White Sharks, without cages in warm (24C) clear water in South Africa.

This experience was a real privilege for me, and I can't wait for next season to arrive. I know that when it arrives and the conditions are right, I will not be waiting at home for a phone call. I will already be in Struis Bay, diving with Great White Sharks.

During the summer months, when the Agulhas current moves closer to shore, large numbers of White Sharks can be found



feeding on the huge shoals of Yellowtail that frequent this part of the coast. We have a very real opportunity and the expertise for underwater photographers/ videographers to come to South Africa to capture footage of the Great White Shark without the restraints and limitations of the cages in Gansbaai and False Bay.

Tony White is a full time professional underwater photographer now based in Cape Town, South Africa. He frequently runs specialised tours in South Africa and across the world. More information can be found at www.seaofdreams.co.uk

