

In the killers' domain

Swimming with great white sharks was the best experience **Brad Crouch** has never had.

“SHARK!” came the urgent warning cry, but it was too late.

I was too far from the boat to get out of the water before it arrived: it was travelling far too fast, homing in on lunch.

And besides, it was the reason I was in the water in the first place.

Welcome to the world of shark cage diving, where — provided things go to plan — you lure massive great white sharks in with tuna bait and berley, then eyeball them while swimming in a cage.

In South Australia — where you can snorkel with giant cuttlefish, playful sea lions, regal dolphins and powerful tuna — swimming with great white sharks seems almost logical. Almost.

Great white sharks can grow to more than 5m, are finely tuned killing machines and have been known to destroy humans swimming in their domain.

They are not to be messed with. But the sheer fascination of these massive, majestic and misunderstood creatures made the option of a cage dive too hard to resist.

We met at 6.30am at Port Lin-

coln's Marina Hotel car park, near where the Calypso Star was berthed for our day trip.

The 17m vessel is comfortable: the main cabin and flybridge are air-conditioned, there is a full galley, comfortable seating, TV, video, hot showers and three cabins for overnight trips.

Among the passengers was Mark Hensel, who was once a keen scuba diver. However, he has not been in the water since his father was killed by a shark in South Australian waters in the 1980s. His wife bought him the trip as a gift.

After riding the swells the boat arrived at North Neptune Island and nosed her way through a narrow gap between two islands.

A large seal colony on the rocks checked us out: their presence is one reason great white sharks regularly inhabit these waters.

Once we were anchored in a sheltered area, deckhand Matt Smith began throwing big chunks of tuna overboard on ropes.

It soon made an impact. Fish of all sorts began filling the waters around us while seabirds came in to fight for their share of the booty.

But no fins. Time passed, and Matt threw more tuna over as each chunk was eaten by the fish life.

Lunch came and went, as did more coffees. All of us were anxiously scanning the waters, hoping for a fin, the bigger the better.

Then skipper Andrew Wright

suggested putting on our wetsuits, getting in the cage and waiting.

The steel mesh cage on the back of the boat has several ominous dents and gaps about 40cm wide between mesh areas which seemed far too open. It can hold about three people. Once it is lowered in the water off the back of the boat, you simply climb in the top and sink into the water, enclosed by the cage.

Sitting on the bottom of the cage, I was in about 2m of water. The water was cold and it was definitely spooky climbing in. Visibility was so-so: you could see the hunks of tuna being devoured by dozens of fish.

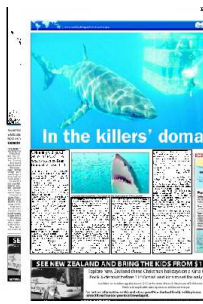
Time wore on. The show around us was entertaining, but my toes were turning numb, my fingers were cramping, and still no star of the show.

Then came the startled cry: “Shark!” In a nanosecond a powerful killing machine emerged from the murkiness and lunged at a watermelon-size piece of tuna just metres from my face.

The gathered fish scattered, and I instantly went from a corner of the cage to cowering in the centre, as far from the viewing gaps as I could get.

Another predator followed and, with my heart pounding, I watched as they tore apart the meat.

They were big sharks, maybe



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3m, but they were bronze whalers, not great whites, and after a quick munch they were gone.

The adrenalin was enough to keep me in the cage for another half hour, hoping a great white

would make an appearance. Mark Hensel was also in the cage, his fears overcome by curiosity.

Alas, on this day no great whites showed.

After a hot shower, a coffee and

more food it was time to start the long trip back to shore. It was an enjoyable day and a fabulous experience seeing bronzies in the wild. But, as far as fish stories go, this was one that got away.



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DESTINATION >>



Port Lincoln

Getting there: Fly to Adelaide and take a connecting flight to Port Lincoln.

Stay: Options include Port Lincoln Hotel and Marina Hotel.

Tour: A full-day shark cage dive trip costs \$375. If no sharks are sighted, another trip at half price is offered. Trips of several days are also available. (08) 8682 3939, www.sharkcagediving.com.au

