

## Friday 13th Adventure Attack

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Sharon Davis swallows her pride (and some sea water) as she tells us how she braved the adrenalin pumping adventures at Durban's uShaka Marine World.

The alarm set off again and I pulled the bed covers firmly back over my head. It is Friday the 13th and I am not getting out of bed! Resolute, I ignored the persistent jangling of the alarm and hid beneath my duvet refusing to budge - but not for the 'normal' superstitious reasons; today isn't any old Friday the 13th &hellip; I have a special date: an intimate rendezvous with a shark!

Bravado eventually got the better of common sense as I cornered myself with my own logic: "I've told too many people of my proposed adventure to back out and lose face now," I muttered as I reluctantly climbed out of bed. Too nervous for breakfast I gulped down some coffee and rushed through my normal morning routine.

Before I knew it, and way before I could come up with a plausible reason to cancel, I'm in the driver's seat, heading for uShaka Marine World on Durban's Golden Mile with a positively bubbling and optimistic Barbara at my side.

To save face, let me explain: Barbara is an underwater photographer and diving instructor - and swimming with sharks and other sea beasts is plain old hat in her opinion. But her blasé attitude did little to stem a growing gnawing nervousness that had me talking and laughing way more than usual.

Friday the 13th dawned beautifully crisp and clear, something I failed to notice in my angst of anticipating diving (cage or no cage) in a tank filled with sharks. I also failed to notice much of the great Disney-like atmosphere as we walked into Durban's splendid R735-million marine theme park, heading for the reconstruction of a 1970's era wrecked cargo steamer - the home of uShaka's Sea World, and more importantly; the venue for my rendezvous with the sharks.

Then suddenly: reality attack! I find myself nose to snout with the star of "Jaws". Well not the real star of "Jaws"; it wasn't the feared great white shark. In reality it was a more docile (but still ferocious looking) body double! He was grinning at me, rows of teeth gleaming, with just a few millimetres of glass between us. No amount of explaining from Barbara could convince me that this ragged tooth shark was harmless. He swam effortlessly and lazily through the water, his cold emotionless looking eye sizing me up for a meal! At least that's how it felt.

Watching the largest collection of sharks in the southern hemisphere swim with listless boredom in a tank where I was soon to join them did little to quell my desire to turn tail and run away screaming. But there was no stalling the inevitable, and I was lead unceremoniously to the shark pool.

With my brave face and snorkel on, I tried to look like I knew what I was doing, as I stepped gingerly into the flimsy floating tank, and stifled a cry as the cold water slid gracefully (but uncomfortably) up past my navel.

I entered the bracing water with my nerves on full alert, and to my surprise, I found the experience most enjoyable. After a few technical glitches and involuntary gulps of water I was floating around comfortably in my cage, manoeuvring for the best view of the sharks. The sound of my own breathing was pervasive and mesmerizing and I embraced the newness and wonder of the underwater world that opened up before me.

For the most part, the mean ragged tooth sharks ignored me, swimming casual in circles below - but in true fisherman story telling fashion: "I was swimming at uShaka and came nose to snout with a shark. It was literally just a meter or so away from me." I shall simply fail to mention that I was safely within the confines of a protective cage.

I began to feel the chill of the water, but splashed about regardless without a wetsuit, drawing deep breaths through the snorkel, until the shivering overtook my enjoyment of this view of an underwater paradise.

It was a pleasure to become a landlubber again and to soak up the warmth from the sun; and I walked off proudly with my souvenir snorkel - a memoir of my shark encounter!

Hungry after my adventures I set off to follow my gut and choose an appropriately celebratory and delectable morsel from the variety of restaurants and food outlets - but before I could make up my mind, it suddenly occurred to me that it might be more prudent to eat after experiencing the exhilarating and gravity defying water slides at uShaka's Wet 'n Wild.

It's easy to get high at uShaka - either literally at the start of some of the steeper slides or high on adrenalin from some stomach turning slide rides. Like an adventure warrior I was off on to the next mission: Project Wild Slides! Trepidation (and a few wheezes to which I will not admit) seized me as I tackled the steps to the slides. And much to the amusement of everyone else, I discovered that I have outgrown the inexplicable joy that a child feels on a roller coaster ride. After a brief encounter (and involuntary scream) down the steep dropping, gut-wrenching stukka and kamikaze slides - where 'free-fall' takes on a new meaning - I opted for a more gentle experience, tubing along a 450m stretch of 'river' that encircles uShaka Marine World.

I enjoyed the roll of water beneath me, turning me gentling and propelling me forward, as I watched the palms wave a

friendly hello and simply relaxed and enjoyed the unique African/sub-tropical blend of fun, learning and relaxation that is uShaka.

By the end of the day I was pleasantly tired and well pleased with my adventures. It is probably the best Friday the 13th I will ever have. I'm certainly glad that I got out of bed!

**Shark Facts:**

- There are 368 different species of shark, and they can be found in waters all over the world, in every ocean as well as some rivers and lakes.
- Fully grown sharks range in size from 18cm (spined pygmy shark) to 15m (whale shark). But most sharks are an intermediate size of 1,5-2m - about the same size as humans.
- Sharks have no bones. They belong to the family Elasmobranchii that includes all fish with skeletons made only of cartilage.
- Sharks can only swim forward. Unlike bony fish they unable to swim backwards.
- Sharks can have up to 3 000 teeth at one time. The teeth are usually arranged in rows, and are replaced if damaged or lost.
- Only 25 species of shark are known to attack humans.
- Sharks attack fewer than 100 people a year. More people die from bee stings or lightning strikes than shark attacks.
- While the diet of the different shark species varies dramatically, they are all carnivores.

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