

Rocktail Beach

— *South Africa's Best Reef Diving*

Text and photos by Christopher Bartlett





LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver with round ribbontail ray and school of goatfish; Hawksbill sea turtle; Close-up of tiny whip coral shrimp. PREVIOUS PAGE: Scorpionfish

South Africa's dive scene is well known for its shark diving. Yet, there is a great deal more to see underwater off the coast of the old continent, towards the border with Mozambique, at Rocktail Bay.

In South Africa, there are year-round opportunities to see oceanic blacktips sharks, bull sharks, scalloped and great hammerheads, black and whitetip reef sharks, and ragged-tooth sharks (a.k.a. sand-tiger sharks in the US or grey nurse sharks in Australia). There are seasonal baited dives with tiger sharks, and whale sharks are present in the Indian Ocean. Off the Western Cape, one can find broadnose seven-gill sharks, blue sharks,

mako sharks, shysharks and, of course, great white sharks. But the Indian Ocean hides some gems beyond this plethora of sharks, with some of the country's best reefs to be found off Rocktail Beach.

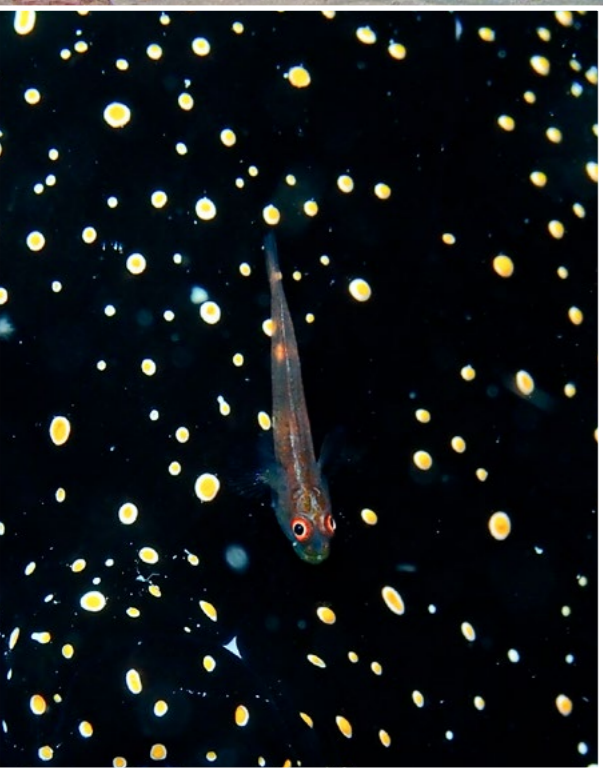
Part of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1999 and a Ramsar site since 1986, Rocktail Bay sits amongst the towering coastal dunes and lush coastal forests of the Maputaland Marine Reserve. Meaning "a miracle" or "something wondrous" in Zulu, the word iSimangaliso comes from when some of King Shaka's subjects were sent to the land of the Tsonga, and returned to describe the beauty that he saw as a miracle. The biodiverse reserve combines untouched coastline with coral reefs, freshwater lake ecosystems—including South Africa's largest freshwater lake, Lake

Sibaya—coastal forests, wetlands, grasslands and woodlands.

Getting there

Getting to the place is an adventure in itself. After driving four hours north from Durban, you pull into a car park at a small cashew factory and shop to be met by one of the guides from Rocktail Beach Camp and transfer to a four-wheel-drive open game viewer for a 30-minute drive along sandy tracks though the forest up to the coastal dunes, which are amongst the tallest vegetated dunes in the world and home to an array of wildlife and birds.

On arrival, my kit bag was taken to the dive centre and I went to check out my room. Rocktail Beach Camp has long been considered the premium dive lodge in the country, and it was easy to see



Gobie on cowry





LEFT TO RIGHT: View from a room's veranda at Rocktail Beach Camp; Diver and snapper; Whip coral goby

why. The open plan bar-lounge area, dining room next to the pool, wrap around veranda and raised viewing deck are simple but classy. Set off a trail in the forest, the rooms, of which there are 17, are tented suites with sliding glass doors. When the canvas is rolled up, the view from the inside of the honeymoon suite over the canopy to the ocean is superb.

Dive centre

I went for a walk down to the beach, 10 minutes away, and met Michelle and Clive Smith, the couple running the only dive centre in the area. Clive was

pulling one of their 7.2-metre RIBs out of the sea with a tractor, as you do in these parts. Apart from three people in wetsuits, the beach was deserted, and stretched endlessly in both directions without a soul on it, golden and pristine. It is a stunning location, and offers diving year-round as most of the resident fish remain on the reefs throughout summer and winter seasons.

The main seasonal differences are water temperature and visibility and the special migratory humpback whale sightings. During the summer months, there is a noticeable increase in shark sightings, including grey

reef sharks, zebra sharks, blacktip sharks, hammerhead sharks (scalloped and great), tiger sharks, white tip sharks; as well as sightings of guitar fish, round ribbontail rays, honeycomb rays, sharpnose stingrays, blue spotted rays and occasional butterfly rays.

We talked about the following day. I was to be their only diver and Michelle wanted take me to Gogo's and Yellowfin, her two favourite spots. As it was August, they had not seen any sharks for a while, but there were rays around and some big resident grouper. I had had a good fill of sharks down at Aliwal Shoal on

my last dive trip, so I was keen to check out the reef life.

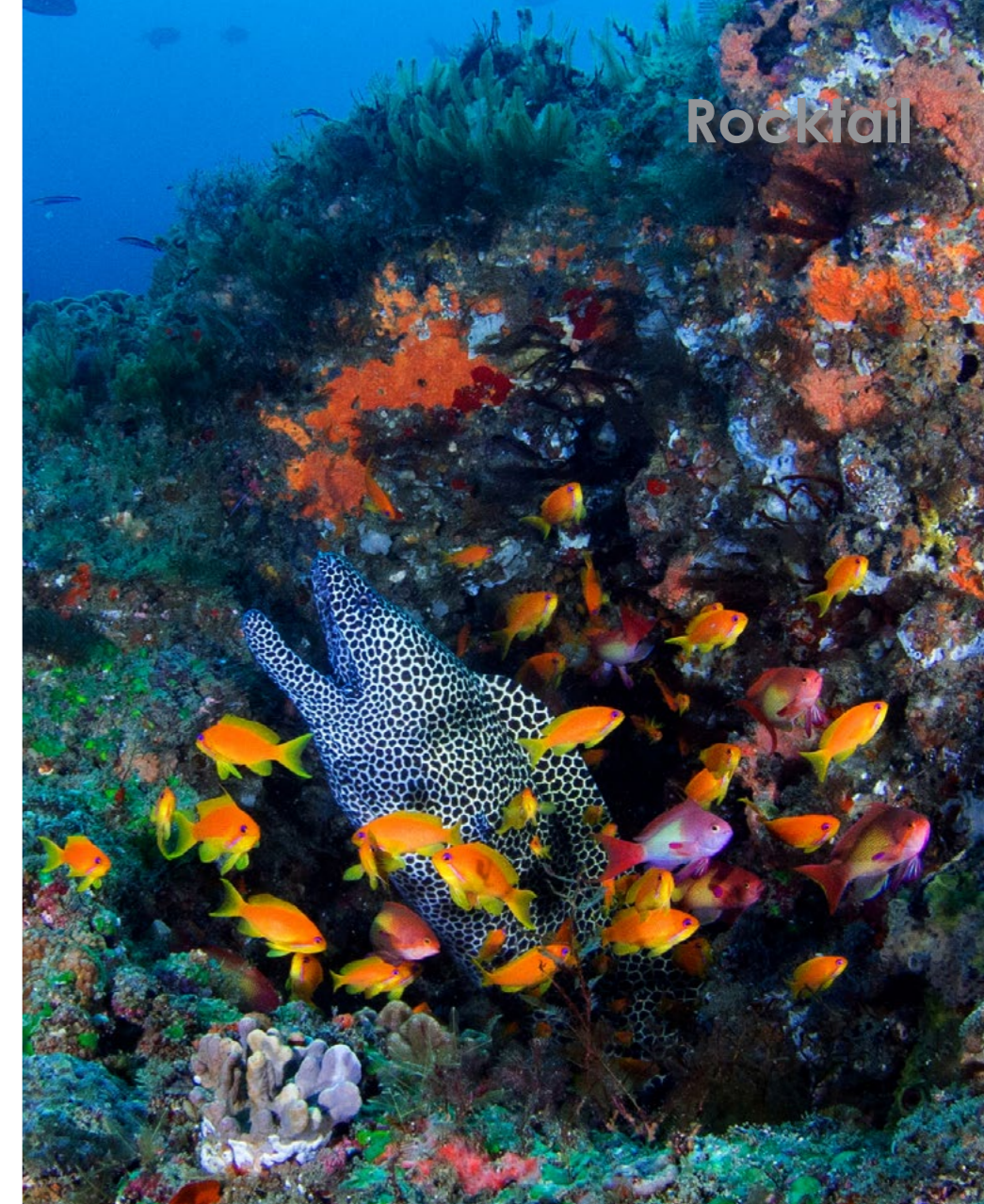
Diving

Despite the choppy surface conditions, the launch was easy, a shallow reef forming a natural RIB-sized harbour close to the beach, and we were at the site in a matter of minutes. I wasn't expecting much in terms of visibility. The sites are mostly shallow, generally not deeper than 18m, and the wind was up. But as I rolled in, I could see the large reef top about 10m below me.



White-banded cleaner shrimp





Gogo's. The topography of Gogo's makes it an ideal haven for fish life, with collapsed features, gullies, overhangs, crevices and swim-throughs. Gogo's is considered the "show piece" of diving at Rocktail Bay. From the reef formations to the abundant fish life, there is something for everyone on Gogo's. A school of silvery slingers danced over the hard and soft corals as trumpet fish hunted, and anthias swam into the gentle current.

I had been promised a potato bass, and within a few minutes a female cruised by. Michelle waggled her finger at me and shook her head "no", then spread her arms and puffed out her

cheeks, hoiked a thumb to the left and turned that way. I followed her lead.

Hovering over a bommie, unphased and regal, was the biggest male potato grouper I have seen for some time, nearly 2m long and going nowhere. His stern face was in stark contrast to my beaming smile. I had been underwater for less than 10 minutes and I could see the riches of Rocktail were abundant. The grouper was so not going anywhere, and I snapped away for a while as Michelle looked for shrimps. Each to their own.

Old Grumpster ignored me, I was insignificant, not worthy of his recognition, but I stayed and watched a cleaner



Potato bass; Tomato grouper, sweepers and glassfish (top left)

Slinger seabream; Honeycomb moray eel and antheas (top right)



Rocktail



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Potato bass being cleaned by blue-streak cleaner wrasse; Green sea turtle; Whip coral goby; Round ribbontail ray with a school of snapper in the background; Gold spotted sweetlips and bannerfish

wrasse nibble around his eye from less than an arm's length away, until a hawksbill sea turtle swam past slowly. It swam slow enough for me to overtake it and get some front-on shots as it cruised the reef, no doubt looking for a tasty snack.

Michelle had found an impressive honeycomb moray eel, which was swaying around, more out of its crevice than in, as if it was being charmed by a tune that

music, but whale song. And, my word, it seemed close. And then there was a reply. Michelle and I both looked around. The whale song was so loud, it seemed like these giant marine mammals must be close enough to see. But apart from a few thousand fish, the only mammal I could see was Michelle.

Then the duet started. One high pitched, one deep back and forth, the sound reverberating through the water

was inaudible to us, putting on a show to the slingers and anthias in the vicinity. I was trying to work out what tune it might be dancing to, when I heard one.

Not eel-charming

and through me. I have been in the water with humpbacks to photograph them before, and of course they sang, but not like this, and not this loud, and it was getting louder. Were they going to swim by us?

Trying to find them would prove fruitless. It is very difficult to work out which direction a sound is coming from underwater, so we just drifted gently, peering into the distance in opposite directions as the concert went on for 10 minutes, until the end of our dive. It was such an incredible experience, we raved about it to Clive during the surface interval.

Yellowfin Reef. Next up was Yellowfin Reef, another pretty dive site with good topography of sink holes and collapsed features, and plenty of corals as well as an abundance of fish life. More shoals of slinger, blue banded snappers, surgeonfish and fusiliers hung in mid-water as there are numerous pinnacles on this site that attract the schooling fish in sig-



nificant numbers. During the season, one can spot grey reef sharks passing by, just off the reef.

A juvenile green sea turtle made an appearance, and resting placidly on

the sand was a 2m wide round ribbontail ray, half-covered in sand, sheltered by the reef on one side. Getting close to the sand, facing the ray, I inched forward, extending the pauses between my



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver with male potato bass over table coral; Orangutan crab in tentacles of an anemone; Durban dancing shrimp under reef ledge (center); Anthias and grouper on rocky reef; Hawksbill sea turtle

inhaling and exhaling as far as I could, turning my head away on the exhale to avoid spooking the ray. The ray filled my camera frame, with its sand-covered body and blotchy head, as it eyed me up.

Topside excursions

The dive centre has hot showers, shampoo, and shower gel, so there is no need to go back to your room after the dive if you are hungry, other than to just soak up the view and or give yourself another dose of wow. Most of the time, dives finish

early enough for divers to either go on an afternoon guided or unguided excursion into the forest to look for duiker and reed-buck (antelope) and some of the 300-odd bird species found here.

The guided excursions are on foot or in the four-wheel-drive game viewer and are free, as are sundowner trips to Lake Sibaya, and full day trips there. Lake Sibaya has one of the highest concentrations of hippos. You can also plan a morning off and visit Tembe Elephant Park, a Big Five reserve, 50 minutes

away. In turtle nesting season, there are also trips to look for either turtles laying their eggs, or the eggs hatching.

As we had made two long dives, I missed the game drive departure, so took a leisurely late lunch, sorted through my photos and had a chat with the bar staff. Before I knew it, it was time for a sundowner on the deck with some new arrivals. The pre-dinner nibbles came out, as did another sundowner (just to make sure the sun went down properly) and then it was time for a top notch three-course dinner. After all that, my giant bed was calling.

More diving

Pineapple Reef. The next day we headed to Pineapple Reef, named after the pineapplefish that are often seen there. Pineapplefish are a very rare find in this part of the world, but are sometimes found with a close look under certain ledges, so I took a macro lens with me. Seems like the fish didn't know I was coming (or maybe they did) and had gone off on a day trip.

Still, there were plenty of other subjects for me to photograph, including Durban dancing shrimp, white-banded cleaner shrimp, an orangutan crab and a bright orange frogfish. And there were, of course, three





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Durban dancing shrimp under ledge; Pair of whip coral gobies; Frogfish; Pair of Whip coral shrimp



more potato bass, which are not quite macro subjects unless they are getting a clean. These three were not, so they were happily gliding around the reef in blue water, whilst my fisheye lens was on the boat.

Never one to tire of potato bass, on the boat I switched lenses and asked if we could do it again. Michelle explained that they sometimes saw four there, and that in the warmer months, manta rays, whale sharks and loggerhead turtles are sometimes seen. But it was mid-winter and the shark and manta action was quiet, much like further down the coast where even on baited dives, tiger sharks would only appear from December to early May.

The bass were still there, doing their bassy thing, this time in front of the right lens. Another honeycomb moray was half out of its hole, so I stopped to take some shots of it as Michelle stayed out of my field of view, with her buoy line.

She was off to one side, checking for pineapplefish again.

Next thing I knew, there was a frantic tugging on my fin. I thought some choice expletives in my head. Couldn't she see I was busy? Then I thought, "Hmm. She's been doing this for 15 years. She clearly can see I am busy. It must be important." So, I turned around and a very animated Michelle communicates to me that there had been a 4m tiger shark behind me (no doubt curious about my camera settings), but that it had swum off as she made eye contact with it.

It was a most curious event, and a subject of much discussion, as it was widely thought that the tiger sharks migrated away from the KwaZulu-Natal coast in the winter (between May and November) for unknown reasons, as they were never seen. Except on our dive, which took place in mid-winter. Two weeks later a dead humpback

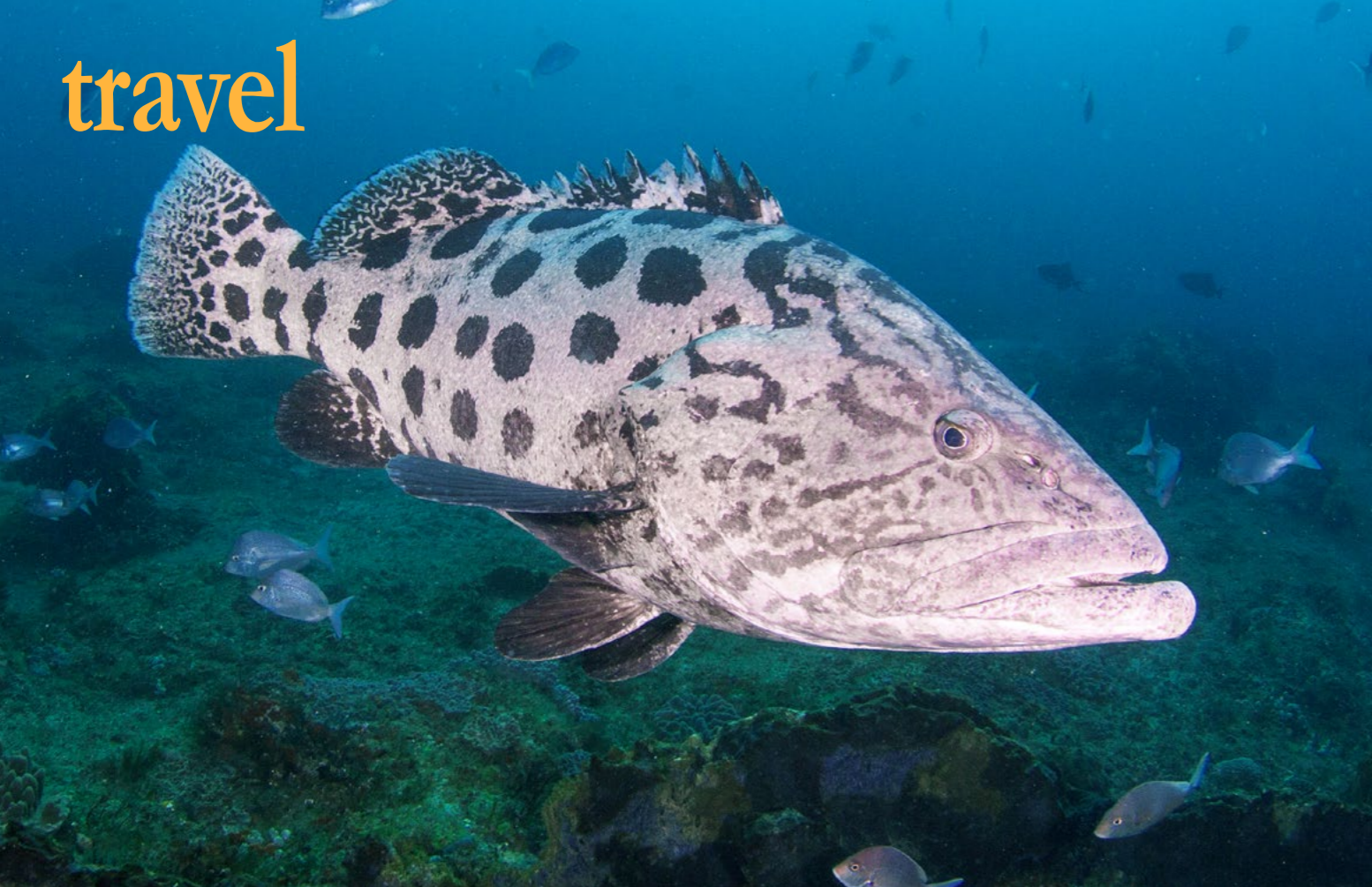
whale appeared close to Aliwal Shoal, and it was estimated that up to a dozen different tiger sharks were seen feeding on it over the weekend. So, they are most definitely around, just invisible—unless you happen to have a dead whale on you, or take photos of honeycomb moray eels.

Other dive sites

In addition to the three sites I dived,

there are another dozen dive sites in the area, which are primarily shallow dives. There are also a couple of deeper sites, including Blood Snapper, which descends to 50m.

In the worst month of the year, I had had a great time. Rocktail Beach's diving was excellent, with healthy, vibrant reefs and plentiful fish. The Camp lived up to its reputation as the premier dive lodge in the country. The service



Honeycomb moray eel and anthias (left); Potato bass (above)

was impeccable, top drawer, and supremely friendly. I can't wait to go back to dive in the summer.

Activities for non-divers

One great thing about Rocktail Beach are the options available for the non-diving members of the family. As well as the morning and afternoon nature activities and day trips to the lakes and Tembe Elephant Park (which is a wilderness area requiring four-wheel-drive expertise, not an African Disney World), the dive centre also runs Ocean Experience trips, either for snorkeling or just observing from the boat. One of the dive sites frequented by ragged-tooth sharks is so shallow, you can snorkel with them. Dolphin sightings are also common, both bottlenose and the shyer spinner dolphins.

Seasons and conditions

In the spring and summer from late September to May, water temperatures rise from the colder winter temperatures to between 21-23°C in spring and up to

25-28°C in summer. Visibility averages around 18-25m and can be as good as 35+m.

During the summer months of December to March, pregnant ragged-tooth shark sightings are very common, as the sharks move northwards from the Eastern Cape area up to southern KwaZulu-Natal, where they mate. The females then continue northwards to these warmer waters and rest for approximately three months during their gestation period, before heading back to the colder Eastern Cape waters to give birth to their pups. The other magical summer sighting is of female loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles coming ashore at night to lay their eggs during nesting season from October to March.

In the autumn and winter months from June to early September, water temperatures drop to an average of 20-23°C in winter, with 19°C being the



coldest recorded winter temperature. Visibility drops to an average of 12-18m but can occasionally get up to 20-25m. August and September are traditionally the windiest months of the year. Diving is still good, but the wind may cause surface conditions to become very choppy. Diving continues unless the swell becomes too big.

The highlight during winter is the arrival of the humpback whales on their annual migration to Madagascar between June to late August, and then returning southwards to the Antarctic between September to November. The whales tend to travel further out to sea on their migration up to Madagascar, as these are mainly adults and adolescents on their homeward journey. We get to see the whales much closer to shore as they travel with their babies. ■

School of snapper

Rocktail

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Durban via Johannesburg, Cape Town, Dubai or Istanbul and either drive up or have a transfer arranged. It is a four-hour drive to Coastal Cashews. Or fly to Richards Bay, and then transfer or drive up. It is a three-hour drive to Coastal Cashews.

DIVING FEES AND EQUIPMENT

Dives cost 530 ZAR per dive. Cylinder and weights cost 150 ZAR per day (not per dive).

ACCOMMODATION

For 2017, accommodation costs 2,900 ZAR during the low season (February, March, May, June, September, October, November) and 3,290 ZAR during the high season (January, April, July, August, December).

DISTANCE TO OTHER LOCATIONS

Diving in Sodwana Bay is one hour south, Aliwal Shoal is 4.5 hours south, and Protea Banks is 5.5 hours south.

TOPSIDE SAFARIS

Safari combinations are plentiful. There are a handful of excellent Big 5 game reserves and safari lodges in KwaZulu-Natal, less than two hours away. Or you could fly to Johannesburg, Nelspruit, or Skukuza to visit the legendary Kruger National Park.

TOUR OPERATOR

This trip was arranged by Indigo Safaris, www.indigosafaris.com. Email Ines on ines@indigosafaris.com and she will put together a dream trip for you.

Christopher Bartlett is a widely-published British underwater photographer, certified FGASA African field guide and dive writer based in London. He leads photographic trips to Papua New Guinea, Southern and Eastern Africa, Mexico and the Maldives providing free workshops and tuition. For more information, visit: Bartlettimages.com.

fact file



South Africa



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, US DEPT OF STATE, DIVEPHILIPPINES.COM

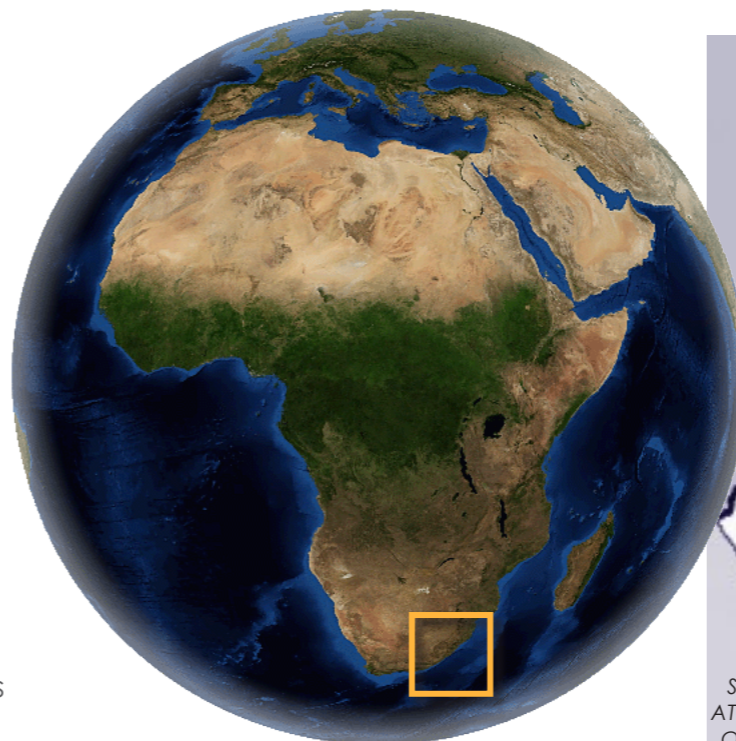
History In 1652, Dutch traders landed at the southern tip of modern day South Africa and founding the city of Cape Town, establishing a resupply station on the spice route between the Netherlands and the East. In 1806, many Dutch settlers (the Boers) travelled north to establish their own republics after the British seized the area of the Cape of Good Hope. In 1867 and 1886, the discovery of diamonds and gold encouraged wealth and immigration. This intensified the subjugation of the indigenous population. The years 1899-1902 saw the British defeat the Boers resistance during the Boer War; but, the British and the Afrikaners, as the Boers became known, governed together under the Union of South Africa. The National Party was voted into

power in 1948 and instituted a policy of apartheid—the separate development of the races. In 1994, the first multi-racial elections saw the end of apartheid and brought in black majority rule. Government: republic. Capital: Pretoria.

Geography Southern Africa, is located at the southern tip of the continent of Africa. The country of Lesotho is completely surrounded by South Africa, which also almost completely surrounds Swaziland. Coastline: 2,798km. Terrain comprises a vast interior plateau surrounded by rugged hills and a thin coastal plain. Lowest point: Atlantic Ocean 0 m. Highest point: Njesuthi 3,408 m. Natural hazards include extended droughts.

Environmental issues Extensive water conservation and control measures are required due to the lack of important arterial rivers or lakes; water usage increases outpace supply; agricultural runoff and urban discharge cause pollution of rivers; acid rain due to air pollution; soil erosion; desertification.

Economy A middle-income, emerging market with a large supply of natural resources, It is the world's largest producer of gold, platinum and chromium. South Africa has well-developed financial, legal, communications, energy, and transport sectors. Its stock exchange is the 17th largest in the world. Its modern infrastructure supports an efficient distribution of goods to major cities throughout the region. Since 2004, growth has been strong, as South Africa reaps the benefits of macroeconomic stability and a boom in global commodities. However, there is still high unemployment and an outdated infrastructure limits growth. The country began to experience an electricity crisis at the end of 2007, due to supply problems of the state power supplier Eskom plagued with aged plants. It necessitated "load-shedding" cuts to businesses and residents in the major urban areas. Remnants of the apartheid period include daunting economic



RIGHT: Global map with location of South Africa
FAR RIGHT: Location of Rocktail Beach on map of South Africa
LOWER LEFT: Hawksbill sea turtle at Rocktail Beach



problems, especially poverty, no economic empowerment among disadvantaged groups, and public transportation shortages. The economic policy of the country is fiscally conservative but pragmatic. It focuses on controlling inflation, sustaining a budget surplus, and—as a means in increasing job growth and household income—employing state-owned enterprises to provide basic services to low-income areas.

Climate South Africa is mostly semiarid with with sunny days and cool nights. There are subtropical areas along the east coast.

Population 54,300,704 (July 2016 est.) This figure factors in the effects and mortality rate of AIDS which is ravaging the country's population. Ethnic groups: black African 80.2%, white 8.4%, colored 8.8%, Indian/Asian 2.5% (2014 est). Religions Zion Christian 11.1%, Pentecostal/Charismatic 8.2%, Catholic 7.1%, Methodist 6.8%, Dutch Reformed 6.7%, Anglican 3.8%, Muslim 1.5%, other Christian 36% (2001 census), Internet users: 27.868 million or 51.9% (2015 est.)

Currency rand (ZAR). Exchange rates: 1USD=13.98ZAR, 1EUR=15.22ZAR, 1GBP=17.10ZAR, 1AUD=10.63ZAR, SGD=10.03ZAR

Language IsiZulu 23.8%, IsiXhosa 17.6%, Afrikaans 13.3%, Sepedi 9.4%, English 8.2%, Setswana 8.2%, Sesotho 7.9%, Xitsonga 4.4%, other languages: 7.2% (2001 census).

Health There is an intermediate degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever. Vectorborne diseases include Crimean Congo hemorrhagic fever and malaria. Water contact diseases include schistosomiasis (2008). Please refer to your health department for required and recommended vaccinations and precautions.

Security Most visitors enjoy their trips to South Africa without incidents. However, there is a high level of crime, particularly in urban areas at night. Please refer to

your state department for security alerts and updates. The country's emergency line is 10111.

Visa Two completely blank visa pages are required in your passports. Otherwise, entry will be denied and you will be forced to return home. Passports must be valid for at least 30 days. Tourist visas are issued at point of entry. Visitors with US and UK passports do not require a visa in advance for tourist travel up to 90 days. Please refer to your state department or local South African embassy for visa requirements and updates.

Decompression Chambers
DURBAN: St. Augustine's Hyperbaric Medicine Centre
Hyperbaric and Woundcare Unit
St. Augustine's Hospital
24-Hour Hotline: Tel. 031-268-5000

Web sites
South Africa Tourism
Southafrica.net □

