

AFRICA

Any trip to Africa is best coupled with an inland safari. Timing your trip so that it coincides with animal migrations as well as the best diving season is a complicated affair; check with a specialist. ... The diving off the coast of Kenya and Tanzania is hit-and-miss. Better diving is found around Pemba Island and off the coast of South Africa.

Mozambique

Marlin Lodge, Bossi Yacht, August 2002, Tom & Tresa Jaskunas (tjaskunas@dalbymontrose.com), Montrose, CO. Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 30 to 150 feet. Water: calm, currents. We stayed 13 nights at the Bazaruto Archipelago. The first two nights at Marlin Lodge, then 10 nights on the yacht *Bossi* and the last night back at the lodge. The Archipelago is a series of small sand islands about a half an hour boat ride from Vilanculos on the main land. We flew to Vilanculos by way of Johannesburg. The air service is small and has its own way of doing things. We did not ever get a ticket — just confirmation we had a seat. We were required to carry all of luggage to the plane; the ticket counter at Johannesburg did not show any sign that the carrier even existed until minutes before someone showed up to sign us in. We got several warnings from the travel agent (Island Castaways) prior to the flight that there was a strict weight limit on the bags (10 kgs per person). We were over by a few kgs and paid an

extra charge of less than \$10 (paid nothing coming back). There is nothing wrong with the air service just a little strange. The islands have mosquitoes and clearly malaria, so be sure to take proper precautions. Marlin Lodge is nice with good food and excellent service. Our first night was spent in one of their new rooms. Very impressive; just one thing missing, a mosquito net. We woke up in the middle of the night being eaten alive (thank God for the medication). We complained the next day and were given an older room with a mosquito net and a fruit basket for our trouble. The second room was fine. The next day we went out with the resort's dive operation. Fast boats, small groups (four to eight divers), and a dive guide who knew the water. The best diving we saw was a dive site on the ocean side of the islands called Two Mile Reef. Clear water, excellent fish life, and beautiful coral (I would rate this site in my top 5). Because the site is exposed to the open ocean, the swells can be sizable so not every boat is up to the job. Although we tried to dive at Two Mile Reef from the yacht *Bossi* later in our trip, we never made it. After our second night at the Lodge we were picked up by the crew of *Bossi*. The yacht is a 45-foot catamaran that normally sails the waters of Madagascar. Because of the political trouble in Madagascar, the boat had moved to Mozambique. The boat was clean, our room with private bathroom was large, the crew of three were helpful and professional and we ended up being the only guests on the boat. The skiff used to take us to the dive sites was one step up from useless. Under powered, dangerous to get in and out of, and

could not handle the sizable swells on the ocean side of the islands. The boat's system for generating fresh water was broken, so we were limited to the fresh water the boat could carry. This meant salt water showers with a fresh water rinse and a lost day in the middle of the trip to get more water. Last the boat really was not a live-aboard. Although we clearly were there to dive, we did less than 10 dives in 10 days. The diving we did from the yacht was on the protected side of the island, generally shallow, good visibility with great numbers of small fish (in one case an absolute wall of fish) with lots of macro stuff. The morning we got off the boat, we ran back to Marlin Lodge so we could make one last dive on Two Mile Reef. It was the best dive of the trip. So if I was to do the trip again I would stay at the lodge for a greater part of the trip, bring a thicker wet suit (5mm), and pack a mosquito net.

(www.marlinlodge.co.za)

South Africa

African Shark Eco-Charters, April/May 2002, Pat Wikstrom, Warne, NC. False Bay was boiling with great white activity. Four circled the boat, chomping at the bait; only to have it jerked away at the last instant. Sometimes they managed to snag the hunks of tuna and sliced through the 3/8-ft line like a surgeon's knife, taking off with their 5lb snack in one easy flick of their tails. One of the big boys, clearly frustrated at having this tasty morsel repeatedly pulled away, finally got his massive jaws around the prize and for some reason gets stuck. All of a sudden

all hell breaks loose. The shark realizes he's caught on a line and churns the water in a wild frenzy until up he comes out of the water like a marlin on a hook. Thrashing and twisting he crashes down and immediately dives below the boat. In a millisecond the rope is jerked out of Rob's hands, but the end is tied to a cleat, and just like the movie, *Jaws* starts pulling the stern underwater. Passengers were staggering and bouncing into each other, cameras were soaked by the spray, I'm trying to keep from falling over the rail and still line up shots and mash the shutter button. Our captain grabbed a filet knife and is about to cut the rope when suddenly the shark strips off the bait and is gone. Then up pops our boat. We visited all three distinct areas where white shark tourism has developed (False Bay, Mossel Bay, and Gansbaai). Each is focused on a permanent seal colony living on a virtually barren island in the middle of a protected bay. Simonstown, an hour drive from Capetown, and Seal Island in False Bay. We dived with African Shark Eco-Charters owned by Rob Lawrence and Chris Fallows. These are the guys who first popularized the "Air Jaws" phenomenon of great whites leaping clear out of the water in their efforts to snag breakfast. Leaving port at the crack of dawn we bounced our way out to the island and circled several times looking for signs of predation. A couple of heavily scarred seals attested to the presence of sharks and the survival skills of the seals. To try and induce a breach we began by towing a floating seal shaped decoy for an hour without success. No sooner did we abandon the effort, put down our cameras, and start pulling in

the decoy when up from the depths came a huge white shark which leapt out of the water and splashed back down having missed the decoy entirely. In False Bay breaches can occur multiple times in a morning or you can go days without seeing a thing. A potato sack of sardines was alternately stepped on and bounced in and out of the water. Within an hour we had our first player. More than fifteen different animals over the course of the day, often with two or three animals circling the boat at one time. The vis was down and Rob didn't deploy the cage but the surface action was heart stopping. Huge sharks up to 16 ft. long chomped at the floating bait, chased each other off, tasted the outboards, and fixed us with their cold impassionate black eyed stare. Renting a car in Capetown we drove approximately 4 hours to Mossel Bay. Shark Africa owners Roy and Jacky Portway have operated their 40 ft long sailing yacht, *Infantes*, since 1995. A leisurely 30 minute puts you at their Seal Island where they establish a slick with the now familiar bags of sardine chum. A two man semicircular steel cage, which is permanently attached to the stern, is swung down as soon as the boat has anchored. Hunks of seven gill or hammerhead shark were attached to a floating line to draw them in to the stern. Waiting times varied from 10 minutes to 2 hours before the first sharks appeared. After the shark settles down the first two cagers are weighted with mountains of lead, climb in, and breathe off hookah regs fed from an onboard tank. Pairs of divers alternate going in and out of the cage as long as the sharks hang around which also varies in duration from 10

minutes to an hour or so. After the first animals disappear the waiting begins again, inevitably leading to a new set of sharks coming by to check us out. Seal Island is less than a mile from a swimmers beach and affords the surrealistic experience of watching great whites circling the boat while vacationers frolic along the beach off in the distance. Gansbaai is the most famous location associated with white shark eco-tourism. Here there are eight licensed operators, friendly competition as well as occasional animosity. Approximately 5 a huge colony of 30,000 seals lives on Geyser Rock. Great whites continuously circle the island. Most days there are three boats lined up in the channel with several others taking up positions in other favorable locations. Cage diving in Gansbaai has evolved over the last 10 years into a mostly uniform system of equipment and procedures. Boats are approx. 30 ft long, single hull, catamarans, powered by twin outboards. First aid and oxygen kits, along with depth finders, marine radios and cell phones are all standard equipment. Most boats carry a single round cage made of rebar and square wire mesh, which is thrown overboard, tethered to the side, and floats a few inches above the surface by means of four plastic boat fenders slung inside the cage. These lightweight contraptions are capable of holding two divers at a maximum depth of 8 ft. the sharks took off when we started breathing off the regulators. We were instructed to perform breath hold diving for most of our in water time. Passengers and crew on board would holler out when the sharks were approaching and we'd duck down and try to shoot what

we could as the sharks swam by. We worked with J.P. Botha and Andre Hartman of Marine Dynamics (the guy who discovered that grabbing the nose of an advancing shark seems to put the animal into a trance like state rising up out of the water with it's mouth wide open). A couple of days of cage diving led to an invitation to transfer onto their 19 ft open skiff for some real up close and personal encounters. We watched in awe as Andre carefully pulled in his bait line, drawing the 14 ft. predator towards the stern. Then leaning out over the outboard, in a 4 ft. rolling sea, he thrust out his arm towards the now open jaws and grabbed her by the nose. Just as advertised the shark rose up out of the water with its mouth agape as we rolled video and shot frame after frame. The winter months of June through September are generally best for shark activity, with July and August frequently mentioned as the high points of the shark viewing season. Shark encounters are often accompanied with whale watching in False Bay, Mossel Bay, or Gansbaai making for a thrilling day on the water. Winter storms are, however, a real possibility and we found ourselves blown out on three of our eight scheduled days of diving in May. No trip to Africa is complete without a visit to one of the numerous game parks or reserves throughout the country. Our 17 day visit including airfare, a three day land safari up in Kruger National Park, car rental for a week, food and lodging, and diving in all three locales cost about the same as a week long live-aboard dive package with air and considerably less than a dive trip to the Galapagos. Fancy restaurant meals for two with a couple

of bottles of wine and tip were \$25-\$30. Lodging ranged from \$8 a night in the bed and breakfasts to \$30 a night in the nicer hotels. Shark diving was a bit more expensive with dive ops in Gansbaai charging between \$80 and \$110 per day. Our False Bay op had a \$150 flat rate. Shark Africa in Mossel Bay charged a sliding scale in Rand (about \$75US) which offered 100% rebate if they didn't set the anchor and about half back if you can't be caged. African Shark Eco-Charters 011 27 082 567 8915; e-mail airjaws@mweb.co.za; www.ultimate-animals.com. Mossel Bay, Shark Africa 011 27 082 455 2438; e-mail sharkafrika@mweb.co.za; www.sharkafrika.co.za. Gansbaai, Marine Dynamics, 011 27 028 384 1005; e-mail jpb@iafrica.com; www.dive.co.za. A complete list of all South African white shark dive ops with links to their e-mail and web sites can be found at www.sharkresearch.co.za, click on Tourism. Tour Operators www.2afrika.com inexpensive air and land package tours of varying length. www.divethebig5.co.za package dive and safari tours.
(www.ultimate-animals.com)

Dive the Big 5, September 2002, Joseph Puglia (JPuglia@aol.com), Orlando, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 55 to 72 F, choppy. Diving/safari trip combined. Dive the Big 5 handled all the arrangements. We booked through Reef and Rainforest and Kristen was a big help. We dove at the Cape of Good Hope with a local dive shop. We encountered seals, pajama sharks and beautiful colors. The water was cool 55F. We rented

wet suits that fit poorly and we got cold quickly. The diving was fun. That same day we saw penguins and toured the cape. A great experience. We then moved to Grootbos and Gansbaai for great white shark diving. Our first dive day was a chamber of commerce day, sun shining a nice 78-80 F air temp. We dove with Great White Shark Company. The great whites were an experience of a life time. I not sure which was better; in the cage or on the boat. We had sharks all day! Nancy, my wife and dive buddy, was jumping with excitement! Our second day of shark diving had significantly worse conditions but the sharks were just as exciting. The diving is done with hook as you are in a cage. The water was 64 F and we used their wet suits (7MM farmer John/Jane). Grootbos is a gorgeous resort just east of Gansbaai. Next stop Umkomaas at 2 hour flight north. This is home to the Raggies (sand tigers). We stayed the Ocean View Guest House not as fancy as Grootbos but clean and well kept. John Mugambo, the owner, makes your stay quite pleasant. We dove with Sea Fever, the operation was not noteworthy. We enjoyed the Raggies even though viz was low. Water was in the 60s F. We then moved on to a safari camp called Phinda. From there we dove at Sodwana Bay at the north corner of South Africa. Phinda provides a same day Cessna plane ride, diving and lunch. The diving was beautiful. The dive, 2 mile reef, started with an eagle ray, schools of Moorish idols, colorful anthias, and a four foot marble eel. Other sightings included pipefish, three frog fish(on one dive), purple parrot fish, tons of nudibranchs. A beautiful

place to dive. It gets crowded on weekends. All dives are surf launches; not for the faint hearted. The remainder of the trip was spent at another safari camp, Ngala tented camp, in Kruger National Park. Both safari camps were beautiful and the animals were amazing. This the best land/sea trip we have ever been on. (www.divethebig5.co.za)

Sodwana Bay Lodge, March 2003, Martin Klein, Hoboken, NJ.

Experience: 142 dives. Vis: 60 ft. Water: 79 F. Dive restrictions: follow the leader, surface with 50 bar. Sodwana Bay is a 4 hr. drive north of Durban close to the border with Mozambique. Roads are in very good condition. I recommend a rental car. South Africa is a great country for self-driving and offers many beautiful and varied landscapes. We stayed at Sodwana Bay Lodge and dove with their attached Scuba Centre. These are the most luxurious accommodations in the area. You stay in your own hut with ceiling fan and bathroom. There is a mosquito net for the bed. The malaria risk is moderate. We took Malarone but did not notice mosquitoes and did not get bit. Most people did not use malaria prevention. The accommodations are somewhat rustic. The shower tub was old and very stained. The toilet seat often served as parade ground for armies of ants. Other huts had nicer bathrooms. It's the luck of the draw. Sodwana Bay does not have a town where one could go in the evenings to dine or have a drink. Therefore, we got the meal plan at the lodge. The food was edible but uninspired. The lodge is a couple of miles from the beach.

Sodwana Bay is a protected area. The beach is beautiful but wild. No shops or such except for a small kiosk selling snacks. The Scuba Centre is at the lodge. The staff is friendly and competent. Dive briefings were excellent. You do two morning dives. In the afternoon the wind and waves are too strong to go diving. They bring the boat to the beach where everyone meets. All diving is done from zodiacs. They launch into the surf which can be exciting and is a good warm-up for the rougher surf launches south of Durban. On the way back the boat will go full speed and ride a wave all the way onto the beach. Great fun. Diving is done in a group with the boat following. Fish life is prolific and the coral is in good condition. The area is known for whale sharks and we did get to snorkel with one.

Unforgettable. We did not see any other sharks. The raggies (sand tigers) are seasonal and March was not the right time. However, while we were diving the skipper saw the biggest shark he had ever seen, a tiger, attack and devour a turtle about 30 yards from the boat. Overall the diving at Sodwana Bay was very good and an outstanding package value. We also had planned to dive Protea Banks south of Durban (supposedly one of the best shark dives in the world for numbers and variety) and to do a cage dive with great whites in Mossel Bay, 4 hours north of Cape Town. To our great disappointment wind conditions at both locations did not cooperate. However, there were worthwhile land-based attractions that helped to distract us. We strongly recommend Ingwe Manor in Margate for diving Protea Banks and Highview

Lodge in Mossel Bay. The cage diving at Mossel Bay should be interesting as it takes place around a rock with seals that is in plain view of a popular beach a mere 600 yards away. I'd probably stick with building sand castles and stay out of the water. The diving in South Africa is certainly good but to justify the 20+ hour flight from the U.S. one should not forego the opportunity to go on a safari. We stayed at Harry's Camp at Mala Mala. An amazing first class experience in every regard — wildlife, guides, accommodations, food, service. An example of the quality of service: On the day of departure our South African Airways flight to Johannesburg had mechanical problems and we risked missing our evening flight to New York. At his expense the owner of Mala Mala had his private jet with two pilots take us to Johannesburg. That certainly beats 500 frequent flyer miles at your local Marriot.

(www.sodwanabaylodge58.co.za)

Sodwana Bay Lodge, August 2003, Kerry Rodgers (brodg@texas.net), Georgetown, TX. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 68 to 69 F, surge. Sodwana is where most South African divers receive their open water qualifications and I have dived here multiple times before, all of them a wonderful experience. However, August was not the right time to be diving here. Even though the sun was shining the weather was cool, the seas were huge and surge was a problem on many of the shallower reefs. The first dive each morning was to one of the further out reefs (20 to 30 minute boat trips), on an inflatable boat, in huge seas — not a fun

experience. In fact the conditions above the water, and the cool weather spoilt the diving experience for me. The DM was also rather inexperienced — one morning we dropped on the northern end of the reef facing a strong south-to-north current, despite the skipper's warnings, and she tried to remain on the reef which was an impossible task. Eventually I surfaced, totally fed-up. At this time of year I would rate these reefs as for the experienced diver only. Go in summer time (January/February).

Egypt

Lahami Bay Resort, January 2003, Peter Louwerse, Switzerland. Dives: 500-600. An airport on Egypt's Red Sea coast, at Marsa Alam, opened a few years ago, a pleasant change from the madhouse at Hurghada. It is served mostly by charter flights from most European countries and one flight a week from Cairo. New hotels, which would have been a six-hour drive south of Hurghada, were built in this area. The farthest south on the coast, still a two-hour drive from Marsa Alam and close to Port Berenice, is Lahami Bay Resort, which opened in 2002. The hotel has spacious, air-conditioned rooms and two restaurants. The main restaurant serves breakfast and supper buffet style. The food was good, although we've had it better in other hotels in Egypt — and I suffered "Pharaoh's Revenge" for two days. The dive operation Ocean Pro is Swiss-owned, and the staff are Swiss and German. It offers Nitrox and Rebreather and is excellently equipped. We were in the lowest of low seasons, most staff were on vacation, and I could

not take the rebreather course that I had planned. Logbooks and C-cards are checked, and a check dive is compulsory. If the result is satisfactory, you can pretty much dive your own profile, or you can follow a guide. The restrictions are maximum depth 30 meters (110 feet) and 70 minutes, back on the boat with 50 bar (about 700 psi). The water was 70 F, and we wore 11 mm of semi-dry neoprene — one pays a price in weights! The weather was sunny to overcast, with occasional strong winds. The house reef is accessible from the shore, or the dive shop takes you somewhat farther out in an open boat that can hold 10 divers. Maximum depth is 70 feet, although most parts are 40 to 50 feet. This reef is rather small, yet we spent most of our time there, because it is truly beautiful. Hard coral pinnacles rise from the bottom to the surface and are in superb shape — no coral bleaching here! The fish are plentiful and friendly, although we missed some of the more common fish of the Red Sea, such as spotted stingrays and morays, and there were only few soft corals. On the other hand, a young Napoleon wrasse and a turtle visited, and large schools of sweetlips and snappers reminded us of the Maldives. There is virtually no current. The second part of the diving area is farther out. I suspect that it is a part of the Fury Shoals. It is reached with big boats of perhaps 60 feet, of which Ocean Pro has two and, when necessary, charters more. The trip takes 1 to 1.5 hours and goes due east. That is important, because the prevailing winds are from the north, and the boats roll quite a bit. Seasickness pills are available at the diveshop! Some of

the dive sites are fabulous — again, large coral formations, with swim-throughs and friendly fish. When one wants to take a break from diving, one can visit the camel market at Shalatin, the last town before the Sudanese border. This is another two-hour drive south, and trucks from Sudan bring thousands of camels for sale and pick up household goods to bring back to Sudan. Another possibility is a trip into the desert with Salah, who has a house close to the hotel. Salah is a retired colonel of the Egyptian Border Guards, who was stationed in this area for seven years. He will take you into the wadis and show you ruins of Roman forts that guarded the way from Assuan to the coast. Both are trips that are well-worth-while! We have dived the Red Sea for almost 20 years and had just about given up, because in Hurghada and Sharm it is hard to get into the water because of all the boats around you. But this area is the Red Sea as it used to be! We advise you to go there soon, before the area will be also overbuilt and five diveboats will be at the same buoy. (<http://lahamibay.com/>)

INDONESIA

While Bali's culture is fantastic (especially if you get away from the coast), the diving's not as spectacular as in other parts of Indonesia. ... On Bali's east coast the Liberty wreck at Tulamben is a favorite among fish specialists, who claim to find a new species on every visit. On the north end there's a good chance of diving with mola molas. ... While they're

certainly harder to get to than Bali, the Banda Islands have some of the best coral and fish life in the world. ... Although it offers few big fish, Wakatobi, a operation in remote southern Sulawesi, offers fantastic color, amazing biodiversity, and one of the best beach dives in the world. ... If bizarre and rare creatures are a lure, Ambon has a dive that surpasses even PNG's famous muck dives, as does Kungkungan Bay in northern Sulawesi. ... If you're into big turtles (and lots of them), Borneo Diver's operation on Sangalaki and nearby Derawan Resort finds them. ... Live-aboards plying the water to Komodo, the home of the dragons, find world class diving. ... The volatile political scene has put a cloud over diving Indonesia, so check with the State Department before travel and inquire about specific destinations rather than asking about the country as a whole. Before you leave, get a copy of Kal Muller's "Underwater Indonesia."

Bunaken

Thalassa Diving, Santika Resort, July 2003, Mel McCombie and Harris Friedberg, New Haven, CT. Number of dives: about 1400 each. The resort is fine. We had an oceanfront cottage with a stunning view of a volcanic island; the room was a little dark for reading but comfortable. The food at the resort is iffy (local dishes are best), but tolerable for a few days. Run by expat Dutch Simone Gerritson, Thalassa