

A journey to the shark-infested  
waters of the Farallon Islands.  
By Amy Sorlie. Illustration by ryan graber.



Farallon Islands

## One cannot imagine how massive the Golden Gate Bridge is ... until you're beneath it. The sun is just rising on this crisp morning, and I, along with nine other adventurous souls, am heading out into open water in search of the most feared predator in the ocean. Our destination? The infamous Farallon Islands.

As a child, I had a rabid fascination with sharks, especially great whites. I flooded my tiny mind with all kinds of knowledge about this perfect killing machine — through books, movies, whatever I could get my hands on. Finding information on the unmistakable torpedo-shaped creature that traverses the water with such elegance and power was my favorite pastime. And to this day, the hold that this animal has over me is impenetrable. Even after millions of years at the top of the food chain, the great white, with its grinning set of large triangular serrated teeth, still embodies a certain mystery that not even the most renowned scientists can pinpoint. Though most of my friends deem me crazy, these reasons alone present a curiosity that I can no longer deny. I have to see one up close.

**THE FARALLONES ARE LOCATED** just 27 miles off the coast of San Francisco, and most shark-dive charters depart from Fisherman's Wharf, a popular waterfront neighborhood bustling with street entertainers, hotels, shops, and restaurants. There are several charter options available, but one of the most popular is through Incredible Adventures, a company that offers shark excursions in various spots around the world. As we board the *New Eldorado III*, the company's new luxury vessel, the crew welcomes us with smiles and a comforting dose of practical advice: "If

you feel sick, just let it happen," says Gwen, our den mother and cook. "Don't fight it, just bulldoze people out of your way and get to the side of the boat. If you try to make it to the bathroom, you'll be a goner."

Even though I've taken the suggested Dramamine, suddenly the six a.m. latte in my hand isn't looking like the best idea. As we depart, a perfect view of Alcatraz looms in the distance. Coupled with the early-morning fog and mist, it provides a certain prelude to where we are heading. The Devil's Teeth, as it's known, is a 211-acre cluster of rocky, jagged islands that not only are a sanctuary for some of the most endangered marine wildlife but, from September to November, also serve as a refuge for the biggest white sharks in the world. It takes a true adventure seeker to embark on this trip, long known as the Mount Everest of shark dives. As I observe the second person get sick, I quickly begin to understand why. Even on a much newer and faster boat, the ride out to the Farallones is an hour and a half

of choppy swells, gusty winds, and roller-coaster-like waves. A little over an hour into the trip, I find myself negotiating with my stomach. *Be good. Please be good, I think. Just a little longer.*

Approaching the Farallon Islands makes the boat ride worth it. From a distance, they look like another planet, a spooky one. Amongst low-hanging fog, the picturesque jagged rocks have a ghostly presence. The only signs of immediate life are the groups of seals that frolic in the surf. The northern elephant seal is the reason the sharks congregate in this area. On average, an adult elephant seal can weigh 2,000 pounds or more, which means it provides quite a feast for a Farallon white shark, which typically ranges anywhere from 16 to 20 feet in length — though it can grow larger than that. The biggest shark in the world was spotted here, a female 23-footer.

"We don't chum or bait," says Greg Barron, West Coast director of operations for Incredible Adventures. "When we see an attack, it's simply 500 million years of evolution doing its thing. My job is to help change perception. White sharks are disappearing at an alarming rate. Seeing them up close is awe-inspiring. They embody power and grace."

The vessel is staffed with a crew of first-rate dive instructors and naturalists to prep us for the dive and educate everyone on the types of marine life we may encounter. Our little group for the day includes a family from Australia that's celebrating the father's and a son's birthday, a couple from Plymouth, England, and a pair of newlyweds from San Diego.

"We talked about doing this on our first date," Aline Thoeny explains. "Both of us have always wanted to experience this."

As the boat reaches its anchor point, those of us planning to dive begin to prepare for our descent into the chilly 50-degree water. The tour also offers a topside experience for those who would rather view safely from the boat, and as I squeeze into my wet suit and watch the instructors deploy the cage into the water, I find myself grappling with a brief moment of topside envy as all sorts of questions flood my mind. *What if I can't breathe? What if my mask fills with water and causes me to stop breathing? What if I stop breathing and don't realize it?* (Yes, most of the questions involve breathing — or a lack thereof.) Luckily, these doubts are instantly erased from my mind after the first couple comes up exhilarated from their 20 minutes in the cage. No shark sightings, but the water isn't as cold as anticipated, and with the sun breaking through, visibility is getting better.

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS about this adventure is that it can be enjoyed by expert and novice divers alike. Directly off the boat, an 8-foot-deep cage is rigged to a platform, where the instructors stand to help divers in and out of the cage — which is incredibly helpful, considering you're wearing a 35-pound weight belt that drags

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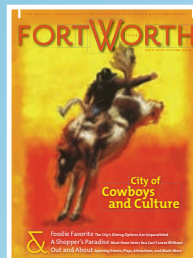
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you to the bottom of the cage once you're in the water. The regulators are attached to air tanks on the boat, so while being scuba certified is encouraged, it isn't necessary. As I prepare to enter the cage, I question whether or not I have truly prepared myself to see a great white shark in the wild. Mask secure to my face, wet suit tight as can be, I put the regulator in and take a few deep breaths.

"You ready?" the dive instructor asks.  
 "Sure, whatever you say."

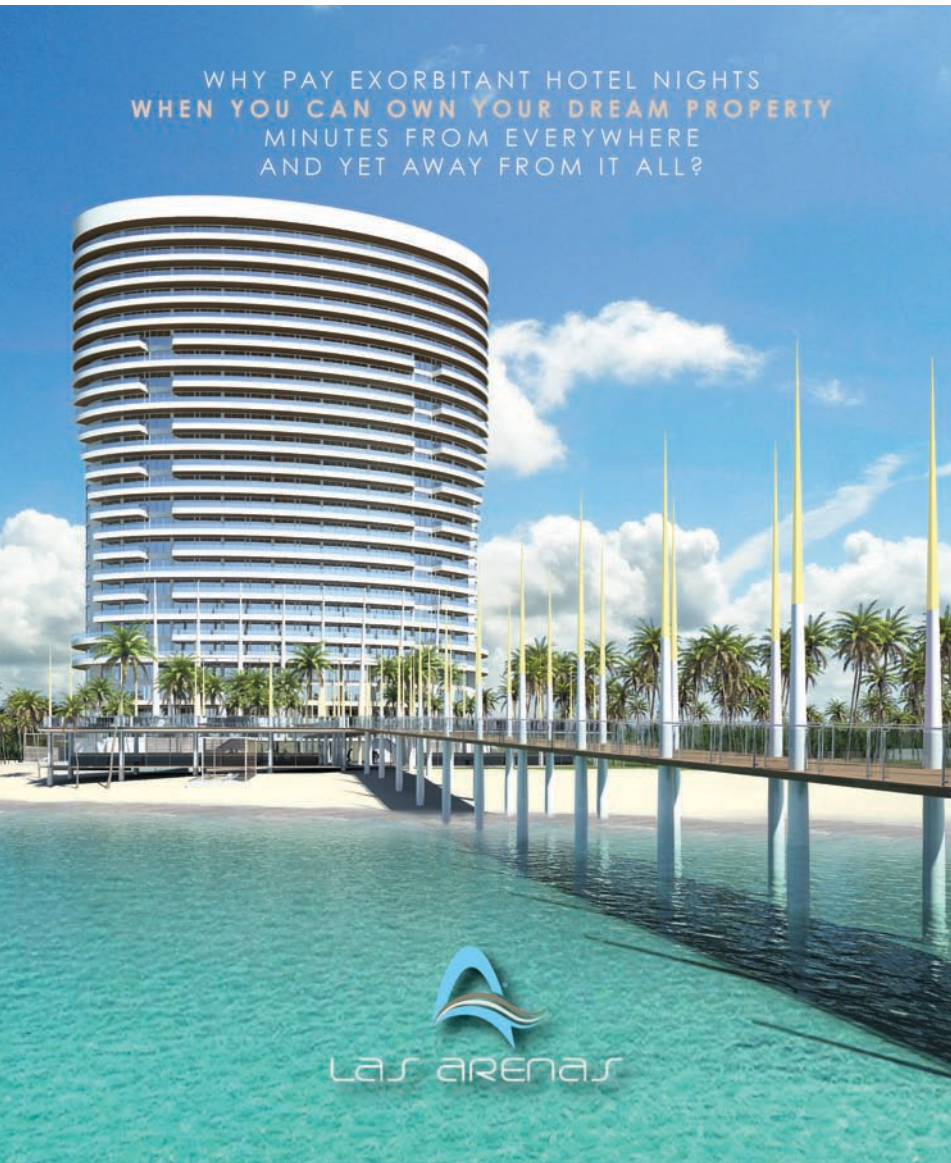
And with that, I jump into the cage. As the weight belt drags me to the bottom, the modern-day world melts away and nature takes over. Down here, things are different. I'm merely a silent observer, intruding into a world that is not my own. The only sounds are my labored breathing and my heartbeat.

As I look through the bars at the open ocean in front of me, I feel like Hooper from *Jaws*. I just know once I get adjusted, I'm going to look in front of me and see the mother of all sharks intent on ruining my day. Thankfully, this is not the case. More often than not, I scare myself with my own bubbles. Michelle, my cage partner, keeps having to surface due to problems with her weight belt, so for the most part, I feel very alone. I spot a few jellyfish hanging under the boat like shadows. One of the crew members mentioned they might be attracted to the gentle hum of the engine. To my left, I can see the seal-shaped decoy floating behind the boat. White sharks race up from the depths to attack their prey, so if one should decide to hit the decoy, I will have the perfect view. Michelle gives me a thumbs-up, as her gear is finally cooperating. My hands begin to ache a bit from the death grip I have on the bars. The current knocks the cage around, and as we bang into the platform, both Michelle and I are startled by the noise, almost positive the snout of a great white has just rammed into us. Again, this is not the case. Instead, the sharks seem to be playing with us. We know they are everywhere, but as pair after pair of divers embarks down into the cage, a sighting is becoming less and less likely.

As the day wears on, we busy ourselves with conversation, food, and the view surrounding us. A whale is spotted in the distance, and the sky is awash with seabirds flying overhead, including endangered populations of gulls, puffins, and ashy storm petrels. Pod after pod of seals jumps in the waves and toys with us, and we can't help but find ourselves rooting for their demise: Come on, sharks, just grab one! Something! Anything! On my second descent into the cage, I am almost willing it to happen, which means, sadly, that it doesn't.

As we pull up the cage and head for shore, I can't help but be a bit disappointed. However, when dealing with nature, sometimes it just isn't in the cards. So while we didn't have an encounter with the most feared creature in the ocean, we did conquer the Farallones, a place of mystery and intrigue not for the faint of heart. And there's always next time, because I'll definitely be back for round two — stay tuned. **AW**

**AMY SORLIE** is a Los Angeles-based screenwriter and journalist and as such, swims with the sharks on a daily basis. When she's let out of the cage, her writing can be seen in *Men's Journal*, *Los Angeles Magazine*, and *Vanity Fair*.



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