It isn’t only baskers that like to hang out off Cornwall in early summer –

WILL APPLEYARD

jumps on a RIB for a whole new shark experience

DRIVING DOWN THE A303 on route to Cornwall, I found it difficult to accept that I was joining a shark-diving expedition but not actually leaving the UK. This had to be too good to be true. The trip was to consist of a single day looking for Cornish blue sharks aboard Charles Hood’s RIB, leaving Penzance at 8.30 on a Saturday morning. With other commitments either side of this trip, it was going to have to be a quick 600 miles in and out, sleeping on the hard shoulder of some A-road in the campervan both there and back. Essentially I was leaving London and going to Cornwall for the day!

Shark encounters in the UK to me are a thing of myth and legend. I have often heard stories of scuba divers off Portland’s west coast being “hounded by porbeagle sharks” attracted to a belly-full of bloody plaice, or reports of mako sharks “sneaking up on divers off the Shambles bank.” These experiences or sightings always seem to happen “last week” or to “someone’s mate”, so when offered a place aboard Charles’ boat, I had taken no convincing to drop my plans for the weekend and get down there.

IT MADE A REFRESHING CHANGE to pack just a minimal amount of light gear, because we would be observing these animals from on or just under the surface, as opposed to scuba-diving with them. It dawned on me that I wasn’t sure if I still owned a snorkel, but I managed to dig out something I had found while diving in Dorset a few weeks earlier (a black Mares snorkel found on the Aeolian Sky, in case anyone is still looking for it).

With my drysuit, weight-belt, mask and snorkel packeted, I set off and definitely felt as if something was missing.

Conditions were perfect on the day, with absolutely no wind, flat calm sea and a high of 23°C forecast. A slight fog hung in the air that morning, which accentuated a feeling of nervous excitement and trepidation. With ropes-off prompt, Charles gave his last briefing just outside the harbour and we set off, St Michaels...
I asked Charles how he knew where to find these animals, and he told me that it was the work of several years spent researching and gathering information from local fishermen. He prefers to take small groups to Mount Peking through the mist in the morning, to begin the day’s work of attracting wildlife to a boat by means of “chumming” the water, or whatever you might like to call it, and we all know that the debate rages fiercely over cage-diving in certain parts of the world.

For safety reasons, all divers entering the water had to be wearing a drysuit or wetsuit and have a GoPro with him, mounted on a stick. This, after Charles’ comment about how attractive GoPros were, now to me simply resembled a fishing rod and bait.

Once in the water and on the chummed side of the boat, the shark came straight to us, bumping its nose into the camera lens right away. Blue sharks are incredibly slender animals and perfectly adapted to their environment. This one’s striking blue back shone and almost flashed as the sun caught it, and its long pectoral fins reminded me of an oceanic whitetip’s. Charles continued to bait the buoyed ropes he had out to attract the sharks, and between checking out our cameras and us, the shark would also engage with the baited ropes. The propeller and the side of the RIB were also high on the shark’s menu and provided fantastic photo-opportunities as long as they kept the animal’s attention.

After an hour or so, I made a conscious effort not to spend most of our underwater time looking through a lens. It’s so important to put it aside from time to time. One by one we reluctantly left the clear blue water, our shark friends and the chum slick, climbed back aboard the boat and prepared to find land again.

The weather and all-round sea conditions had been more than generous to us that day, and we were all pumped to have experienced an encounter that one would normally expect to find only a plane ride away. With the sea still as flat as a millpond, we glided back to Penzance and collectively fiddled through a few images over a couple of decent local ales.

Some might disagree with the act of attracting wildlife to a boat by means of “chumming” the water, or whatever you might like to call it, and we all know that the debate rages fiercely over cage-diving in certain parts of the world. However, Charles’ Hood’s operation is low-key and informative, and it struck me that in this instance, 16 miles offshore, the sharks were observing us as much as we were observing them.

Charles Hood takes a maximum 4-5 people (aged 18 or over) per trip. The price of the boat charter for the day is £700, charleshood.com/snorkel-with-blue-sharks