

# Dive In

Join travel blogger Nick Westermeyer on an accessible shark diving tour in South Africa as he goes eye-to-eye with the most feared predator on the planet.



**S**cuba diving in a cage alongside great white sharks bigger than some cars would be enough to grab anyone's undivided attention, but Nick Westermeyer had something else on his mind as he prepared to enter the water with these nightmarish predators.

"I was more scared of the cold water ... than I was of seeing a shark," the 44-year-old travel blogger says.

Westermeyer was getting ready to slip into the frigid waters off the coast of South Africa last June for an accessible shark diving adventure. Paralyzed in a gymnastics accident while studying at Michigan State University in 1991, Westermeyer is

a certified scuba diver and knows all too well how cold water temperatures can affect his body.

He says the water was a frigid 60 degrees and stopped short of taking his breath away. The cold water alone was enough to deter one of the passengers getting into the cage, but Westermeyer says the temperature didn't affect him too much.

"I was in for probably about 35 minutes and my hands didn't start getting cold until the last five minutes," he says. "I get cold in 80-degree water scuba diving, so it's kind of ironic that I wasn't really that cold in there, but a lot of that could have been the adrenaline."





PHOTOS LEFT AND RIGHT PAGE ©KELLY BAKER - WWW.SHARKWATCHSA.COM

by Melissa Stewart

## Just Feet Away

Being amped up on adrenaline in a situation like that is understandable.

Westermeyer was floating in a cage just feet from several great white sharks as long as 13½ feet with thousands of razor-sharp teeth up to three inches long. Having visibility of only about 16 feet and the mysterious nature of the sharks added to the intensity of the experience.

"People make comments about how elusive they are and how you can't see them sometimes," he says.

"What they would do is they had two spotters on each side of the cage and they'd tell you to go down and look, like, 'look left' and that's where the shark would be coming from. Sometimes, when you did that, you still wouldn't see them until it was like almost right in front of you."

Instead of being frightened, Westermeyer was invigorated. Seeing those sharks so close made him want to live a little more dangerously. But tour operator Marine Dynamics ([sharkwatchsa.com/en/home](http://sharkwatchsa.com/en/home)) emphasized that Westermeyer keep his hands and feet inside the cage.

Nick Westermeyer, seated, looks over the cage he would soon be getting into to go diving with great white sharks off the coast of South Africa.



“I won’t say [it was] scary not being able to know where he was when you were down there, but it was ... interesting.” — **Nick Westermeyer**

---

“I won’t say [it was] scary not being able to know where he was when you were down there, but it was ... interesting. It was exciting,” he says. “The closest one that got to me was about two-and-a-half, three feet away. I could see his eyeball directly right in front of me. I could have reached out and touched him.”

## They Didn't Care

Westermeyer chose Marine Dynamics in Gansbaai, South Africa for the dive because the company claimed to offer an accessible shark cage diving experience.

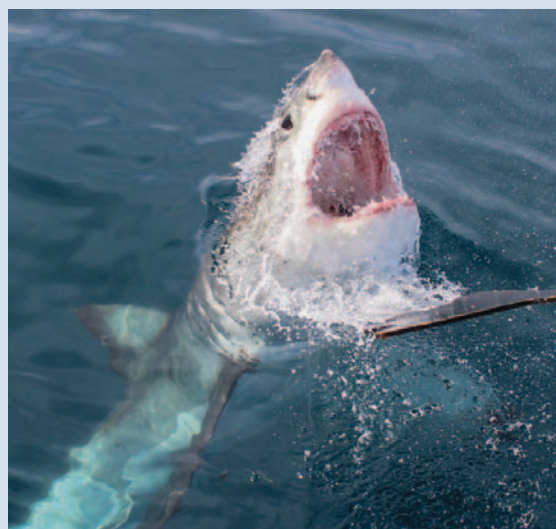
The Marine Dynamics shuttle service picked him and other passengers up at about 5 a.m. Neither the bus nor the boat was as accessible as promised, but the guides and other passengers assisted him.

Equipped with a large cage that attached to the side, the tour boat, which can hold up to eight peo-

ple, was lowered into the water. All the equipment needed for the dive, including wetsuit, booties, mask and weights, was provided by the tour operator.

Westermeyer says as they moved closer to “shark alley,” a guide helped him put on his wetsuit. Once the boat was in a suitable location, the guides attracted the sharks by

During his accessible cage diving adventure off the coast of South Africa, Nick Westermeyer says great white sharks got close enough to him that he could have reached out to touch them if he wanted.



© KELLY BAKER - WWW.SHARKWATCHSA.COM



© KELLY BAKER - WWW.SHARKWATCHSA.COM

throwing chum (bait) and artificial seal decoys in the water. Within five minutes, the first shark appeared.

Despite the image many people may have of great white sharks being vicious man-hunters, they didn’t try to attack the cage or take an interest in the people watching them.

“It’s like it didn’t even care that we were there,” Westermeyer says. “They were more interested in the tuna and the decoys that were out on the water.”

Westermeyer says for the \$130 cost, the dive was worth it, but he doesn’t expect to do it again. The shark dive was just one part of a South African adventure for Westermeyer, who also went on a safari and visited Victoria Falls, all of which he chronicles on his blog.

## See If It Works

After working for more than a decade, Westermeyer began focusing on saving money to facilitate his traveling and soon he had a new career — blogging.

“It actually started with me just wanting to travel and ... one of my friends suggested I should start a





© HELEN PATULLO - WWW.WHALEWATCHSA.COM



COURTESY OF NICK WESTERMAYER



COURTESY OF NICK WESTERMAYER

Top three photos: Besides diving with great white sharks while in Africa, Nick Westermeyer also went on a safari in Botswana and visited Cape Town, South Africa.



© KELLY BAKER - WWW.SHARKWATCHSA.COM

Left: Nick Westermeyer, seated, says he was more concerned about the cold water than cage diving with great white sharks.

blog," he says. "So, then I started that and then I figured I'd do reviews on the places I went."

During his travels, Westermeyer takes notes and writes detailed reviews of his experiences for his readers at [offtheaccessiblepath.com](http://offtheaccessiblepath.com). He did this with the trip to Africa, detailing the places he visited day-to-day.

"I basically wrote down what I did during the day, how accessible stuff was and things like that," he says. "I'm reviewing how accessible the places I stayed are and how the tours were."

Westermeyer has been traveling alone and staying primarily in hostels. He says hostels are a great way to save money. Even private rooms in hostels generally cost less than hotels, and if Westermeyer does research ahead of time, he can usually find accessible hostels.

He also notes that hostels afford him the opportunity to meet other travelers and spread the word about his blog.

Traveling since December 2013, Westermeyer has experienced some of the most exciting tours the world has to offer.

"[I] wanted to do things that people in wheelchairs or disabled people don't normally do," he says "I've been skydiving, and ... I went bungee jumping and paragliding and things like that. [I] just wanted to try something and see if it works."

*Melissa Stewart is a Chino Valley, Ariz.-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to PN magazine.*

**S'NS**