

South Africa and Mozambique

by Tim Rock

It may surprise some that South Africa and northern neighbor Mozambique are amazing dive destinations with myriad opportunities to see and photograph sea creatures great and small. And after the diving, the ever-evolving geography and safari animals never fail to bring even more eye-popping photo ops. One can truly spend months photographing these diverse areas and exploring new sites that are being found annually.

The extremes are also there. From the chilly waters of the Cape Peninsula and False Bay to the tropical warmth of Tofo, the different types of diverse marine life that one can see is a veritable candy store for the diver and underwater photographer.

Cape Town is a great city to visit even if you are not diving. Between the Table Mountain's sheer cliffs and the sun-speckled sweep of Table Bay lie many of the world's most famous beaches. And the great dining and superb jazz ensure evenings are always fun.

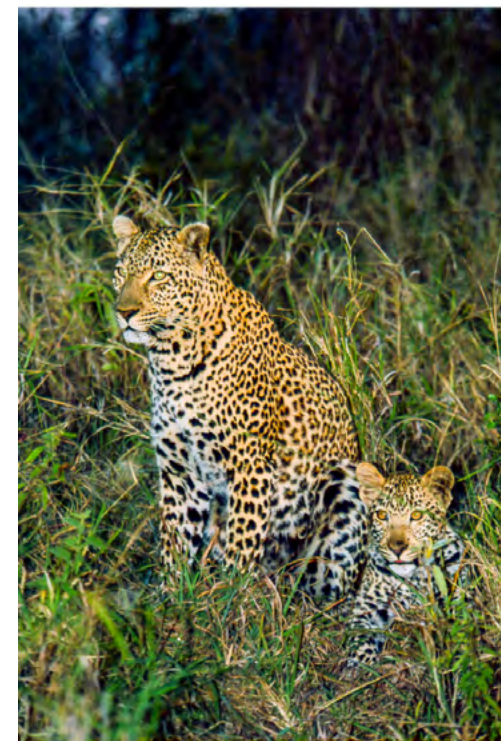
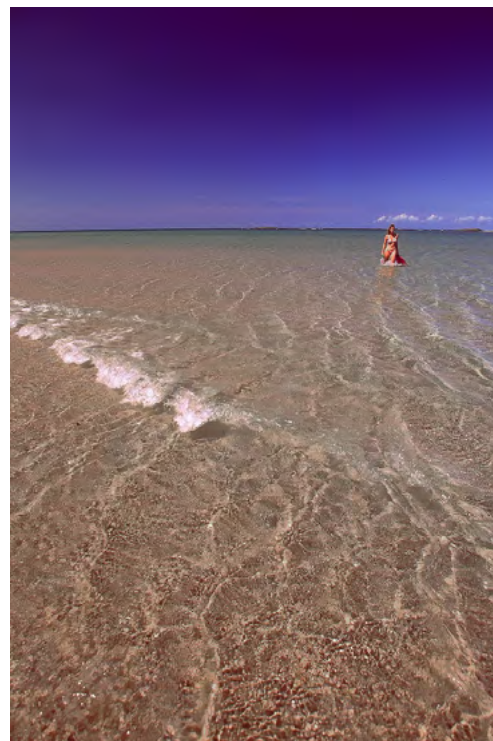
The movie "My Octopus Teacher" has given the Cape kelp beds a lot of attention. I am still trying to figure out how the "student" in that

film was able to free dive for minutes and hours with no wetsuit, but the rocky reefs, kelp inhabitants and light filtering through make dives south of Cape Town and inside False Bay magical experiences. There are seal colonies in this area and seal diving and snorkeling is popular too. Two new marine protected areas are the Robena Island MAP and Namaqua National Park MAP, which form part of 20 new national MAPs along the SA coast.

Castle Rocks are a very well-known landmark for Cape Town divers. It is well protected and the Rock provides a good lee side if the northwester is blowing.

The inside part on the Southern side is a popular training location. Here one can find sandy patches, kelp, interesting reef life and a nice route to navigate. This is also a great place to do night dives, when the basket stars open like huge lace shawls.

One can swim all the way around Castle Rocks, exploring the mini-walls and also the sections farther out. There are a few caverns and "swim-throughs" at this site. Since this is a marine sanctuary and any fishing and harvesting is prohibited,





the fauna is prolific and many species of fish can be found.

False Bay and Gansbaai at one time were a hotbed for viewing great white sharks, but their presence has declined. Mossel Bay is now where great whites are seen on the most consistent basis. Normally depicted as basically mindless, solitary and fearless, *Carcharodon carcharias* is truly an amazing creature. It is found in all of the oceans of the world, even tropical seas. They eat highly intelligent prey, so they have to be operating at a higher level than the simplistic way they have been depicted. Large brained animals, dolphins and small whales, eared seals, sea otters and birds can make up a good percentage of their diets. And they can react to their prey, juking them into the wrong move. This has been seen during seal chases where the shark actually counters a seal's feint and traps it into going the wrong direction. The research has shown that these animals are very complex predators. So much so, that they are believed to be both cognizant and sentient hunters, highly capable of making a choice. Shooting from the boat or doing a cage dive is a must for any ocean lover.



Heading up the coast through the Garden Route, Plettenberg Bay is a vast area full of action. One added attraction is the chance sighting of orcas, especially in January through April. The presence of orcas can make the dolphins scarce but if the orcas are feeding (sometimes on dolphins), the action is exciting and a sight seen rarely by but a few.

At RIY Banks off Port Elizabeth, the Banks is one of the premiere dive sites in the area rife with amazingly colorful encrusting marine life. Especially interesting are the basket stars that cling to sea fans by day and open into lacey fans at night to feed. Speckled klipvis sit nestled among the orange tubastrea corals and other clinging marine invertebrate life. Giving the reef brilliant color are red sea whips, yellow cold-water corals and various sponges. Nudibranchs are diverse and ubiquitous and the ever-present crinoids wave from the cracks.

It gets wilder after this, with The Sardine Run along the Wild Coast. The sardine run is without a doubt one of the most interesting events on the South African coastline. Usually starting late May each year and continuing through early July, the Natal Sardine Run comes to the southeastern



coast of South Africa. Millions upon millions of sardines (*Sardinops ocellata*) shoal on the east coast between Port Elizabeth and Durban.

Each and every predator in the oceanic food chain follows this sardine bonanza. Whales, dolphins, sharks, seabirds, game fish all join in the great feast. People who have had the privilege to experience the sea during this time will never forget the vibe and the adrenaline rush. This presents the

adventurous snorkeler and diver a chance to experience one of Nature's most exciting events. Ultra-lights and small choppers are used to scout the area and zodiacs equipped with radios communicate and zero in on a place to drop the divers. The topside photography can be as amazing as the baitball action. The annual Sardine Run unique to South Africa.

Heading up the coast we have The Protea Banks. So why dive here? If conditions are right, this is a superb spot to drift dive and to sight pelagic fish and sharks. It can be a hit or miss dive, although bringing a bait bucket usually helps the chances of sharks showing up. Oceanic blacktips, tigers, hammerheads and bull sharks all make an appearance.

The diverse reef profile is also good for a good assortment of marine life. Divers see the increasing number of colorful Indian Ocean reef species mingling with the silver cold-water fishes. Thus, schooling snappers, bigeyes and sweetlips can be seen as can kingfish and mackerel. Most divers go here for the macho experience to see sharks while hurtling along at warp speed.

Between Umkomaas and Scottburgh is the Aliwal Shoal. It has one of those "rated by the late Jacques Cousteau" honors as "one the foremost dive sites in the world". This gives it a lot to live up to. But it is



equal to the task. It is truly an exciting and diverse site with plenty to offer all levels of divers.

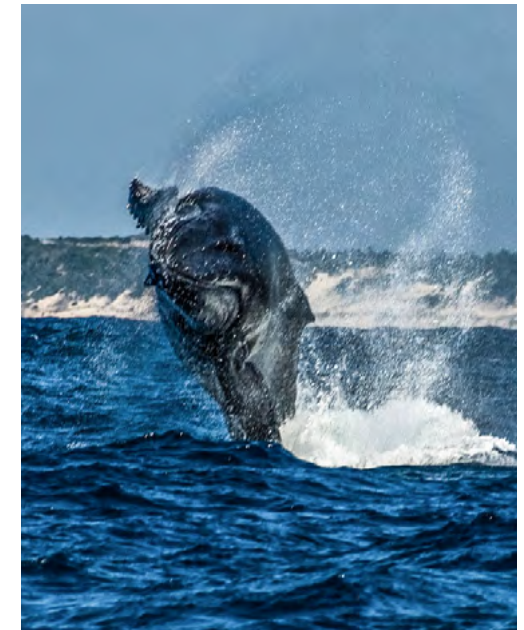
Aliwal Shoal is home to many different species of fish both tropical and sub-tropical. The expanded Aliwal Shoal Marine Protected Area was proclaimed in 2019. The MPA provides protection to the Crown Area - the main area of the Aliwal Shoal Reef popular with divers - and the extension protects deep reefs, endemic fish, catsharks and many mysterious species of the upper slope (to depths of 7200ft -2200m) that scientists are just starting to explore.

Watch for the northern migration of the humpback whale from June to October, the sperm

whale at odd times, minke whales year 'round and southern right whales from July to August. Common dolphins are seen June and July. The Natal Indian Ocean dolphin is here year 'round and occasionally the rare humpbacked dolphin.

Divers love the raggies that seasonally show up at Raggie Cave and the wreck The Produce is always full of fishy action.

Sodwana Bay is part of iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Its tropical reefs are fully protected. As a result, they teem with warm-water species, from countless types of colorful fish to manta rays, whale sharks, turtles and dolphins. The coral in Sodwana is also particularly



beautiful.

This is the start of the mile reefs that can be found from here and at just about every dive destination northward. Two Mile, Five Mile and the rest are named for their distance down the beach from the lighthouse on the bay's Jesser Point. None is far offshore and beach launches are done closest to Quarter Mile. Each reef area then has dive sites. Raggie sharks are here in season May thru December and they can be seen here in good numbers. Raggies like this site for the cleaning stations and stay on the shallows moving back and forth in a pattern in a small area. When conditions are really right, most local divers believe that is right before they



are ready to migrate, they gather in big groups of 20 to 30 sharks. At this time, they are big bellied pregnant females and present quite a scene with layers of big sharks hovering horizontally.

Later in the season, the currents bring plenty of plankton and mantas and whale sharks have been seen here. Look for Spanish mackerel, rays and other marine life.

Southern Mozambique

Not far from Sodwana is the Mozambique border and Ponta Do Ouro. It is 75 miles (120km) south of Maputo, and only 6mi (10km) from the South African border's Kosi Bay. The area was declared a Marine Protected Area and is managed to ensure that the reefs and their aquatic life retain their original pristine state.

Beach launches here can be fun as dolphins like to surf just offshore. A cruise down to the sites can produce schools of bottlenose dolphins, spinner dolphins farther

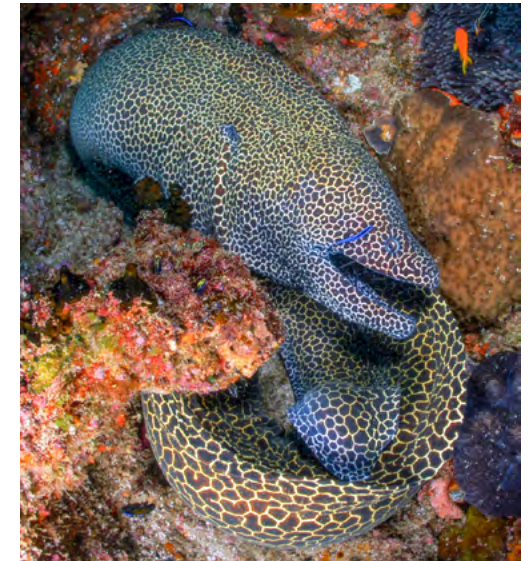
out and, in season, humpback whales and whale sharks. Underwater, Ponta do Ouro has a sandy shoreline with about 25 very different coral reef sites. There are shark drift dives similar to Protea Banks but generally deeper and with consistently better visibility. The sharks are mainly hammerheads, Zambezi and oceanic blacktips. Shallower second dives are spent looking for critters like big rays, rock cod, tropical fish and coral.

Moving north past Maputo are some amazing sites. As one ventures into Mozambique and heads up the two-lane blacktop, the look of the tropics becomes more evident. Coconut palms grace the roadside and the weather warms. A real sense of the tropics comes into play. At the literal end of the road is the town of Inhambane, up a peninsula from the main EN1 highway. Here a large pier jutting out into Inhambane Bay greets ships and the sun sets across the vast mangrove -lined peninsula. Coconut

trees have taken over the skyline and the traditional dhow sailing ships sit at anchor or come into port for the night, sails glowing in the evening sun.

It is from here a smorgasbord of dive bases can be accessed, each offering incredible diving and marine life. North of the pleasant city of Inhambane, at the tip of the peninsula, the mangroves merge with the sea and the marine life becomes even more varied. Tofo is pretty much this region's dive central and is quite popular. The mangroves are incubating grounds for all kinds of juveniles. Thus, the seas are full of unique creatures big and small. North of the famous Manta Reef, there are at least 20 sites with more being found all the time and they have some wonderful and rare surprises.

This is also a great place to see whale sharks and divers often see one and jump in on the way to a dive so



bring a snorkel when diving in Tofo. A lot of instruction takes place here too. The after-dive night life is fun and there are good restaurants and bars to



add to the fun atmosphere.

New dive sites are being found all the time. This coastline has so much to offer it can take many trips to explore it from The Cape to Bazaruto. What a wonderful chore!!

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Tim Rock is an internationally published photojournalist who specializes in the ocean realm. Based on Guam in the Western Pacific Ocean, Rock has traveled to South Africa/Mozambique numerous times to work with white shark and South Africa diving pioneer Jean-Pierre Botha. The two have just updated a full diving guide to the coastlines of South Africa and southern Mozambique.



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