Parting shot

I travelled out to California in 2004 with Charles Hood in response to an advertisment in UwP, promising giant kelp, good visibility… and sharks.

After three days hunting jewfish through the kelp forest and being mobbed by garibaldis we left the rocks and reefs. A dayboat that seemed as big as the average Red Sea live-aboard pulled onto the jetty, and 12 divers struggled aboard.

There was a rush to get the cameras onto the shelf as there was only space for half of the equipment. The rest cluttered up the cabin, wedged in by jackets, towels, shoes and other spare clothing against the Pacific swell.

Later, several miles south of Catalina Island, we were surrounded by an expanding circle of fish guts and a slick of oily blood. With an expert shark-wrangler, the blue sharks were guaranteed. Two hours, then three and the hot Autumn sun (California, remember: where cold-water diving is 18∞C!) made our undersuits unbearably uncomfortable, but we thought about kitting up anyway, because it was the time for the sharks, guaranteed, of course.

It was a lot more comfortable in the water, but the only thing to see was a rain of white snotty chum. The small aluminium cage didn't look very inviting so we took turns to swim in circles, further and further away from the boat, with the deep blue tempting us into a downward spiral.

After an hour Hollywood arrived, the paparazzi strobing for all they were worth. Errol Flynn and David Niven, speed-boating to Avalon for the sport fishing? No, the excitement of a passing salp when there's nothing else to focus on.

Two hours, 30 bar, and out of the water. The next shift of divers splashed into the chum. Two more hours, and back to Catalina. There was a lot of talk about the persecution of sharks throughout the world.

Next day was the same. After 90 minutes I was abandoned beside a sorry fishes head, tied vainly to the cage; by then lunch was so much more attractive than the bare blue. Suddenly, a flicker of white, just beneath the swell. I peered into the blue, and the flicker disappeared. A second later, and the shark was perfectly clear. Shutter release. Again. Again: bah! Strobe cycling. Again, great. Again; blast! Buffer full! Oh… I'm not in the cage… and the Mako had her nose on the dome… and the buffer was full.

So I bought a DSLR.



Coolpix 5000 + x0.68 wide-angle supplementary lens. Twin Inon z220 at -1.0 and -2.0 stops (manual, R hand strobe in slave mode, linked by fibre-optic cable). Subal housing with dome. 1/120 and f5.6, 100 ASA equivalent, Auto white balance. Processed in Photoshop CS.

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Do you have a nice shot with a short story behind it? If so e mail me and yours could be the next "Parting shot".

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