

Shark cage diving in Gansbaai – up close with the Great White Shark

Written by {ga=staceyv}

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Just off the fishing village of Gansbaai in the Western Cape of South Africa, lies what some call the Great White shark capital of the world: Dyer Island.

Thousands of African penguins live on Dyer Island, and the smaller island of Geyser Rock nearby is the home of a high concentration of Cape Fur seals. No wonder the channel between these two islands is called 'Shark Alley' – with seals being a particular favourite on the Great White sharks menu.

Shark cage diving in Gansbaai

For tourists in South Africa looking for an up-close-and-personal encounter with the ocean predator at the top of the food chain, Gansbaai is your town. The best time of year to view Great White sharks is between June and September. There are many local tour and adventure operators offering the experience, and you do not need to be a qualified scuba diver to go down in a shark cage – just plenty of courage!

The tour boats leave from Kleinbaai harbour, and the outing is 3 to 5 hours long (pricing varies) and you can usually expect an educational briefing on what to expect from your Great White encounter as you head towards your shark hot spot in Shark Alley.

The shark cage is engineered to withstand any advances made by the sharks, and it usually floats with the top above the water. Divers need to duck down under the water (no more than 1m) as the Great Whites approach, attracted to the tour operators' boats by the chum that is placed in the water – an oily mixture of crushed tuna or sardines that sharks can smell from a great distance.

You can also stand on the top deck of the boat and get a fantastic view of the curious sharks as they circle the shark cage and its occupants. It's a once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity, and you may even get a photograph of one of the Great Whites as they surface by poking their snout a few feet out of the water.

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Another popular shark cage diving location in South Africa is around Seal Island in False Bay, where the Great Whites are famous for breaching the water in a spectacular display of predatory skill. Once a shark has circled its prey – a seal – it barrels up from the deep at an incredible speed, launching vertically out of the ocean with its prey caught in its jaws, before splashing back down into the churning waters. It's a breath-taking sight and a stark reminder that the deep blue sea is the Great White's territory first and foremost, not ours.

www.gansbaaiinfo.com

Great White shark conservation

Thanks to the Hollywood blockbuster

Jaws and other sensationalist media, the Great White shark is thought of as a ferocious predator of humans. While attacks on swimmers, divers and fishermen throughout the centuries have been few and far between (the International Shark Attack File lists only 43 fatalities in South Africa in the last 100 years) – the Great White is now a prized trophy, its teeth and jaws displayed over mantelpieces and on necklaces.

In 1991, South Africa became the first country in the world to protect the Great White, which is on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and is classified as 'vulnerable to extinction'. Today most of the countries with Great White territories also have protection laws in place. Dyer Island is closed to the public and hosts scientists, conservationists and often *National Geographic* and other film crews who study and record the habits of the Great White, as well as the penguins, seals, whales and dolphins in the area.