



South Africa's

Sardine Run

— *Wild Nature at Port St. John*

Text and photos by Gregory Leceour



From a point on the horizon, frantic sounds of gannet birds became louder and their dives from the air seemed to accelerate as they shot straight down, piercing the surface of the sea. Before our party of divers got into the water, I could not imagine the incredible spectacle that would be found under the surface.

The ocean was full of energy. We were escorted by hundreds of dolphins; foam at the surface revealed several fins among the frenzy of birds. All the region's predators seemed to have gotten the same invitation to join the party. A signal from the spotters announced that a bait ball of sardines had been sighted. At full throttle, our dive boat headed towards

the vortex of seabirds in the air, the adrenaline rush grabbing all of us aboard the zodiac. The hunt was on!

Mass migration

During the winter months in South Africa, a natural phenomenon known as the Sardine Run takes place every year between the months of May and July. It is just as exciting and spectacular as the wildebeest migrations in the Masai Mara and the Serengeti plains. Millions of sardines off the coast of South Africa follow and benefit from the nutrients in the cold water currents moving up the African coast, taking the fish from their natural habitat in Cape Agulhas to the southern part of KwaZulu Natal, along the Wild Coast of the country.

The mass formed by the migration of millions



of sardines can stretch over several kilometers and be observed from space. It is an event that draws many predators.

Thanks to its underwater topography, Port St. Johns is a mecca for migrating sardines.



Sardine Run

Picturesque view over the Umzimvubu River at Port St. Johns (far left); Gannet seabirds (left) and diving for sardines from 30 to 40m high (below); Spotter on dive boat looking for activity that indicates a bait ball is nearby (lower left)

PREVIOUS PAGE: Fur seal and bait ball of sardines during Sardine Run





Large pod of bottlenose dolphins tracking bait ball of sardines during Sardin Run

Sardine Run



Bottlenose dolphins seen at the surface and common dolphins feeding on sardines (right)

As the continental shelf is narrow here, deep waters are close to the shore, so the schools of migrating sardines become concentrated as they near the coast.

Opportunists

Whether friends or enemies, all predators here combine to form a single army, together hunting the small sardines, leading to the greatest “show” on earth. But this show depends on many ingredients. Evolving along the rocky sandstone coast, cold water currents and thermoclines, with water temperatures between 14° and 20°C are imperative to ensure the presence of the sardines.

The hunt begins with common dolphins that have developed special hunting techniques using their sonar skills and bubble streams to locate and isolate a ball of sardines in the outgoing tide.

The ball of sardines called “bait

ball” are preyed upon by seabirds like albatrosses, terns, cormorants, but the crazy gannet is the king of group. With remarkable eyesight, the gannets follow the dolphins before diving in a free-fall from 30 to 40 meters high, piercing the surface of the water head first at a speed of 80km/h, immersing themselves as deep as 15 meters to get their fill of sardines before reaching the surface.

Other opportunistic predators attracted by the agitation can appear, including hundreds of sharks, tunas, sailfishes, sea lions and sometimes Bryde’s whales—all are drawn to the feast. Orcas also can also show up in an attempt to snatch a dolphin.

Challenging nature

The Sardine Run was made world-renown by the BBC’s television documentary series, “Oceans.” Now divers from around the world come to South African waters wanting to experience the same fabulous event seen on the





Sardine Run



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Encounter with locals on a country road; Picturesque view of the Wild Coast; Elephant herd at a watering hole and giraffes on a grass plain in the early morning at Nambiti Reserve; Vervet monkey



years, divers can have a 90-minute ringside seat to the magic show; in other years, sardines are hardly found, if at all. Remember, it took several

film. But very few of them come back from this dive destination with full memory cards and still-dreamy eyes. Because the Sardine Run depends on so many factors that, if not all present, frustration can become a big part of the adventure.

Each year is very different from the next on the Wild Coast. Some

years for the BBC production to acquire just a few minutes of incredible footage, showing the event. That said, this region of the world still attracts exceptional biomass, and the possibility of capturing the spectacular scenery and wildlife of the Wild Coast pushes underwater photographers to try their luck.

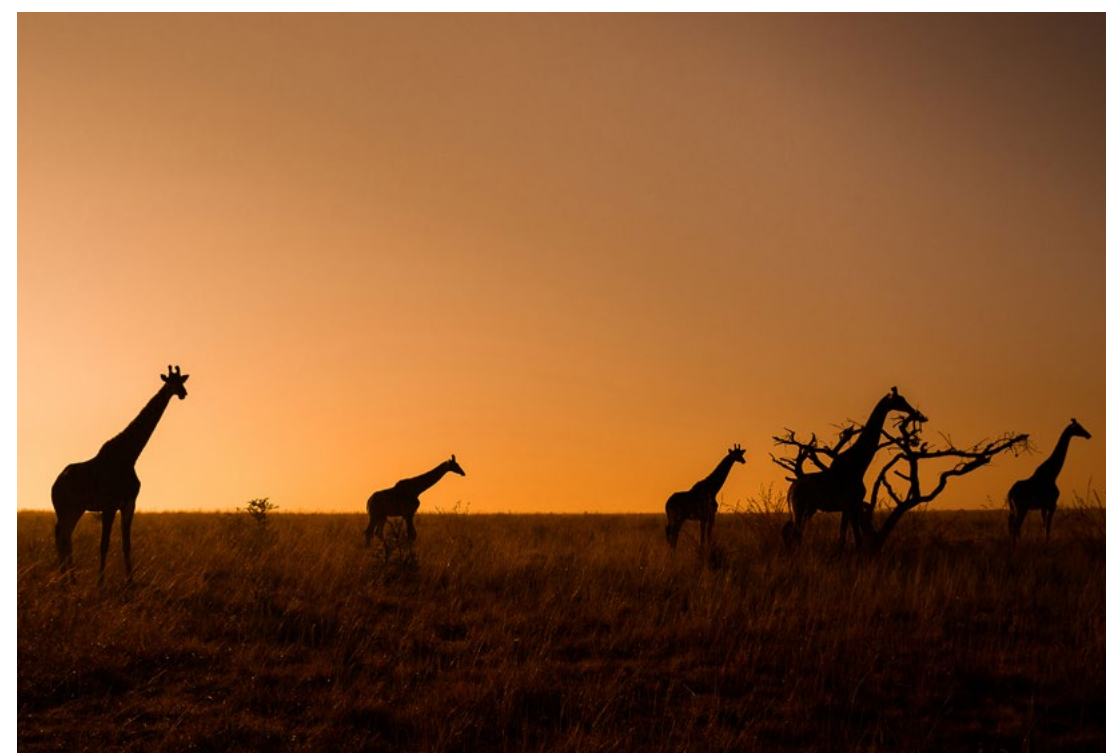
In addition to the sardine migration along the wild coast there is also, during this time of year, the migration of humpback whales, heading to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean to give birth. Keep in mind that it is a lottery—divers who come here will always hope that chance is on their side and try to win the jackpot!

Getting there

After arriving on the tarmac at Durban's international airport, it took six hours to drive to the village of Port St. Johns, located in the estuary of the Umzimvubu River. The Wild Coast is one of the most spectacular tourist destinations in the world, with its pristine beaches, beautiful waterfalls, lush

forested landscapes and cultural diversity. Due to its remoteness and prior inaccessibility, this area has long been unknown to the outside world.

Port St. Johns is located on the wild coast, a coastline of about 270 km long, with some of the most beautiful scenery in the country. It lies at the mouth of the Umzimvubu River, a river that flows through an impressive gorge known as the "Gates of St. John" in an estuary situated on the Indian Ocean. Offshore Africa is the only operator in residence



that has all the logistics, expertise and experience to successfully conduct dives for the Sardine Run. From the river, our party of

divers embarked on a zodiac with skipper Rob Nettleton and dive guide Debbie Smith. Nettleton is passionate about diving in South Africa, having crisscrossed and



Sardine Run



THIS PAGE: Bottlenose and common dolphins hunt and gannets dive for sardines

dived the South African waters from an early age. Besides being an excellent skipper, he knows the area and is unbeatable in his knowledge of the local flora and fauna. An undeniable asset to any dive group, Nettleton can read and anticipate the behavior of predators and put divers in the best spots to observe the wild life and the action.

We travelled down the river to get to the surf crashing on the beach. The first challenge was to cross the breaking waves. Only a few South African skippers are able to read these waves to spot an aperture and get out to open sea.

We had our feet secured in the straps of the zodiac, and we clung to the handrail of the boat. The departure is on! We crossed the violent waves before making a final push to get out of the surf zone.

Wild life

Barely recovered from our emotions after the crossing, we focused on the marine

life. After a few minutes of searching, we saw hundreds, even thousands of common dolphins spread over the water.

The blue sky was filled with gannet birds flying over the area and occasionally diving here and there to steal some fish. Excitement took over the boat, but Nettleton remained unmoved and said that we needed to concentrate our energies on finding more consistent action of wild life—not ephemeral action, which he called “popcorn”.

After only a few minutes spent on the waters of Port St. Johns, we were in the presence of thousands of dolphins and birds. With steep cliffs and steep rocks, seen from the sea, the landscape offered a sumptuous surrounding.

We followed the direction of the birds and dolphins with the help of a small plane, which spotted the most suitable areas of



action. We went to an area where few birds fell from the sky, but it was still brief action or what Nettleton called “popcorn”.

The first challenge of the dive boat is to get across the violent surf





THIS PAGE: Encounter with a breaching humpback whale migrating to warmer waters in the Indian Ocean



It looked like all the ingredients were here: the water was cold, the sardines were there, with predators on the look out. As we watched, the predators worked together and created a consistent bait ball. While waiting, we all pictured in our heads, the perfect bait ball, harassed by predators. With all this life around us, our imaginations ran wild.

Surprises

After a while, doubt started creeping in, when suddenly, a huge spout of water followed by a giant tail was spotted. It was a humpback whale! The whale was not here for sardines, though; she was on her way to warmer waters where she would

give birth to a calf and wean her offspring. She disappeared after surprising us with a hefty breach, lifting her 40-ton body out of the water!

The show was surreal, but Nettleton spotted some new activity of gannet birds. We left the whale and set a course offshore. The closer we got to the action, the more the bird activity seemed to increase. We saw a lot of dolphins were in the area, too.

It was literally raining hundreds of birds, and dolphins were breaking the surface of the water. With the engine turned off, and we drifted in the direction of the seething broth in the ocean created by the hunt.

We were waiting for the signal to



Sardine Run



do our back-flip into the water when Nettleton asked us to take off our scuba gear. The water was green, full of nutrients, with visibility less than five meters—it was too dangerous to jump into the water with so many predators.

So while frustration filled us on the boat, the show on the surface was just fantastic to watch. We consoled ourselves by observing the aerial show and cementing in memory the hunting scene from the boat.

Back on land, we mulled over our luck. Navigating the sea, with all its marine life, is simply unique. Diving amidst sardines

is the cherry on the cake, as there are many beautiful things to discover on the Wild Coast.

Another chance

Our following days at sea were met with lowered expectations. The perfect sardine ball in blue water, like the one in the BBC documentary, does not happen every day. Nettleton proposed that we took advantage of every possible opportunity to find the wildlife action.

A storm was announced, which was a good sign, as the winds and currents tend to clarify the water, and predators,

fond of turbulent waters, tend to come to the table. Back at sea, we observed that the area of action had moved and all of the marine life was in the south. Visibility was also improved in places, while some areas remained milky.

Although there was a high concentration of birds and dolphins, the sardines moved quickly and “popcorn” activity was present everywhere. The visibility was good, so Nettleton suggested we try to intercept the path of the Sardine Run. After watching the carousel of birds, Nettleton read and anticipated the trajectory. Equipped with minimal gear—

THIS PAGE: Gannet birds and common dolphins feeding on sardines; Bottlenose dolphin (above)





Common dolphin under sardine bait ball



THIS PAGE: Dramatic view underwater of the hunt, with diving gannets and swooping dolphins

... fins, masks and snorkels—we jumped into the water.

Dolphins were the first things we observed, followed by several explosions announcing the arrival of diving birds. Curious and opportunistic dusky sharks and oceanic blacktip sharks passed right underneath our dive group.

We remained in this spot near the surface for a moment when our dive guide Debby brought our attention to a small bait ball forming around us. Dolphins also spotted the bait ball and patrolled around us.

The predators launched their assault, and dolphins rushed in to the sardines right before our eyes. Like lightning, crazy gan-

net birds pierced the surface, ending up about ten meters deep, and then began a disorderly swim to catch several fishes in the same dive. The assault was stealthy, and the little bait ball burst apart, only to reunite under our fins.

We took the opportunity to quickly put on our scuba gear so we could dive with the sardines. The dolphins and the gannets were exciting to watch. The dolphins' attacks were accompanied by rattling and the gannets' attacks were announced by the impacts of the birds perforating the surface. Sharks prowled just below and made occasional intrusions into the bait ball.





An added bonus

Back on board, everyone was ecstatic and all our eyes sparkled when Nettleton asked us to prepare for another dive, as another vortex of birds had recently arisen near our boat. The magnitude and impact of sea birds at the same place suggested that the sardine bait ball had reassembled. With our air tanks empty, we just jumped in the water with snorkels.

In a frenzied state, birds were diving from all sides. Common dolphins, large dolphins, tunas, sharks and one fur seal were decimating a new bait ball. We

invited ourselves to the show, keeping our distance, as the attacks were dazzling and unpredictable, and visibility was rather average. After several minutes of chaos, sardines and their predators were gone. It was time to leave the water and return to the mainland.

For several days, we spent eight hours at sea looking for anything that was hunting. Like many opportunistic predators in this region, we took every opportunity to throw ourselves in the water. In between dives, on the boat, we visited the "cooler box" (or icebox) which had delicious

homemade food, or we spent time watching humpback whales, which gave us a show every day.

Topside excursions

Visitors in the area can enjoy a hike to Eagle Nest for a panoramic view of Port St Johns, a trip to one of the cultural villages of KwaZulu Natal, a visit to the waterfalls of Magwa Falls and Fraser Falls or a cruise along the Umzimvubu River to explore its nature and ecology. There are also opportunities for horseback riding, kayaking and fishing.



Common dolphins; Blacktip sharks patrol over a bait ball (top right); Fur seal hunts sardines (top left)





View of the estuary at Port St. Johns (above); Water buffalo at watering hole in Nambiti Reserve (top left)



Elephant at watering hole in Nambiti Reserve

And what would a trip to South Africa be without visiting the animals in the different reserves on the African savanna? One such reserve is Nambiti where a French couple has settled and now welcomes visitors to their beautiful lodge, "Esiweni". Lions, cheetahs elephants, buffaloes, giraffes, rhinos and all the game of the savanna are observed during the safari here, ensuring an exceptional stay.

The Wild Coast has many treasures for lovers of authentic experiences in nature and certainly seduces those who take the time to discover it. Visitors who remain long enough may be lucky to get the right number of dives in to experience the action around a sardine bait ball, like the one in the BBC documentary. Reserved for experienced divers, diving in these places is not guaranteed, not easy, and can be frustrating. But this part of the world deserves the

journey for its abundance of life and its magnificent landscapes. ■

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SOURCES:
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[HTTP://WWW.PLACES.CO.ZA/ACCOMMODATION/OUTSPAN-INN-BED-BREAKFAST.HTML](http://www.places.co.za/accommodation/outspan-inn-bed-breakfast.html)



THIS PAGE: Zebra, giraffe, lions and cheetahs are found roaming the bush of Nambiti Reserve

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: 2,798 km. Terrain: 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: 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. South Africa is party to: Antarctic-Environmental Protocol, Antarctic-Marine Living Resources, Antarctic Seals, Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands, Whaling.

Economy A middle-income, emerging market with a large supply of natural resources, 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

out-dated 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 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. Natural resources: gold, chromium, antimony, coal, iron ore, manganese, nickel, phosphates, tin, uranium, gem diamonds, platinum, copper, vanadium, salt, natural gas. Agriculture: corn, wheat, sugarcane, fruits, vegetables; beef, poultry, mutton, wool, dairy products. Industries: mining (South Africa is the world's largest producer of gold, platinum, chromium), automobile

assembly, metalworking, machinery, textiles, iron and steel, chemicals, fertilizer, foodstuffs, commercial ship repair.

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

Population 43,786,115 (July 2008 est.) This figure factors in the effects and mortality rate of AIDS which is ravaging the country's population. Ethnic groups: black African 79%, white 9.6%, mixed 8.9%, Indian/Asian 2.5% (2001 census). 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: 5.1 million (2005).

Currency rand (ZAR). Exchange rates: 1EUR=11.39ZAR, 1USD=7.60ZAR, 1GBP=14.27ZAR, 1AUD=6.67ZAR, SGD=5.44ZAR

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 water-borne 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).

Decompression Chambers CAPE TOWN: National Hyberbarics Klienmont Hospital, Cape Town 24-Hour Hotline: Tel. 021-671-8655

DURBAN: St. Augustine's Hyperbaric Medicine Centre Hyperbaric and Woundcare Unit St. Augustine's Hospital 24-Hour Hotline: Tel. 031-268-5000 www.sahmc.co.za

Web sites South Africa Tourism www.southafrica.net

RIGHT: Global map with location of South Africa

FAR RIGHT: Location of Durban on map of South Africa

LOWER LEFT: Sunset over the savanna, South Africa

