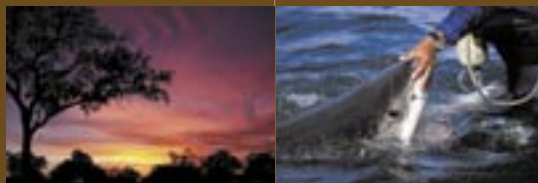


by STEPHEN FRINK

Africa

ABOVE & BELOW

Many underwater photographers never think of taking pictures above water, but there is one very special terrestrial adventure that we have found introduces the same sort of reverence for nature that drives us beneath the sea ... the African Wildlife Safari. In this case we traded our dive boat for a Land Rover, and swapped our underwater housings for long telephoto lenses. Yet, there is much the same thrill in finding a cheetah on the prowl as there is in a close encounter with a friendly pod of dolphins. The main difference is that in this environment you can change film without flooding your camera!



BOTSWANA SAFARI & SOUTH AFRICAN GREAT WHITES

GIRAFFE AT SUNSET – The best drivers of safari vehicles are collaborators in your photographic pursuits. They will gauge the light, see the photo in their mind's eye, and put you in position. This is what happened to facilitate this giraffe shot. My driver saw the setting sun, saw the giraffe silhouette, and put me in position to execute. The “decisive moment” was 30 seconds or less, but sometimes proximity is as important as performance.





MALE LION – A male lion, showing the recent scars of a dispute over a particularly comely lioness, pauses to lick his wounds.

A NOTE ON BOTSWANA SAFARIS

While countries like Tanzania and Kenya have opted for a more “mass-market” approach, Botswana is purposely targeted to small groups at upscale camps. Consequently Botswana is typically more expensive than some other places one could go on safari in Africa, but they have an amazing “bush” product in terms of wildlife, and the level of service is truly incredible. It might cost a bit more, but in my experience Botswana is the best place in Africa to go on safari.

Usually I am pretty good about keeping a daily journal on location. However, I found this whole vacation was so intense in terms of things to do and critters to photograph from morning until night that I relied on my ten-year old daughter’s journal to keep track of our daily wildlife sightings.

From Alexa’s Journal (in italics) – *The first camp we went to was Kings Pool. On the way there we saw elephant, giraffe, zebra, impala, and red lechewe. Then we went out in the afternoon and night and we saw elephant, giraffe, impala, lizards, hippos, monkeys, kudu, zebra, and baboons.* Not bad when you consider this was just the ride from the airstrip to the camp!

The safari vehicles are made by Land Rover specifically for this application. They have three tiers of bench seat, with hand rails perfect for mounting long lenses on beanbags to steady them. The drivers not only know where to find the game, but how best to approach for optimal light and camera angles. Clearly they have been around very good photographers before, and our guides quickly became our allies in our photographic quest. In fact, they were so good, we should probably share our photo credits with them! The giraffe and Cape buffalo sightings were both good, and we had some very close opportunities with wart hogs as well.

Very strange animals they are, especially when observed from a near vantage point.

On any safari, the cats are the big draw, and we had one exceptional day in this regard. In the morning we found a group of lionesses in beautiful warm light, slowly meandering through the high grasses, their tawny coats in perfect camouflage. But the hot shot this day was a leopard we tracked off-road through the bush for about one hour, getting only glimpses and grab shots. And then, at the very end of the day, in the last golden rays of the setting sun, she sat on a high wooded ridge and posed in absolute regal indifference to our presence. This was the first year I was taking both film and digital pictures of the Africa experience, and to see those leopard shots pop up on the camera's LCD screen was both exciting and reassuring.

The antelopes of the plains, like kudu, red lechewe, and impala are everywhere ... kind of like Blue-striped grunts in Key Largo or clownfish in Papua New Guinea. But they are so cute you can't help but photograph them. My daughter made the observation that the impalas had an "M" shaped mark on their butts, resembling McDonald's golden arches. And given their popularity as prey, maybe fast-food-of-the-bush is a fair analogy.



MOTHER AND BABY LEOPARD –

We were fortunate to encounter a 6-week-old leopard cub while at Mombo Camp. Each night the mother would go off to hunt, but in the early morning and late afternoon there was usually an opportunity to observe their bonding time together in the den.

LIONESS – As with shark photography, photographing big cats is all about "teeth". Catching a lion snarling, or even yawning, demonstrates the potential of their very serious canines. (Should you call a feline's teeth "canines"?).



CAPE BUFFALO – Many of the Plains animals herd in massive numbers in Botswana. Cape buffalo, zebra, impala, and even elephant occur in bountiful quantities.



ZEBRA – While “tail-shots” are normally as mundane on safari as they might be with fish, sometimes unusual details and patterns are revealed.



Photography on Safari

This is the perfect place for long telephoto lenses. A 300mm is probably entry level for quality safari photography, and ideally a teleconverter or a longer lens in the 400mm to 600mm range should be used. Zoom lenses with good telephoto capacity are good choices as well. The 80-400 Nikkor or Canon 100-400mm equivalent should be excellent.

For film, the longer lenses will typically require more speed. While I prefer Fuji 50 ISO Velvia for most of my underwater and topside photography, I would probably limit the use of Velvia to bright daylight photography, or maybe push it one stop to 100 ISO. The new Velvia 100 ISO is an excellent choice as well. The extra stop (or shutter speed) at 100 ISO is an important consideration when hand-holding a long lens. I would recommend taking some 400 ISO film as well.

I tend to shoot transparency film and digital, but others may wish to consider print films as well. The 200 ISO print films are excellent general-purpose films. In terms of quantity of film, 12-15 rolls of film per shoot day, or digital equivalent, is a fair target. On a safari with 6.5 shoot days, I would take about 100 rolls of film.

Digital enthusiasts need several batteries because when you are out on safari you are unable to recharge batteries until you get back to camp. Spare media cards or some means of digital download (other than your laptop) is definitely prudent!



IMPALA - On a coral reef you can go to the cleaning station to gain close access to skittish marine life. On safari, find the watering hole and sooner or later your subjects will come to you.





GREAT WHITE SHARK – The water clarity in South Africa is normally challenging, so to get good shots it is imperative to get very close. In the two white shark photos on this page Shark expert Andre Hartman managed to lure the shark with a bit of tuna on a line. Getting the shark near is part of the trick, but getting the bait out of the way at the critical moment is likewise paramount. This is what separates the “bait dangles” from the “shark wranglers”.

Great White Shark Photography

Shark photography underwater is essentially wide-angle photography. I have had my best results with housed wide-angle lenses; although, with some sharks that come right up to the cage, an extreme wide lens like the RS and 13mm fisheye works well. It all happens pretty quickly when it does happen, so a viewfinder camera or something with fast, efficient autofocus are the best options. Here are some suggested optics:

Underwater systems:

Nikonos V -

15mm or maybe 20mm. Visibility will have to be pretty good for anything less wide.

Nikonos RS -

13mm (occasional use in general, but with a friendly or aggressive shark, a terrific option) or, if the water is reasonably clear, a 20-35mm zoom can work. >

White Shark Safaris

The “White sharking” in South Africa happens near Gansbaai, a small fishing village on the western side of Cape Agulhas, near the southern-most tip of the continent. Many of the White shark expeditioners who make the pilgrimage to Gansbaai each season choose to stay in a variety of bed and breakfast accommodations. Some are austere, and some are quite nice.

We arrived on a full moon and the extreme low tides meant we could not get out of the harbour until 11:00am, but that was not a problem because we all needed the morning to switch our minds and camera systems from safari mode to White shark mode. From previous experience I also figured that I would have plenty of time on location to assemble cameras in housings while waiting for the White sharks to show. However, as we took over an existing chumline from a boat which was leaving just as we arrived, within ten minutes of the hook being dropped we heard the soon-to-be-familiar cry of “Shark at the bait!” Topside cameras furiously clicked as the four-metre White shark aggressively ripped into a tuna head and we were all deluded into thinking how easy it must be to get White sharks into camera range. In fact, the action was so hot this day, as I was photographing one rather aggressive White shark at the bait, another came perilously

close to taking that oh-so-dangerous exploratory nip of my foot as I perched on the outboard for water-level shots. Here already was the extremely rare happenstance of having two sharks at the boat, both extraordinary performers.

Last time I visited Gansbaai I was so intrigued with the topside photo potential, and so disappointed with the water clarity, I never even tried any underwater shots. This time in-water shots were a high priority and to that end I armed myself with three specific tools: a Seacam housed Nikon D1X digital system with a 12-24mm zoom lens; an F100 film camera set up in a Seacam housing with a 14mm wide-angle lens and a 45 degree swivel viewfinder (in case I ever had an opportunity to try over/under shots with the White sharks); and a Nikonos RS with a 13mm fisheye lens and remote shutter release so I could use it as a pole-cam.

Gratefully this day I had a few magic passes while in the cage with a cooperative shark that allowed both film and digital wide-angle coverage. We were working with famed shark wrangler Andre Hartman, subject of many documentaries and Shark Week renown. Through long years of experience, and instinctual empathy with the sharks, Andre knew just how to lure the shark into camera range, yet pull the bait away at exactly the perfect moment.



SEA GULLS – With white sharking there is ample “down time” while the sharks decide if you are interesting enough for them notice. That’s when the sea gulls and sea lions that are often nearby become subjects of photographic frustration.





Great White Shark Photography

Housed cameras - 16mm (occasional use, but good for over/unders if we are VERY lucky, and for up-close-and-personal encounters), 18mm, 20mm, 17-35mm (excellent choice), and 20-35mm zoom. Digital – I used a Nikon D1X in a Seacam housing with the new 12-24mm zoom lens as my “go-to” system, and found the zoom range ideal.

Topside systems:

Topside camera – I am only familiar with the Nikon line but, whatever camera, make sure it has a good motor drive, fast autofocus, and preferably a zoom in 20-105mm range. You could try zooms like 17-35mm, 20-35mm, or 24-120mm. The shark action happens close to the boat because of the bait. But you never know where or when the shark will break the surface. That’s why a fast ergonomic zoom is a good idea. You will have occasion for strobe fill too, so a TTL strobe like the SB80DX is important as well.

When all the elements were perfectly aligned I could get a shark close (anything farther than three feet away simply would not work in this turbid water), mouth open, and no bait in the frame. Seeing a few of those pop up on the camera’s LCD was a great comfort, for then I knew I had something significant recorded. And here it was only a day-and-a-half into the trip. Very cool indeed!

My next series of photos were with the housed film camera, sitting on the side of the cage as the shark ripped into a tuna head not more than three feet away. I have to admit the adrenaline was pumping pretty well as the motor drive raced and the frenzied shark shredded the bait. As the action peaked and the shark slid back in the water I realised the last few shots looked kind of blurry. Then I looked at my dome and saw it smeared in tuna blood and shreds of meat from our rather messy predator. And then I wiped my face and found I too was splashed with blood and detritus. Being close enough to a feeding Great White shark to need to rinse fish blood and flesh off my face was the reason I had travelled to South Africa, and Andre and the crew of Predator II had delivered.

While we had more action on and off all afternoon, nothing ever compared to that one magic hour that morning. We probably had ten different sharks visit the

boat over the course of the day, but we were looking for “players”, the sharks who want to hit the bait with some level of attitude or, at the other extreme, those which come close to the back of the boat so Andre can lift their snouts in a behaviour they call “jawing”. This is the specialty photo-op of the South Africa White shark experience, and it takes a coincidence of cooperative shark, good shark wrangling and perfect surface conditions to make it happen. As it turned out, the confluence of those variables would pretty well elude us as the week went on.



Other places in the world are better for in-water photography of great white sharks. Guadalupe (22 hour boat ride off San Diego) offers close access with crystalline water clarity. But no where else but South Africa offers the topside photo opportunities with aggressive white sharks ripping into bait.

Great White Shark Photography

Water clarity – The visibility is best in the wintertime, but even so I never expect much more than 20 feet or so (compared with just ten feet in the summertime). The chum deployed may also reduce visibility and add particulate matter making backscatter highly probable when using strobes. That is why so many shark shots you see published are available light shots. Still, I have had good luck in the past using a strobe with 1/4 power manual setting for fast recycle and slight strobe fill. Remember though that there is minimal room to move within the cage, and the combination of turbidity plus space considerations makes strobe lighting challenging.

Films - I have used both 50 and 100 ISO transparency films for shark photography. The new Ektachrome 200 is good if you need a faster film (either the pro version or the consumer Elite 200... it is apparently the same film). For me, my primary film of choice is Fujichrome Velvia for the 50 ISO and, for the 100 ISO, the new Fujichrome Velvia 100.

Web links:

www.waterhousetours.com
www.stephenfrink.com
www.wilderness-safaris.com
www.dive.co.za
www.grootbos.com