

Adventure Mozambique

Story and Photos By Tim Rock

Whales and whale sharks. Mobulas and mantas. Bottlenose and humpback dolphins. Bull and great white sharks. They're all here waiting for ya. The potential of the place really sinks in from atop a rolling, sandy hill near the Mozambique coast.

Look inland. It takes but one evening watching a sunset from high atop an ancient dune overlooking broad plains of trees and rolling hills with not a telephone or power pole in sight and only two track roads meandering off in the distance to realize Mozambique is someplace special. Perhaps it is as close to the "real" Africa one expects. Look toward the sea. The sound of crashing surf and rolling seas stretch out across the horizon. The beaches are endless and there's no one on them but sea turtles.

Immediately crossing the border the change from South Africa to "Moz" is astonishingly apparent. Situated on the northern border of South Africa and along side the Indian Ocean, Mozambique is a country that boasts rich diving. Divers can spend a few days in nearby South Africa in the famous Kruger National Park hunting big game with a camera and then go

for the undersea life as well. Just leave the Crocodile Bridge gate and drive toward Maputo.

There's a mostly one lane black top that carries divers north of Maputo to the hotspot of Tofo Bay. Mozambique is known as a year round diving destination. The best months to dive along this coastline are May to July, due mainly to more moderate temperatures.

History

Humanoids have been around Mozambique for over 2 million years, and Homo sapiens have been settling the area for at least 100,000 years. Starting around 2000 years ago, Bantu peoples (named for their language group) began migrating into the area, bringing iron tools and weapons with them. Toward the end of the first millennium, several towns along the Mozambican coast grew into Bantu trading ports with links to other parts of Africa, the Middle East and India. The Arab influence in these ports was strong, and Swahili was the lingua franca of trade.

The country was not always



Above: Yoko Higashide snorkels with a youth male whale shark off Tofo.

Right: A giant potato cod fills a crevice at Manta Reef.



Tim Rock uses Nikon D200 cameras and primarily the Tokina 10-17mm zoom lens in Aquatica housings. Ikelite strobes and TLC arms are part of the kit as well.



The rich mangroves of the Inhambane Peninsula.



Fishermen watch from their tiny boat as a humpback whale sounds



Divers from the Manta Research Center head out into Tofo Bay.

accessible and hospitable. A recent long, horrific civil war has scarred the country, shattered its infrastructure and left a million land mines scattered about the countryside. Much of its wildlife, including big game such as elephants and rhinos, was decimated by war, and much of its coastline has been ravaged by cyclones. Droughts and floods take turns rubbing salt in Mozambique's wounds.

But it seems Mozambicans are a resilient bunch. They have begun putting the past behind them and have begun rebuilding their country at a remarkable pace.

Mozambique is fast reclaiming its former status as prime seaside destination. Mozambique is a somewhat reasonably priced destination. Very comfortable dive travel is available for US\$150 a day or less.

Most dives are done from 8m-rubber inflatable boats powered by 2x85hp+ motors. Dives sites vary considerably from approx. 7m down to a current-swept 35m plus.

Inhambane & Tofo

Divers head north up the coastal highway to the various venues along the expansive coast. Getting there is truly part of an amazing journey through Mozambican life. People center much of their lives and activities along the main roads. Kids swimming naked in swimming holes, women with immense bundles of wood atop their heads, men shoeing cattle down the sandy path are all images gathered while careening down the oft potholed two-lane blacktop that winds north to the famous beaches and reefs. A boy hawks a small parrot in a handmade wire cage. Young girls with baskets of red berries try to attract passing buyers. Buses with massive loads and a crushing load huff down the highways. Pickup taxis brim to capacity with people.

Mozambique has become the escape of choice for northern dwelling South African divers. Many make weekend drives into "Moz" to enjoy the

beaches and reefs.

About eight to ten to twelve hours drive up the two-lane (sometimes pocked) blacktop is a jutting peninsula. It can now divers can fly on small turbo-prop planes. Baggage can be a bit limited but it is fast and less bone-jarring. In two hours you're there from Johannesburg.

The newest hotspot is Tofo Bay. Protected and scenic, this bay holds some nice lodges and motels. The Casa Barry Lodge is the home of the The Manta Ray & Whale Shark Research Centre, small science outpost with a big job of trying to survey and protect the area's main attractions. You can hear whale shark and manta lectures at the lodge twice-a-week. Tofo Scuba is the main dive operation here. It's a PADI 5-Star with all kinds of training available. Longtime Moz diver John Pears runs the place and is still finding new dive sites along the coast.



Top left and center: Snorkeler Yoko Higashide cavorts with bottlenose dolphins and a young whale shark. Right: A large manta hovers over the cleaning station.

Manta Reef

The premier site of the Inhambane coastal peninsula is without a doubt the massive manta cleaning station. Manta Reef, as it is cleverly called, starts in about 20m of water along the top of a rocky and craggy ridge.

Divers are always on the lookout heading for the site. Whale sharks feed along the coast and seasonal humpback whales breach and play amazingly close to shore. Sometimes they even come right into the shallow Tofo Bay. We slipped in to the water with a pod of bottlenose dolphins and the pod played with us for a while before moving on to better things. We were told we were snorkeling in the same place a diver had seen a great white shark the year before!

The Manta Reef reeftop is featureless although there are some cracks and crevices. Its

full of many sea anemones in amazing numbers. Soft leather corals also thrive here and stubby but brilliant red soft corals feed in the constant flow. The attraction is not only the mantas but also the holes, valleys and cracks that run along either side of a ridge bottoming out at 27m on the shoreward side and 31m on the seaward side. Here schools of striped snapper congregate in large numbers along with shoals of bigeyes and lots of red fang triggerfish.

The cleaning stations here are also the place to see large and somewhat docile potato cod.

But the reef got its name for the mantas and they are there feeding in the current and swooping in for cleaning. According to resident marine biologist Andrea Marshall, this relatively unexplored section of the Mozambican coastline boasts what appears to be one of the largest most stable populations of mantas in the world. She has

seen upwards of 30 mantas on a single dive being cleaned at the various cleaning stations. She feels over 400 mantas actually live and thrive in the area. Her years of research at the Centre leads her to believe the consistency of the numbers of mantas on these coastal reefs is unparalleled. Manta Reef is consistently being used by mantas throughout the year.

There are actually three main cleaning stations that the mantas visit. And these mantas are generally huge. The biggest are mostly females. Mantas can be seen in numbers of up to 30 rays at a time. They circle a reef flat area looking for a quick clean from a wrasse and can get quite close to divers if one says still and doesn't chase them. The largest ray may exceed 7m across.

And one odd thing about this population is well over 70% of the mantas have some sort of shark bite. Some have huge crescents taken from



A resident school of batfish hang in the current in the waters above Manta Reef.

their wings and rear areas. Others are even missing a mandible. Many have no tails. In all, it is tough to be a manta in these waters. And even though large sharks are rarely seen on this reef, they are evidently here. Not only are the mantas a testament to their presence, but bait balls often boil in the water only to dissipate in a flurry of writhing fins and tails at the surface of the Tofo sea. So the sharks are here. Zambesis (bull), tigers and even great white have been reported in the area.

Divers can also look for mobulas, eagle rays and the occasional reef shark to cruise by. Sometimes the toylike mobulas come in to clean with the giant mantas. And marble rays and guitarfish can be seen in the sandy flats off the reef in the sand or under crevices. Sea turtles like loggerheads and even leatherbacks are here as well as lots of other tropicals and the collection of goldies (anthias) is amazingly colorful and active.



A beach launch is a daily chore along the sandy coastline here.

Ascend the buoy line and decompress in open ocean keeping an eye out for whale sharks as they like it here and are sometimes seen feeding over this reef.

This is one of those dives where the diver wished he or she could stay all day. Even as we ascended, the batfish patrol reappeared and then six giant rays moved across the reef directly below us. Few dives have the consistent electricity and variety this place has and even fewer can package it all in one submersion. This little spot off the continental shelf is a truly superb site by any and all standards.

As if the mantas aren't enough, one of the many great attractions in Mozambique waters is the chance to see and dive or snorkel with a whale shark, *Rhincodon typus*. The focal point of this endeavor is the area south of Tofo Bay but they can cruise the shallow northern coast as well. The sharks here are feeding happily on an abundance of

plankton in the water. Encounters of up to ten whale sharks of all sizes have been reported in a two-hour span. This relatively shallow expanse is only 5-30m deep.

For best results, snorkel with the shark and don't touch the big fish. Some get spooked and dive down away from snorkelers but others get curious and actually seem to want to play, slowing to swim with the snorkelers. Even though they seem to be barely moving, whale sharks are cruising at a pretty brisk clip. Watch the graceful motion of the largest fish as it seines food. When the whale shark does decide to leave the presence of its short-term guests, it may do an almost balletic move, twisting tail and body and showing off its white underside as it careens downward into the abyss. The rays of the sun reflect in shafts through the water and make the departure of the shark and amazing sight to see.

More Tofo

Beachy and laid back, this tip of the peninsula is blessed with an eastern sunrise and a western sunset over the mangroves. Waters are plankton rich and feature whale sharks in season and plenty of game fish and sea life. It isn't a luxurious place to stay and pushing the boat into the surf every day can be a real chore, but rewards are worth the efforts. This is the ocean at its finest. Wild Tofo.

There is also another manta cleaning spot called The Office. On one dive we saw twin leopard moray eels, a manta with white wingtips and small valleys and gorges with lots of sea life. Anemones colonies were encased in soft bristle corals. There were Goldies, triggerfish and lots going on. When



The coastal dunes and broad beaches are excellent places to watch the sun rise

we surfaced, a huge leatherback turtle was sunning itself close to our RIB.

Also nice are the shallow reefs just out from Casa Barry Lodge. There are very good sites for small fish life and juvenile fish. Linkia starfish releasing, dragonets, many nudibranchs, oyster, crocodilefish, green mantis shrimp, glassy sweeping huge numbers with baby barracuda.

More and more of the coast is being explored and the wealth of big marine life here is just beginning to be fully appreciated. From migrating whales to whale sharks to one of the world's most incredible manta array populations, this piece of the African

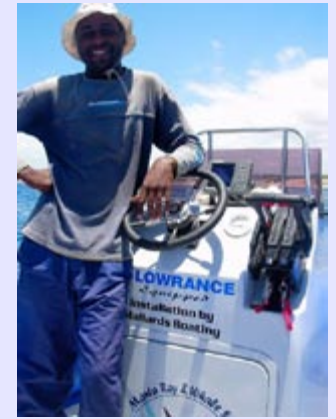
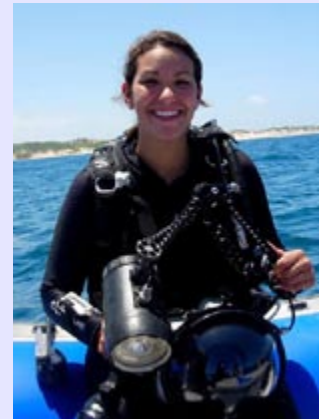
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Manta & Whale Shark Research Centre

Researching, protecting and conserving the marine life of Mozambique



The Manta Ray & Whale Shark Trust is a non-profit organisation formed in 2004 to encourage and facilitate research, conservation and education on manta rays and whale sharks in southern Africa. As a result of hunting and war, large land animals are scarce in Mozambique. This costs the country millions in lost tourism revenue each year as it is bypassed by the 'safari circuit'. However, marine life in the country is outstanding.

Mozambique may have the largest populations of mantas and whale sharks in the world, presenting a major addition to ecotourism in southern Africa and a point of difference for Mozambique itself.

These massive fish are now the focus of a burgeoning tourism industry in the south of the country, providing much-needed employment in one of the poorest countries in the world.

The Manta Ray & Whale Shark Trust is now conducting world-leading research in Mozambique on the ecology and conservation of mantas and whale sharks.

To learn more about the work of Drs. Andrea Marshall (left), Simon Pierce (centre) and locally born boat driver Gulamo Mamudo Ismael (right) go to:

<http://mozmarinescience.googlepages.com>