

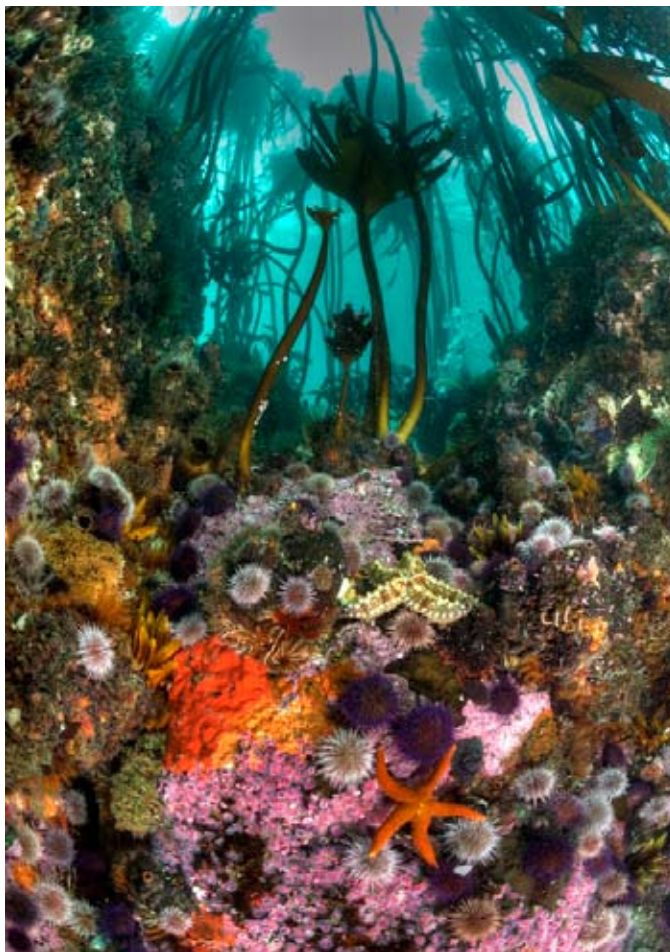
Diving Cape Town

with images by Geoff Spiby
and text by Georgina Jones

To the cursing Portuguese sailors battling to contain the wind in their fragile sails, it was the Cape of Storms. Their king, thinking of the wealth a sea route to the East would bring, named it the Cape of Good Hope. Subsequent explorers fell in love with its vertiginous mountains and shaded valleys and called it the Fairest Cape. Botanists studying the local vegetation, astonished by the variety and uniqueness of the plants, proclaimed it the smallest of the six known floral kingdoms, the Cape Floristic Region. Underwater, though no-one has yet given it a name, the wonderland unfolds even further.

Simply put, Cape Town is one of the most fascinating places to dive on earth. It combines really impressive megafauna with an astonishing array of invertebrate life, as well as soaring granite reef topography, kelp forests and ghostly wrecks, much of which can be reached by shore entries. On top of that, despite it being the most studied water around the South African coast, undescribed species are discovered on a regular basis.

The general format of Cape Town Peninsula diving is False Bay side in the winter when the north west winds blow, and what is known as the Atlantic side in summer, when south east winds cause the visibility to open up to over 20m, all the better to take wide angle images with. The two sides of the peninsula are very different indeed. Imagine the False Bay side as an Old Master painting, all olives, rich burnt oranges, terracottas and the



Old Master colours on a False Bay reef Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing 10.5 mm Nikon lens F8 1/60th sec ISO 200

occasional bright purple. The Atlantic side, by contrast, is more like an Andy Warhol: acid pinks, neon yellows, electric blues and vivid greens. Then there are pelagic trips, where it's all about blue. Operators take divers out south of Cape Point until they reach the warm waters of the Agulhas Current



A basket star on an Atlantic side reef Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing Tokina 10-17 @10mm F9 1/60th sec ISO200

and there they look for blue sharks and makos.

Great white shark cage diving is a guaranteed thrill, but increasingly, photographers are heading for a small surface-breaking pyramid-shaped rock south of Simonstown. It's known with startling originality as Pyramid. Here, either after a small

rocky clamber and a short surface snorkel or an even shorter boat ride, divers can revel in the presence of sevengill sharks in a mere 10m of water. These sharks are the only inshore members of the most ancient shark family, the Hexanchidae, and they inhabit the kelp forest around Pyramid all year. They're near-apex predators which grow to around 3m in total length and have only great whites or orcas to fear. They are opportunistic ambush hunters which may, acting on as-yet unknown signals, hunt as a pack, particularly when they go for seals. They are curious animals and will come close in to inspect divers in their regular circuits through the kelp forest, providing photographers with many opportunities for close-up images.

A bit further south of Pyramid is another rock, this one larger, flatter and rather smellier. With the same originality that marked Pyramid's naming, this rock is known as Seal Point and this is where a big colony of Cape fur seals haul out to mate and bring up their pups. Seals are a regular feature of Cape Town diving, and are known to startle many divers by diving down in front of them and barking. But diving with these underwater dancers is a real treat. Watching seals as they twirl, swoop and pose underwater, trailing silvery bubbles, all liquid-eyed and fluid of form, their land-based ungainliness seems like it must be an act.

Winter is the season when the southern right whales arrive around the peninsula to bear and raise their gigantic babies (a southern right is a decidedly nontrivial 700kilos at birth). The southern rights occasionally come right into the shallows and shore divers tell tales of giant shadows turning out to be whales playing around them. Humpback whales also pass through on their northward migrations, enlivening dives with their haunting songs.



The Andy Warhol colours of the Atlantic side Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing 10.5 mm Nikon lens F5.6 ISO160 1/60sec

Orcas visit, schools of yellowtail rush overhead, and common dolphins hunt in huge schools more than five hundred strong. Many divers, however, barely notice the megafauna, being seriously preoccupied with the benthic reef life. Cape Town's average visibility is 8m, which is to



Sevengill cowsharks come close in to inspect divers Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing 10.5 mm Nikon lens f5.6 iso 320 1/60sec



A crowned nudibranch on the wreck of the Pietermaritzburg Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing ISO250 F8 1/60sec Tokina 10-17mm @10mm



Heading into the kelp forest Nikon D-7000 camera in Nauticam housing with 2 Inon Z-240 strobes Tokina 10-17mm @10mm ISO 250 F8 1/60sec

say, the waters around the peninsula are a thin soup which provides nourishment for a host of filter feeders and planktivores. Carnivorous subsea forests of several species of seafan grow over a metre in total height, extending their delicate polyps into the water to extract their prey. Topshell snails, blue-spotted klipfish and long-legged spidercrabs take advantage of the fans' added vantage point and pursue their own hunts. The fractal nets of basket stars unfurl to catch passing small crustaceans.

Octopus lurk in holes, surrounded by debris gardens of mussel shells.

The reefs are made up of densely covered granite boulders, jumbled together to form swimthroughs, overhangs and the occasional cave. Rearing peaks reach up towards the surface and sudden faults provide a glimpse into the life of shy dark-loving species like the mouth-brooding seacatfish or John Browns, brown fish with cerulean blue eyes and protruding yellow teeth enough to give any fish dentist nightmares.



A seafan forest on Atlantis Reef. Nikon D-7000 camera in Nauticam housing with 2 Inon Z-240 strobes Tokina 10-17mm @10mm ISO 320 F8 1/60sec

For photographers it's hard to know where to start. Macro subjects are everywhere you look and often even finding a fingertip's space to balance requires a concentrated search. Over a hundred species of nudibranch are known from False Bay and more are being described with extraordinary regularity. Some, like the locally common gasflame, are huge by nudibranch standards, growing up to 10cm in total length,



A gasflame nudibranch in an unusual pose Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing Nikon 60mm F36 ISO 100

others are tiny but vivid splashes of colour, while still others are extremely well camouflaged and almost indistinguishable from their prey.

Camouflage is something of a motif: smoothskin scorpionfish are extremely common but seldom seen, so well do they blend in with their environments. Their bigger cousins lurk on reefs almost undetected apart from the sheen of their eyes. The toothed decorator crab which, as its

name implies, is usually covered with a fantastic array of camouflaging growths and is almost always very hard to spot. When recently moulted though, it is a dangerously conspicuous magenta, a problem it solves by hiding in the fields of striped anemones commonly found on False Bay reefs. These anemones have the unusual ability of firing sticky defensive threads through their body walls and the crabs co-opt them for their own defence.

Cape Town is blessed with no less than four different species of inshore catsharks: puffadder and dark shysharks, and pyjama and leopard catsharks. All four have the habit of curling up into a ball when threatened, presumably to make them too big for the predator to swallow. Of course, given that the biggest of them, the pyjama catshark is a not-specially huge 1.2m in total length, this strategy only works for a relatively small predator. All four species lay eggs in cases known as mermaids' purses, and divers with torches can sometimes see the living jewel of the embryonic shark as it dreams and grows inside.

As the earth swings round and presents its southern hemisphere to the sun, so the prevailing wind changes to the south east and this is where Atlantic side diving comes into its own. Sun strikes down through kelp forests and lights up a myriad vividly



*Southern right whales come to Cape Town in the winter to calve and mate.
Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing ISO200 F8 1/90sec Tokina 10-17mm @10mm (no strobe)*

coloured invertebrates. Sponges are resplendent in acid yellow, scarlet, purple and bright green. Anemones are electric blue or purple-splotched orange. Hydroids resembling hard corals are pink and prolific. Over and around them all are the small flames of nudibranchs in a bewildering array of colours and shapes, some only ever seen on this coast. The crabs are here too: the amazingly camouflaged sumo crab blends almost invisibly with the

reef. Its cousin, the shaggy sponge crab, which has considerably longer hairlike growth on its carapace, would be a lot harder to spot were it not for its strange predilection for decorating itself with a variety of vivid sponges (the neon green one is a particular favourite) or soft corals. Klipfish perch on the invertebrates, posing like eager starlets, and silver hottentots drift like dream fish through the kelp.

The undersea topography of



A Cape fur seal, marine ballerina Nikon D-200 camera with Sea & Sea housing and Nikon SB-800 strobe in Subal housing Nikon 10.5mm F5.6 ISO 160 1/250sec

the Atlantic side is mostly massive granite outcrops which rear up from the seabed in walls and soaring cliffs, tumble together to make caves and swimthroughs and provide sheltered environments for the more delicate animals: brittle fan hydroids and lacy false corals cluster in crevices. It's a fantasia of neon and acid colours, and after a good south east blow,



A school of hottentot Nikon D-7000 camera in Nauticam housing with 2 Inon Z-240 strobes Tokina 10-17mm @10mm ISO 320 F8 1/60sec

the visibility can be well over 20m. Divers wander in crystalline blue of a clarity matched only by its low temperature: the deep upwelled water can be under 10°C.

It's hard to know what most to emphasize about Cape diving. Even the storms which so imperilled the early explorers have played their part. There are more than 500 wrecks within an hour's drive of Cape Town and many more as yet unaccounted

for. For wreck enthusiasts, there are wrecks dating from the 1600s to last year to explore. Some vessels have been scuttled to provide artificial reefs, or have succumbed to Navy target practice. Others ran afoul of the storms for which the Cape is justifiably legendary and provide divers with both exploration and epic tales of misadventure, bravery and, occasionally, sheer farce. These tales must sometimes be enjoyed on land

rather than while en route to or from a wreck dive: it is the Cape of Storms after all.

But it's not stormy all the time. And for much of the year divers and underwater photographers revel in the rich submarine wonderland that exists all around the peninsula of the Fairest Cape.

Images

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Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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