

African Diver

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An African Odyssey

Exploring Africa's east coast



A German Picture of an African Seascape

SOUTH AFRICA & MOZAMBIQUE Article and photographs by Jan Finsterbusch and Christoph Schaffelhuber



We were after an adventure holiday.

Not an excursion filled with artificial diving, round-the-clock-service in our hotel or guided tours, but a real African adventure; a diving adventure with not only big fish, but the best sharks of all sizes; guaranteeing a diving experience of incomparable magnitude.

The ideal place for this kind of adventure was quickly found: it would mean going to South Africa.

The guidance given on our local website, www.taucher.net, is not comprehensive, but enables us to make a good assessment of all of the diving and tourism possibilities that a certain country has to offer.

We divided our holiday into three sections. The first being Port Elizabeth so that we could look for a sardine bait-ball. The articles we had read and

the documentaries we had seen of the biggest feeding frenzy in the world captivated us. These showed scores of sea birds, dolphins, various sharks and even whales present at this annual marine phenomenon and emphasised how this experience promised a diving experience that was at the top of our to-do-lists. The second place we were to visit was Shelley Beach with the choice diving location of Protea Banks, where sightings of tiger sharks are commonly reported.

Finally, to round off our trip, we chose to experience a few dives in warmer climes; selecting Mozambique as our third and final section. Also, the chance of seeing a whale shark was too great to ignore.

We were also keen to learn about the countries we were visiting, so we decided to rent a car instead of flying - even though we had already travelled via plane beforehand, we did not regret our decision.



Port Elizabeth



Protea Banks



Mozambique



Section 1: Port Elizabeth, or 'Following the Birds'

The time it took to travel in our rented car from the airport to Villa Chameleon was only a few minutes where our host Rainer Schimpf of Dive Expert Tours also provided the accommodation. Rainer placed personal value in his dealings with his guests and gave us the warmest of welcomes followed by a long but necessary briefing about diving with sardines which taught us of the behavioural traits of the various sharks to be encountered feeding off the shoal of sardines so that our safety wouldn't be compromised.

Armed with this information, we launched the next morning at 8am. Given the early start, it is quite fresh outside and the waves are not without substance. With a 7mm wet suit and a weatherproof jacket we are ready to go, but are quite unaware of the physically demanding challenge that comes with spending six to seven hours in the high seas. Rainer's methods are quite intense, with a very specific list of sights to see and a very limited time to see them, but all the more enjoyable for it! We tirelessly searched for some activity that could point us in the direction of the sardines. Our search finally ended when we spotted a flock of birds and as we got within earshot

of the cacophony of excited squawks, we became certain that we had found our elusive target. The birds search for the dolphins; the dolphins search for the sardines. It is as simple as that. Rainer's area of potential sardine action is between 50 and 100km, which is so big that a clear indication of where to find the best activity is simply impossible.

During the search there is also the option to wile the time away. On a few occasions we stopped to snorkel with sea lions and penguins, which if you are lucky enough, is truly a memorable snorkelling experience. At times, we found the animals quite funny; quickly vanishing as the first snorkeler entered the water and then just as quickly reappearing beside the boat when the snorkeler was back on the boat.

We ended up snorkelling as much as we dived, which was great as it granted us a rare and exciting opportunity to spot sea-life from the surface and from the depths.

On most dives, there were a large number of resident ragged tooth sharks with us at any one time on the reef. In some cases, the sharks came so near that they soon became an unwanted presence to be around. However, if you are aware that ragged tooth sharks are harmless then one look at their impressive teeth makes for a great adrenaline rush.

Unfortunately, we weren't lucky enough to find a sardine bait-ball out at sea during the four diving days we were there, although April is among the best times to. With the weather prohibiting diving on some days, we spent them by having the odd braai (barbeque) with Rainer, walking along the breath-taking coast and even taking a tour through the Addo National Park.



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On the last afternoon we drove along the coast and saw the countryside, which always served as a treat for the eyes as we observed masses of birds and hundreds of dolphins hunting together. On one such day, we were lucky enough to see two Brydes whales working a sardine bait ball and were frustrated at not being able to be there, owing to the weather.

Altogether, it was thanks to Rainer for his great support that we owe our unbelievable week to; he honestly deserves a massive cheer!



Section 2: Protea Banks, or 'Eye to Eye with the Tiger'

After a quick breakfast at 5am, we left Port Elizabeth for our first transfer. An arduous ten hour drive on a network of back-end roads then ensued; made more bearable by the breath-taking scenery that decorated the dusty highway, until we finally reached Shelly Beach (roughly 110km before Durban).

Roland of African Dive Adventures, together with his wife Beulah, run the 'Divers House'; a villa with bedrooms and wonderful views of the sea, which would be our accommodation for the coming week. In this environment, it isn't surprising that we never hesitated to begin diving the very next day.

The dives here differ considerably from the dives in Port Elizabeth. The water is about 23°C; significantly warmer and also admittedly deeper at about 33-40 metres. On the first day, we consulted our dive computers to work out the dive times our group could enjoy in the area. Because of the depth at Protea Banks, our dive time was severely limited and so, after a conversation with Roland, we decided between us that we should dive with enriched air so that we could dive for an extended period on the reef. Diving on the reef presents a good chance of a big-fish encounter and if you do not only want to see ragged tooth sharks in their intriguing deep caves, then there is no good reason why you shouldn't follow these animals onto the reef.



Roland's speciality is tiger shark dives, knowing exactly how to lure these sharks with tantalising bait. Getting into the water with these sharks is like stepping into a feeding frenzy, with the mangled remains of sardines and various other fish decorating the blue water with a healthy red tinge. Right at the beginning of this experience, a formidable 4m long tiger shark patrolled the bait.

It didn't really show much interest and disappeared after a few minutes to be replaced by a few Zambezi sharks and black-tip sharks. The name 'Zambezi shark' is a southeast African colloquial term for the bull shark as a result of often being found in the Zambezi River. Elsewhere it is known as a 'bull shark'.

It remains to be said that if you hear the name 'bull shark', you become aware of how dangerous this shark actually is, distinguishing it from other deep-sea sharks and creating a very tense event strong enough to quash any scepticism of this shark's capabilities.

We had, therefore, no desire to be in such an uncontrollable situation, especially if we were to be seen as shark bait!

On one occasion we were in the middle of six or more bull sharks and a lone black-tip when we dived. This was an intensely frightening experience made more intense with the hope of another encounter with a tiger shark, which we were lucky enough to have, even if it was only for a few minutes.

On the whole, Protea Banks served as the ideal location to see massive rays, dolphins and large guitar sharks alongside the big sharks themselves. It is also possible to see mantas and white sharks, although this is quite rare.

The launch and boat rides here are also tough, but not as wild as those in Port Elizabeth. A wondrous virtue of the diving experience at Protea Banks is the fascinating array of animals that occupy the reef, which I don't recommend for beginners because of the depth.

However, for experienced divers, Protea Banks offers a fantastic opportunity to interact with sharks. Roland, through his diving style, does not spoon-feed his knowledge or experience to you, but rather grants you the freedom to find things out for yourself; thus ensuring a diving experience of the highest quality.



Section 3: Mozambique, or 'The Wait for the Whale Shark'

At 4.30 in the morning, we made our way to Mozambique, conscious of the two-day journey that lay ahead of us. We gave little thought to the condition of the roads in Mozambique, so because we had a normal hire car without four-wheel drive, the drive to Tofo was full of problems. The first annoyance we had to deal with lay in a special kind of highwaymen: the police! We had heard stories about the arbitrary rules and regulations of these con-men, but in Mozambique we experienced them first hand. In the end, we adapted our driving style and adopted new handling strategies in the event of further encounters with our friends in blue.

Just north of Swaziland lies Mozambique, where 'Casa Lisa'; a small but functional bungalow, would be our over-night lodgings. The accommodation in Mozambique does not compete with that in South Africa and this humble bungalow paled in comparison to the great housing facilities we had enjoyed before we crossed the border. We were, however, happy to call this place home for the few days we would be staying there.

This set the trend for our stay-over in Tofo, where we were housed in Bamboози; a very nicely located bungalow made more charming by its haphazard structure. We had to get used to the very unavoidable reality of using a toilet separated from the rest of the room by only a curtain, a lovely reminder of our dubious privacy. Electricity was also only available at certain times, which made doing our business an especially taxing task ...

We only made use of the dive centre at Bamboози for a short time, because their facilities did not include enriched air and we were informed strictly "no enriched air and no dives with deco



stops". With the reefs and animals lying between 22 and 35 metres below the surface this was not an option for us. About 600m down the beach we found in Tofo Scuba; a dive centre offering "enriched air for free", presenting us with the perfect organisation to dive with.

The dive was conducted in a very safety-conscious manner, with guides and surface marker buoys always accompanying us. These safety measures are in place because there is no coast guard at hand and no recompression chambers available for use. Being underwater here is for the experienced, self-sufficient and circumspect diver, although some scope into the dive logistics is given.

The diving scene here at Tofo offers you everything you can wish and more. This begins with the wide range of species in the area; with stonefish, paper fish, frogfish, white-ribbon eels and scorpion fish setting a wonderful scene for the bigger fish on the reef. It was always possible to see white-tip reef sharks and the odd Bowmouth guitar shark, which was quite special.

However, our ambition to see mantas and whale sharks had not yet come to fruition. With the second boat in the dive centre reporting sightings of mantas and whale

sharks every day, we religiously searched for them for the first five days.

And lo-and-behold on the sixth day our search came to an end. First, five to six manta rays in the afternoon and then the highlight of our ocean safari: 'our' whale shark. After multiple dives, this single experience in Mozambique was truly special.



Next came the journey back to Johannesburg; a rather sad capital to end our holiday in. However, there was still one final magic-moment to be had.

We drove for three hours through the Kruger National Park; where we managed to see rhinos, hippos and giraffes, despite the relatively short amount of time we spent there.

After 3,658km through some magnificently beautiful scenery, we dropped off our rental car at O. R. Tambo International Airport and reflected upon our epic holiday and what a brilliant adventure it was! 🐠

