

The background of the entire page is an underwater scene. In the foreground, a large shark, possibly a sand shark, is swimming towards the left. The water is a deep teal color, and the background is filled with a dense forest of kelp stalks. Several divers are visible in the distance, some appearing to be working on a structure or equipment. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and rich in marine life.

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CAPE TOWN

There's nothing like a little inside knowledge to get the most from your travels. Cape Town resident **Aaron Gekoski** guides us round his favourite local dive sites and shows us the rich variety of marine life, from top predators to tiny nudibranchs, the 'Mother City' has to offer

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There's more to Cape Town's diving than just great white sharks. In fact, these chilly waters are also home to a surprising array of marine life, housed in the most dazzling marine amphitheater imaginable. Along with the animals, there are fascinating seascapes and lashings of colour to be found.

If you know where to look you'll unearth mysterious kelp forests full of apparently smiling fish, giant pinnacles, coral gardens and playful seals. And then there's the chance to come nose-to-nose with the world's fastest shark. You may even learn a thing or two about marine conservation in the process.

No trip to South Africa's Southern Peninsula would be complete without a dip into great white territory. It's simply that thrilling. These giant sharks – the largest on record was more than 7m in length – need little introduction.

More than just a high-octane pursuit, this trip teaches visitors about the animals'

behaviour and conservation concerns.

Great whites face a number of threats including trophy hunting, sport fishing, trawl netting, long-lining and – perhaps most pertinently – the demand for their fins in Asia for shark fin soup. Man is now responsible for the slaughter of more than 100 million sharks every year. These pressures have reduced great white numbers to fewer than 3,500 globally.

During the day you will spend time getting to know the great white, dispelling some myths and understanding their importance to our oceans. You may even see them preying on seals and breaching. Towed seal decoys often cause the sharks to propel themselves out of the water with spectacular speed and power. However, the real fun is had in the cage, where the sharks congregate just metres away, oblivious to the presence of onlookers. Believe it or not, we make nasty snacks. You will leave with a belly full of respect for one of the ocean's most finely honed predators. »

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Next, turn your attention from predators to prey, with an entertaining seal dive. Cape fur seals are Jekyll and Hyde characters. As the timid and cumbersome animals flop into the water, they morph into aquatic acrobats. Anyone who's shared the marine realm with seals will attest to swirling, somersaulting and curious animals, who will dish out a cheeky nip of a fin.

'Bobbing up and down with seals in great-white-shark-infested waters?' you may say. 'Are you mad?!' While this is an understandable reaction, fear not – the Cape's kelp forests and shallow waters aren't suitable hunting grounds for the toothy predators.

There are two major seal colonies to explore. Firstly, Duiker Island, which lies a short boat ride from Hout Bay Harbour, is home to approximately 3,000 barking seals. The noise – and smell – is something to behold. You'll also see a host of sea birds, including bank cormorants, on this bustling little island.

On the other side of the Cape Peninsular is Partridge Point. This inshore rocky reef may house fewer seals, but interactions can be just as good, if not better. With seals lolling at the surface warming their flippers in the sun or playing beneath the waves, this is a fun encounter for anyone from a novice snorkeler to an experienced diver.

Tantalisingly close to Partridge Point lies a little-known gem of a dive site, Atlantis Reef. Discovered by Steve Benjamin of Animal Ocean in 2011, this offshore reef features systems of swim-throughs and overhangs, along with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore.

The reef is characterised by two giant rock formations called the Pinnacles of Hercules. Terminating just 4m below the surface of the water, the duo descend vertically to 23m.

On your way to the seabed, scan the pillars' colourful walls for plum and strawberry anemones, as well as lacy false corals. And when you reach the bottom, don't forget to look up - on a clear day you can almost see to the top.

This section of reef has been offered protection for many years, so marine life flourishes. Forage among the sea fans and you'll spot an excellent selection of invertebrates, including sea cucumbers and the fascinating nudibranch. These brightly coloured and toxic sea slugs are hermaphrodites, meaning they can mate with any other adult that passes by.

The macro life, along with giant schools of blacktails and hottentots, make Atlantis Reef an underwater photographer's dream.

But back to Cape Town's major attractions – sharks.

Contrary to popular belief, most shark species are skittish and will go out of their way



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to avoid strange bubble-breathing interlopers. Yet broadnose sevengill sharks, aka cow sharks, are perhaps the oceans' friendliest fish. And best of all, these slow moving and curious animals congregate en masse, just a stone's throw from shore, in invitingly shallow waters.

The dive site lies close to Miller's Point, 4km south of Simon's Town in False Bay. It can be reached either by a quick boat ride, or by wading in from the rocky shore. Shivers of up to 20 sharks await. Cold water? What cold water?

The majority of shark species began with seven sets of gills, but over time have evolved and dropped a couple. For some reason, cow sharks still boast all seven. In fact, they have very few modern adaptations, making them one of the most prehistoric animals around.

Shark scaredy-cats fear not - while the largest specimens grow to more than 3.5m, cow sharks pose little or no threat to humans. In fact, look closely as these animals glide past - you may even notice a sly grin.

Get lucky and you can also spot gully sharks and giant rays in the eerie kelp forests. If the chilly water doesn't take your breath away, this extraordinary dive site will.

If you have a full day to spare and would like to see sharks in the open ocean, then consider

a pelagics dive. During this trip you'll have the opportunity to see species such as blue and mako sharks, yellowfin tuna, marlin and yellowtail.

An early meeting at Simon's Town jetty is followed by a couple of hours' boat ride past Cape Point. Unless you want to assist in the chumming, it may be worth investing in some seasickness tablets - this is a long day out at sea and conditions can get choppy. On the plus side, the water here is warmer and bluer, offering better viewing opportunities. You must keep your eyes peeled en route for sperm and killer whales, along with six species of albatross.

When the first sharks arrive after a period of chumming, guests enter the water with snorkels or scuba gear. Makos are the world's fastest shark. Shark Explorers owner Morne describes them as 'great whites on heat'. As a result of bycatch, they are also among the most heavily fished.

With their magnificent cobalt blue colouring, streamlined shape and large eyes, blue sharks are no slouches either. Being surrounded by these electric animals as they dart above, beneath and around you is a truly exhilarating experience. ●

Plan your trip

GREAT WHITE ENCOUNTERS

Contact: info@sharkexplorers.com
+27 (0) 82 564 1904

Further details: Trips run from March to September, but the best time of year to see the sharks is April to August.

Difficulty rating: 4/10

SEALS AT DUIKER ISLAND

Contact: info@animalocean.co.za
+27 (0) 794 885 053

Difficulty rating: 3/10

MORE SEALS: PARTRIDGE POINT

Contact: info@piscsdivers.co.za
+27 (0) 21 782 7205
Difficulty rating: 3/10

ATLANTIS REEF

Contact: info@animalocean.co.za
+27 (0) 794 885 053

Difficulty rating: 7/10

COW SHARKS

Contact: info@piscsdivers.com.za
+27 (0) 21 782 7205

Difficulty rating: 5/10

PELAGIC PREDATORS

Contact: info@sharkexplorers.co.za +27 (0) 82 564 1904

Further details: Trips run from October to July.
Difficulty rating: 7/10 ●

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