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QUESTIONS
FOR . . .

Jeremy Cliff, research head at the KwaZulu Natal Sharks Board, on the threat to these predators

FM: How many shark species exist?
Cliff: About 440.

FM: How many great whites are there around SA?
Cliff: In 1996 there were about 1 200.

FM: How many die annually?
Cliff: For several years the figure of 100m has been used as an estimate of annual shark mortalities. It has been estimated that the fins of 40m-80m sharks pass through the Far East shark fin trade.

FM: Main causes of death?
Cliff: A primary cause is predation by other large marine predators. Fishing is the other major cause of death. Some fisheries deliberately target sharks for their meat, fins, skin, livers and teeth.

FM: How common are shark attacks and how many people die?
Cliff: According to the International Shark Attack File (ISAF) there are 50-80 attacks each year. The ISAF gives a global annual average of four fatal shark attacks. In SA, on average one attack in every six is fatal.

FM: Why do sharks attack?
Cliff: Many attacks are due to hunger, with the shark mistaking a human for natural prey.

FM: What is your board's role?
Cliff: It was formed in 1964, following a spate of shark attacks which crippled the economy of coastal holiday resorts. It provides protection against shark attacks, keeps records of shark attacks and undertakes research on captured sharks.

David Furlonger

coast at Aliwal Shoal, which claims one of the highest concentrations of sharks in the world, it costs about R1 250 to share the water with Zambezi, tiger, whitetip, hammerhead and other species.

You may also come face to face with an occasional great white. But if you really want to meet one of the most feared creatures on the planet, your best bet is the Western Cape.

But does the great white deserve its fearsome reputation? It is arguably the most efficient predator alive but its occasional attacks on humans have also seen it dubbed "man-eater". Lurid stories and headlines — not to mention Hollywood movies in which sharks make a gory meal of swimmers — have made the creature the stuff of bloody myth.

"If you use the words 'killer shark' in any article you write, I will come and find you," says Wilfred Chivell. I think he's joking but I can't be sure. The CEO of the Dyer Island Conservation Trust and of a company offering cage-diving encounters with great whites, says journalists are too quick to write dramatic stories about these predators, without thinking of the consequences.

Tens of thousands are slaughtered each year — some, like other sharks, to meet Far Eastern demand for shark-fin soup (the fins are cut off and the rest of the shark dumped back into the sea to die) but many more because of the undeserved fear they inspire.

Chivell's company, Marine Dynamics, is one of a handful of Western Cape boat operators licensed by the department of water & environmental affairs to offer cage-diving. Most, like his, are in Gansbaai, east of Hermanus. The area is home to a particularly high concentration of great whites. Marine Dynamics carries about 9 000 visitors into the bay each year (out of an estimated 50 000 total) and he says he has a 95% success rate in sighting sharks.

Cage-diving requires no previous diving experience. A metal cage hangs from the side of the boat, the top just above the surface. The crew provide visitors with thick dive-suits, boots and masks. Six or seven people at a time clamber down into the cage, then stand on a bar with their heads out of the water. When a spotter on deck shouts that a shark is approaching, and from which direction, they hold their breath and

drop down to watch.

When I made the trip last month, the viewing rate was phenomenal. We barely had time to draw in breath after watching one great white, before the call came that another was on the way.

It doesn't matter how many times you have dived with sharks, or how: to come face-to-face in their territory is barely describable. To do it with great whites is awe-inspiring. Cage-diving boats use fish-heads and oil to attract sharks to the vicinity, then lures to bring them close to the boat. We had a succession of massive sharks thrashing into view within centimetres of our faces. It was extraordinary.

According to Chivell, great whites are present in Gansbaai year-round. There may be 50-60 at any time. Sometimes they are out in the bay, at other times close to the beach — which is when they come into direct contact with humans.

The Dyer Island Conservation Trust, founded by Chivell in 2006, exists to study and protect five creatures that call the area home: the great white, southern right whales, the endangered African penguin, Cape fur seals and dolphins. It also educates local schools and businesses.

For sharks, the trust — which recently gained Volkswagen SA as a major sponsor — supports research into their movements and habits. It employs marine biologists to study the species. One of the



Well protected Cage divers wait for great whites

current investigations, by a UK specialist, is into what drives great whites to move from deep ocean to shallows. "If we want to live with these animals and be responsible, we must know why they come closer to shore," Chivell says.

Most Gansbaai operators charge about R1 350 for the cage-diving experience. Not surprisingly, Chivell says 80% of his customers are foreign. Age is no limit. His oldest visitor was 83. If the weather is fine and the sea calm, parents can take their children with them into the cage. A Spanish couple were recently accompanied by their three-year-old.

Most great whites around Gansbaai are about 4 m. "The biggest I've seen was about 6 m," says Chivell. "At that size, beneath the surface it looks like a submarine."

He got a closer-than-expected view of one shark. "Two years ago we had just anchored offshore when a 2.6 m great white jumped out of the water and landed on the bow. It wasn't injured and we got it back in the water."

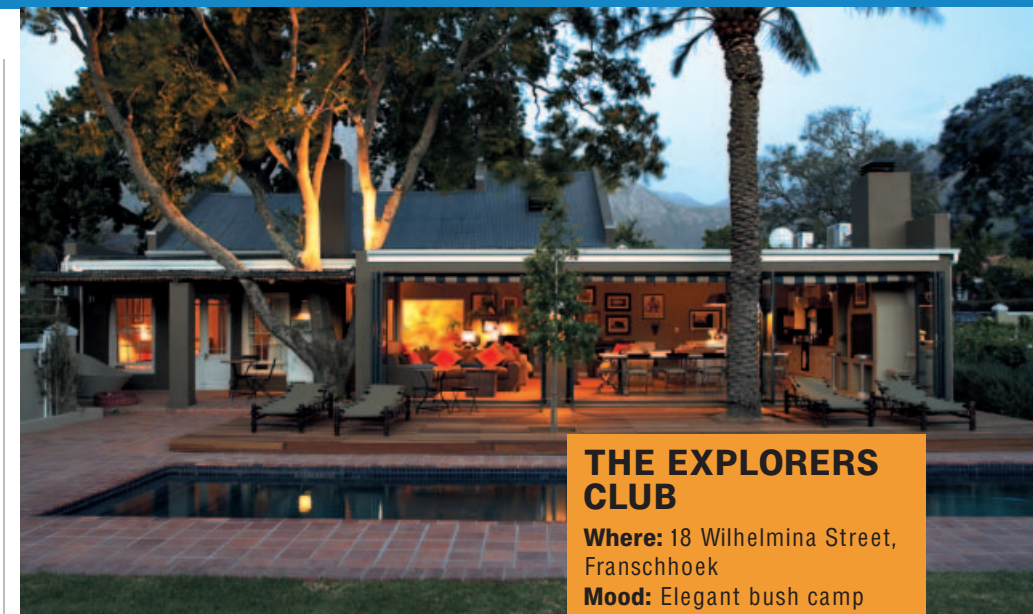
Close encounters are commonplace at Aliwal, says Bryan Vivier, owner of the Umkomaas Lodge dive centre. "We call this area the shark capital of the world," he says. Visitors have reported seeing up to 100 sharks on a single dive.

About 70% of Aliwal shark divers are foreign visitors. Though Vivier says there have been no incidents of unduly aggressive behaviour by sharks, dive schools avoid going out when underwater visibility is poor. "You don't want to surprise a Zambezi or tiger by coming up on it unawares."

Sharks encountering divers will occasionally show their displeasure by snapping their tails to make a loud "crack!" Vivier says: "Some divers interpret this as a sign of aggression but it's simply the shark showing he doesn't like to be surprised."

Dive operators say education is an important part of what they do. Gareth Austin, training manager at Sodwana-based Coral Divers, says: "Our dive instructors are trained to create awareness of sharks and of their importance."

The most common shark around Sodwana is the raggie but Zambezi and tiger also occur. "Visitors see that sharks are not mindless killers," says Austin. "They may look vicious but they can be the gentlest of creatures." ■



THE EXPLORERS CLUB
Where: 18 Wilhelmina Street, Franschhoek
Mood: Elegant bush camp

THE PLACE TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Smell of adventure



The last thing you expect to find in Frenchified Franschhoek is a guest house whose ambience is unashamedly colonial safari, even down to its reedy, straw-basket smell, which immediately evokes hot, dry places to the north.

But no moth-eaten zebra skins litter The Explorers Club. The bush camp vibe is stylishly understated, achieved by the subtle use of vintage wood, wicker and colonial relics like old German maps of the world, and striking black-and-white photos of Masai women and baobab trees, the work of inveterate adventurer Horst Klemm, who was gored through the buttocks by a rhino while photographing.

Exploration is the stock in trade of the owners of this guest house. Jo Sinfield is a roving romantic who has sailed with Irrawaddy dolphins in Myanmar, and travels with a parrot. His business partner is Tom Priday who lives in London with his family but has always had an interest in Africa. He and Sinfield do offbeat things like exploring the Croatian coast in ancient ketches.

So it was a natural move to create distinctive, self-catering venues for adventurers who are also energised by exploring. They have four. One in Prince Albert in the Karoo and three in Franschhoek, in the heart of this tourist magnet just behind Le Quartier Français. Next door to The Explorers Club is

The Library, which has a spacious upstairs living area, where explorers give lectures on their escapades. Around the corner is The Map Room, with memorable mountain views.

The Explorers Club is the flagship. Impeccably appointed, with coir matting throughout, it's a relaxed and comfortable place that sleeps up to 10 and is ideal for families or friends.

In a large, open-plan area under a white slatted wood ceiling, you can cook, eat, drink and lounge around on puffy sofas in selected corners. A central island doubles as a bar counter. Folding doors run the length of the room and open the whole area on to the deck and long heated pool, with the inside wall braai becoming the outside wall braai.

Amenities include aircon, fans, classic DVD library and a state-of-the-art kitchen. At R2 900-R4 900/night, depending on the season, it's reasonable for this high-rent Gallic hoek of the woods.

Sinfield is a companionable guide to buzzy Franschhoek, judging by comments in the visitors' book. Graham Warsop, founder of The Jupiter Drawing Room advertising agency and a frequent guest, writes glowingly: "Jo goes beyond the call of duty to welcome you."

Hilary Prendini Toffoli

www.explorersclub.co.za. Tel 072-464-1240