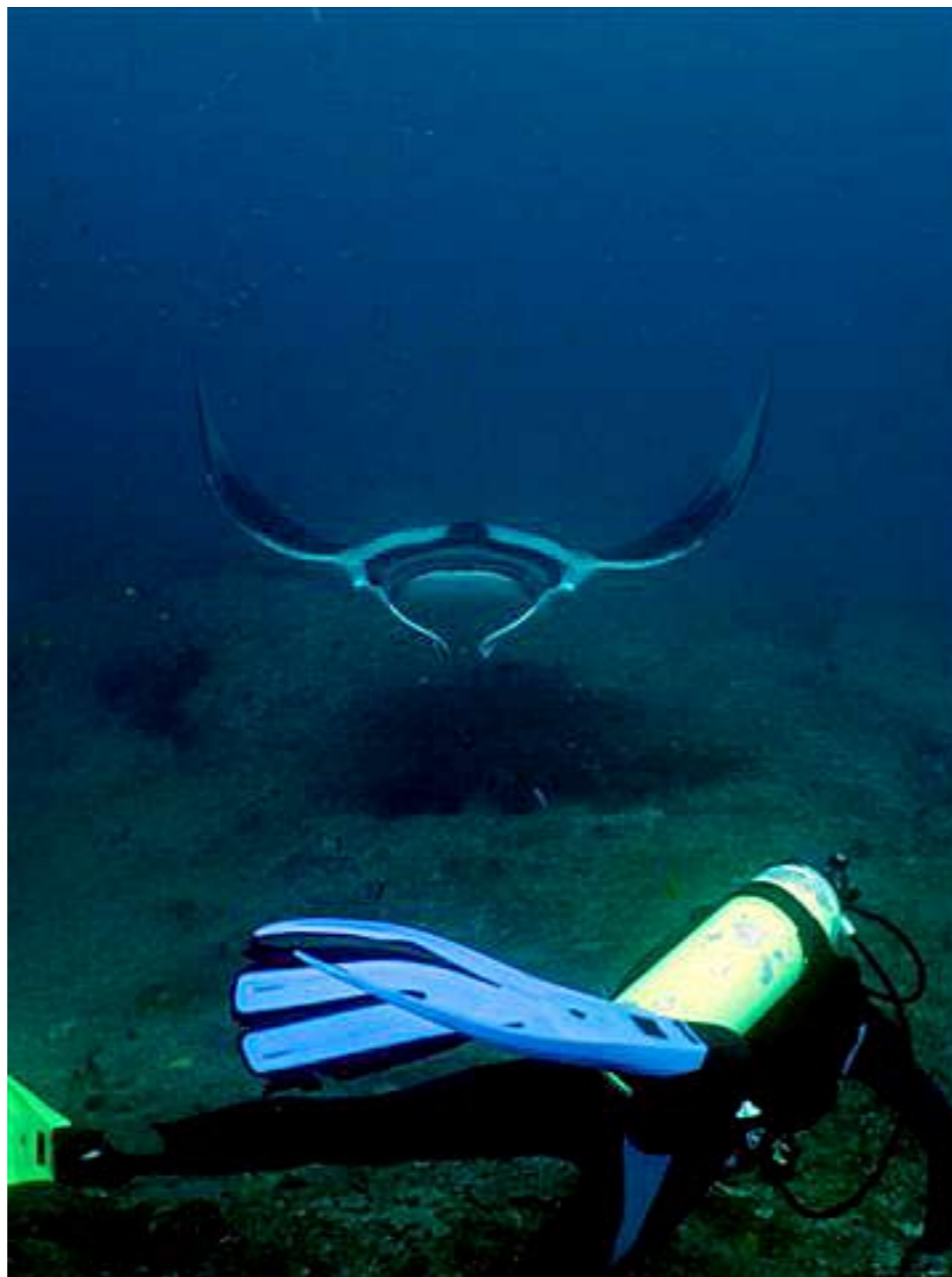




Tantalizing Tofo

Diving with Mantas Rays & Whalesharks in Mozambique



Four hundred and fifty kilometres north of Maputo, Mozambique's capital, and half an hour from the historic Portuguese trading town of Inhambane and its airport, Tofo is a laid-back village popular for its endless pristine beaches and, of course, scuba diving. The warm waters of the Indian Ocean provide sustenance for an abundance of marine life here, but the mantas and the whale sharks are the stars of the show.

Text and photos
by Christopher Bartlett

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Sunrise at Tofo

THIS PAGE: Encounters with giant mantas at Tofo, Mozambique

"Three, two, one go!"

Rolling backwards off the pontoon of the RIB, I delighted in the slow-motion freefall from a negative entry, going straight down with Carlos, our Dive Master. "At last," I thought, "this is the life." Yet, I had little time to contemplate the hue of the blue and the visibility, as the instant I looked down I saw a giant manta moving slowly over the cleaning station 20 metres below. It slid graciously and effortlessly through the water, butterflyfish, goldies, and wrasses nibbling it clean of the parasites it had picked up on its oceanic wanderings. We unobtrusively dropped behind a wall next to the cleaning station and watched as a second and then a third manta glided in, whilst a large green turtle settled into a hollow. What a start!

As we drifted gently along the dive site, the oddly-named Hogwarts, 100 kilos of potato grouper gave us the eye, kingfish cruised past, and a school of barracuda zipped along. My grin was so wide I nearly lost my regulator when a

unique small-eyed stingray, the largest of all stingrays and only ever seen alive here, 5000 kilometres from the edge of its previously considered range, flapped its two-metre wide wings and slid past nonchalantly. It was undoubtedly the best first dive of a trip ever, and there were some big smiles on the surface, dive leader Carlos beaming even more than normal.

On the boat after the first dive, the crew changed our cylinders and we moved close to the coast and started cruising slowly, looking for the biggest fish in the ocean, the beautiful and docile whale shark. Within an hour skipper Ernesto's eagle eye picked out the outline of one of these giant planktivores. Donning fins and masks we slid over the side and snorkelled alongside a six-metre specimen, the sun's rays highlighting the white spotted patterns that cover its body from the tip of its tail to its super-wide terminal mouth.

Attracted by the plankton blooms



Fish catch a free ride in the mouth of a giant whale shark; Respect the whale shark's space and lengthen your experience; Six-metre whale shark; Schooling Bannerfish on Giant's Castle



scientist and Whale Shark specialist Dr Simon Pierce, Tofo has the world's largest population of the species, present year round, making it an ideal place for a sighting or two. Non-divers can also enjoy an amazing encounter with this behemoth on a two-hour ocean safari run by Tofo Scuba. I swam with them on four occasions in two weeks.

Diving

There are three dive centres in Tofo, with similar prices, but Tofo Scuba (www.tofoscuba.co.za) has an attractive, purpose-built dive centre on the beach, a training pool, an on-site restaurant, and very professional and friendly staff. They are an eclectic mix of nationalities who make you feel at home straight away, and with smiles everywhere it is impossible to not have a good time. The rates are the best in town, too: On a ten-dive package with your own equipment, a dive comes to a very reasonable 22 pounds. Some of the further reefs are subject to a small surcharge, but are well worth it.

To the north, Amazon with its strong currents has



that occur in the vicinity, Junior opened wide to filter out the nutrients with the spongy tissue near its gill arches. As we did our best to keep up, he progressed effortlessly seemingly not moving his tail at all, staying just below the surface for ten minutes, before he disappeared from view.

And Junior is not alone; according to research





Anemone crab; Potato Bass; Snappers and diver on Manta Reef; Honeycomb moray eel; Frogfish and its aura; Eye-stripe surgeonfish

a good mix of macrolife, lionfish, honeycomb morays, and groupers, and never has it such a pleasure to be informed that it is time to go to The Office. David Brent was happily absent but his chair is often filled by a leopard shark, some whitetips, and the wierdly beautiful bowmouth guitarfish. Colosseum has only ever been dived a handful of times but should be renamed The Hospital for its schools of eye-stripe surgeonfish.

Straight out of the bay lies Giant's Castle. Dropping next to a Manta cleaning station, we drifted along the battlements as spectre-like silhouettes appeared from the blue, before dropping down to find the crawling sea moth or short dragonfish, morays, and ribbon

eels. Often the second dive of the day, it has a relatively short bottom time despite a 90-minute surface interval, but it's an action packed half-an-hour. As the bottom slopes downwards peppered with green coral trees, a big school of pelagic big-eye kingfish cruised into view circling us for a minute, and as we rose to our safety stop a school of devil rays ambled past. Giants also seems to be a favourite haunt of the small-eye stingray, and I was fortunate enough to see it there on two occasions.

To the south though, next to the impressive Hogwarts, lies the jewel in Tofo's crown. The aptly-named Manta Reef is as vibrant a piece of underwater eye candy that I would



Coral Whip Goby



Ribbon eel



happily dive over and over. From the surface, swathes of yellow and striped snapper, red soldierfish, and blue red-fang triggerfish covering the pinnacles can be seen.

Dropping into an amphitheatre that starts at 18 metres and bottoms out at 28, it is impossible to know where to look. Whilst taking

in the stunning colours of the schooling fish, my eye is caught by a coral whip goby, and then I spy African and Potato Grouper under different overhangs.

Back over the edge of the wide bowl, countless mantas (the resident and world-leading manta researcher Dr Andrea Marshall, identified 22 different individuals there the previous day), both giant and "normal", glided gracefully over the numerous cleaning stations, as a myriad of

goldies, damsels, and butterflyfish picked them clean. They danced over us, around us, and even between us, as if courting each other. I was certainly smitten.

And that was before meeting the monster.

I have seen many a fair-sized giant moray, as thick as a large

man's head, but, standing proudly on one-third of its three metres at the back of a cave like a dragon in its lair, was a beast with a head the size of a horse. Unsurprisingly, I could not convince my buddy to go in with a torch to help me focus my camera and give a sense of scale, but the image of this goliath of morays will stay with me until I return, as return I will. Manta Reef is definitely up there with the best.

Accommodation & transportation

Tofo has a range of accommodation options from camping to lodges, but right next to the dive centre, the independently owned and run Aquaticos Beachside Casitas provide conveniently located, good value for the money self-catering, with friendly staff who take care of dishwashing and free laundry to boot.

A short walk along the beach or sand roads to the market and several restaurants and bars, and an even shorter walk to Tofo Online



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Leopard blenny at Amazon; View of Tofo; Starfish posing; Market scene; Sea cucumber feeding at The Office



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Manta gets close; Stunning spiky starfish; Soldierfish on Manta Reef; Another stunning starfish; Shortfin dragonfish rests on the seabed



for email junkies, or to Dino's Bar for pizza or prawns—everything is close by. Meals at Tofo Scuba, Dino's or Fatima's go for around four pounds; a pizza will set you back a fiver.

The market has fresh fruit and veggies, cashews, fish and basic groceries—and, hidden in the centre behind the colourful batiks, some local lunch eateries serve rice with fish, chicken, or beef cooked on coals for a pound. If your Portuguese or Bitongo isn't up to much, pointing at a pot and saying "que es, por favor?" Will get you a look inside. In the evening, ask for Mr Bamboo's for grilled chicken or fish with a mountain of rice and fresh tomato salsa. Wash it down with a 500ml Manica, a Dois M, or Mozambique's stout, Laurentina Preta, and you'll get change from three pounds.

It's perfectly safe to walk around day or night, and the curiously squeaky sand is a delight to stroll along. Just remember to pack the sunscreen, as even in early May, the air temperature is in the low 30s, and the sea at 25-27°C, although it can drop to the low 20s in July.

LAM-Mozambique Airlines flies

between Inhambane and Johannesburg on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, or it's an eight-hour ride on a shuttle bus from departing from outside Fatima's in Maputo at 5 a.m everyday. The cost is 11 euros, and there is more information at www.fatimasnest.co.mz. The LAM ticket office is difficult to deal with, and it's best to go through an agent like Tofo Scuba Safaris (www.tofo-scubasafaris.com). Ask for Lucie, and she'll be delighted to interrupt her endless coffee consumption to answer your queries. A Joburg-Inhambane return is around 300 to 350 pounds. Both Lucy and Sharon at Acquaticos (info@aquaticolodge.com) can organise airport transfers.

As I write this in the bus heading south,



Maputo then London-bound, taking in the palm trees, acacias, and the villages with cassava crops and roadside vendors, I wonder when I'll be back. Tofo and its megafauna have enchanted me. ■

fact file

Mozambique



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM

History In 1975, Mozambique established its independence after nearly 500 years as a Portuguese colony. However, the country's development was hindered by large-scale emigration, economic dependence on South Africa, a severe drought, and a prolonged civil war until the mid 1990's. In 1989, the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) party formally abandoned Marxism. The following year, a new constitution authorized a free market economy and multiparty elections. In 1992, fighting ended between FRELIMO and rebel Mozambique National Resistance

(RENAMO) with a UN-negotiated peace agreement. After 18 years in office, Joaquim Chissano stepped down in December 2004, leading Mozambique into a delicate transition. The elected successor, Armando Emilio Guebuza, pledged to continue the sound economic policies that have nurtured foreign investment. Largely due to post-conflict reconstruction, Mozambique has seen very strong economic growth since the end of the civil war. Government: republic. Capital: Maputo. Legal system: based on Portuguese civil law system and customary law.

Geography Mozambique is located in Southeastern Africa. It borders the Mozambique Channel, between South Africa and Tanzania. Terrain is mostly coastal lowlands, uplands in central Mozambique, high plateaus in the northwest and mountains in the west. Coastline: 2,470 km. Lowest point: Indian Ocean 0m. Highest point: Monte Binga 2,436m. Note: the Zambezi River flows through the most fertile north-central part of the country.

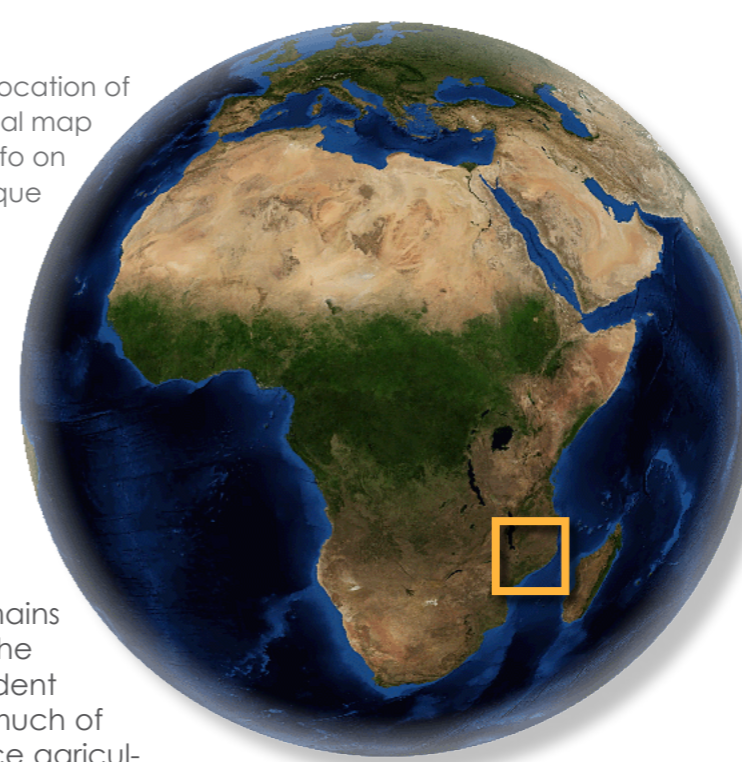
Economy Mozambique was one of the world's poorest countries at its independence in 1975. Exacerbating the situation were socialist mismanagement and a brutal civil war from 1977-92. In 1987, the government initiated a series of macroeconomic reforms made to stabilize the economy. These led to vast improvements in the country's growth rate. Despite these gains, the majority of

the country's population remains below the poverty line and the government remains dependent upon foreign assistance for much of its annual budget. Subsistence agriculture employs the majority of the work force. However, through forgiveness and rescheduling under the IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and Enhanced HIPC initiatives, Mozambique's once substantial foreign debt has been lowered, and is now at a manageable level. July 2007 saw the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) sign a five-year Compact with Mozambique, which went into force in September 2008 and focuses on improving infrastructure, sanitation, agriculture, and the business regulation environment in the northern provinces. Natural resources: coal, titanium, natural gas, hydropower, tantalum, graphite. Agriculture: cotton, cashew nuts, sugarcane, tea, cassava (tapioca), corn, coconuts, sisal, citrus and tropical fruits, potatoes, sunflowers; beef, poultry. Industry: food, beverages, chemicals (fertilizer, soap, paints), aluminum, petroleum products, textiles, cement, glass, asbestos, tobacco

Climate tropical to subtropical. Natural hazards: severe droughts; devastating cyclones and floods in the central and southern provinces

Environmental issues adverse environmental consequences have resulted from increased migration of the country's population to urban and coastal areas spurred by civil war and recurrent

RIGHT: Location of Mozambique on global map
FAR RIGHT: Location of Tofo on map of Mozambique



drought in the backcountry. Other issues include desertification; pollution of surface and coastal waters; elephant poaching for ivory. Mozambique is party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands

Currency Meticals (MZM)
Exchange rates: 1EUR=37.41MZM;
1USD=25.55MZM; 1GBP=43.70MZM;
1AUD=21.78MZM; 1SGD=18.27MZM

Population 21,669,278. In poverty: 70% (2001 est.). Living with AIDS: 1.5 million (2007 est.) Ethnic groups: African 99.66% (Makhuwa, Tsonga, Lomwe, Sena, and others), Europeans 0.06%, Euro-Africans 0.2%, Indians 0.08%. Religion: Catholic 23.8%, Muslim 17.8%, Zionist Christian 17.5%, other religions 17.8%, no religion 23.1% (1997 census). Internet users: 200,000 (2007)

Time CAT (UTC+2)

Language Emakhuwa 26.1%, Xichangana 11.3%, Portuguese 8.8% (official language spoken by 27% of population as a second language),

Elomwe 7.6%, Cisena 6.8%, Echuwabo 5.8%, other Mozambican languages 32%, other foreign languages 0.3%, unspecified 1.3% (1997 census)

Health There is a very high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; the vectorborne diseases malaria and plague; the water contact disease schistosomiasis; and the animal contact disease rabies (2009)

Recompression Chamber
St. Augustine's Hospital
Durban, South Africa
www.sahmc.co.za

Links
Mozambique Tourism
www.mozambique tourism.co.za ■



Diver with large lionfish