

This is Africa

by Tom Burd

“Leave your lumbago on the beach, hook your feet into the floor-straps, and hang on for dear life!” Perhaps my memory of the actual safety briefing is a tad hazy, but this is the general advice needed when launching a RIB through the rough South African swell. Grab your camera housings and tuck in those strobe arms, as reaching the dive sites here is an experience in itself.

The province of Kwa-Zulu Natal on the Eastern coast of South Africa is one that all divers and thrill seekers should remember, even if you can’t pronounce the name! Spread over an area larger than Scotland, this region is renowned for its world class shark diving, whale encounters and the phenomenal sardine run.

The beautifully wild coastline is a photographer’s paradise, boasting many opportunities to witness Africa’s iconic land mammals and discover a variety of breath taking scenery. The diving in South Africa is extremely varied and seasonal, ranging from the warm tropical reefs of the Indian Ocean at Sodwana Bay, to the cold kelp forests of Cape Town. This makes it impossible to cover everything on a single trip, but if you have a particular species on your tick-list, the chances are you can probably find it here at some point during the year! Top this off with the incredible current exchange rate for UK travellers, and South Africa becomes a major contender for that next photo trip.

My objective for this visit was sharks, sharks and more sharks. With this in mind the first stop



King of the reef, the bull shark’s muscles and curves make for some great portraits. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, f13, 1/250, ISO 200, Available light.

was Shelly Beach, a small bustling town 2.5 hours South of Durban. Roughly 8 km offshore lies the phenomenal Protea Banks, a 6 km long reef rising to 27 m below the surface.

With no natural harbours to provide shelter from the constant pounding waves, getting out to sea requires a touch of improvisation: the “surf launch”. Early in the morning, before the winds pick up, the dive boat is dumped onto the sand and dragged with great effort through the first breakers,

before everyone scrambles aboard and straps in!

The final step relies on the expertise of the skipper, who must perfectly time his exit between the rocks and the incoming waves. This can be very bumpy and with little storage space available, a cushioned container for your camera equipment is highly recommended. I personally use a large beer cooler bag! Not only does this come in very handy for post-dive barbecues (or “braai” in Afrikaans), but it is extremely well padded and has convenient



Waiting for a gap in the waves at Shelly Beach. Timing is vital!

© Kym Pollard, Aqua Planet Dive Centre

When the sun shines there are many interesting lighting opportunities within the top ten meters of water. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 13mm, f18, 1/320, ISO 200, 2x Sea and Sea YS-D1.

carry handles. It also does a great job of keeping your kit cool on a sunny day, helping to prevent any inconvenient housing fog during the dive.

If you survive the launch then keep your eyes peeled at all times, as whales and dolphins are galore in these highly productive waters. We were lucky enough to see many humpback whale breaches, and even be in the water to witness a “fly-by”

from a mother and her calf!

July to October is typically the period of their migrations along the coastline, however last year they stayed into late November. This coincided particularly well with my trip, being also the beginning of the hammerhead season on Protea Banks. By this I don’t just mean the occasional sighting, I’m talking about regular, Galapagos-style schools of thousands of scalloped hammerheads





Witnessing schooling hammerheads on Protea Banks is a moment of true joy, and one that every diver will cherish forever. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, f9, 1/100, ISO 500, Available light.

(without the need to take out a second mortgage)!

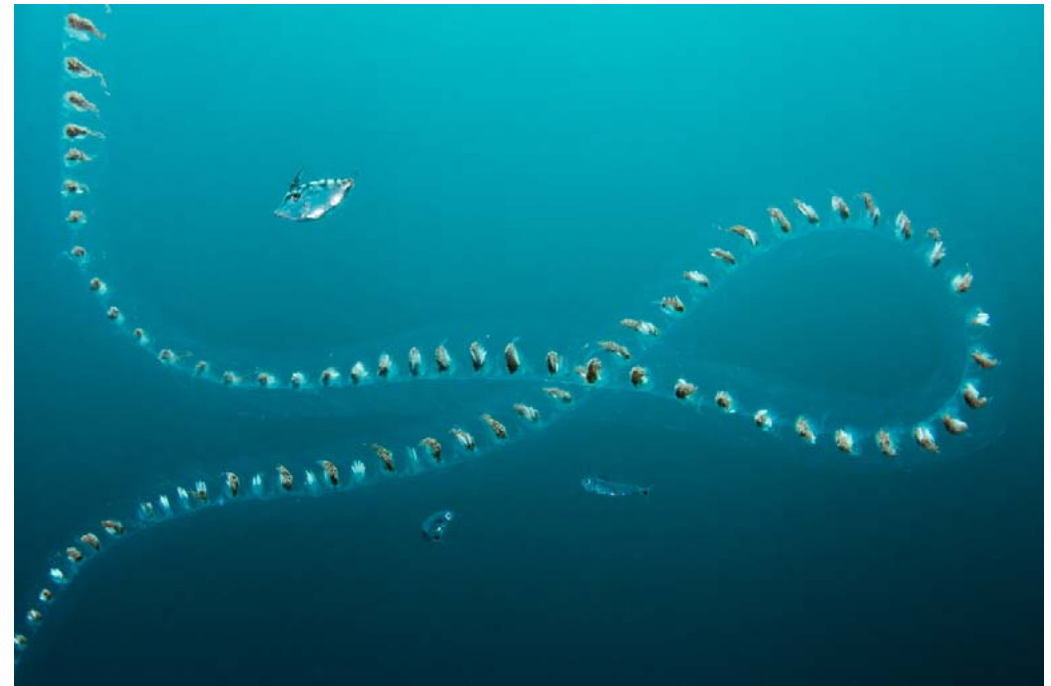
The compromise that you make by choosing South Africa over a Galapagos liveaboard is the visibility, which normally ranges from 5-15m. This makes it very challenging to photograph such skittish animals, so don't expect to come home with crystal clear shots in blue water.

After a few dives I actually found that removing my strobes to reduce drag was critical for any attempt to photograph the distant schools, which always seemed to linger on the edge of visibility. Without a rebreather it's unlikely that you will get close

enough to need a flash anyway! However, on a couple of days, the water cleared and we were greeted by the most amazing sight of a dense hammerhead wall, spanning from top to bottom. The sheer number of sharks was mind-boggling and I was instantly transfixed by their beautiful undulating bodies.

Being in their presence was an incredibly humbling experience, especially considering the huge pressure on shark populations worldwide, and I could have honestly gone home very happy at that point.

There was more to come however, as South Africa is widely



This delicate siphonophore was a few metres in length and home to a variety of juvenile fishes. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 17mm, f11, 1/250, ISO 400, 2x Sea and Sea YS-D1.

considered the home of the baited shark dive. Although understandably a controversial topic, these close encounters within the top 10 m can provide some of the best photographic opportunities, especially when visibility is low.

Historically the most famous location for this is Aliwal Shoal, a reef situated 90 km to the North, where people have been diving with sharks since the 1980s. The main attraction here is the large population of blacktip sharks (*Carcharhinus limbatus*), a species which is

widespread along many tropical and sub-tropical coastlines, and is surprisingly even found throughout the Mediterranean Sea. These fast moving, agile predators are great fun to share the water with, and divers quickly find themselves surrounded by over 20 individuals at a time. To get a clean shot without the baiting equipment and divers in the frame is not easy, even with so many sharks to choose from! Luckily however, halfway through our first dive another boat joined nearby, which created a "corridor" of sharks travelling in-



A glimpse into the mayhem of a baited dive at Aliwal Shoal! Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 14mm, f20, 1/100, ISO 500, Available light.

between the two groups of divers.

This was the perfect opportunity to photograph them away from the baiting process, as they were much calmer and presented against more pleasing backgrounds. I was also tentatively hoping for a tiger shark (*Galeocerdo cuvier*) to make an appearance, as they are regular visitors here from December to May, but of course they decided to arrive a few days after my departure!

Protea Banks offers similar baited dives to Aliwal Shoal and even boasts a greater variety of species.

Whilst the blacktips are less abundant, it's more common to encounter large bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*), known locally as Zambezi, as well as the slender bronze whaler or copper shark (*Carcharhinus brachyurus*). Even great hammerheads (*Sphyrna mokarran*) occasionally come to investigate!

Bull sharks in particular have always fascinated me, and I jumped at the opportunity to capture their raw power through the lens. Normally the cheeky blacktips start the proceedings by creating havoc around the drum,



In particular on Aliwal Shoal, most sharks were accompanied by a charismatic remora or two. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17mm Fisheye at 10mm, f16, 1/100, ISO 500, 2x Sea and Sea YS-D1.

whilst the bulls waited patiently below for these hyperactive little puppies to calm down, before rising up to take pride of place. Their beefy outline is a perfect candidate for silhouettes through the murky water, and they exude a relaxed but confident “king of the reef” personality, making it easy to predict their swim patterns and plan your shots.

Interestingly, they have the unique ability to thrive in extremely varied water salinities, from hyper-saline lagoons to entirely freshwater, hundreds of kilometres upstream.

This is the aquatic equivalent of an Arctic fox surviving a trip to the Sahara desert! For a long time it was actually believed that Lake Nicaragua, the largest lake in Central America, contained its very own species of freshwater shark. However, in 1961 it was shown that they are in fact bull sharks, which are thought to have jumped up the rapids of the San Juan River from the Caribbean, just like salmon!

The reef itself on Protea is covered by magnificent sponges and hosts a variety of fishes including



Not far from Shelly Beach, a drive around the beautiful Lake Eland nature reserve is a great way to relax after a day diving. Nikon D7000, Nikon 70-210mm at 135mm, f7.1, 1/250, ISO 100.

grouper, kingfish and stingray, but it is tricky to explore properly due to the extreme currents found here. We once drifted over 6 km on a single baited dive! As a result it is necessary to quickly descend and stay close to the guide, who is dragged along by a permanently deployed surface marker buoy. Photographers, in particular, must pay serious attention to the whereabouts of the guide, as current strength varies with depth and the skipper cannot follow two SMBs at once in these conditions.

After 15 minutes of flying over

the reef, the group starts a slow multi-level ascent, with good chances of some mid-water shark encounters. Whilst wide-angle photography takes priority on Protea, you may also want to put on your macro lens for at least one dive, as the variety of planktonic life during the safety stops is astounding! From salps and siphonophores to tiny jellyfish, these intricate alien-like creatures are completely mesmerising.

Between November and March, ask the skipper to drop you over "Sand Shark Gully" on the



The true force of nature is ever present on South African beaches!

Southern Pinnacles, where dozens of giant guitarfish (*Rhynchobatus djiddensis*) congregate at 40 m. These unique looking rays can grow up to 3 m in length, and are often found cruising along the sand in squadrons. During the colder months of May to September, it is more common to dive the Northern Pinnacles, where a series of caves provide shelter for huge groups of spotted ragged-tooth sharks (*Carcharias taurus*). These ferocious looking "raggies" migrate North from Cape Town in order to mate, and the sight of a cave packed to the brim with them would certainly be worth a visit on its own!

Although not for the faint hearted, a trip to South Africa is

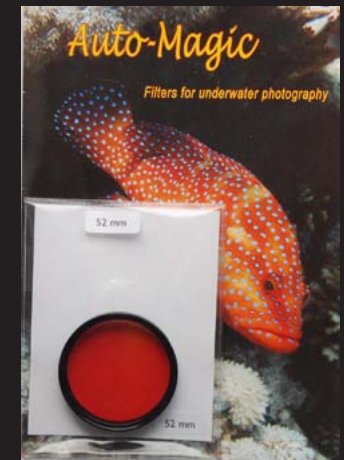
always exhilarating and full of surprises. Keep an open mind and allow yourself enough time to properly explore the area, as there is so much to visit and nature will always dictate your sightings. If you enjoy fast drifts, adventure, and can embrace the prospect that a great white shark might just decide to turn up, then I guarantee you won't be disappointed!

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