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Silent Thrill Big Teeth



*His story is a robust one, dragging
with it a sack-full of serious
treasure finds and tales of love...*



You've got to love sea-sickness. It provides a never-ending current of stories...like 'the time' a good number of years back in Stanford, that cute, recently vaguely yuppified southern Cape village. My mission was to see the southern right whales off Gansbaai with Wilfred Chivell, a local tour operator. But late one afternoon in a restaurant called Mariana's – well-known by now, with the requisite slow-food and organic credentials - I was introduced to the Excelsior label's dry red.

After Mariana and her husband had locked the doors, somewhere between the chickpeas, crusty bread and the olives, they opened a few whites. In the early hours of the next morning I drove back - in true South African fashion, a little inebriated, I confess - to my accommodation (the brilliantly conceptualized Grootbos Nature Reserve). Walker Bay was to the right and fynbos to the left.

I didn't pay any thought to of my excursion the next morning to see the whales. Any sense of responsibility had dribbled away with the wine.

After fifteen minutes on Wilfrid Chivell's boat at first light, after just the right amount of deep swell rocking, I wanted to puke. It felt like I'd eaten a salamander and that it desperately wanted out, with my humiliation and embarrassment the only thing keeping it down. For a while at least.

With everything appearing green and overly salty, I had no idea then that Chivell would become one of the most respected operators on the southern Cape coast. So I was relieved that he made no awkward remarks about that first encounter when next we met.

It was the better part of a decade later, this last October. The reason I returned with my Alison was because of Chivell's reputation, and - by association - that of his shark cage diving operation, Marine Dynamics.

Before introducing tourists to the sharks and whales Wilfred was diving the wrecks of the region for years, which resulted in his deep knowledge of the water and, eventually, his career in tourism.

His story is a robust one, dragging with it a sack-full of serious treasure finds and tales of love and companies that both crested waves and plumbed the depths. Wilfred Chivell has done the hard yards, which makes him the interesting person he is.

He also recognises his limitations, and surrounds himself with those who know more than him, specialists in their own fields. Which explains how Ali and I met his English import, Alison Towner, a BSc biologist researcher clearly in love with the Great White.

With Dyer Island (six nautical miles from the mainland) regarded as possibly the best place in the world to see the creature, Towner would struggle to find a better site to study the fish, and she accompanies the cage-dives to the various sites.

But let's not duck the anticipation issue. The thought of being underwater with a Great White Shark - notice the capitals, even lions don't get such treatment - has been the stuff of bad dreams since *Jaws*, that seventies big screen classic. And it still keeps people out of the water. So it's a big deal.

Which sort of qualifies my Alison's initial reaction to my intention of going cage-diving a few months' previously.



Driving into the Karoo at the time, she said that as the father of Fynn - our baby of six months at the time - it would be plain selfish of me to dive with what is commonly referred to in wildlife terms as an *apex predator*.

For Pete's sake, I thought to myself (before uttering), I'd be in a bloody cage! The remainder of the drive took place in silence.

Nevertheless, time worked its wonders and Ali relented - with the proviso that only if she could do it too! So later that summer found us in Kleinbaai with Wilfred, staying at The Great White House, his comfortable thatched and whitewashed lodge.

When I think back to it, bobbing up and down in that cage, watching Great Whites cruising back and forth with menacing intent was a serious privilege. Much like Ali felt when seeing one of

them acrobatically plucking a seal from the surface. 'Look', she said. 'Where?', I replied. There was not a hint of the shark, seal or its blood.

As for that earlier bit about reputation, Marine Dynamics was earlier this year Fair Trade in Tourism (FTTSA) accredited. Yes, Wilfred has to pay for the privilege, bit FTTSA takes people down a good road, and speaks volumes for his ethics, and about where his heart lies.

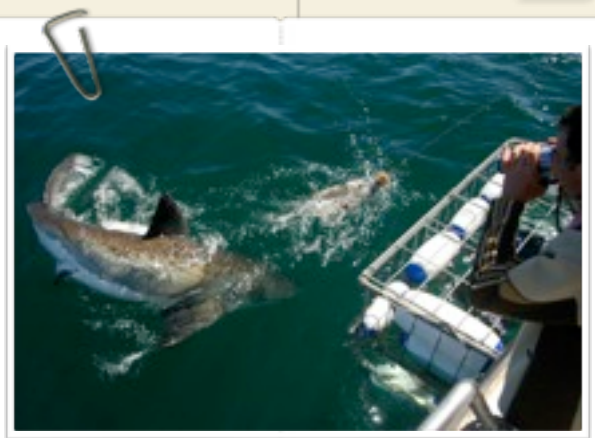
Thinking back to our first meeting (which I'm sure Wilfred doesn't remember), I can't recall much about the whale-spotting. I remember the whale was close, and that from my position on the floor of the boat - sod the camera, I was thinking - I didn't really care.

This time I took it all in. I saw that shark with the frightening, trademark, dislocating set of teeth. It couldn't have been more than two metres from my outstretched hand (attached to someone else's camera).

It's most likely the biggest shark I'll ever see. The question is whether I have the *cojones* to do it without the cage. And whether Alison lets me.



For the first time, due to sea-sickness, salt-water and camera issues, not all the pictures here are ours. But we did get Wilfred and the seagull to pose for us.



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