



Diver explores
Aliwal reef

When it comes to marine diversity, South Africa certainly has the lion's share. Blessed with a lengthy coastline swept by warm and cold currents, the resulting array of marine habitats makes for spectacular diving in any season. For shark junkies, however, South Africa is nothing less than the promised land. While the Western Cape's cold waters are famous for its great white sharks, the country's subtropical environs are home to two of its premier shark dives—Aliwal Shoal and Protea Banks. With such underwater bad boys as tiger and bull sharks as the main attractions, I knew I was in for an experience like no other.

Text and photos
by Scott Bennett

Aliwal Shoal & Protea Banks **South Africa**

My journey to see some of South Africa's most impressive predators would begin above water in the world-famous Kruger National Park. Starting in neighbouring Mozambique, I took a plane to the capitol of Maputo where I would meet my driver to take me across the border.

Prior to my arrival, I was told that my driver, Bruno Liebi, would be a white guy with dreadlocks. I figured he probably wouldn't be too difficult to spot. An easygoing South African of Swiss descent, Bruno was waiting right outside the arrival hall. Greeting me warmly, we loaded

the car and headed for the border, negotiating Maputo's rush hour traffic in the process.

Twenty years ago, the border was tense and heavily fortified, as waves of Mozambican refugees, desperate to escape the violence in their home-

land, took tremendous risks to escape. If they managed to negotiate the heavily mined no-mans land encircled with barbed wire, there was a contingent of South African troops waiting on the other side. Beyond that lay the Kruger National Park where many succumbed

to marauding lions and leopards.

Today, that scenario is but a distant memory, replaced by scenes of vehicular chaos. Bruno recounted one instance where it was backed up 17km, resulting in an excruciating seven-hour wait. Arriving at 8:00PM on a Friday evening,

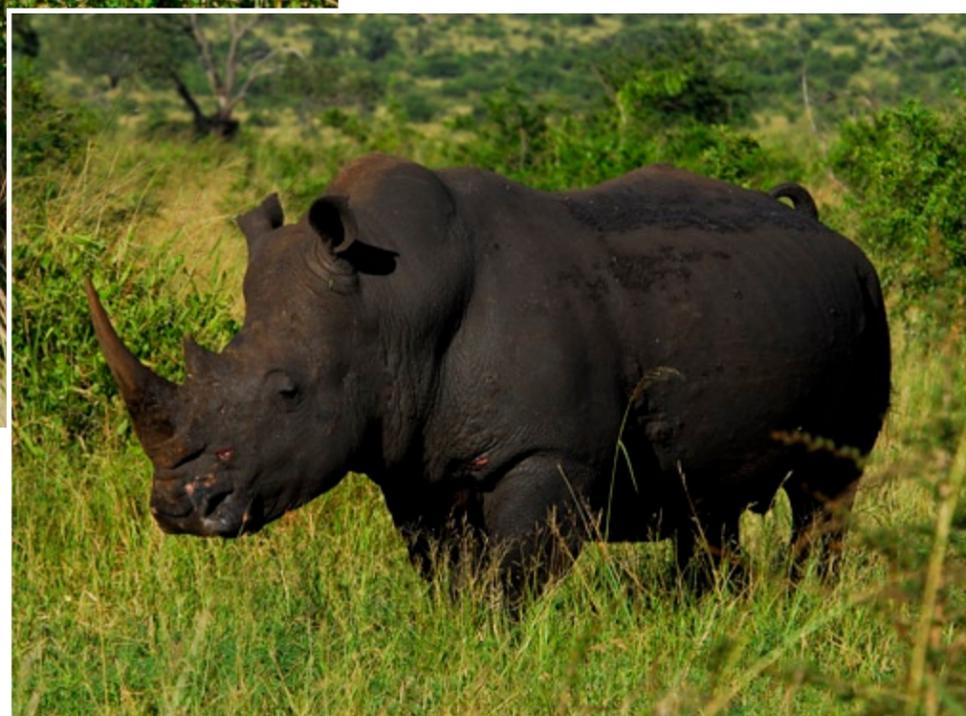




wife, Annette, the lodge overlooks the Kruger National Park and a 35-min drive from the Crocodile Bridge gate. Small and intimate with only five rooms, I felt like I was visiting friends for the weekend. For my first night, I was the sole guest. The



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Elephant; Cooking up breakfast in the bush; Bushwise Lounge view; Zebra in the tall grass; Brai—South African style barbeque; Endangered white rhino can be found in Kurger National Park



resort's game driver Werner joined me for dinner and we ate at the outside dining table. The main course was a traditional South African dish called Potjie. Translated as 'pot' in Afrikaans, it was a delicious lamb stew cooked in a huge earthenware pot. Washed down with an ice-cold Castle beer, it was just the ticket after a long day of travel. Even in my comfortable room, the African bush was never far away. Returning after dinner, I nearly squished a sizeable locust perched astride my bathroom door.

elephant, lion, leopard, rhino and buffalo—which received this title by being the five most dangerous species to hunt. For my first day in the park, I would be spoiled rotten, as I would have would have the safari vehicle all to myself. Photo bliss!

Established in 1898, Kruger is the flagship of South Africa's park system, covering two million hectares and home to an impressive array of species including 34 amphibians, 114 reptiles, 507 birds and 147 mammals. Among the latter are The Big Five—

The wildlife parade commenced immediately; we spotted four white rhinos within the first 15 minutes. We soon added zebra, giraffe, impala, wildebeest and elephant to a rapidly expanding wildlife tally. Approaching one substantial tusker

we were in luck. Mozambiquan workers returning home for the weekend had yet to arrive, and we sailed through customs in 20 minutes flat.

My home for the next three nights was Bushwise Lodge, situated in Marloth Park, less than an hour's drive from the border. Run by transplanted Zimbabwean, Tim Van Coller, and his Afrikaans



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Giraffe; Impala; Buffalo crossing a dirt road; Roaming blue wildebeest; Resting lion; European roller



beside the road, I asked Werner if he could shut off the engine while I took some shots. Politely refusing, he recounted the time he was chased backwards in a VW van by a charging elephant. From the moment on, I could live with the idling motor.

After stopping at a riverside hide to observe hippos, it was already mid-morning. With hunger pangs became persistent, we headed for the picnic area at Londolozi Dam for breakfast.

Offering expansive views over the surrounding countryside, a large covered pavilion housed picnic tables and barbecues.

Werner immediately got to work, whipping up a deli-

icious bush breakfast of bacon and eggs with all the trimmings. With the copious amounts of meat on display, I could already sense that South Africa was a dangerous place for vegetarians.

The remainder of the day was enthralling, with an impressive array of wildlife on display. An elephant carcass was mobbed by vultures and marabou storks as others waited their turn in nearby treetops. Despite a serious problem with poaching, white rhinos were especially abundant, counting 18 by day's end. A perfect day was capped by a dip in the lodge's infinity pool with a glass of Amarula liqueur in hand.

The next day's activities included a pair of totally different experiences—an early morning bushwalk and a sun-

set drive. For the former, an ungodly wake-up call of 3:30AM added a whole new dimension to the term 'bleary-eyed'. Stumbling out of bed, a jolt of coffee did little to rouse my stupor. Joining me for the walk was a Dutch couple who had arrived the previous evening.

Bushwalk

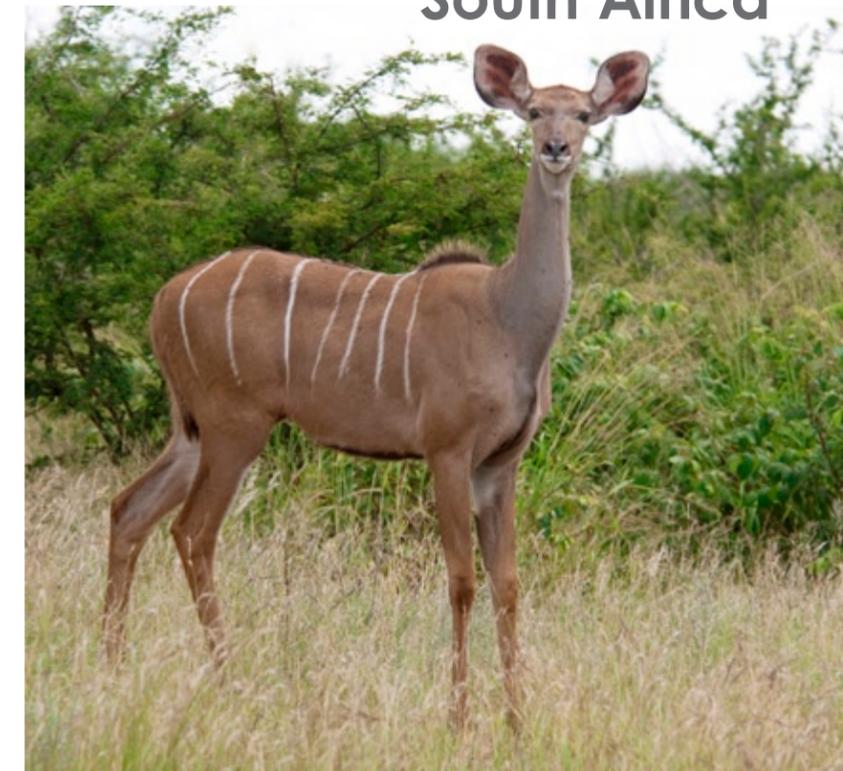
Arriving at the park office, a change of vehicles and guide was necessary, as protocol dictates park staff and vehicles must be utilized for both early morning and sunset excursions. Bidding Werner adieu, we met our guide Dingaan and his driver. Boasting an imposing six-foot frame with shaven head and broad grin, Dingaan soon

proved to be a treasure trove of information.

By 5:00AM, we were inside the park enroute to our embarkation point. I soon spotted what appeared to be a large tawny bag obstructing the road ahead. Only after stopping did I realize that the "bag" was an adolescent male lion! Despite being immature, the cat looked enormous at such close range. Although I had been assured

that animals don't recognize human shapes within a vehicle, for one brief moment the cat's striking golden eyes bore directly into mine. I couldn't help but wonder if he was regarding us as meals on wheels.

Arriving at the embarkation point, we were treated to a solemn briefing. With wildlife afoot that could perceive us as a buffet lunch, this would be no simple walk in the park. "When we



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Family of banded mongoose; Vultures; Female kudu; Red-necked francolin; Kingfisher; Yellow-billed hornbill; Enter-at-your-own-risk entrance sign

towards us in a comical cluster. Suddenly, one got spooked and the entire group bolted. Seconds later, they reappeared, only to repeat the entire procedure two more times.

After a day of rest at the lodge, it was back to the park for the sunset drive. As with the bushwalk, the park's guides would be leading the excursion. After a half hour of driving, we came across another safari vehicle parked off road in a clearing. Following suit, we approached the other vehicle to discover a trio of lions resting

to lighten the load, everyone had to get off. There was something decidedly surreal about standing on a darkened roadway with a trio of lions watching us intently. Fortunately, they



in the tall grass. It was hard to believe they were invisible from the road only metres away. Also hard to believe is what happened as we tried to back out. A loud bang announced an extremely untimely flat tire.

Fortunately, we limped back to the road, where the other truck's driver helped ours change the flat. Then,



appeared to be well fed.

With tire changed, we resumed our drive. Along with elephants, giraffes and hyenas, a range of nocturnal creatures put in an

crouch, you crouch, if I tell you to stop, you stop. Most of all, no talking unless we say it is okay." With both guides brandishing rifles, we then set off on our two-hour hike.

Trudging through the waist-high grass offered a totally different perspective than from the comfort of a safari vehicle. Within minutes, apprehension turned to wonder. Here, we were on the animals' terms, with an overwhelming collage of sights, sounds and smells. Never knowing what was around the next bend added to the excitement.

Stopping frequently, Dingaana divulged snippets of bush lore at each and every turn. He pointed out a sausage tree, whose sausage-like fruit hung down on long, ropey stems. A prized food source for animals and humans alike, we also learned to never park your car underneath one, as the 10kg fruit is capable of smashing through a windshield.

In the distance, giraffes eyed us warily while an elephant wallow had already been colonized by frogs and a turtle. Tottering on delicate feet, a trio of warthogs momentarily froze at our approach before bolting into the scrub—their tails raised comically like fluttering flagpoles.

After traversing a dry riverbed, we happened upon a rhino midden (latrine). Dung beetles seethed beneath the surface while additional dung at the periphery indicated the presence of other rhinos that had stopped by, kind of like the bush version of email.

With plenty of highlights during the

walk, two especially stood out. As a troop of baboons passed in a clearing ahead of us, a young male jumped atop the highest branch of a fallen tree, vigorously shaking it in defiance. "It's going to break," whispered Dingaana with a grin and right on cue, it snapped off, taking the hapless baboon with it.

Later, as we crouched to observe some rhinos sheltering under a grove of trees, a family of striped mongoose was perturbed to find us blocking their way. Squeaking and chirping, they skittered



With plenty of highlights during the



South Africa

my gear, we set out for the town of Umkomaas, gateway to Aliwal Shoal. Driving on the N2 Freeway, the trip was fast, taking only 90 minutes.

Before long, we arrived at the Umkomaas Guest House, where I met up with owners Mick and Sue Clark, rambunctious Jack Russell terriers Jack and Robbie and Lulu the African grey parrot. Expats from the United Kingdom, their spacious home offered sublime views over the Indian Ocean.

For dinner, I headed to a local takeaway spot to sample a true Durban delicacy: Bunny chow. Although the name may conjure visions of a *Fatal Attraction* bunny-on-the-stove scenario, the reality is much more benign. A hollowed out loaf of bread stuffed with curry, it is a legacy of Durban's huge Indian population. In any case, it is enough to max out one's daily carb intake in one fell swoop. Tasty but messy!

Rising after sunrise the next

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Elephant; Scene from Kruger National Park; Umkomaas Guest House; Bunny chow; Impala crossing

ery before stopping in Bruno's home-

town of Nelspruit for breakfast. I decided to go whole hog (literally) for the farmer's breakfast, a meat fest of eggs, beans, bacon and Afrikaans sausage called Boerewors. After Nelspruit, the land flattened out into endless expanses of farmland before entering the perimeter of Johannesburg's urban sprawl. Stopping for petrol, I glanced at a copy of the day's paper. Emblazoned on the front was a photo of a car that had been overturned by an angry bull elephant. I was eternally grateful that Werner always kept the motor running. Arriving at the air-

port, I bid Bruno farewell and headed for the domestic terminal to catch my South African Airways flight to Durban, situated on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal province. With the dreaded spectre of excess baggage fees looming, I received a pleasant surprise at the check-in counter. After explaining I had a separate case of dive gear, they waived it though as sporting equipment with not so much as a rand in excess fees. South African Airways

rocks!

Situated 35 kilometres north of the city centre, Durban's King Shaka International Airport opened just prior to the start of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. After meeting my driver and loading



6:00AM. After having a coffee with Tim on the verandah, we set off on our five-hour drive to Johannesburg. We had some very

interesting conversations regarding today's South Africa compared to the Apartheid days and of the many challenges the nation faces in the new millennium. I also learned Bruno's wife was an African American from Seattle. He had some interesting anecdotes of mistaken assumptions whenever they arrive at U.S. immigration!

Enroute, we passed by some beautiful rugged mountain scen-

er appearance including owls, porcupines, spotted genets and even a highly venomous puff adder.

My final day of game drives was just as exciting. Although I only saw four of the big five during my stay (lion, elephant, buffalo and rhino), the wealth of species more than made up for the absentee leopard.

The following morning, Bruno was waiting to meet me at

appearance including owls, porcupines, spotted genets and even a highly venomous puff adder.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Blue Vision Divers; Aliwal reef scenes

morning, I could see from my window that the ocean looked reasonably calm. Fingers were crossed! During breakfast, Sue informed me Mick set out at 4:00AM to do some fishing from his jet ski. By the time I was picked up at 9:00AM, he had returned with a hefty catch, which I got to sample that evening for dinner.

Aliwal Shoal

Just before 9:00, I was picked up and driven to Blue Vision Dive Centre, where I met up with Carol and her son Ferdie, who manage and own the operation. Our dive guide was Tyler, an affable guy in his early twenties with wavy blonde hair who then gave our group of four divers a briefing about the area.

A fossilized sand dune, Aliwal Shoal was created approximately 80,000 years ago by a combination of ice age flooding and a shift in the continental plates. It received its name in 1849, when a ship named the *Aliwal* narrowly collided with the shoal while

enroute to Durban. Surprised by its absence on any charts, the ship's captain alerted the local papers to ensure others became aware of its existence. In the ensuing years, two ships have been sunk here: the *Nebo* and the *Produce*. Due to its unique position, Aliwal fosters a diverse milieu of marine life, from tropical reef fish and turtles to pelagics, rays, dolphins, and whales.

Diving in South Africa isn't exactly for the faint of heart. Sharks aside, just getting out to the dive sites provides a major adrenaline rush. As in Mozambique, transport to the dive sites was via rubber-duck, an inflatable boat brandishing a pair of powerful outboard engines.

Able to take a beating in rough conditions, the durable 'duck' is the mainstay of the South African diving scene. Having gotten used to entry and beaching procedures in Mozambique, I figured there wouldn't be any surprises. Famous last words...

By briefing's end, all of our gear

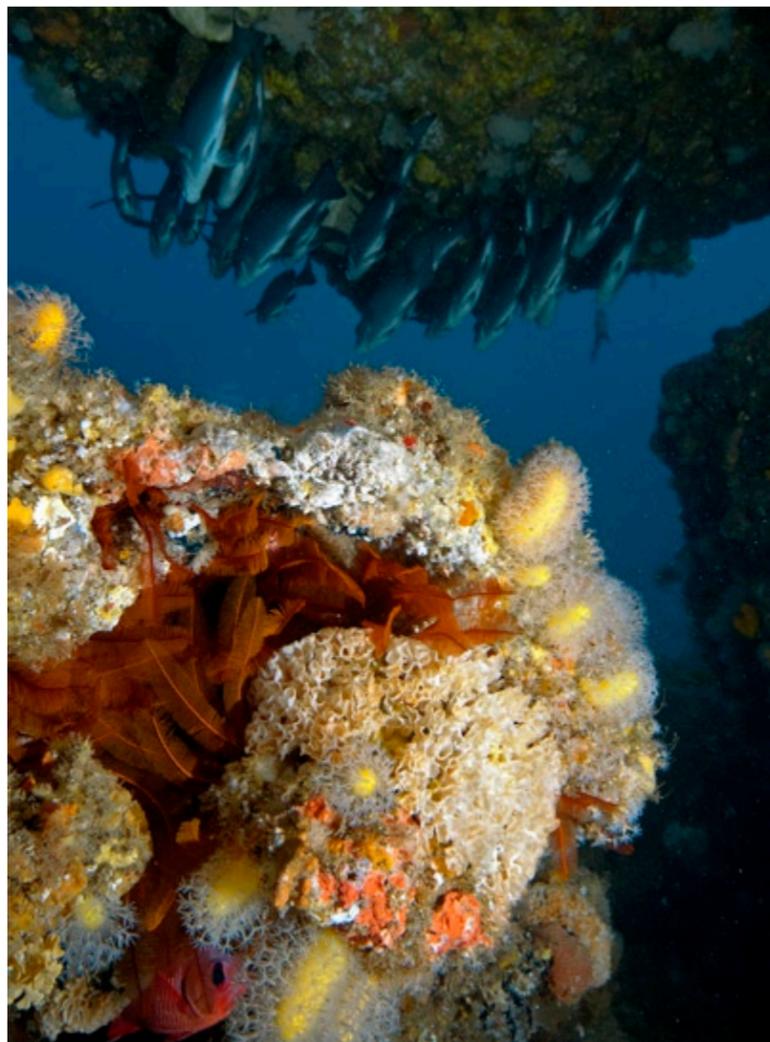
had been placed in the duck perched atop a trailer hitched to a truck. Our group of four then hopped in the back of the truck for the short drive to the entry point. After stopping at the Marine Park office for the obligatory paperwork, we continued on beneath the railway viaduct spanning the mouth of the Mkhomazi River. A large number

of whales once used the estuary as a nursery, with the Zulus naming the river uMkhomazi, meaning the place of cow whales.

Stopping on a wide bank of exposed sand, we hopped off the truck while Tyler and the driver got everything prepared. Fortunately, we didn't have to wade too far



Beaching Duck



into the water, as the ominous dorsal fins of bull sharks could be patrolling the middle of the river.

Before my arrival, I heard horror stories about Aliwal's launching conditions, which are reputed to be among the most treacher-

ous in all of South Africa. Visions of my camera or myself being hurled into rough seas had left me a tad anxious. Fortunately, Umkomaas is also home to some highly experienced skippers, and Tyler was no exception.



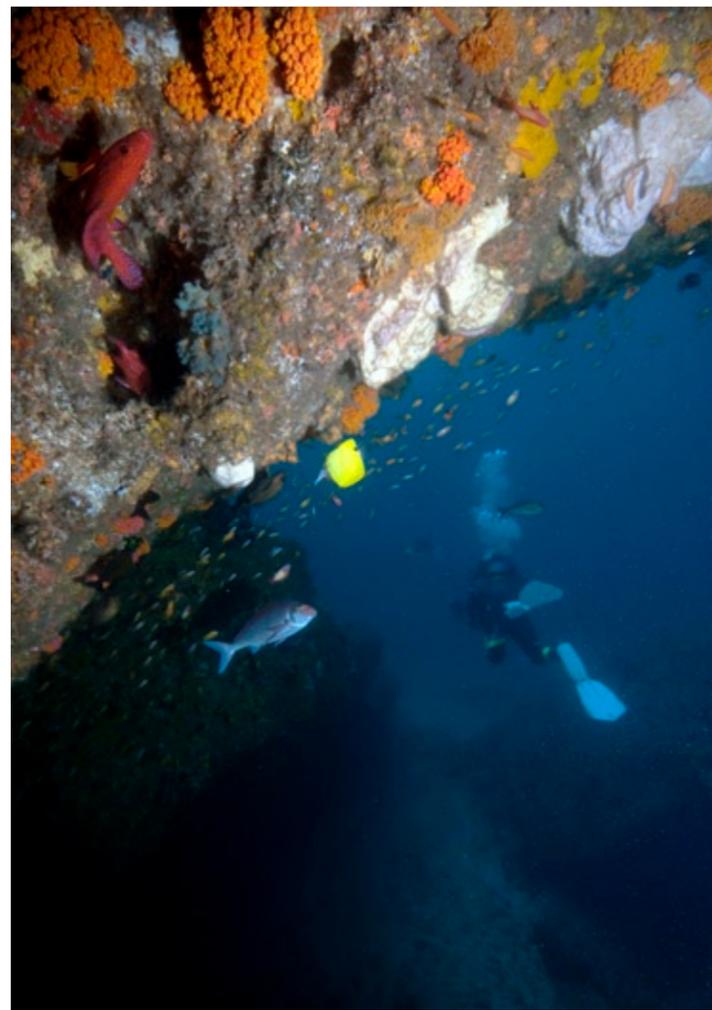


Easing the trailer to the waterline, the duck slid effortlessly into the river. Clambering aboard proved trouble-free, with no crashing surf to contend with. Unfortunately, *that* part was soon to follow. After passing beneath the railway viaduct into the estuary, the waves grew ominous with a profusion of whitecaps.

Tyler casually remarked that conditions didn't look that bad. The day before my arrival, exceptionally rough conditions flipped

over a boat from one of the other dive shops, injuring one of the passengers. That particular tidbit I could have done without.

Looking for an opening, Tyler made several attempts to get through. Finally, a break appeared and opening the outboards to full throttle, we roared ahead. Tightly grasping the side ropes with feet secured in the foot straps, I braced myself for a very bumpy ride. Fortunately, Tyler handled it with aplomb



THIS PAGE: Reef scenes from Cathedral
BELOW: Ragged-tooth shark

Cathedral. Our first site was Cathedral, a large cavern with a floor at 28m. During the winter months between June and August, it plays host to a large congregation of ragged tooth sharks during their breeding season. At that time up to 200 'raggies' can be observed here when colder water pushes up from the Agulhas Bank.

While the sharks were absent, there was plenty of life on view. We arrived to surprise a large blotched fantail ray resting on the cavern's sandy bottom.

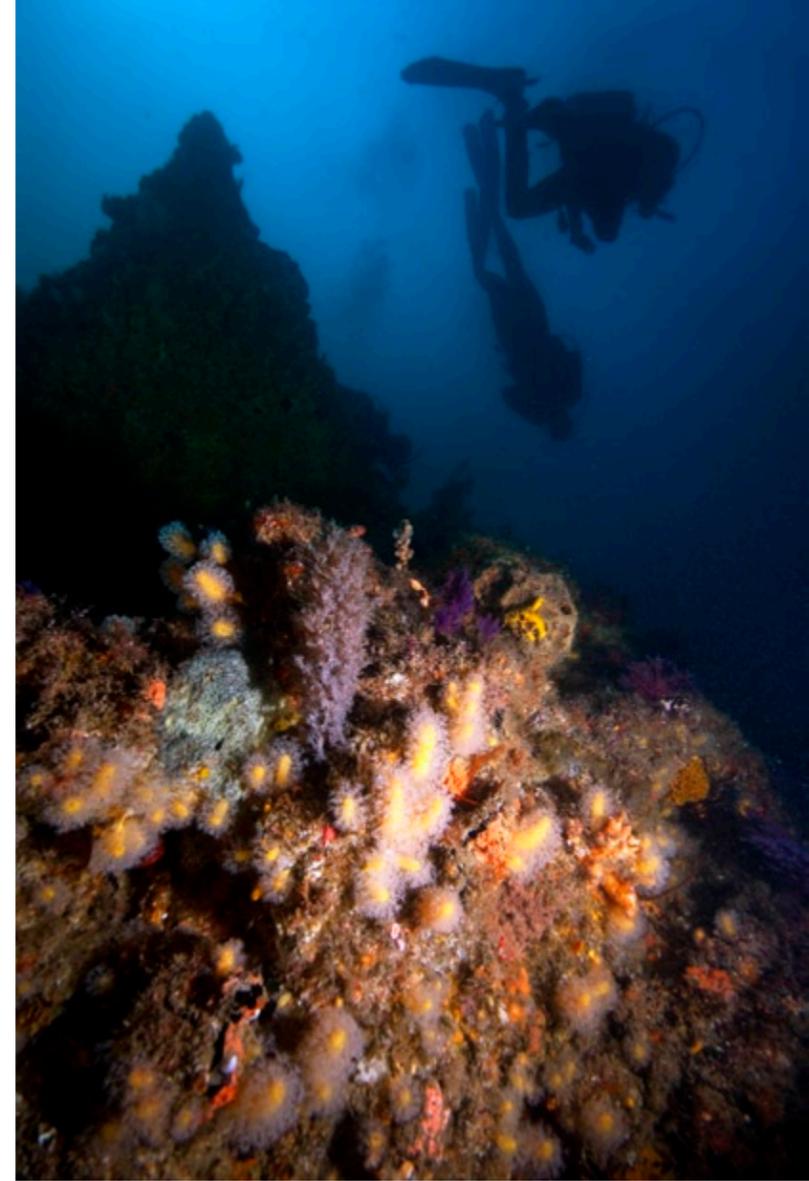
flitted amongst rocky overhangs. With the temperature a chilly 21 degrees at the bottom, I was almost underdressed in my 3mm suit.

North Sands. Every underwater photographer has experienced at least one 'missed moment', that dreaded occurrence when the camera gods conspire to ruin that once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity. Mine happened during our second dive at North Sands.

The dive certainly started promisingly. Plunging into clear, warm water with

20m+ visibility, we descended to an expanse of white sand hemmed in by rocky outcrops. Rummaging through the sand, Tyler produced a couple of ragged tooth shark teeth, which upon closer scrutiny, turned out to be everywhere. With a slight current running, we then drifted across an undulating seascape buzzing with reef fish. Descending to 19m, a large overhang concealed a profusion of copper sweepers and squirrelfish. Stopping for

a photo, my weight belt unexpectedly started to slide off. Placing my housing on the seabed, I re-adjusted



my belt. Once secure, I retrieved my camera and finned after the others.

Descending further, the action increased exponentially. A massive marble ray cruised past reef followed by a hawksbill turtle. Moment's later, some frantic tank banging by Tyler heralded the arrival of something remarkable—a pod of bottlenose dolphins. Photographing furiously, the curious cetaceans passed within a few metres before veering off into the blue. Ecstatic at my good fortune, I checked my camera's viewfinder to ensure I nabbed the images. Success! If that wasn't enough, a school of barracudas arrived on the scene buzzed by a trio of oceanic blacktip sharks. Thank goodness for the nitrox.

Back at the dive shop, however,



and after one good jolt, we were through and on our way to Aliwal Shoal.

A profusion of soft corals shrouded the walls as swarms of squirrelfish and anthias, locally called 'goldies',

flitted amongst rocky overhangs. With the temperature a chilly 21 degrees at the bottom, I was almost underdressed in my 3mm suit.



my elation quickly turned to heartbreak. Nearly all of my photos were out of focus! It seems that when I put my housing down to re-adjust my weightbelt, the autofocus lever accidentally got bumped to manual, rendering all the subsequent images out of focus. To add insult to injury, a shifting tank had shattered my mask during the return trip. This clearly wasn't my day. Photo and gear mishaps aside, nothing could detract from a superlative pair of dives.

Down but not out, I eagerly anticipated the next day's dives. Now secure with Tyler's exemplary boating skills, our entry passed without a glitch, and we were on our way back to Aliwal Shoal. A return

previous day's outing. A hefty potato bass made an appearance along with a Zambezi (bull shark) and a whitetip.

Castle. As good as Cathedral was, our second dive at Castle was exceptional. Soft corals, barrel sponges and kelp enveloped the terrain along with a delirious array of reef fish. Tyler then drew my attention to a large, squat archway. Peering inside, I could discern a shark circling about. Suddenly, my eyes widened: it was a raggy!

Boasting protruding, needle-like teeth, the sinister grin belies a relaxed demeanor. After a few more circuits, the raggy exited, practically colliding with me in the

visit to The Cathedral proved to be much more photographically productive than the

process. It didn't even react when I accidentally kicked it with my fin. After taking some more shots, I turned to discover the raggy's toothy grin mere inches from my face. Fortunately, he merely wanted to retreat to his protective overhang. The raggy, however, turned out to be but a prelude to the afternoon's main event—the tiger shark dive.

Shark diving etiquette

Beforehand, Tyler gave us a comprehensive briefing. When it comes to shark dives, there definitely are a lot of *don'ts* involved. For starters, it was imperative to remain behind the dive guide and maintain buoyancy at all times. Moving up and down in the water column would attract unwanted attention, as would the motion of flipping one's hand back and forth, an action a shark could interpret

as a fish in distress. I was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea....

To attract the sharks, a discarded washing machine drum was loaded with a pungent brew of chopped up sardines and fish oil. Within moments of hurtling it overboard, a half dozen oceanic blacktip sharks crowded the surface. It was bizarre to think I would be doing a backward roll right into their midst. Soon the moment of truth arrived, and we all entered the water.

More than 30 sharks,



South Africa

LEFT TO RIGHT: Razorfish; Underwater photographer and swarm of blacktip sharks; Blacktip shark

all of them blacktips, instantly enveloped us. Despite the encircling melee, my apprehension vanished instantly. In fact, my first thought was, "Cool!"

Not one shark displayed an iota of aggressive behaviour; they were far more intrigued by the scent emanating from the bait drum. On a few occasions, I was even bumped, as they tried to avoid one another. With so many sharks bombarding us from all directions, photographing them proved to be a real challenge.

Thirty minutes into the dive, a dim silhouette materialized from the





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Nolangeni Lodge; Beached Duck; View of Shelly Beach at St. Michael's

Protea Banks

After collecting my gear and thanking my generous hosts, I headed back to the guesthouse to pack. My next destination was St. Michael's, an hour drive down the coast and gateway to Protea Banks. Unlike quieter Umkomaas, St. Michael's on Shelly Beach was a major holiday destination, with scores of hotels and guesthouses fringing the coastline.

gloom. The distinctive striped body was unmistakable. A tiger shark! Despite its bad boy reputation, it proved surprisingly timid, sticking to the periphery away from the frenzy of blacktips. Eventually, it came straight up to the drum and attempted to take a bite out of it. Even after an hour underwater, I didn't want it to end.

My accommodation, Nolangeni Lodge, was situated on a secluded, leafy street away from the beach's bustle. Run by Bev and her German husband, Herbert, their immaculate home commanded a prime location on a hilltop surrounded by tropical gardens. My tastefully appointed room, complete with sea-facing terrace commanded a beautiful view towards the ocean. Being

without my own vehicle was a bit problematic, so Bev ordered me a chicken Tikka pizza from a nearby restaurant called Debonair's. After dinner, I posted a few images from the on my Facebook page. "You're insane" was the general consensus.

At 6:30AM the next morning, I was picked up by Beulah Mauz, co-owner of African Dive Adventures. We soon arrived at Shelly Beach named after the millions of tiny shells that make up its beautiful expansive sweep. Waiting for us was Beulah's husband, Roland, an easygoing German with an infectious sense of humour. African Dive Adventures soon proved to be decidedly different dive operation.

In fact, they don't even have a shop. For the past decade, they have permanently rented a storeroom and compressor from the Shelly Beach Fishing Club. For the comfort of guests, some permanent thatched umbrellas have been erected right on the beach.

Situated some 8km offshore, Protea Banks' reef system is consistently rated as one of the world's best shark dives. With depths ranging up to 40m, we would be diving nitrox to maximize our bottom time. As safety is

paramount, Roland paid a visit to the harbourmaster's residence to give them everyone's name before we set out.

In marked contrast to Umkomaas' placid river entry, we set out right into the crashing surf. Once the duck was in the water, everyone then scrambled to turn it around. With only a few of us on the first dive, it was a challenge to rotate the craft in the rough conditions.

South Pinnacles. Our first dive would be at South Pinnacles, which is famed for its Zambezi sharks. During the dive brief, we were told we might run into a big potato bass roughly 2m in length. Name: Billy Bob Steinberg!

Descending through a strong surface current, we headed for the reef top at 32m. With his surface towline

acting like a sail, Kyle was propelled forward and the group had a struggle to keep up. Protea's undersea terrain proved different than Aliwal, with little in the way of soft corals. With his surface towline acting like a sail, Kyle was propelled forward and the group had a struggle to keep up.

Filtering nutrients from the strong currents, yellow barrel sponges peppered the sea floor as legions of blue triggerfish foraged the vicinity. The sponges, however, weren't the attraction—South Pinnacles immediately proved to be a mecca for all things big.

The current took us past an expansive sandy patch called Sand Shark Gully. Positioned at 40m, it is a favourite haunt of giant guitar sharks. A trio of spotted eagle rays glided



Two-meter-long potato bass named Billy Bob Steinberg



South Africa

examined the drum.

Later on, a second tiger appeared and came fairly close. It was also seriously big shark, measuring nearly 4m. Unfazed by our presence, its languid movement was sheer elegance. Approaching the drum, it gave one of the blacktips a deliberate bump to show it who was boss.

Seventy-seven minutes later, my tank was empty and memory card full. I

minutes.

Back on the duck, I just had to ask Roland about the grouper's unusual moniker. Originally nicknamed 'Billy Bob' by Kyle, the last name was added when Roland saw a news item on CNN featuring someone called Billy Bob Steinberg. Right away, their bass had a name!

Next up was the shark dive, with Zambezis the star attractions. As at Aliwal, a discarded washing machine drum was packed with chopped sardines and fish oil. Attached to a float, the contraption was heaved overboard along with copious amounts of fish oil and additional fishy bits. Kyle remained topside while Roland took control of the guiding duties.

Alas, only three sharks made an appearance—a pair of blacktips and a dusky. After 13 minutes, we called it quits to try a new location. With a total dive time of 13 minutes, there was plenty of air in my tank for round two.

Moving on to a new spot, Roland manned the boat while Kyle took to the water. At 23 degrees, it was nippy but instantly more productive. Along with the ubiquitous blacktips, a tiger shark showed up right at the start, only to vanish into the depths. In no time, a surfeit of oceanic blacktips arrived. Four Zambezi's made an appearance, but kept to the background as the smaller sharks

was also thoroughly chilled, a sensation not exactly synonymous with Africa. The day's diving was truly incredible, having spotted over 50 sharks of six different species!

For dinner, I walked down to a nearby German restaurant called Munchner Haus. After a week in South Africa, I finally had my chance to sample some wild game. In fact, with

WRECKS

Aliwal Shoal is also home to a pair of wrecks that can be explored by experienced divers. A 2000-ton wooden steamer, the *Nebo*, sank on her maiden voyage from Sunderland to Durban on 20 May 1884. It is theorized that the ship was incorrectly loaded and floundered in heavy seas. Positioned between depths of 19-25m, the stern remains reasonably intact, although the bow and midships are quite broken up. The propeller was damaged in the grounding, and the blade can still be observed in the Pinnacles area of the Shoal. The stern harbours a large assortment of fish and features a swim-through beneath the propeller. The boilers are still visible in the midships area as is the cargo of railway girders. A large debris field can be observed on the port side, with the cargo of railway line material making for a surreal sight on the sea floor.

A much more recent wreck is the *Produce*, situated between depths of 20-32m. A molasses carrier, it struck the northern part of Aliwal Shoal on 11 August 1974, breaking apart in three sections. They are the aft section, which is tilted onto one side, the broken up centre section and the front section. Today, the vessel is a refuge for a profusion of reef fish as well as a resident brindle bass, a massive grouper reaching three metres in length and tipping the scales at more than 500kg. Manta rays and game fish surround the wreck along with plenty of scorpionfish, lionfish and legions of goldies. ■



LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver and blacktip shark; Blacktip shark; Harbourmaster's house

past along with several blotched fantail rays. A great hammerhead came by for a look and deeper down, we could discern a school of 15 scalloped hammerheads.

Halfway into the dive, Billy Bob showed up for an up close and personal encounter. Easily mea-

suring 2m in length, he definitely didn't have any shyness issues, coming right up to me for a look. Slowing in the current was a challenge, but I managed to fire off a few photos before heading off to catch up with the group. Include nine Zambezi sharks, and it all added up to a spellbinding 44



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Kyle prepares chum for shark dive; Zambezi or bull shark; Tiger shark; Zambezi with remora; Tiger shark mug shot

few exceptions, all game in the country is branded “venison”. The special for the day was kudu medallions in a mushroom and fresh green peppercorn sauce. Dessert was a white chocolate mousse with Amarula liqueur and fresh fruit. Sheer decadence!

The next day’s itinerary mirrored the first; a morning dive at South Pinnacles followed by a shark dive in the afternoon. Both yielded a few more surprises. At South Pinnacles, we were having our safety stop when Kyle gestured wildly to the blue. Just at the edge of vision was

a wall of dusky sharks accompanied by a few scalloped hammerheads. Back at the surface, Kyle said he counted at least 50.

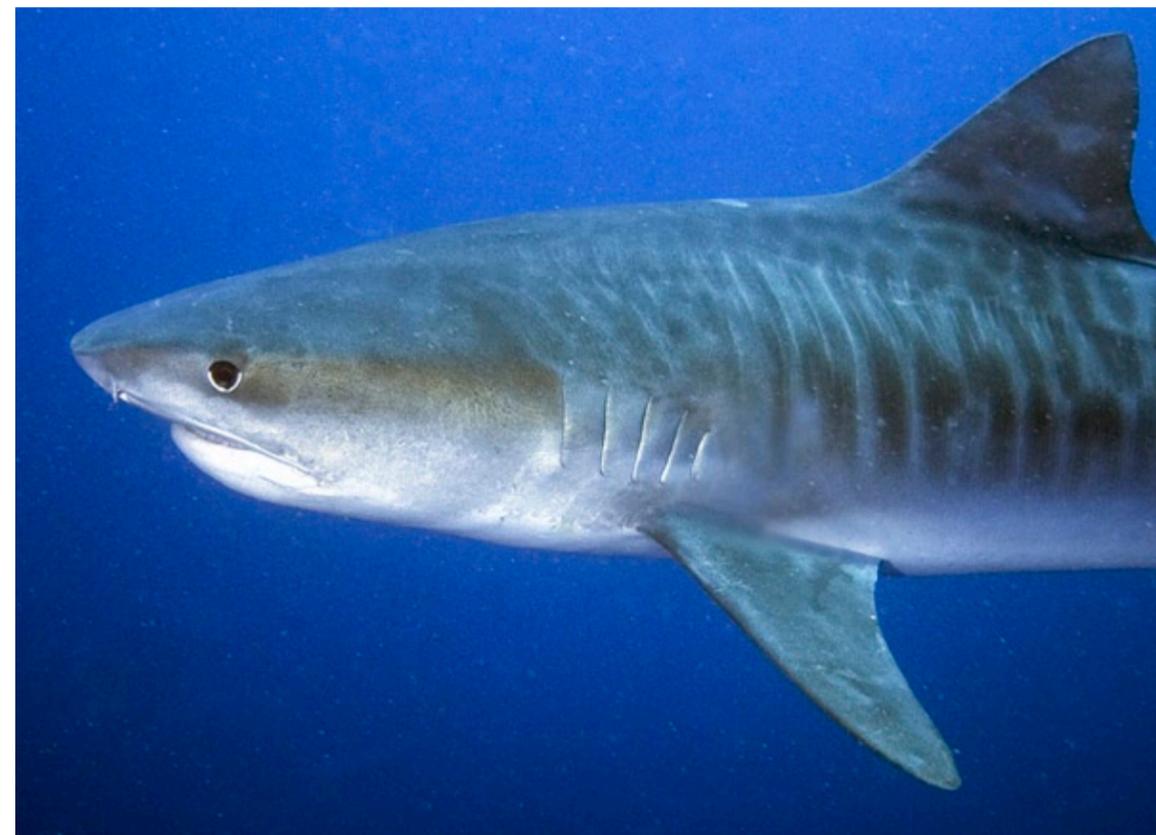
Going into my final shark dive, I was a bit apprehensive. Despite the plethora of sharks, I had yet to photograph a Zambezi, and time was running out. During the ensuing hour, scores of blacktips and dusky approached, but no Zambezis. With air supply dwindling, I photographed every shark that passed within close range

“What an amazing dive”, enthused Kyle as we broke the surface. “Yes it was”, I replied. “It’s too bad there were no Zambezis.” Kyle looked at me incredulously. “What do you mean, there was a great big one right in front of you!” To put it mildly, I was stunned.

Back on shore, I excitedly

reviewed my images. As I scanned the last few images, a few sharks stood out in marked contrast from the blacktips. The massive, blunt heads were unmistakable—I got my Zambezis!

Before I knew it, my ten-day visit had drawn to a close. During my all-too-brief stay, I had encountered more sharks than I have in nearly 20 years of diving combined. Add an incredible array of sea life to the mix and South Africa adds up to a destination like no other. Next time, I might even look for some nudibranchs! ■



fact file

South Africa



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.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.

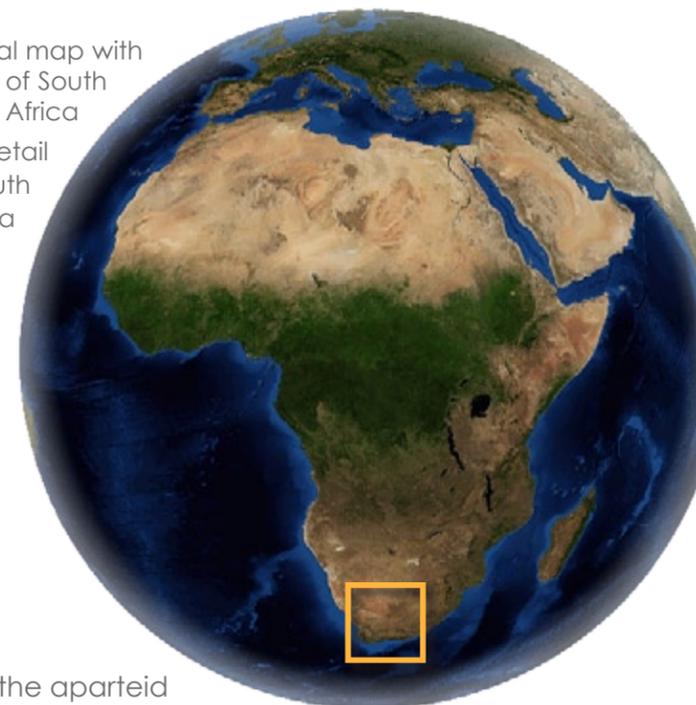
In 1994, the first multi-racial elections saw the end of apartheid and brought in black majority rule. Recent ANC infighting came to a head in September 2008 when President Thabo Mbeki resigned and was succeeded by party General-Secretary Kgalema Motlanthe as interim president. Jacob Zuma became president after the ANC won general elections in April 2009. In January 2011, South Africa assumed a nonpermanent seat on the U.N. Security Council for the 2011-12 term. 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. Although robust between 2004 to 2007, the economy slowed during the second half of 2007 due to an electricity crisis and the global financial crisis' impact on demand and commodity prices. The GDP fell nearly 2% in 2009, with high unemployment and outdated infrastructure constraining growth. Remnants of

RIGHT: Global map with location of South Africa
FAR RIGHT: Detail map of South Africa



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 49,004,031 (July 2011 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: 4.42 million (2009)

Currency Rand (ZAR). Exchange rates: 1EUR=10.36ZAR, 1USD=8.11ZAR, 1GBP=12.55ZAR, 1AUD=8.37ZAR, SGD=6.29ZAR

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 Hyperbarics 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

JOHANNESBURG: The Hyperbaric Treatment Centre cc, East rand of Johannesburg, Tel. 011-914-2675 www.hyperbaric.co.za

Web sites
Expert-Tours
www.expert-tours.de
South Africa Tourism
www.southafrica.net



Marauding weaver finches

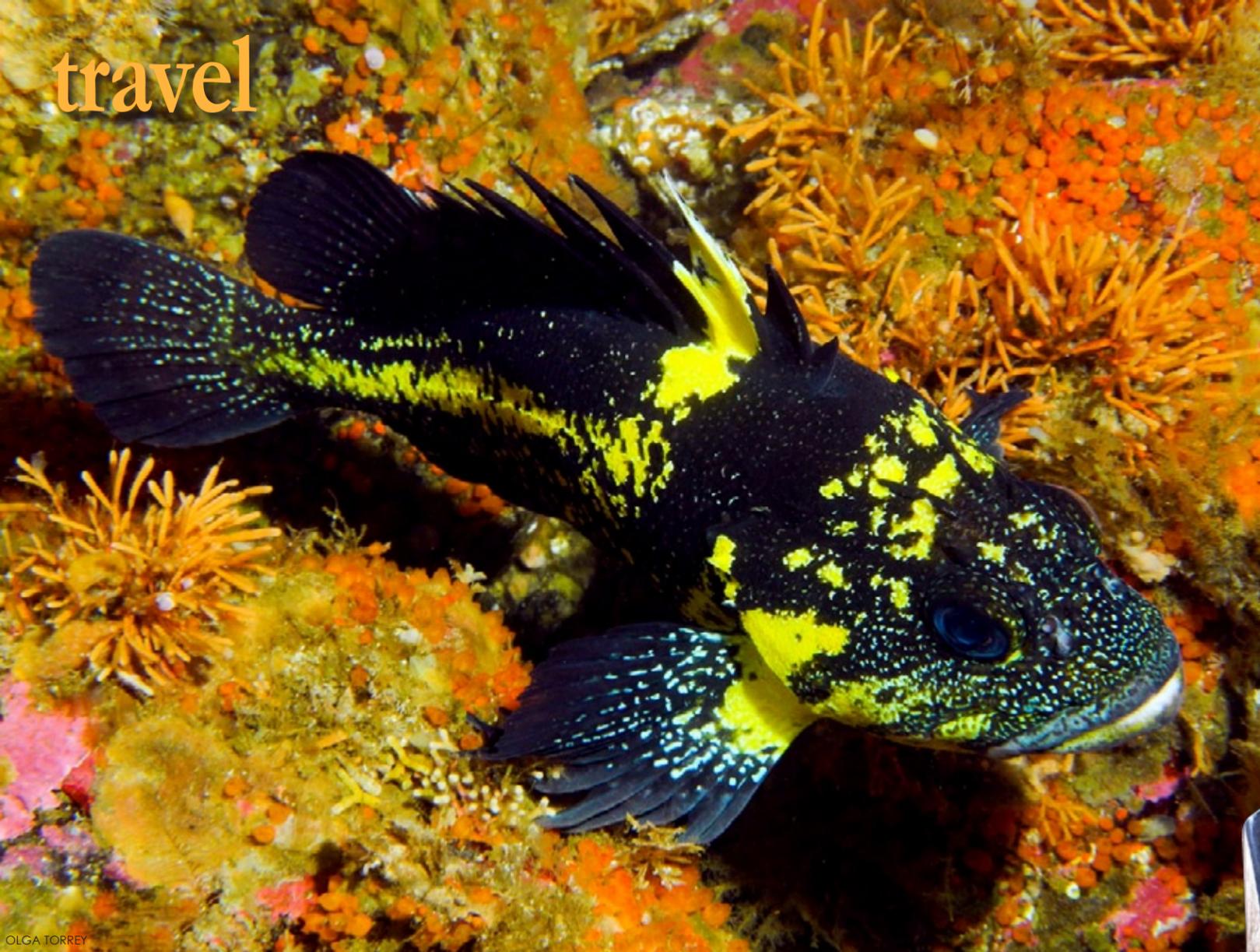




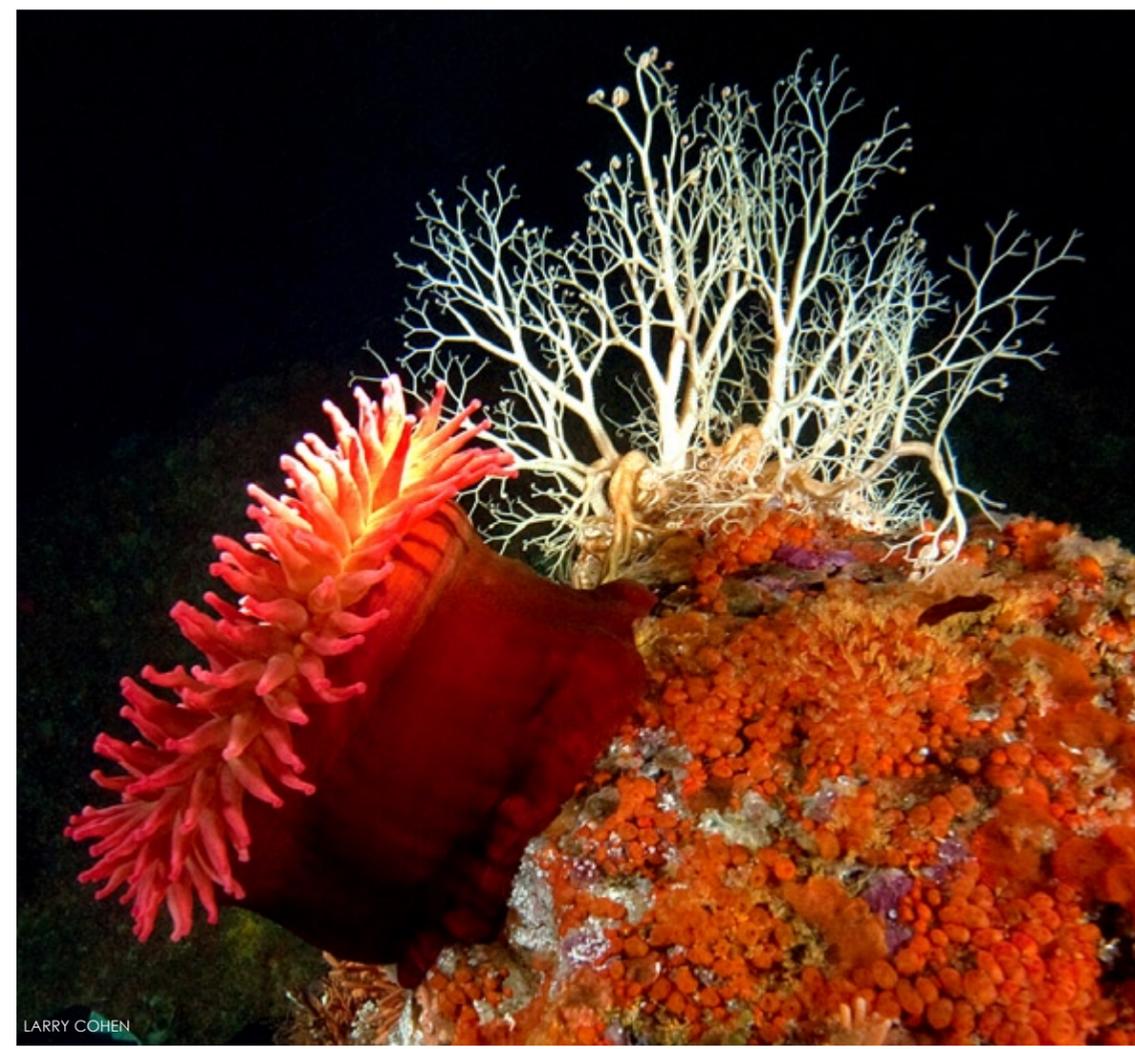
Juneau to Sitka Alaska

Text by Larry Cohen

Photos by Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey



Sitka National Historical Park, also known as Totem Park, has artwork decorated by Kiksadi Tlingit and Haida indigenous people



China rockfish at dive site near the Smudges. PREVIOUS PAGE: Magnificent view of the Mendenhall Glacier

A dive trip to the U.S. State of Alaska is a true adventure, both above and below the surface. The rich green waters of the Pacific Northwest are full of life and photographic opportunities. The liveboard dive boat, *Nautilus Swell*, is a great way to experience Southeast Alaska. This 100-year-old refurbished tugboat is the perfect platform for cold-water exploration. The crew is well versed in dive procedures in this environment. The itinerary began with boarding the boat in Juneau, followed by a week of diving, and departing finally from Sitka.

Before embarking on the *Nautilus Swell*, there was a chance to spend a few days in Juneau. This town started as a gold-mining camp in 1880. When Alaska became the 49th state of the United States in 1959, Juneau became the capital.

One of the not-to-be missed experiences right in downtown Juneau was the Tramway up Mount Roberts. The Mount Roberts Tramway was about 3,087-feet long and rose to around 1,745 feet in elevation. On the way up, one got a view of the upper inside passage, where many cruise ships were docked. Upon reaching the top of Mount Roberts, the Timberline Bar & Grill was a nice place for dinner, before exploring some of the well-marked hiking trails.

There were interpretive signs describing many of the flowers, plants, trees, birds and animals, that one might see en route. Trails started in a sub-alpine eco-

Crimson anemone and basket star on the wall (above). The *Nautilus Swell* (top)



OLGA TORREY



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

Crew on aluminum skiff, *Indie*, checks out next dive site system. Within another 300 feet, there was a true alpine environment.

Some of the wildlife encountered included eagles, ravens, ptarmigan, grouse, marmots, Sitka black tail deer, red squirrels, mountain goats, black bears and porcupines. Along the trails were trees with totemic carvings depicting native legends.

Mendenhall Glacier was also an amazing place to explore in Juneau. Mendenhall was formed during the Little Ice Age, which began about 3,000 years ago. The climate and geography of this area allowed the glacier to survive, while others in North America have already disappeared. Mendenhall Glacier continues to provide researchers with new insights into past, present and future climatic conditions.

The Mendenhall Glacier flows for 12 miles down the Mendenhall Valley and terminates near the visitor center. The ice flows at an average rate of two feet per day, but at the same time, it is melt-

Mendenhall Glacier viewed from TEMSCO helicopter (above); Ice flowing down to the ice fields (left)
NEXT PAGE: Roberto Chavez kayaking just before the iceberg calved

travel

Alaska





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



OLGA TORREY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TEMSCO helicopter on Mendenhall Glacier; The contrast between icebergs and mountains is breathtaking; A 27-year-old bear feeds on salmon

ing at a slightly faster rate. When the ice melts, large pieces of ice break off the face of the glacier. This is known as *calving* and creates the icebergs floating in Mendenhall Lake. When the rate of melting is higher than the rate of flow, a

glacier recedes. The Mendenhall Glacier has been receding since the late 1700s and currently retreats at a rate of 25-30 feet per year.

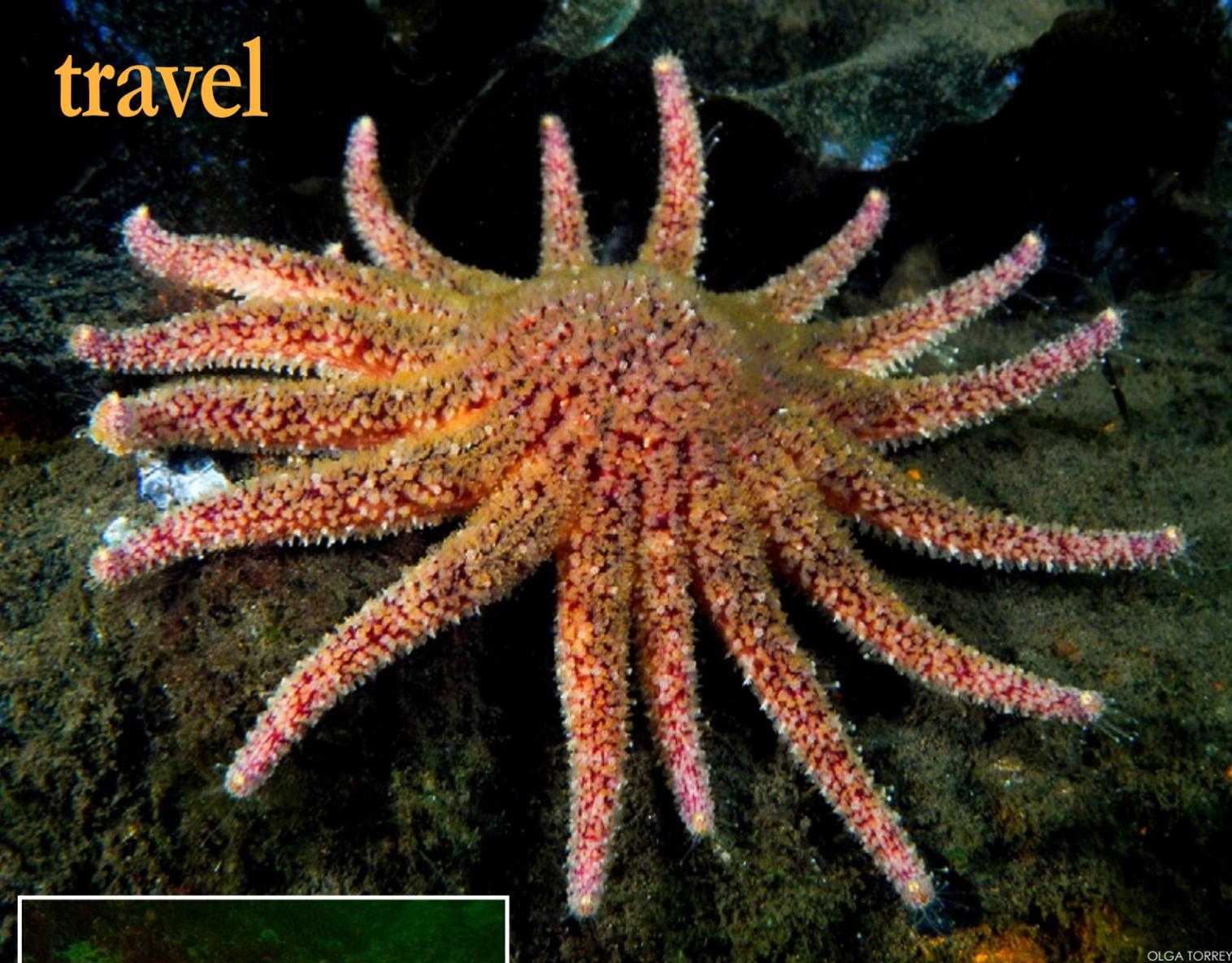
There are many hiking trails around the visitor center. Some of these short trails have viewing plat-

forms to see salmon and bears. Eagles are frequently seen in the area. Small mammals such as fox, coyote, porcupine, squirrel and snowshoe hare inhabit the valley floor. Several small herds of mountain goat can sometimes be seen

on the mountain peaks. The Trail of Time is an extremely pretty trail that is well worth visiting. Bears catching salmon in the stream can sometimes be observed.

Taking a helicopter to the top of the Mendenhall Glacier was a sce-

Icebergs floating in Mendenhall Lake



OLGA TORREY



OLGA TORREY



LARRY COHEN

Sunflower star at The Graveyard dive site

nic adventure. TEMSCO (an acronym for: Timber, Exploration, Mining, Survey, Cargo Operations) takes travellers on glacier tours. This company has been around since 1958. They used Hughes-500D choppers to get their passengers safely to the top of the glacier. Even when the weather was not very good, seeing the majestic mountain of ice was breathtaking.

After all these land-based adventures, it was time to go diving.

Diving

As the crew came to help my dive partner, Olga Torrey, and I load our dive gear, we were happy to see divemaster, Dan Dayneswood, who we knew from our *Nautilus Explorer* trip to the California Channel Islands. Also on board was chef, Enrique Aguilar, who we also knew from the *Nautilus Explorer*. So, even if the diving was



LARRY COHEN

Ling cod on the shipwreck, *State of California*; Dark dusky rockfish at dive site near the Smudges (top); Hermit crab hugging another hermit crab (right)



OLGA TORREY

Orange sea pen on Alaska reef





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Basket star at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Shrimp sitting on limpet; Buffalo sculpin at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Crab at The Graveyard dive site

whales breaching in the distance. We knew right then that this trip would be amazing. Most of the dive sites had walls blanketed with anemones, sea stars and other marine life.



LARRY COHEN



OLGA TORREY

Sitka, we had some amazing experiences.

The *Nautilus Swell* was a beautiful old tugboat that was extremely comfortable. The rooms were a little small but well-designed with ample heat, which guests could control. All dive operations took place on the aluminum skiff named, *Indie*.

State of California wreck. Alaska also has many historic shipwrecks. We dove the wreck of the *State of California* located in Gambier Bay. This 300-foot ship sank on the 17 August 1913. She sat in 220 feet of water, but the bow came up to 85 feet. The morning we did the wreck, it was so dark, it seemed like a night dive. Still the wreck provided many photographic opportunities since it was home to so much marine life.

Many of these dive sites were only visited by the *Nautilus* crew. This was the first season for the *Nautilus Swell*, but the *Nautilus Explorer* has been taking divers to explore Alaska since 2000.

All You Can Eat Shrimp. New sites were always being explored, including All You Can Eat Shrimp, named for the thousands of tiny shrimp crawling over every inch.

bad, we knew the food would be great! Well, in Alaska, bad diving just does not happen. As we headed south towards

As we departed Juneau, we got excited about seeing underwater Alaska. On the first morning, we saw humpback



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

If one stayed in one spot to allow the eyes to adjust to the scene, one would see a small area explode with life.

We were told that setting the cameras up with macro lenses was the only way to go. Well, while shooting some tiny sea stars, I saw some movement out of the corner of my eye. In the distance, there appeared to be a number of sea lions. They slowly got closer, and with macro lenses deployed, we now had four sea lion pups buzzing and playing with us. No images were captured, but that experience was burned into our minds' eyes.

Smudges. The jellyfish dive site called Smudges was a disappointment for us. This site was supposed to have thousands of jellyfish just like Jellyfish Lake in Palau. This was a case of *you-should-have-been-here-last-week*. We did see

and photograph a number of moon jellies but not in the numbers expected.

We then went to a nearby site filled with life including buffalo sculpins and other interesting fish. While photographing a China rockfish, my dive partner, Olga, had the unique experience of having a giant Pacific octopus come up between her legs and climb up her body. Another Alaska experience that went undocumented.

While near the Smudges, the crew got word of a pier thought to be worth exploring. Everyone on board got excited about being the first on this site. As we descended, the visibility kept getting worse. Under the pier, the bottom was dark, with thick black silt. When everyone surfaced, they declared this site to be spooky. So, it was named, The Graveyard. That being said, the site was filled with macro life. Tiny skel-



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In Alaska, even a one-inch square area is teeming with life; Mated pair of wolf eels are believed to mate for life; Orange sun star at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Olga Torrey on the hunt to capture images of salmon



LARRY COHEN

Alaska

eton shrimp blanketed every inch. The site was also filled with crabs, anemones and sea stars.

Snorkeling with salmon. Many of the adventures on the *Swell* did not involve scuba gear. Snorkeling with salmon was one of the highlights.

The first site we tried did not pan out. We saw very few salmon, so I used the time to photograph my dive partner in her OS drysuit. The yellow color of the water made an interesting background. Because of the mixture of salt and fresh water, a halocline was created. We had to be careful not to move around too much, or the water mixture would make our images appear out of focus.

The second site was much more productive. Taking a Zodiac upstream until it got very shallow, than it was time to jump in and swim. The water was two to five feet deep. The first thing we noticed were dead jellyfish. Drifting

into freshwater was not good for their health. All of a sudden the salmon appeared. There were hundreds of them. Some seemed to be at the end of their life cycles, but swimming and photographing the salmon was an experience that will remain in our memories forever.

Location of region on global map (right); Map of region (below)



NASA



South Sawyer Glacier

Another great non-dive adventure was the South Sawyer Glacier at Tracy Arm. Donning our drysuits to stay warm and dry on the surface, we took the aluminum skiff, *Indie*, up the passage to get up-

COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The kelp patch turns into a magic forest of giant Metridium anemones below 60 feet; Olga follows a salmon upstream; Schools of Alaskan king salmon swimming up stream



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

The South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm (top left); Iceberg at the South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm (above); Leather sea star, blood star and green urchins on an Alaska reef

close and personal with the icebergs of southeast Alaska. The icebergs were not as large as the ones I experienced in Newfoundland, but they were just as majestic. Being small, they were easy to climb. It was tons of fun to go slipping and sliding on an iceberg. It was also a great place to have cocktails, which were prepared in advanced on the *Swell*.

Some of us took out kayaks to navigate the ice fields. When Roberto Chavez paddled away from an ice-

berg, it calved—a giant chunk of ice landed just where the kayak was moments before.

The *Nautilus Swell* also visits the fishing village of Port Alexander. This was a booming town with a population of 4,000 before the Great Depression. Today, around 80 people call this place home. Exploring this village transported us back to a bygone era. **Vancouver Rock.** It was time to get back to diving. The next site was Vancouver Rock. This beautiful cold-



OLGA TORREY

Harbor seals check out the tourist



LARRY COHEN

Part of the trail leading to the Baranoff Island natural hot spring is built on a platform (left); Kelp crab at dive site near the Smudges (bottom left); Cruise ship docked in downtown Juneau (below)

forest of giant *Metridium* anemones. Because of the nutrient-rich waters, everything underwater in Alaska was huge. Some of these *Metridium* anemones were four feet tall. The size and large number of them were visually stunning.

Baranoff Island & Sitka

Before heading to Sitka, we spent time on Baranoff Island. A few of us jumped on *Indie* and did a tour of the bay. We saw a number of seals and sea lions sitting on the rocks. In the water, we saw sea otters. We then did a short hike to a natural hot spring, which sits right

next to a waterfall. While sitting in the hot water and listening to the rushing water, one had to wonder, "Does life get any better?"

Our last leg of the journey took us into the city of Sitka. Since we had an early morning flight, our cab driver gave us just a brief tour of the area. There was a strong Russian influence in the city. Sitka was the cultural and political hub of Russian America in the early 19th century. Sitting in the middle of town was St. Michael's Cathedral, an active Russian Orthodox church established in 1837.

The Kiksadi Tlingit native people have lived continuously in Sitka for over 50 centuries. We did a drive-by of Sitka National Historical Park, which is also known as Totem Park. Here, totems carved by both the Kiksadi Tlingit and Haida indigenous people can be seen along a pathway.

As we arrived at the airport and prepared to go back to the reality of New York, we knew we would miss Alaska. Thinking about all the adventure and beauty, returning to Alaska is definitely in our near future. ■

Alaska

GETTING THERE

Alaska Airlines has flights in and out of both Juneau and Sitka. In the United States, you can connect in Seattle, Washington. www.alaskaair.com

DIVING

The *Nautilus Swell* is a 100-year-old refurbished tugboat. This live-aboard is the comfortable way to experience Alaska diving. The boat's itinerary includes both Alaska and British Columbia. www.nautiluswell.com

ACCOMMODATIONS IN JUNEAU

Extended Stay Deluxe Hotel in Juneau is comfortable and convenient. It is located across the street from the airport. They provide a shuttle bus to take you downtown. www.extendedstayhotels.com/hotels/juneau-shell-simmons-drive-esd.html

THINGS TO DO IN JUNEAU

TEMSCO helicopters provide charters, plus glacier and dog sled tours. They are located near the airport and Extended Stay Deluxe Hotel. temscoair.com

Mendenhall Glacier is worth a visit. There are many trails where you can observe this beautiful environment and the wildlife that call it home. The Visitor Center is a good place to get information and to warm up after hiking. www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/mendenhall

Mount Roberts Tramway will take you up Mount Roberts around 1,745 feet. Enjoy the view from the tram and have dinner at the Timberline Bar & Grill. With the nature center, hiking trails and cultural attractions, there is plenty to do. www.goldbelttours.com/mount-roberts-tramway



OLGA TORREY

water reef started at 60 feet and gently sloped down to 90 feet. It seemed like there was a wolf eel in every crevice. This fish had a face only a mother could love.

The Kelp Patch. From here, we moved to The Kelp Patch, which is located just outside Warm Springs Bay on Baranoff Island. Below 60 feet, this rich kelp forest turned into a magic



LARRY COHEN

