

We admit it: We're impressed by size, from state-fair-winning watermelons and Mark Zuckerberg's bank account to the formidable dimensions of the Grand Canyon and Mount Everest. But nothing on terra firma gets our pulse racing as fast as a big animal coming out of the blue depths, sometimes at terrifying speeds. Skip this article if you suffer from megalophobia (fear of large things), but if you're a fan of the truly colossal, you'll love this gallery of the most electrifying big-animal encounters in the ocean, from the Arctic to the South Pacific.

BY TERRY WARD



01
« **Great White Sharks**

ISLA GUADALUPE, MEXICO

South Africa and Australia are among a handful of places in the world where you can reliably get in the water for a cage match with great white sharks. When it comes to water clarity and insane topside views, however, there's no place like Isla Guadalupe. Save for a few scientists, this volcanic island about 150 miles off Baja's west coast is as unpopulated as it is exotic. Clouds cascade waterfall-style down rust-red cliffs into an ocean the color of mouthwash, where the great whites lurk. Migratory animals, the sharks traverse these waters from August through November to feed on elephant seals and other pinnipeds. And this is when divers descend on liveboards (the only way to dive here) to observe the animals up close from the relative comfort of aluminum cages. You'll be breathing hookah air from the surface, so if you forget to breathe for a bit — and you might — no worries.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



CONDITIONS 70°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 125 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW [SOLMAR V](http://SOLMAR.V), SOLMARV.COM

GO

TRAVEL ROUNDUP
BIG

LEAVE YOUR MACRO LENS ON LAND FOR THESE WIDE-ANGLE ANIMAL WONDERS

02 Nerpa » Seals

LAKE BAIKAL, RUSSIA

No one says getting to Siberia is easy. But Russia's remote World Heritage-listed Lake Baikal is the only place in the world where you can dive with nerpa seals. Endemic to this one particular lake, they are an earless species related to Arctic ring seals and among the only freshwater seals in the world. Nerpas can weigh up to 260 pounds, and like other seals are underwater acrobats, diving to depths of more than 1,000 feet. They spend most of the winter under the ice or in snowy lairs topside. And while ice diving is one way to see them, we advise waiting for the summer thaw to enjoy Siberia's fabulous hiking too.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

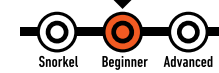


CONDITIONS 54°F WATER TEMPERATURE IN SUMMER, 130 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW BAIKAL DIVING, BAIKALDIVING.RU



a magnet for mola molas. Settle in near the cleaning stations where they tend to gather. Nothing lowers your heart rate like watching a mola mola do its cool and casual thing.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



CONDITIONS 80°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 65 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW ARENUI, THEARENUI.COM

03 Mola Molas

BALI, INDONESIA

Because they spend much of their time lollygagging near the ocean's surface, soaking up the sun's heat, mola molas are often referred to as ocean sunfish. Known for their unusual body shape, they can grow up to 10 feet long and tip the scales at 5,000 pounds, making them the heaviest bony fish in the world. From July to October, the clear waters around Nusa Penida off Bali's southeast coast are

04 Caribbean Reef Sharks

NEW PROVIDENCE, BAHAMAS

No place has sharks like the Bahamas. And for all the bulls, tigers and hammers that await in this enormous archipelago, accessible dives with graceful Caribbean reef sharks off Nassau deliver some of the headiest thrills. "Divers realize that these Caribbean reef

sharks on our dives are not indiscriminate man-eaters but majestic, powerful animals to be respected," says Michelle Cove, of trips with Stuart Cove's Dive Bahamas. Most are in the 6-foot range, but you might spot a few up to 8 feet long as you kneel on the sandy bottom in the feeding arena and take in the frenzy.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



CONDITIONS 80°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW STUART COVE'S DIVE BAHAMAS, STUARTCOVE.COM

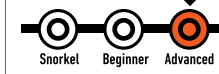
05 Humboldt Squid

SEA OF CORTEZ, MEXICO

In-water encounters with aggressive Humboldt and giant squids are very rare and only for very serious (or crazy) adventurers. But

just seeing the creature jiggled up on deck during liveaboard trips in the Sea of Cortez is a thrill. "Our clients say it's the most alien thing they've witnessed — like seeing a creature from outer space," says Rocio del Mar owner Dora Sandoval. At night, dive guides jig up the squid — some specimens up to 6 feet long — using lights to attract them in the deep waters where sperm whales, which are the squids' main predator, are seen during the day. "They get pretty aggressive and excited," says Sandoval of the squid, which are voracious eaters and often engage in cannibalization as they're being reeled in.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



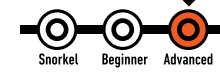
CONDITIONS 65°F-85°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 60 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW ROCIO DEL MAR, ROCIODELMARLIVEABOARD.COM

06 Dolphins »

SOUTH AFRICA

Catching the legendary Sardine Run when it's doing its thing is like witnessing an underwater Serengeti. From May through July off South Africa's east coast, billions of north-bound sardines are fodder for an all-out frenzy that lures whales, sharks, diving gannets and dolphins. Common and bottlenose dolphins are the primary herders, working in teams to corral the sardines. With an estimated 18,000 dolphins following the Sardine Run, this is one of the most reliable places in the world to see them.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



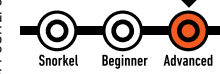
CONDITIONS 62°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 20 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY, STRONG CURRENTS POSSIBLE
GO NOW BLUE OCEAN DIVE RESORT, BLUEOCEANDIVE.CO.ZA

07 Tiger Sharks

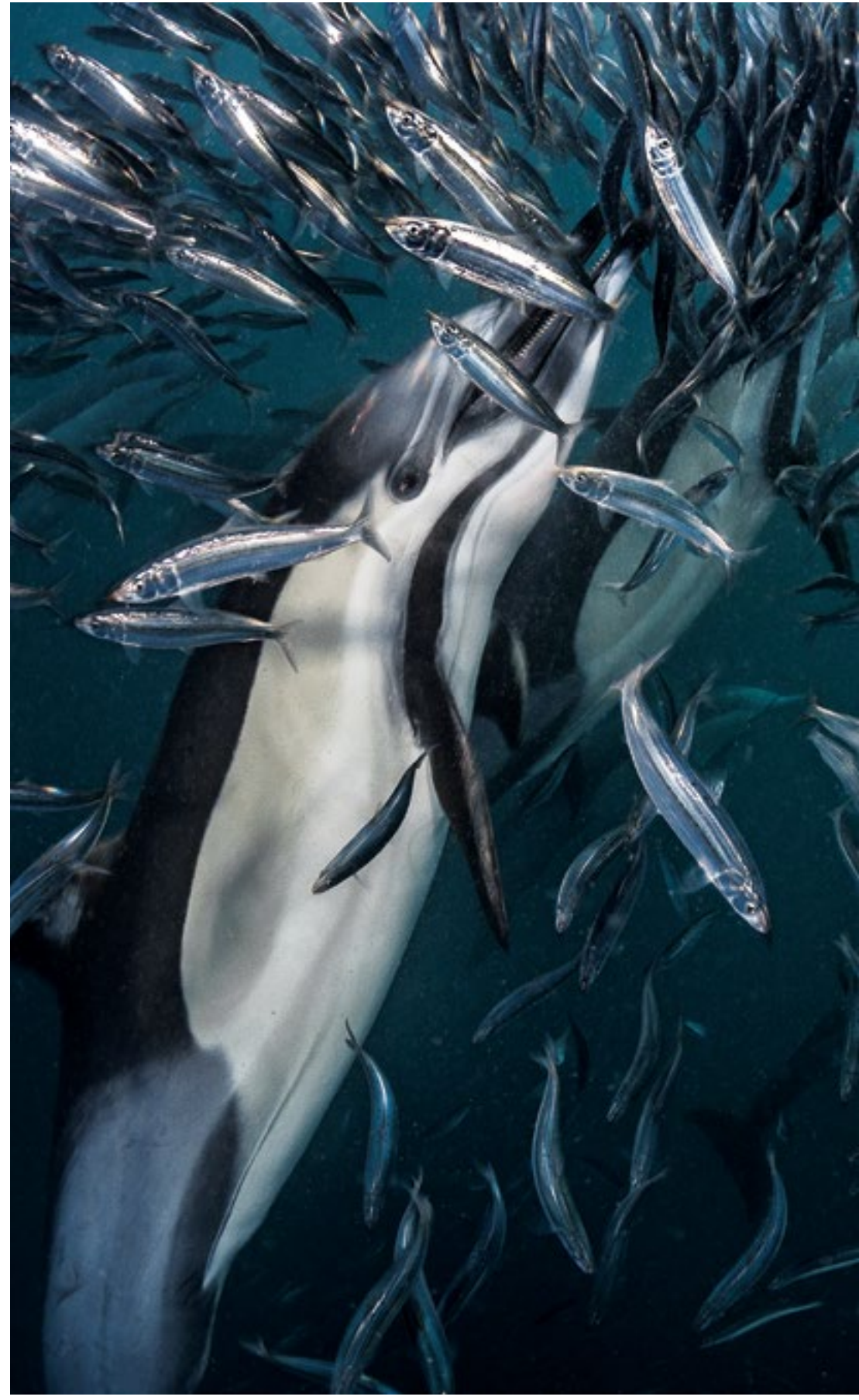
BEQA LAGOON, FIJI

"Set your lens and strobes wide, and don't turn into a dribbling pile of sissy," says underwater photographer Jeffrey Millisen of photographing tiger sharks. At Tiger Shark Cathedral, off Beqa, Fiji, the striped beauties are lured by a feeding box near a wall that drops to 70 feet. As many as seven tigers show up on a single frenetic dive.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL



(MUST HAVE AT LEAST 30 LOGGED DIVES)
CONDITIONS 79°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 90 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW BEQA LAGOON RESORT, BEQALAGOONRESORT.COM



GREG LECOEUR; OPPOSITE: GERALD NOWAK

TRAVEL ROUNDUP

08 Atlantic Sailfish

ISLA MUJERES, MEXICO

Every year from January to March, shoals of sardines attract huge numbers of sailfish for one of the Caribbean's greatest feeding frenzies. Keeping up with the fish as they use their bills, sails and color flashes to herd sardines will test even the fittest diver. But the rewards are worth it. "To be in the water with the ocean's fastest fish is as exciting as it gets," says Swedish underwater photographer Magnus Lundgren. "They are the Ferraris of the sea. You realize how controlled and deliberate their hunt for the sardines is."

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Snorkel Beginner Advanced

CONDITIONS 79°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 65-100 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW PRO DIVE MEXICO, PRODIVEMEX.COM



11 Manta Rays

KONA, HAWAII

Underwater lights placed in the sand near Garden Eel Cove set the stage for one of the world's greatest night dives. Swarming plankton arrive first, and they are followed by huge manta rays that immediately start loop-the-loop feeding somersaults. "This is the only dive where the animals are performers and the divers are both the audience and the stage lighting," says Byron Kay of Kona Honu Divers. "The mantas are like graceful alien ships dancing in an underwater rave."

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Snorkel Beginner Advanced

CONDITIONS 78°F WATER TEMPERATURE, NIGHT DIVE
GO NOW KONA HONU DIVERS, KONAHONUDIVERS.COM

09 Scalloped Hammerheads

GALAPAGOS, ECUADOR

Of the endless Darwinian reasons to visit the Galapagos in the eastern Pacific Ocean, the chance to fin among schooling scalloped hammerheads is near the top of every diver's list. Though hammers can be spotted throughout the archipelago, Darwin and Wolf islands — accessible only by liveaboard — are the best spots to encounter them. June brings massive migrations, with the animals often numbering in the thousands. Wayne B. Brown, CEO of Aggressor Fleet, remembers his first time in the water with these unique sharks: "There was a virtual wall of them, from as far deep and as high as I could see," he says. "To see

them in person — what I had previously seen only on TV and in magazines — was the ultimate justification of why I started diving."

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Snorkel Beginner Advanced

CONDITIONS 79°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 90 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW GALAPAGOS AGGRESSOR III, AGGRESSOR.COM

10 Whale Sharks

TOFO, MOZAMBIQUE

There's no better surprise for visitors on a dive than whale sharks, which often disappear into the blue as quickly as they appear. It's practically a religious experience: With a tendency to eclipse the sun when they cruise overhead, the bus-size spotted beauties can stop divers in their tracks and leave them

open-mouthed with amazement. To all but guarantee encounters with the largest fish in the sea, head to Africa's Tofo Beach, a tiny travelers' and scuba diving mecca roughly 250 miles north of Mozambique's bustling capital, Maputo. From October to March, a nonstop supply train of plankton from the Indian Ocean attracts the filter-feeding sharks, which sometimes roll up to 50 animals deep. But encountering whale sharks are a quality over quantity experience — seeing just one is enough to make your day. Operators offer snorkel-only encounters.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Snorkel Beginner Advanced

CONDITIONS 80°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW TOFO SCUBA, TOFOSCUBA.COM

GREG LECOEUR; OPPOSITE: PETER G. ALLINSON, M.D.

12 Humpback Whales

TONGA

“Getting to Vava’u is a bit of an ordeal,” underwater photographer Brandon Cole says of the remote Tongan island group, “but the humpbacks are so worth it.” From late June to November, the whales make this tropical stop on their way north from Antarctic feeding grounds. Most of the whales are mellow mothers with young calves. But you might find yourself in the water with feistier males too. “For hot drops into the chaos of a testosterone-charged ‘heat run’ — with multiple males chasing a female — I switch my camera [from manual metering] to shutter-priority metering,” says Cole.

TRAVEL ROUNDUP

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

Snorkel Beginner Advanced

CONDITIONS 77°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW TONGAN EXPEDITIONS, TONGANEXPEDITIONS.COM

13 Fur Seals

NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

Clearer waters make the antipodal winter months (May to October) prime time to dive or snorkel with thriving colonies of Australian fur seals that frequent the waters around Jervis Bay, south of Sydney in southeastern Australia. “They’re playful and curious and come right up to your face, then veer off and do somersaults,” says Bill Mountford, owner of Dive Jervis Bay. And the fur seals’ habitats here — including a cave on the side of a cliff —



VANESSA MIGNON

are spectacularly scenic, with beautiful sponge gardens and soft corals, and frequent appearances by gray nurse sharks too.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 63°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 30-50 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW DIVE JERVIS BAY, DIVEJERVISBAY.COM

14 Sperm Whales SRI LANKA

A mask, flippers and snorkel are all you're permitted to use when encountering sperm whales off Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. One of Earth's deepest-diving animals, capable of plunging more than a mile to feed on giant squid, local operators find them when they surface to breathe.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 80°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 30-80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW SRI LANKA AGGRESSOR, AGGRESSOR.COM

15 Oceanic Mantas RAJA AMPAT, INDONESIA

The West Papuan archipelago of Raja Ampat has more than 1,500 islands, cays and shoals to lure divers, and sits smack in the triangle of biodiversity. Gill-raking practices prevail in many of the world's oceans, but both reef mantas and oceanic mantas are protected in the waters around Raja Ampat, where they appear in large numbers. The largest of all rays, oceanic mantas can weigh as much as 2,900 pounds. But most of the ones you'll see in Raja are smaller, with a wingspan of around 15 feet. "They're as big as a blanket when they move over you, and with so much grace and elegance," says Seth Setiada, a Jakarta-based diver.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 84°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW S/Y INDO SIREN, SIRENFLEET.COM

16 Beluga Whales SVALBARD, NORWAY

Nothing can prepare you for an encounter with these whales that are as white as snow. Liveaboard trips in Svalbard — an archipelago in the Norwegian Arctic — cruise the coastal fjords and even enter the pack ice to look for belugas. They tend to hug the coast in numbers anywhere from five up to several hundred, says Sven Gust of Northern Explorers, who runs trips here under the mid-night sun, in June and July. Entering with snorkel gear and seeing how the animals react is standard protocol.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 37°F-42°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 20 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW NORTHERN EXPLORERS, NORTHERN-EXPLORERS.COM

17 Napoleon Wrasse PALAU

Also known as humphead and Maori wrasse — a reference to the intricate patterning around their heads that resembles tribal tattoos — Napoleon wrasse are one of the most outgoing and friendly creatures you'll encounter in the Indo-Pacific region. The largest of wrasses are among the world's biggest reef fish too; they weigh up to 400 pounds and could easily blanket your car's windshield. Napoleons have a curious streak that endears them to divers. At iconic Palau sites such as Blue Corner and Peleliu Express, divers are approached by puppylike Napoleons that seem to be soliciting a pat on the flank.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 82°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 82 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW SAM'S TOURS PALAU, SAMSTOURS.COM

18 Potato Cod GREAT BARRIER REEF, AUSTRALIA

Another enormous fish with puppy-dog tendencies is the potato cod, thought to be named for their dark, spudlike markings. But don't let the oft-mellow demeanor of this fish — often seen lying in the sand or calmly cruising — fool you. On shark-feeding dives in Australia's Coral Sea, potato cod are often seen zipping in and out of the action with immense power, scrapping for scraps. They've been known to appear out of nowhere, even popping up between a diver's legs. "On night dives at Cod Hole, they love to cruise up out

FRANCO BANFI. OPPOSITE: DAVID B. FLEETHAM/SEAPICS



of the darkness and hang right near you and scare the bejeezus out of you," says Janine Lucas of Mike Ball Dive Expeditions.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 80°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 50-70 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW MIKE BALL DIVE EXPEDITIONS, MIKEBALL.COM

19 Giant Pacific Octopus VANCOUVER ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Forget all you know about mini Caribbean octopuses. The bracing waters off Vancouver Island set the stage for an octopus encounter on an entirely different scale. The intelligent giant Pacific octopus is the largest of all octopuses, averaging 16 feet across and weighing around 110 pounds. They blend with their surroundings and live in large dens or caves, but they can be spotted in open areas too. Color changes give insight into their moods. "White indicates fright, bright red is anger, and a dull brick-red octopus is tired as well as angry," says Washington diver Mike Reynolds, who was once approached from behind by a bright-red specimen (he managed to free himself thanks to loose rocks preventing the octopus from gaining a hold).

EXPERIENCE LEVEL

CONDITIONS 57°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 35 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW GOD'S POCKET RESORT, GODSPOCKET.COM

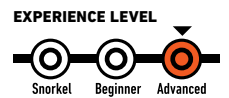
TRAVEL ROUNDUP





20 **Blue Sharks**
AZORES

Operators use pulverized sardine and mackerel to attract blue sharks in the Atlantic waters off the remote Azores. Back-roll off the Zodiac and drop down a line to wait for the show. Most of the blues are in the 6-foot range, but their attitude makes up for what they lack in size. "Showing no signs of stress, they roam the water around the boat and the bait box, and come over to the lines for a closer look at the bubbling visitors," says German photographer Daniel Brinckmann. "Don't be surprised if one gives your strobes a little toothy treatment."



CONDITIONS 71°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 60 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW NORBERTO DIVER, NORBERTODIVER.PT

21 **Narwhals**
NUNAVUT, CANADA

Often called the unicorn of the sea, the narwhal is known for a spiraling, swordlike protuberance from its head that's actually an erupted tooth rather than a horn. Entering the water in Arctic Canada with these fantastical creatures is inspiring. During May and June, you'll gear up in your drysuit atop landfast ice miles out to sea, then plunge in at the floe edge. "You can hear them loud and clear as they vocalize,"

says Jason Hillier of Arctic Kingdom. "They are like underwater acrobats, and the younger whales seem to truly enjoy checking us out."



CONDITIONS 29°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 80 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW ARCTIC KINGDOM, ARCTICKINGDOM.COM

22 **Thresher Sharks**
MALAPASCUA, PHILIPPINES

You likely won't mistake a thresher shark for anything

else. The scythelike tail that commands almost half of its torpedolike body and can alone weigh more than 700 pounds gives this animal an unmistakable look. That they use those tails S&M-style to stun or kill prey makes them all the more fascinating and intimidating. Threshers exist in all of the world's tropical oceans. But for the most reliable sightings, Malapascua — a tiny island off the northern tip of Cebu in the Philippines — is the spot. Cleaning stations at the dive site called Monad Shoal are magnets for

Sea's dive sites are a world apart. Trips on the *Red Sea Aggressor* that depart from southern Egypt are a safe way to visit the area to get up close with some of the most exciting sharks in the ocean. Oceanic whitetips are reliably seen around the pelagic-magnet pinnacles of Daedalus Reef, Brother Islands and El-phinstone from October through December. "The sharks gather in 15 to 20 feet of water under the live-aboards and make repeated passes at any divers lucky enough to share the water," says *Sport Diver EMEA* editor Mark Evans. "They can become rather frisky, but shark aficionados and underwater photographers will be in their element."



CONDITIONS 74°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 100 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW RED SEA AGGRESSOR, AGGRESSOR.COM

24 **Basking Sharks**
UNITED KINGDOM

When most people think about snorkeling, they daydream about warm, tropical waters and coral reefs that

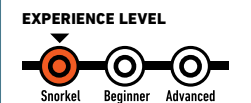
are packed with colorful fish. Heading to England to snorkel in the north Atlantic Ocean might seem counterintuitive. But it's worth beelining it to the chilly waters off Cornwall from May to July to swim alongside basking sharks, the second-largest fish in the ocean. There is perhaps no more prehistoric-looking fish than these wide-mouthed, slow-moving behemoths that can grow up to 40 feet long. The long, sunny days of summer bring plankton to the surface, which in turn lures the basking sharks. While they are spotted elsewhere along the U.K. coastline, they arrive here first. Cornwall's waters are also markedly clearer than elsewhere, and since all the action is at the surface, you won't even miss your tank. If you want to photograph one, "the trick is to spot the fin above the surface, swim into position, float on the surface, and wait," says underwater photographer Alex Mustard.



CONDITIONS 60°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 40 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW ATLANTIC DIVER, ATLANTICDIVER.CO.UK

25 **Orcas**
NORTHERN NORWAY

There are operators who will take you scuba diving with orcas in Andenes and Senja in northern Norway. But snorkel-only encounters are the best way to appreciate these dolphins as they enter Andfjord from December to early February to feast on massive schools of herring. (Bubble-blowing divers scare the herring away, and when they leave, so do the orcas.) Feeding situations are the most thrilling, with several orcas herding herring in shallow water. Float above or free-dive down for a look as they slap the fish with their tails to stun them, sending scales flying everywhere. As if orcas weren't enough of a thrill, there are usually humpbacks feeding in the area, and sometimes even fin whales too.



CONDITIONS 41°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 20 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY
GO NOW LOFOTEN OPPLLEVELSER, LOFOTEN-OPPLEVELSER.COM

one of the toothiest and tailsome shows of your life.



CONDITIONS 84°F WATER TEMPERATURE, 65 FEET AVERAGE VISIBILITY, STRONG CURRENTS POSSIBLE
GO NOW SEA EXPLORERS, SEA-EXPLORERS.COM

23 **Oceanic Whitetip Sharks**
RED SEA, EGYPT

With aquariumlike visibility and some of the most beautiful soft coral gardens in the world, the Red



FROM TOP: JORDI CHIAS; GREG LECOEUR