I got back into the RIB elated, and was promptly sick over the side. Seconds later, another of our party, Mark, was also reviving his breakfast.

In a few moments Simon had climbed the ladder and proudly joined the chorus of vomiting. Soon I was laughing, high on adrenaline and amused by the absurdity of grown men forking over wads of cash in exchange for a weekend spent spilling their guts out at sea.

Somewhere in the background, our captain quietly congratulated himself on maintaining his “100% chunder record” and the last member of our group, John, wondered why the visibility had taken a sudden turn for the worse.

The strangest thing is, I was loving the experience and would do it again in a shot! We were floating 20 miles off the coast of Penzance, searching for the elusive blue shark in what has to count as one of the most spectacular wildlife encounters in Britain today. The trip is conducted by Charles Hood, who has years of experience leading visits to some of the most famous shark spots in the world.

Back in the 1990s, he would go in search of blue sharks Stateside but, over time, encounters became scarce. Their numbers had been noticeably diminished by commercial fishing.

Reminded that blue sharks are one of the oceans’ great pelagic wanderers and, presumably, were also present closer to home, his quest to find the blues in Cornish waters began.

These are sharks that spend most of their time in cool, deep water, beyond the limits of recreational diving.

Fishermen in Cornwall would hook the occasional blue, and provided guidance on where they could be found. Charles tried chumming the waters to lure them in and, over a number of attempts, found reducing the amount of bait to be most effective.

Top left: Goose whoops with pleasure as the RIB approaches the bauball. Above: Blue sharks circle the boat. Right: Tuna gather to attack the bait ball.

Over 10 years, the art of finding and attracting the blues was refined, and now the experience is open to an eager crowd of underwater photographers and marine enthusiasts.

Our group of four had boarded the RIB at 9am on a moderately sunny morning. We raced out of the marina to find a lumpy sea. Our outing the previous day had been cancelled because of bad weather, and conditions today were passable but not ideal.

Playful dolphins rode our bow as the coastline became a distant haze. After a 45-minute ride, the RIB came to a halt and Charles put out some pungent bait.

You could head for South Africa in the hopes of being in the right place at the right time on the Sardine Run – or you could take a chance off Cornwall, because you never know your luck. HENLEY SPIERS enjoys an auspicious start to his UK diving career.
A short while later the first blue shark appeared, boosting our spirits. However, Charles advised us to wait for another shark to appear, because this would make them less skittish around humans.

A long pause ensued, and as the boat rocked in the swell, most of us started to feel a little seasick.

Make no mistake, this is an adventure, not a luxury cruise. Once signed up, you’re in for a long day out at sea, exposed to the elements with whatever food and drink you remembered to bring aboard.

Enduring a little hardship only sweetens the taste of reaching your goal and, after a couple of hours, we had up to four blue sharks circling the boat.

A little confession: at this point, I’d had a 19-year dive career that started in balmy Caribbean waters and never strayed to the tropics. I am, or at least was, a warmwater wuss. Zipping up the thickest wetsuit I’d ever worn in my life, I was both excited at the prospect of pelagic sharks. My adrenaline was racing, and the thought of sharks circling the boat had me ready for action. Mark, debilitated by seasickness the day before, wasted no time getting in, and we watched him swim into the heart of the action. Once arrived, he victoriously raised his head and gave a big OK sign back to the boat, the excitement apparent even from 50m away.

The atmosphere was electric, and the presence of squid in Cornish waters. As we speeded out onto a calmer sea, we were again greeted by dolphins, and Goose bounced up and down in delight. Five minutes later, and Charles slowed down again as we came across a storm of birds over a disturbed sea.

Goose held his camera aloft and whooped with pleasure. The birds were torpedoing down while large fish attacked from below, thrashing the surface.

In a scene reminiscent of the South African Sardine Run, we had come across a bait-ball being feasted on! I’m no expert, but would later be told by my more experienced buddies that this was a very rare scene indeed.

We decided to try our luck at getting in, and now I regretted not having my wetsuit ready for action. Mark, debilitated by seasickness the day before, wasted no time jumping in, and we watched him swim into the heart of the action. Once arrived, he victoriously raised his head and gave a big OK sign back to the boat, the excitement apparent even from 50m away.

The remaining three of us scrambled around the small boat, collecting snorkel gear and cameras. Back-rolling into the cool water and heading for the swarming birds, I wasn’t sure what to expect.

A stupidly brave seagull competes with sharks for food! Goose held his camera aloft and whooped with pleasure. The birds were torpedoing down while large fish attacked from below, thrashing the surface.

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a complete natural high – what a start to the day!
The blue sharks proved to be a little more shy than previously, but even on this quiet day we each came away with hundreds of images. In fact you can get up close and personal with the blues without leaving the RIB.

We took turns at positioning two of us on the chum-side of the boat, cameras held under water as the sharks raced at the bait, eyes rolling back into their head for protection at the last moment of attack.

Seagulls had been frequent visitors to the boat, but always exhibited a natural wariness of sharks and snorkellers. That afternoon, however, we came across one stupendously brave individual intent on competing for the baited fish-heads. Thinking of nothing but its stomach, the seagull dived fearlessly for the bait, over and over again.

Surprisingly, no blue sharks took advantage of the situation and, satiated, the bird floated merrily away.

Heading home that evening, I was elated at the British blue wonders we had encountered, and with a newfound taste for temperate-water action, resolved to no longer be a warmwater wuss!

Charles Hood runs blue-shark tours from late June until October out of Penzance. Whole boat charter is £840 (£900 weekends) with up to four or five guests allowed on board. Visit charleshood.com for bookings. Henley stayed at the Lombard House Hotel near the marina – rooms start at £40 per night, lombardhousehotel.co.uk