



Close encounter



Joel Seaton, Rex First Officer, travels to Port Lincoln for an up-close-and-personal meeting with some Great White sharks.

At age seven, through the textured pattern of a crochet blanket on my grandmother's lounge, I first viewed the Great White shark – actually, its oversized mechanical replica. My parents were wary of letting me watch confrontational films and Spielberg's 1975 cinematic classic *Jaws* was no exception. Yet my Nan, like many grandmothers seem to be, was totally cool with me staying up late, eating white bread and watching horror movies.

Hollywood's *Deep Blue Sea* did little to help the cause. The recent death of Roy Scheider, aka *Jaws*' Sheriff Brody, aggravated the situation further.

In early 2009, when Sydney experienced three separate shark attacks within a few weeks, it seemed as though the mass media wanted nothing more than to whip the general public into a 'shark terror' frenzy.

My 'home' surf break, North Avalon, on Sydney's Northern Beaches, played host to one of these dreadful attacks. Despite the tightknit surfing fraternity appearing unconcerned, the waves remained uncharacteristically empty over the following few weeks...

Nevertheless, my obsession with surfing and my fascination with these aquatic predators continued into adulthood. Flying from Adelaide to Port Lincoln as a pilot

with Rex, viewing the countless uncrowded waves that peel down South Australia's hundreds of point breaks and reefs, made my mind boggle at the possibilities.

I decided to confront my fears and assuage my curiosity, and arranged a shark cage-diving experience with Calypso Star Charters, a company with more than 20 years' experience, operating out of Port Lincoln. I was joined by Rex First Officers Scott Sutherland and Cameron 'Chuck' Maxwell, Cameron's dad Bob, mate Milan, and Candice Teo from Rex Head Office.

We boarded the 17.3-metre *Calypso Star* as dawn broke and departed the marina beneath a foreboding southern sky. A slight wind created a choppy, rolling motion that had the less seasoned sea dogs donating their own berley to the operation fairly early on in the piece.

The Neptune Islands consist of four small, exposed rocky outcrops about 38 nautical miles south-east of Port Lincoln. The area supports an abundance of marine life: an array of sea birds, schools of tuna and kingfish. Sharks, of course, also inhabit the surrounding waters.

Information about Great Whites is limited by the relative rarity of the species, but we do know some things. The Great White shark is the world's largest predatory fish. The official record for the largest Great White is disputed but reportedly, it was around seven metres in length and weighed 3,200-odd kilograms. The shark's usual diet includes fish, stingrays, birds, seals and other sharks. Typically, it is a migratory predator, ranging along the coastlines of South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, North and South America, the Mediterranean Sea and Asia.

Great Whites are capable of short, high-speed pursuits and can even launch clear of the water (breaching). They are also the only fish known to 'spy hop' (poking their heads above water to explore the environment above the surface).

Following a brief from Captain Simon James, the shark cage is lowered off the back of *Calypso Star*. Almost on cue, the slight wind recedes, the wind chop lessens and we hustle nervously to dress in our wetsuits.

Baits – berley and chum – are dispersed into the water as a lure. Within minutes, a massive dorsal fin shatters the water's surface. It is followed by a spray of water and the flick of the massive grey tail of a four-metre Great

White. The residents are in. There's a further eruption of excited gasps as everyone rushes to the vessel's stern. A second five-metre shark has joined the first and the huge fish are taking turns feasting on the tuna baits.

Weight belts attached, face-masks fitted and regulators at the ready, we take turns to slip cautiously into the cage.

As my vision adjusts to the underwater environment, all sense of time and space seems lost: I stare outwards, transfixed. Suddenly I become very conscious of my own suspenseful, fast-paced, astronaut-style breathing pattern. The water colour, an extreme aqua, seems to deepen into an abyss of darkness in the distance, the serenity interrupted only by the raspy noise my regulator makes as I inhale, then exhale with an expulsion of bubbles. Unannounced but highly anticipated, the Great Whites appear from the depths.

The first thing that strikes me when I see them underwater is their sheer size. The length and volume of these fish is incredible, and it's surreal to be so close to such powerful creatures. The sharks appear and disappear casually from the depths and cruise around us like mini-submarines, investigating the cage and its inhabitants.

After what seems like an eternity underwater, we leave the cage and board the boat to give other divers an opportunity to experience the sharks.

Our second dive allows us to meet a mature five-metre female Great White known as 'Bluey' because of the blue-coloured tag the CSIRO attached to her for their studies.

Bluey appears curious and circles closely around the cage, giving us the opportunity to witness her at very close quarters and capture some exceptional underwater photos.

After I become comfortable with the presence of the sharks – which, surprisingly, takes no time at all – a euphoric sense of their grace and majestic nature takes hold. Mesmerised, I watch them materialise from, and evaporate back, into the depths.

The presumption I had – of these animals being mindless 'eating machines' – has evaporated, too. I can now see why the species has been declared 'protected': Great Whites are a true treasure of the ocean.

Many thanks to our fantastic hosts, Simon, Lana and Harry, and to everyone at Calypso Star Charters, for a day we will never forget! 🌟

The water, an extreme aqua, seems to deepen into an abyss of darkness in the distance...

From left to right: Joel, just after his first dive; a close-up view of the beast; the creature's infamous dorsal fin; the Rex divers and Calypso's crew.