

# *Sardine Run & Cage Diving* South Africa

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Ballito Beach; Bait ball at the Wild Coast (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Anemones and sea urchins, Partridge Bay

**The world in one country is an oft-used quote to describe South Africa and is not unwarranted. Along with dramatic scenery and a rich cultural heritage, it is a nation renowned for its diversity of ecosystems and wildlife. However, its undersea environs rival the terrestrial abundance. From northern subtropical reefs to the chilly waters of the cape, South Africa offers a wealth of marine life few nations can rival.**

I had a brief introduction several years earlier, visiting Aliwal Shoal and Protea Banks in KwaZulu-Natal and the Kruger National Park [see X-RAY MAG issue #46 -ed]. The diving was unlike anything I had done before not to mention challenging. And there were sharks—lots of sharks! From that moment, I planned to make a return visit.

**Sardine Run**

Like an aquatic version of the Serengeti's wildebeest migration, South Africa's Sardine Run is one of the world's utmost

undersea spectacles. During the winter months from May to July, a cold south to north-flowing current develops off the east coast, moving inshore and counter to the warm Agulhas current. After spawning in the cool waters of the Agulhas Bank, millions of sardines surge up from the Cape, following the current to the Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal province. The migration fuels an explosion of life, with all manner of predators partaking in the rich bounty, including dolphins, sharks, whales and seabirds. However, this is no guaranteed event; sardine numbers vary on a yearly basis and is only considered a "run" when the shoals are

large enough to be seen at the surface.

Having seen the spectacle on nature documentaries, I was eager for an up close and personal experience. When my good friend Sonja Newlands announced she would be leading a group from the United States and invited me along, how could I refuse? Factoring in time for additional activities, the biggest challenge was narrowing the options. With Sonja's help, I decided on some Zululand game reserves and Cape Town.

After a grueling trip from Toronto to Durban via London, I arrived in the morning. A recuperation day was welcome and Sonja couldn't have chosen a nicer place. An hour's drive north of Durban, the holiday town of Ballito featured green hills cascading to golden beaches reminiscent of Sydney's northern suburbs. "The Vineyard at Ballito" was a beautiful bed-and-break-

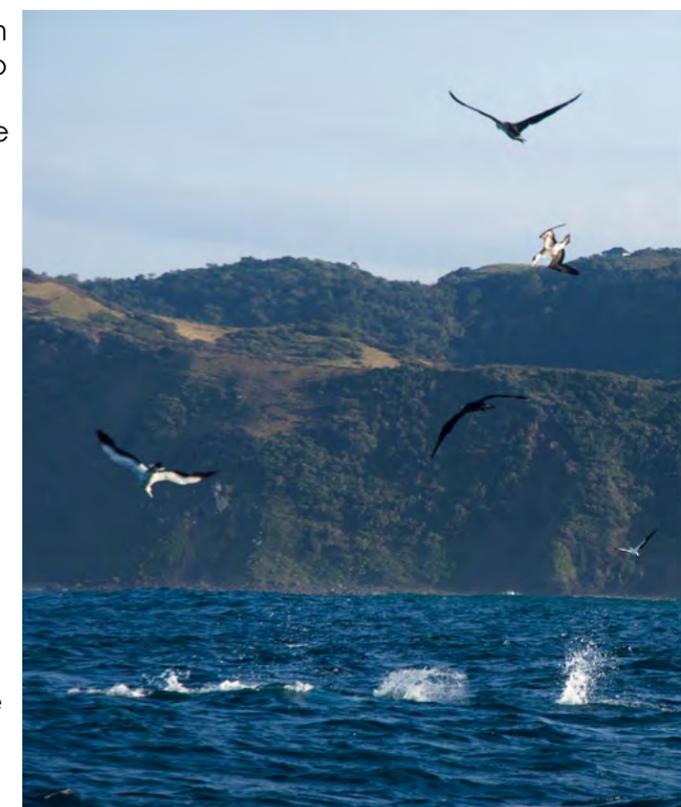
fast nestled on a hillside a short walk from the beach. For my first night, I decided to splurge with dinner and Al Pescatore, situated right across from the beach, came highly recommended.

The seafood platter was the epitome of extravagance, replete with mussels, prawns, oysters, fish and lobster. A Ballito iced tea, a concoction of ginger ale, sprite and five unknown spirits, necessitated another notch to my belt. People were very friendly, especially the owner, coming over to chat with the poor lone Canadian. If this was winter, I'll take it!

The following morning, Sonja arrived at 8:30, and it was a challenge packing all of my gear into her small car. We then headed to the airport to meet the Enfield scuba group from Connecticut. Right away, I could see it was a diverse but very nice group. With over 18 people and a ton of gear, Sonja had chartered them a bus, although two, Laura and trip leader John Langlois, rode with us.



Dinner decadence at Ballito



Fishing gannets, Wild Coast





Crashing surf (left) and the rugged landscape (above) of the Wild Coast; N'taba River Lodge (right); Wild Coast highway (center left)



ing two-laned and potholed. We soon crossed into the Eastern Cape or Transkei, which, until the early 90's, had been a separate region like Swaziland and Lesotho. Towns became fewer and further apart. The landscape was striking, with golden hills of grass dotted with numerous houses. Many were round with thatched roofs. Sonja informed us that this was deterrence against evil spirits, as they had

no corners to hide in. As the road gained elevation, the locals were bundled up in hats and heavy coats. No matter how remote, every town seemed to have a KFC.

Arriving at N'taba Lodge outside of town, we were greeted by owners Ivan and his wife, Bugs. (No, not her real name. Sonja has known her for years and *still* doesn't know it.) Situated alongside a river flanked by rugged peaks, the location was stunning. In the midst of renovations, severe floods had damaged the dining room and terrace overlooking the river four months earlier. Most of the damage was wrought by sand, but optimist Ivan regarded it as free building material.

As the mountain of gear was unloaded, we enjoyed a welcome drink. Also on hand was boat captain Ant and partner Lauren and dive guide Mike. Prior to dinner, Ant gave a briefing on what we could expect for the

ensuing week. Right away, I knew this would be no walk in the park.

### By zodiac

Like most South African diving, we would journey by zodiac. Being in the middle of nowhere necessitated all gear, zodiacs included, must be brought in. With our large group, Sonja chartered two zodiacs from different operators in Umkomaas, outside of Durban. On average, we would spend six hours at sea daily, returning around 3:00. Fortunately, as the action occurs near the surface, deco issues would not be a problem. With temperatures around 15°C to 21°C, the water was warm enough for a 5mm wetsuit with boots, gloves and hood.

The sardines would not be a gigantic unbroken mass, but fragmented schools.

Ravenous for plankton, the fish converge close to shore, constrained by a preference for water temperatures of 20°C or less. Shoals may exceed 7km in length, 1.5km wide and 30m deep. To minimize chances of predation, they mass together in bait balls 10-20m in diameter. Clearly visible from the surface, they are ideal targets for bottlenose and common dolphins, Cape gannets and a range of sharks including bronze whalers, black-tips, dusky, ragged-tooth and zambezis. Even whale sharks and great whites have been observed on occasion.



On the Wild Coast, diving is by zodiac

Our destination was the town of Port St. John's in a region of the easterly Transkei called the Wild Coast. Here, the continental shelf plunges sharply close to shore, resulting in enormous waves and tempestuous seas. I was soon to discover the name was highly appropriate.

Travelling on the motorway, the first few hours were easy. Past Shelly Beach, the motorway ended abruptly, becom-



View of the Umzimvubu River; Dolphins hunting at Sardine Run (top right); Close-up of dolphins (right)

With such a big coastline, they could be anywhere. Assisting in our endeavours were ultralights conducting air searches. Dispatched almost daily, the pilots kept in close contact with the various captains by phone. While operators generally work in tandem, there is a definite “first come, first served” protocol, as latecomers must wait until the first group is finished. With the forecast sounding favourable, everyone was raring to go.

The morning was cool and grey as I geared up for our 9:00 departure. There would be seven people per boat plus dive masters and crew; I would be with Ant, Lauren and Mike. Getting aboard necessitated a slippery descent down the muddy riverbank created by the recent flooding. Overnight, the weather took a turn for the worse, with rainy, unsettled conditions in the immediate forecast. Undaunted, we set out with a palpable sense of excitement.

Translated as “Land of the Hippos”, the Umzimvubu River has fashioned a gorge of towering 300m ramparts known as the Gates of Port St. John’s. The hippos are long gone, having been eradicated back in the 50’s. On the other hand, it could be re-named river of bull sharks, as the brackish water is an important nursery for young sharks. Definitely not a place one would care to wade across!

Getting out to sea faced some navigational challenges. Along with shallow water near the river’s mouth, offshore surf was intense, with Ant timing our exit to steer clear of the cresting waves. A second attempt was necessary, but Ant was a master, getting us through with minimal discomfort.

Binoculars raised, Ant scanned for signs, with congregations of dolphins and Cape gannets harbingers of imminent action. Right away, things looked promising. A large pod of

dolphins cruised alongside us, while a distant flock of gannets circled expectantly. We were off!

We arrived to discover an avian holding pattern; some birds were diving for fish but most lounged on the surface or circled overhead. False alarm. The radio soon crackled to life—another swim-bait ball 30 minutes away. Roaring down the coast, we discovered the other group had dived it, but we were late for the party.

With sardine action still lacking on the second day, we decided to concentrate on humpback whale encounters—and there was plenty,



with many breaching or swimming past throughout the morning. This time we would be on snorkel only. Sensing our presence, the whales would make a quick detour. I wouldn’t have thought seeing something so large would be so problematic.

At the surface, my camera and



Humpback whale breaching



ANDREY BIZYUKIN



ANDREY BIZYUKIN

## South Africa

Hunting gannets at Sardine Run above (lower left) and below the water (far left); Sharks also join in the fray at Sardine Run (left)

top of one. Regrettably, we managed only one more bait ball dive, and no predators were to be seen. Although there were

nication to coordinate the assault. Their ranks perforated, the sardines regrouped in a seething panicked mass. Bronze whalers and blacktips joined the fray while Cape gannets attacked from above, zooming through the water column like feathered torpedoes. The water boiled in the onslaught.

beyond. Back at the lodge, Ivan whipped up a tasty Cape Malay/Greek fusion dish of mixed seafood in a yellow curry sauce along with BBQ ribs and vegetable curry. I hoped the next day would provide some much-needed exercise.

### Changing weather

Unfortunately, conditions worsened as the week unfolded. Along with a rain and brisk wind, the roller coaster swells made snorkelling a real challenge. The sardines were around—just not where we were. Nevertheless, there was always something to see. Cape gannets put on a spectacular display, plummeting at dizzying speed before striking the water like machine gun fire. A few dead individuals indicated that not all succeeded; an erroneous trajectory could easily result in a broken neck. One unfortunate member of our group did a backwards roll right on



the plunge. As the whales advanced, he cast me a mischievous grin. "They are going to shit themselves!" he chuckled. Moments later, snorkels muffled delighted whoops as the whales passed to within a few metres.

The next time, I opted to go and with camera clasped to chest, did a back roll in. Scanning frantically, I wheeled to dis-

cover a humpback heading right at me. At such close range, it was enormous! Then, the unthinkable happened; my camera's autofocus ceased working. With the whale's massive head filling my

viewfinder, there were no hard edges for the focus to lock on. Seconds later, it was out of range and I missed the shot. Curses!!!! Now there is a situation one doesn't confront every day: a whale too close to photograph.

An hour later, Ant spied common dolphins gathering at the surface. We finally heard the magic words: "Bait ball!" I geared up in a flash. As this was no controlled environment, we were instructed to stick close to our buddies, staying back to back in case any sharks got over inquisitive. This would be wild and woolly!

About 4m down, we found the bait ball of sardine, and it was under attack. Like sheepdogs herding a flock, common dolphins made repeated passes, striking it with precision accuracy. I was immediately aware of their high-frequency squeaking, commu-

nication to coordinate the assault. Their ranks perforated, the sardines regrouped in a seething panicked mass. Bronze whalers and blacktips joined the fray while Cape gannets attacked from above, zooming through the water column like feathered torpedoes. The water boiled in the onslaught.

Incredible!

My elation proved short-lived. My steel tank, combined with an excessive weight belt, wreaked havoc on my buoyancy. Bobbing up and down like a yo-yo, I managed a few shots before making a hasty retreat to the boat to remove some weights. The sardines were rapidly decimated—glittering scales the only indication they had existed at all. To commemorate our first bait ball, everyone was treated to a Sardine Run tradition—a green (cream soda) lollipop. I was unsettled to learn a bronze whaler had taken interest in my erratic buoyancy.

Back on land, we headed to the airstrip atop Mount Theisger for sundowners. Despite the overcast conditions, the view was magnificent, offering a clear view of the gorge and Indian Ocean



ANDREY BIZYUKIN

Humpback whale, Wild Coast





White rhino (left) and giraffes (right) at Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve; Serval (far left) and cheetah (below) at Emdoneni Lodge

even allowed to pet them. The cats clearly enjoyed the attention, purring like electric motors. Without warning, one flopped over, rested its head on my foot and fell asleep.



South Africa

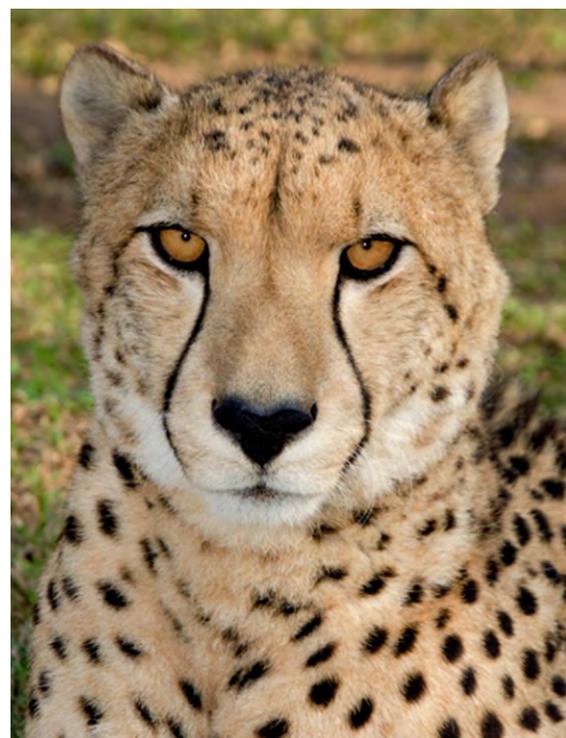
plenty of whales, we missed one notable. Measuring up to 15m, Bryde's whale is Africa's largest predator, capable of ingesting huge quantities of sardines in a single gulp. According to Ant, they have occasionally surfaced right beside the boat.

On our final morning, I nearly went out, but the prospect of a rainy, dive-free excursion didn't entice, and I opted out. Big mistake! Although no one left the zodiac, several humpbacks put on quite a show with repeated close breaches. Lesson learned: Always go! In the afternoon, everyone hiked into town

to explore the local market. We were intrigued to check out the local witch doctor until discovering the fee was \$30.00 each. Pass.

**Topside activities**

Before my journey to Cape Town, Sonja had arranged me a few nights at some Zululand safari lodges. After all, the very idea of visiting South Africa and not going on safari was virtually sacrilegious! Bidding the Enfield group adieu in Umkomaas, I transferred to another vehicle for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Zululand.



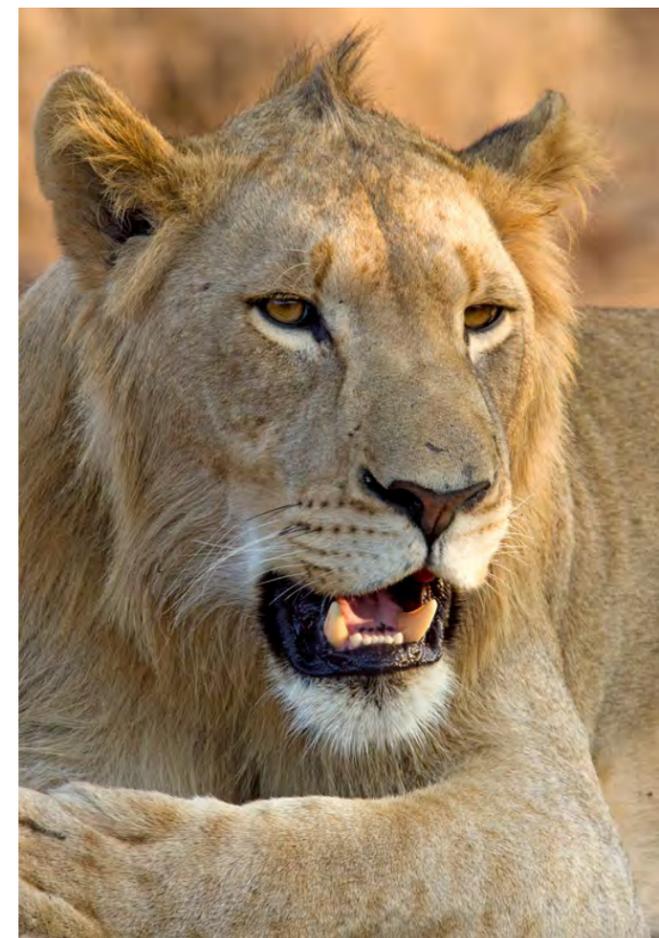
**Falaza.** My next stop for two nights was at the nearby Falaza Game Reserve and Spa. An afternoon excursion visited Lake St. Lucia, part of the World Heritage iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Boat cruises are popular, and we arrived in time for the day's final cruise. Crocs and hippos were the prime attractions, with copious numbers basking on the muddy riverbank. The air was nippy on the upper deck, and I was glad to have brought my fleece jacket. The poor crocs must have

been frigid!

The next morning featured a visit to the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve, Kwazulu-Natal's oldest and largest game park and home to the Big Five (elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino). The park's northern sector, known as the Hluhluwe, features hilly topography with altitudes ranging from 80 to 540 metres, a far cry from the flat savannah one associates with Africa.

Although some of the big five remained elusive, white rhinos were highly visible as well as buffalo, impala, spotted hyena and plenty of giraffe. An afternoon drive at Falaza's private reserve yielded nyala, warthogs, impala, blue wildebeest and red duiker. The star attraction was the reserve's resident white rhino, a real bruiser that was the biggest I have ever seen.

**Thanda.** For my final overnight stop, Sonja saved the most luxurious for last. Located within a 14,000-hectare private reserve, the Thanda Safari Lodge proved to be a real stunner. Another big five reserve, this one was private, giving the feeling



Young male lion at Thanda



Hippos at Lake St. Lucia

**Emdoneni.** My first stop was Emdoneni Lodge, a private lodge famous for its cat breeding program. Four species are bred at the centre including African wildcat, caracal, serval and cheetah. On a supervised tour, it was possible to enter the enclosures, allowing for some amazing photo opportunities. The highlight was the cheetahs—two brothers long habituated to people. We were



Main Street, Simon's Town (left); Boulder's Beach (right); Penguins of Simon's Town (below)

including a mother and calf. After a sundowner in the bush, spotlighting revealed seven more rhino wallowing joyfully in the mud alongside a waterhole. Back at camp, a glass of wine beside a rearing bonfire was a great prelude to a gourmet dinner. This was a safari with style.

**Simon's Town**

The next morning, I returned to Durban for the two-hour flight to Cape Town. Occupying a dramatic seaside posi-



of your own private wilderness. My room for the night proved jaw dropping. To call it a "tent" was akin to calling the Burj Khalifa a "building". With a verandah overlooking the distant hills, the airy rotunda interior featured a huge bed and ensuite bath. With only a one-night stop, it was a shame I wouldn't have

more time in it.

Despite only one afternoon game drive, it proved extraordinary. Within the first hour, we encountered two groups of lions, including a lioness and three cubs at a kill, my first in three Africa trips! In addition to impala, zebra, giraffe and buffalo, there were plenty of white rhino,



Simon's Town Harbour



entire area.

My final destination was Simon's Town, nestled alongside False Bay on the Cape Peninsula's eastern coast. An important naval base for more than two centuries, the town is rich in history, its main street flanked with charming Victorian architecture.

My accommodation was the Quayside Hotel, situated right on the harbour. My balcony offered superb views of the harbour and rugged coastline. Plus, how can one

fault a hotel that offers a welcome glass of sherry?

That evening, I had dinner at Bertha's, a restaurant right on the water below my room. The springbok medallions with mushroom sauce were outstanding, ensuring a return visit every night at mealtime. By week's end, the entire staff knew my name.

After breakfast the next morning, a phone call from Dave prompted a change in itinerary. "May I humbly suggest we do Table Mountain today

instead of the Cape? The afternoon weather forecast calls for clear conditions, a high of 26° and no wind." As unsettled weather can thwart a visit to Table Mountain, especially during the winter months, I readily agreed to seize the moment.

My morning free, I headed for Boulders Beach, home to view some decidedly un-African wildlife: African penguins. Arriving just after 9:30, I paid for my ticket and walked in. I wondered if something was wrong, as I seemed to be the only one there.

A sheltered cove of white sand punctuated with granite boulders, Boulders Beach is part of the Table Mountain National Park. From just two breeding pairs in 1982, the penguin population has since ballooned to 3,000. To protect both penguins and the environment, a wooden boardwalk has been erected along the beach. Close observation was not an issue, with penguins often an arm's length away. Despite their comical appearance, razor-sharp beaks are capable of inflicting a nasty bite.

I photographed in contented solitude



Crossing the peninsula, we headed for Chapman's Peak drive, touted as the country's most scenic. Hugging the vertiginous cliffs of the Constantia Mountains, the 9km road was constructed by convicts between 1915 and 1922. A series of fatal accidents involving boulders prompted a four-year closure for maintenance. The road was re-opened in 2004 as a toll road, a move deemed controversial amongst local residents.

From the lookout at Noordhoek (North Corner) Village, the impressive sweep of Long Beach stretched 6km to the 30m Slangkop Lighthouse, the highest on the South African coast. Despite the chilly Atlantic temperatures, Cape Town's beaches are thronged during the summer months. Even during my winter visit, hardy souls could be seen battling the surf on body boards. The locals call them shark biscuits!

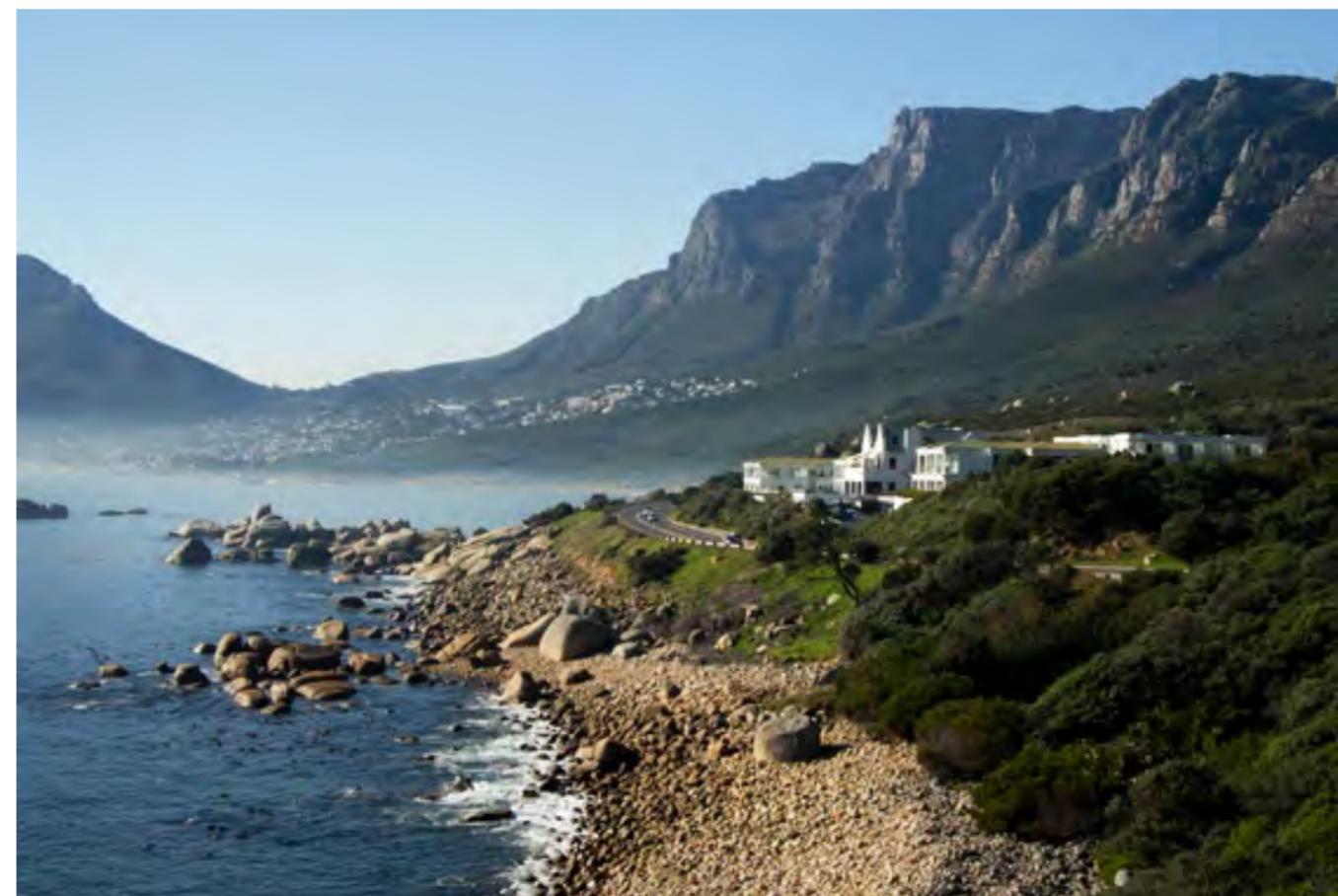
Approaching the city proper, we passed Clifton and Bantry Bay, home to some of the country's most costly real estate. Signal Hill revealed superlative views of the city, hugging the coast below and sprawling to the north and east behind Table Mountain.

Majestic yet temperamental, Table Mountain is the city's most iconic landmark. Prior to the Cableway, the only way up involved an arduous hike of several hours. The cable car is unique as it has a 360-degree revolving floor, which allows everyone the opportunity to photograph from a couple of open windows. Not enamoured with heights, I did okay until the very last leg. Skimming a sheer rock wall provided an unwanted dose of vertigo!

A World Heritage Site, the Table Mountain National Park is part of the Cape Floristic Region, the smallest and richest of the world's

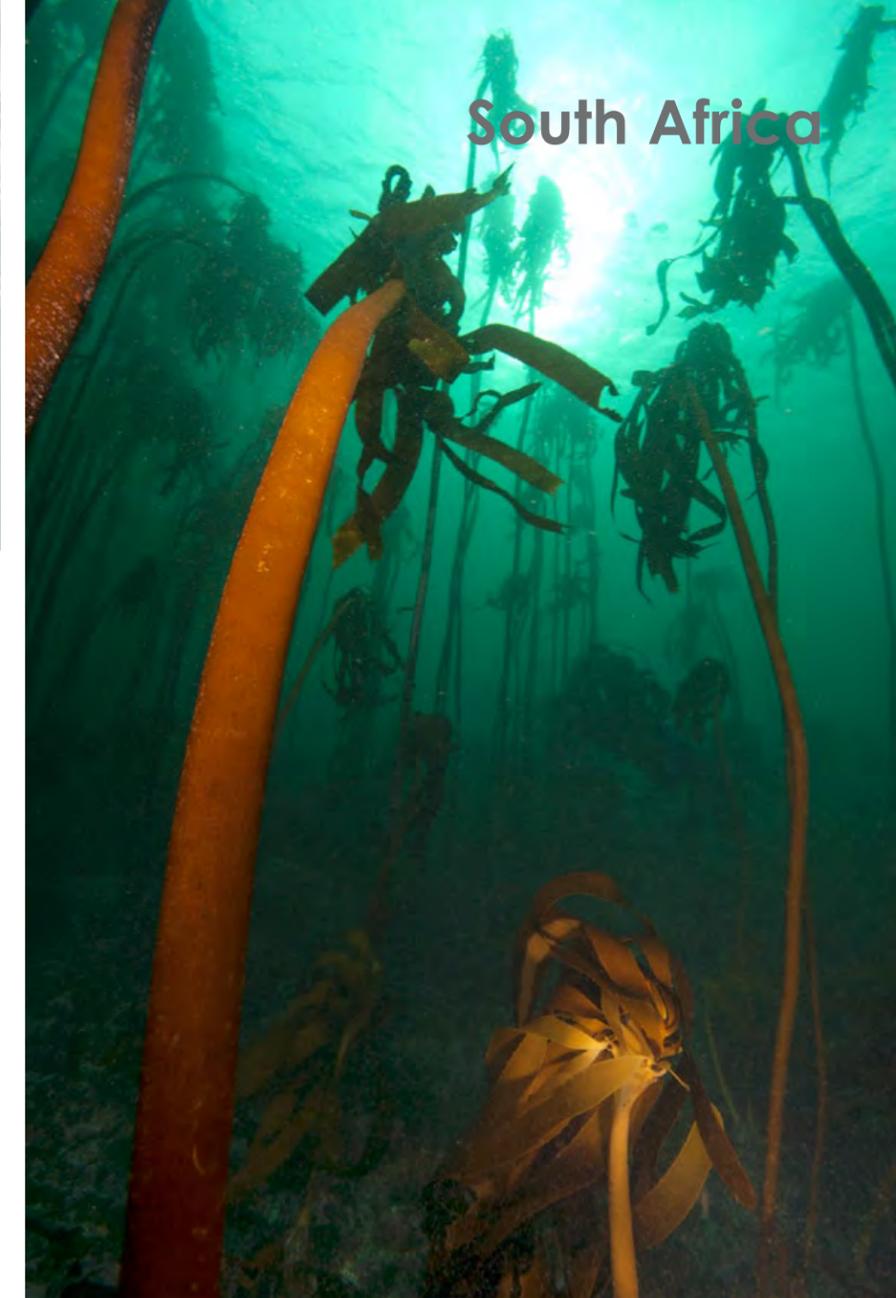
for an hour as the birds went about their business of tending chicks, preening, waddling and squabbling. Then, a busload of tourists arrived and the viewing platform was promptly overrun. It didn't last long, and peace and quiet resumed, apart from the occasional powerful bray. It was easy to see how they received the name jackass penguin.

For lunch, I opted for a favourite South African delicacy: biltong. The local version of beef jerky, the air-dried salted meat comes in many varieties. Dave recommended a shop near my hotel called Biltong and Bake. Along with the usual beef and pork, there were plenty of exotic game versions, and I selected gemsbok, ostrich and springbok. Although initially tough, all proved delicious. Take that, beef jerky! My beverage was Iron Brew, a soft drink regarded as South Africa's favourite. How can one refuse a drink billed as "rosy vanilla, fruity flavoured"? Definitely unique!



CLOCKWISE: Twelve Apostles; Sunset over Table Bay; Chapman's Peak Drive; Table Mountain panorama





South Africa

Breaching great white shark (left); Fur seal at False Bay (above); Kelp forest at Miller's Point (right); Author Scott Bennett armed with camera in shark cage (lower left)



**Shark diving**

After nearly five days, it was finally time to get wet. I would be diving with Shark Explorers, established in 2008 by Morne Hardenberg and Stephen Swanson. With the motto "Change your perspective", the company has been committed to providing visitors a positive shark experi-

ence to counter perpetual media negativity. The Cape's waters are a mecca for sharks and a number of trips are offered to see them depending on the season. My winter arrival coincided with the big boys—the great whites! In addition, excursions would be made to dive with fur seals and to kelp forests for sevengill sharks.

Arriving at the shop, I was pleasantly surprised to see a familiar face—my friend Linda Ferwerda, who was visiting from the Netherlands. Unfortunately, Morne was still at the Sardine Run, but did meet his niece Monique. Also on hand was divemaster Ernest Salima, who hails from Malawi (my next stop after South Africa). With gear sorted, it was time to head to the jetty.

water turned out to be a balmy 15°C. I was fitted with a 5mm suit along with an outer shell. Learning my lesson from the Sardine Run, I opted for fewer weights to compensate for the steel tank. There was also another South African first. We would be on a real boat, with entry via a giant stride and a ladder to get out. Sweet!

**False Bay**

False Bay is one of the few places in the world where it is possible to dive with sevengill sharks. An ancient species attaining lengths of 3m and weighing up to 335kg, sevengills are normally deep water residents. Opportunistic predators, they prey on everything from rays, chimaeras and bony fishes to carrion and other sharks. They are especially formidable predators of Cape fur seals, which I was hopeful they could differentiate from wetsuit-clad divers. According to Stephen, it isn't unusual to see more than ten on one dive, and being naturally curious, chum or bait isn't necessary.

The group was big, with a number of international students from an ocean studies course participating. During the

briefing, we were told visibility can range from 6-12m, so staying in close proximity to your dive buddy was essential. As Linda would be my dive buddy, her camera set-up would make her easy to spot. All was good.

**Miller's Point**

The boat trip to Miller's Point was short but scenic, passing alongside the Cape Peninsula's rugged coastline. Our destination was jammed



Cow shark at Miller's Point



Silhouette of cow shark at Miller's Point; Colony of seals at Seal Island (right); Red Roman at Miller's Point (lower right)



Detail of kelp at Miller's Point

with bobbing kelp, buoyed to the surface by gas-filled bladders. The largest and fastest growing of the world's seaweeds, kelp thrives on nutrients churned up by the Cape's cold, rich waters. Having never dived such an environment, I had unhappy visions of being entwined in a tangle of stems and fronds.

With Linda ready to go, we plunged in and descended to the bottom. Entanglement concerns were promptly replaced by wonder. Shafts of light flickered from above, creating the ethereal atmosphere of an underwater cathedral. Visibility was good, with the surface clearly visible from the bottom.

With everyone assembled on a sandy patch at 18m, it didn't take long to see the sharks; they soon found us! Approximately eight appeared, some coming to within an arm's length. None showed aggression, only benign curiosity. The upturned corners of their mouths gave the appearance of a goofy smile.

After watching the sharks, we spent the

remainder of the dive exploring the kelp forest. Fronds undulated in the mild surge, while red Romans made arresting photo subjects. A member of the seabream family endemic to Southern Africa, their numbers have been severely depleted due to excessive fishing.

Unfortunately, my dive was cut short when my weight belt slid off, and I shot to the surface like a rocket. Fortunately, Linda found it, the orange weights glowing like a beacon on the sandy bottom. Someone was the recipient of a well-earned beer!

### Seal Island

Surface interval completed, a short boat ride brought us to Seal Island at Partridge Point. Many of the shivering students opted out, but I couldn't wait to get back in the water. The dive would be very shallow, only 6m along the island's drop-off. Before weighing anchor, a legion of brown, whiskered heads bobbed expectantly at the surface.

"Don't worry," said Ernest with a chuckle. "They will come to you."

He wasn't kidding. Descending the wall, we were immediately besieged, and the dive proved to be one of the most memorable I have ever experienced. I surmised the seals would be moving too quickly to photograph, but was pleasantly surprised. Although many zoomed past, others came in for a closer look.

Boasting big brown eyes, their playful antics reminded me of mischievous dogs. I couldn't get over their sheer grace, gliding and pirouetting while we clumsy humans were buffeted by the relentless surge. Some were real characters; looking up from my camera's viewer, I caught one chewing on the end of



one of my strobes. The mark remains to this day.

With the relentless seal action, it was easy to overlook the reef. Very different from the tropics, the rocky walls were ablaze with colour, jam-packed with star-



MORNE HARDENBERG

fish, clams and urchins. The later proved especially photogenic with hues of lavender, yellow and orange. Marveling at the array of shapes and textures, I practically ignored the seals.

**Great white shark cage diving**

Finally it was time for the main event: the great white cage dive! After my 5:30 wakeup call and a quick coffee, I grabbed my housed camera and headed down to the jetty for 6:00, which was already abuzz with activity, with several operators gearing up for morning



MORNE HARDENBERG

trips. Along with eight passengers, the boat had a full crew. With Stephen at the helm, along for the ride were divemasters Ernest, Corne Ligtermoet and Nina Daniels.

Departing the jetty at 6:30, we set out for Seal Island. Situated eight nautical miles from Simon's Town harbour, it is home to 70,000 furs seals, along

with cape and bank cormorants and even a few penguins. The morning's excursion would feature three distinct segments. First, we would search the bay for predations, as the majority occurs prior to sunrise. Next, a seal decoy would be towed behind the boat to entice a breach. The final stage was the cage dive.

Arriving just after 7:00, Stephen gave a briefing on shark hunting behaviour and what to expect. After weeks of feeding at sea, the seals head for home, exhausted and highly vulnerable. This

is what the sharks are waiting for and gather in large numbers during the pre-dawn hours. The seals are unable to discern the sharks below, but are highly visible to the sharks, rocketing to the surface to snatch their unsuspecting prey.

Predations can last anywhere from seconds to several minutes. While the sharks possess the brute force, agility is the seals' trump card. On many occasions, the shark will miss its mark, with a wild chase ensuing at the surface. The seal will often out maneuver the shark, tiring it to the point of giving up.

With multiple crewmembers on the lookout, all directions were covered for potential shark action, specifically, "porpoising" seals. With sinister motives, seabirds shadow their movements, anticipating leftovers from a potential attack. It didn't take long before the first breach. Then the second. Then the third. I lost count of how many times I heard "Predation, three

o'clock" and turned to discover it was all over.

One predation proved particularly gruesome. "Lots of blood," winced Ernest, as I quickly averted my eyes. The gulls descended in seconds, frantically snatching up blubber and undigested fish bits. Stephen estimated that approximately 50 great whites reside in False Bay. Judging from the number of predations, it appeared they were all around Seal Island.

**Trolling with seal-lure**

It was then time for stage two of our excursion, as Ernest prepared "Frank", a life-size seal mockup.



Fur seal at Partridge Bay; Great white shark attacking seal lure (left); Great white and cage divers (top)





Fur seal at Partridge Bay (left); Ostrich at the Cape of Good Hope (above); Smitswinkel Bay (right); Baboon (lower right)

viewpoint.

With everyone in position, Ernest lowered some hefty frozen fish chunks into the water. Another decoy was employed, this one a flat seal silhouette called "Susie." The action

commenced quickly, with the first shark appearing within minutes. "Okay, standby, standby...DOWN, DOWN!" commanded Stephen. Gulping a breath, I submerged to the window, frantically trying to position my camera. Glancing to the curtain of green, the unmistakable sil-

houette came into view—a great white.

Seeing this magnificent predator up close was mesmerizing. Swooping in gracefully, the great mouth opened wide, swallowing the bait in one gulp. At least seven individuals appeared during an hour, including one specimen over 5m long. Another got a bit rambunctious, thrashing the cage with its tail and soaking everyone on deck. Several other boats were in the vicinity; it seemed there were more than enough sharks to go around.

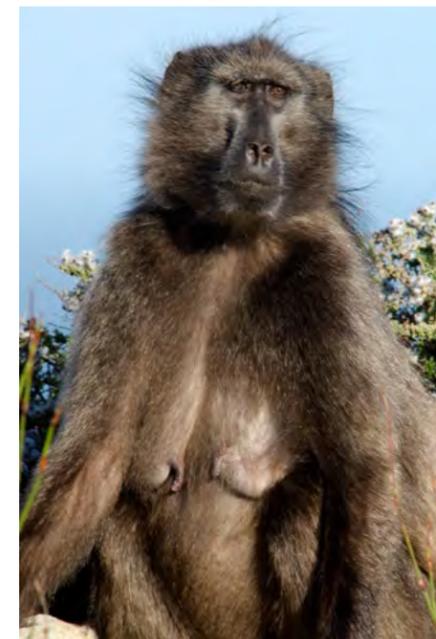
### Cape of Good Hope

Unfortunately, a second trip for the following morning was cancelled due to rough conditions. Dave arrived after lunch, and we headed for the Cape of Good Hope. Famous as Africa's southernmost point and the convergence of Atlantic and Indian Oceans, in reality, it's neither. The actual meeting point fluctuates according to ocean currents, which doesn't actually happen at the Cape. As for the continent's southernmost point, that honour belongs to Cape Agulhas, a peninsula some 150 kilometers to the southeast. Just don't tell the tourist literature.

Wending curvaceously, the road

offered frequent lookouts, providing stupendous views. The beauty also bore an ominous side; a large sign emphatically proclaimed "DANGER: BABOONS." Large and aggressive, chacma baboons are a real problem in the area, attacking people and even breaking into homes causing extensive damage. Further down the road, we encountered a "baboon squad" trying to frighten some off a property by firing blanks. After that, I was afraid to get out of the car for the rest of the morning.

From the graceful sweep of Smitswinkel Bay, the road turned inland, entering the Cape National Park. Stopping to pay the entry fee, a sign announced closing



Essentially, we would troll with a seal-sized lure. "Come on Frank, give us joy!" enthused Steven. With Stephen, Ernest, Come and Nina on the lookout, all directions were covered for potential shark action. Somehow, I couldn't imagine the seals echoing his enthusiasm.

At 9am, the guys started chumming with fish oil to lure in the sharks. The moment of truth had finally arrived. It was cage time. Donning wetsuit, boots, gloves and hood, I was perplexed as to not only where the cage would be positioned but also how I would actually get in. I soon had my answer. The cage was suspended from the vessel's side, and we would step down like on a ladder. It was a lot narrower than expected, holding four people lengthwise, with barely enough room to turn around. No scuba was involved; with heads and shoulders above the water line, a window below the surface provided an unobstructed



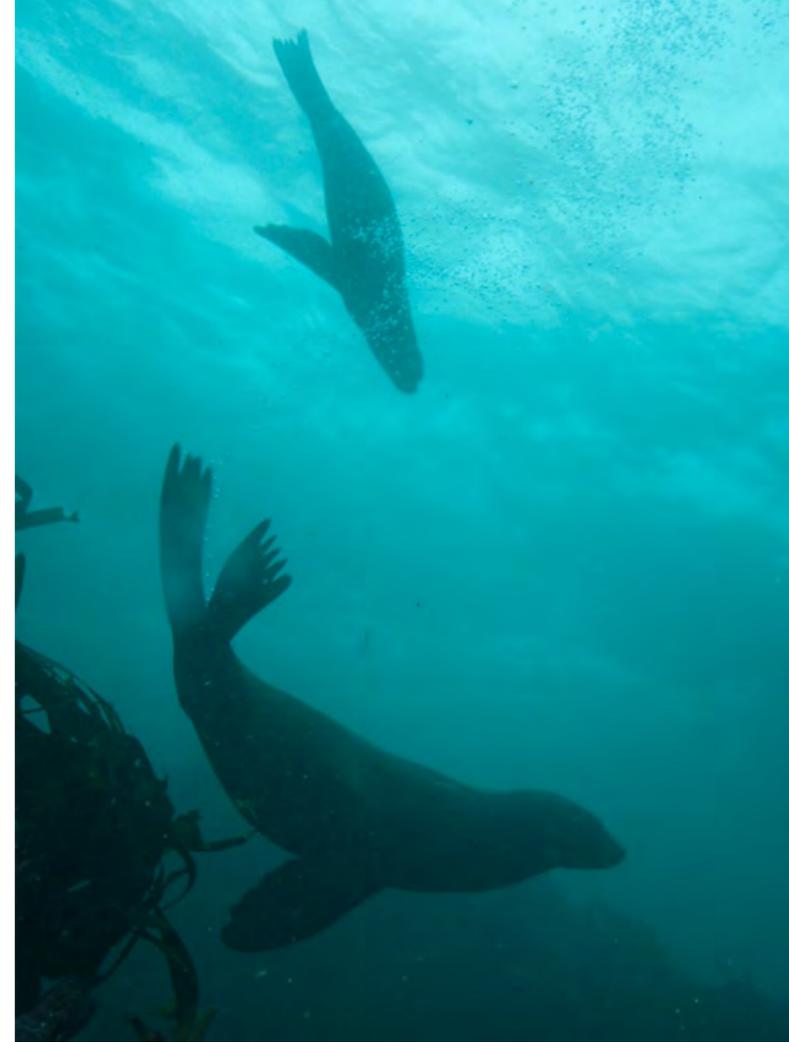
Tourists visit the Cape of Good Hope

time was 17:54. Not 18:00, but 17:54? Windswept and carpeted by Fynbos vegetation, the landscape was stark yet beautiful. An eland bolted across the road, while along the coast, we encountered all four of the park's ostriches.

Normally associated with dry savanna, the birds made for an incongruous sight along the seashore. Seeing one relieve itself was practically awe-inspiring; the sheer force appeared capable of shattering a car windshield. Stopping for a photo at the

Cape of Good Hope, the wind actually knocked me off balance.

With daylight waning, our final stop was Cape Point Lighthouse. Not wanting to hike up in the wind (coupled with a dose of laziness), I opted for the funicular.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Detail of colourful reef at Partridge Bay; Cape Point lighthouse; Fur seals at Partridge Bay

Painfully slow, the ascent was further impeded by the driver-in-training that stopped short of the platform, resulting in a 15-minute wait. With extreme irony, I noticed the tram's name was "Flying Dutchman." From the look-out, the views were spectacular and winds even stronger. With surf pounding below, the "Cape of Storms" certainly lived up to its name.

### More seals, sharks and kelp

During my final days in Simon's Town, I managed additional seal and kelp dives along with a second shark trip that proved even more thrilling. Conditions were rougher, testing everyone's seasickness threshold. I was okay, but one poor woman vomited for the entire trip. This time I finally witnessed a full breach where the shark caught a seal. Despite having seen footage on BBC's *Planet Earth*, nothing quite prepared me for witnessing the event in person. The sheer force displayed as the sharks erupted from the surface was mind-boggling.

Stephen counted 15 predations and five fatalities. I must admit, watching the proceedings left me with decidedly mixed feelings. Although observing predations was an incredible experience, one can't help but sympathize with the seals. It was definitely exhilarating to see one escape.

Describing the experience to friends

back home on Facebook, it was always the same question. "Was it scary?" Not at all. Pure exhilaration was a more apt description, with participants on both excursions utterly thrilled by their close-up encounters. Shark Explorers means to transform peoples' perception of these amazing creatures and seeing them up close in the wild is just the ticket.

### Afterthoughts

During my 19 days in South Africa, the wealth of different experiences proved exhilarating. When it comes to the Sardine Run, fair weather divers beware. Truly nature in the raw, it was hard work; each evening, I could feel muscles I didn't know I had. Like anything in nature, nothing is guaranteed, with rain and rough conditions making for uncomfortable days out. However, that tantalizing glimpse of action was enough to whet my appetite for more. With so much more to explore, both under and over the water, I will definitely be back. It is the world in one country, indeed. ■

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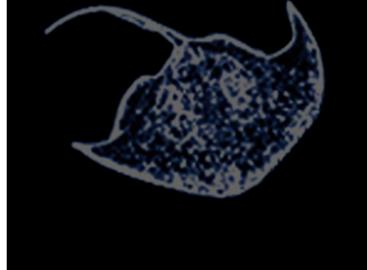
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# fact file



## South Africa



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM

**History** In 1652, Dutch traders landed at the southern tip of what is now South Africa. They established a re-supply station here at this point on the spice route to the Far East from the Netherlands. It eventually became the city of Cape Town. In 1806, the British seized the Cape of Good Hope, compelling many Dutch settlers (the Boers) to move north to establish their own republics. Diamonds and gold were discovered in 1867 and 1886 respectively, spurring immigration and wealth. As a result, subjugation of the native inhabitants intensified. British encroachments

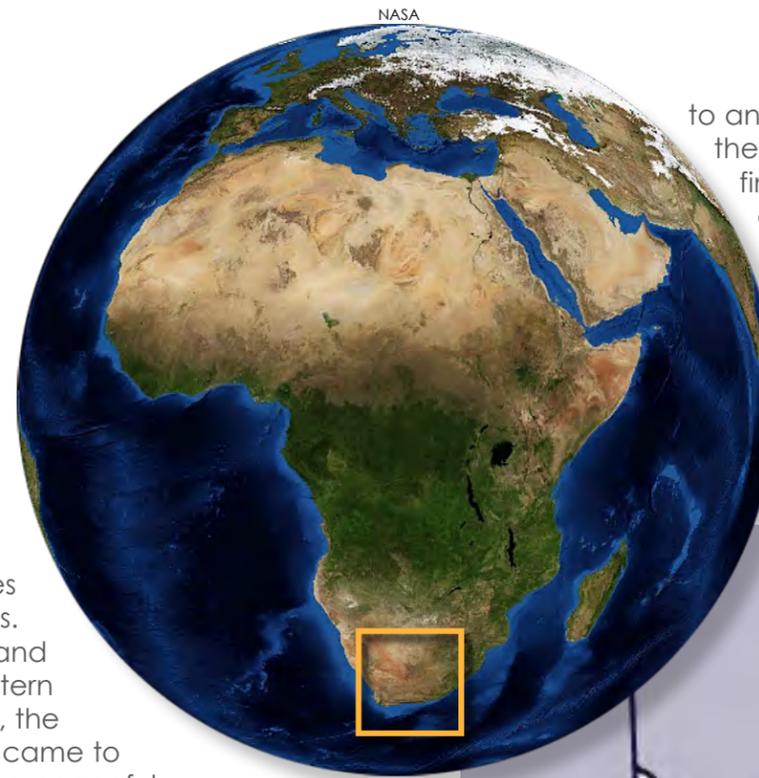
were resisted by the Boers, but they were eventually defeated in the Boer War, which took place from 1899 to 1902. But in 1910 the Boers, or Afrikaners as they came to be known, ruled together with the British under the Union of South Africa, which in 1961 became a republic after a referendum by white voters. A policy of apartheid (segregation) was instituted by the elected National Party in 1948. This policy favored the white minority over the black majority. Opposition to apartheid was led by the African National Congress (ANC) of which Nelson Mandela was a leader who was

imprisoned for decades for his political activities. After years of conflict and boycotts by some Western nations and institutions, the ruling party eventually came to the table to negotiate a peaceful transition to majority rule. The end of apartheid came in 1994, when the first multi-racial elections were held, ushering in majority rule under a government led by the ANC. The country still struggles with apartheid-era imbalances in education, health and decent housing. Infighting in the ANC has led to abrupt changes in leadership. Government: republic. Capital: Pretoria

**Geography** Located in Southern Africa, the country occupies the southern tip of the African continent. Terrain is comprised of a vast plateau in the interior, surrounded by rugged hills and narrow coastal plain. Coastline: 2,798km. Lowest point: Atlantic Ocean 0m. Highest point: Njesuthi 3,408m.

**Climate** Primarily semiarid, South African climate is subtropical along the east coast, with sunshine during the day and cool nights.

**Environmental issues** Extensive water conservation and control measures are required due



RIGHT: Global map with location of South Africa. LOWER RIGHT: Map of South Africa, BOTTOM LEFT: Fur seal in Partridge Bay

to the country's lack of important lakes and major rivers. Demand for water is outpacing supply. Other challenges include pollution of rivers due to urban discharge and agricultural runoff, acid rain due to air pollution, desertification and soil erosion.

### Economy

A middle-income, emerging market, rich in its supply of natural resources, South Africa has well-developed sectors in finance, law, communications, energy and transportation as well as the 15th largest stock market in the world. Despite the country's modern infrastructure, which supports efficient goods distribution to major urban centers, there are obstacles that slow economic growth. In 2007, aging electrical plants led

to an electricity crisis and slowed the economy. Then the global financial crisis hit, reducing commodity prices and world demand. In 2009, GDP fell almost 2% but has since recovered. Current challenges include poverty, inequality and unemployment at nearly 25 percent of the work force. However, improvements

**Currency** Rand (ZAR)  
Exchange rates: 1EUR=15.14ZAR, 1USD=11,16ZAR, 1GBP=18.41ZAR, 1AUD=9.80ZAR, 1SGD=8.75ZAR

**Population** 48,601,098 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: black African 79%, white 9.6%, mixed 8.9%, Indian/Asian 2.5% (2001 census). Religions: Protestant 36.6% (Zionist Christian 11.1%, Pentecostal/Charismatic 8.2%, Methodist 6.8%, Dutch Reformed 6.7%, Anglican 3.8%), Catholic 7.1%, Muslim 1.5%, other Christian religions 36% (2001 census). Internet users: 4.42 million (2009)

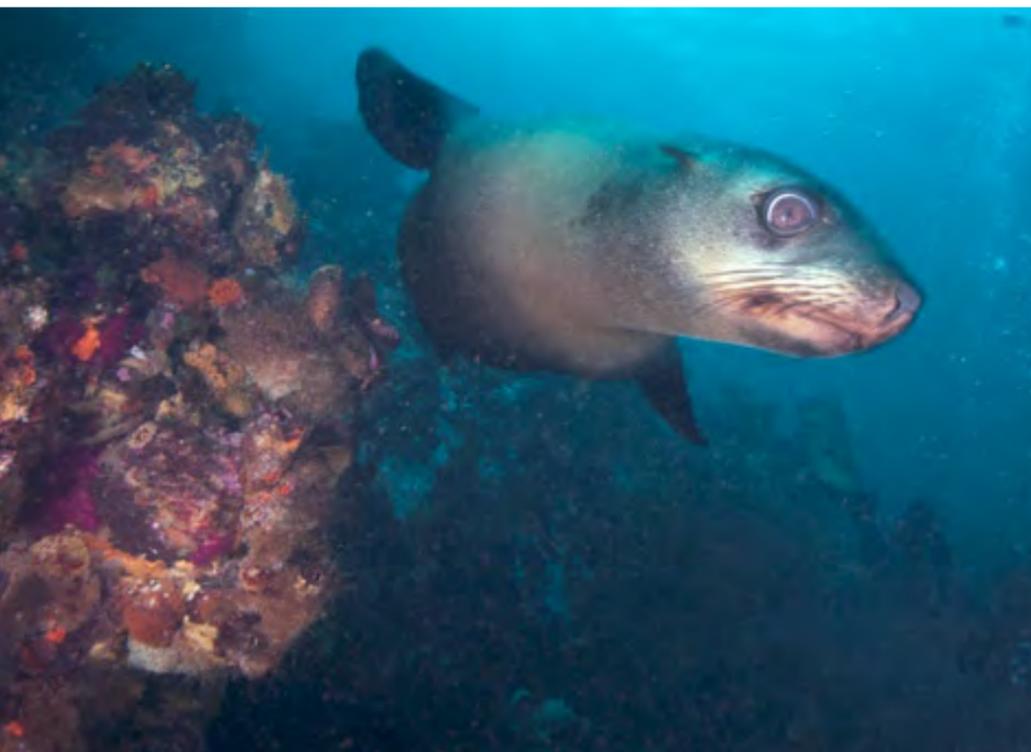
**Language** Official languages include: IsiZulu 23.82%, IsiXhosa 17.64%, Afrikaans 13.35%, Sepedi 9.39%, English 8.2%, Setswana 8.2%, Sesotho 7.93%, Xitsonga 4.44%, siSwati 2.66%, Tshivenda 2.28%, and isiNdebele 1.59% (2001 census)

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*Honduras'*

# Miskito Cays

Text and photos by George Stoye

Diver swims along the edge of a reef covered in marine life, Miskito Cays, Honduras

PREVIOUS PAGE: Rope sponges cling to a boulder

Following six flights, two nights and a 30-hour boat trip, I found myself approaching a relatively uncharted group of small coral cays about 60km off the northeast coast of Honduras, not far from the Nicaraguan border. I joined a group of scientists from various institutions around the world, assigned to document their activities and photograph the habitats and associated wildlife both above and below the water.

Embarking on the *Caribbean Pearl II* from Utila, one of the Bay Islands a few miles off the north coast of Honduras, we made our way along the coast to an area unknown to the region's tourist diving operations. As we got close to the cays, our crew grew increasingly nervous, perhaps justifiably so.

This part of Honduras has long been a major route for cocaine trafficking into the United States from South America, and the region through which we were sailing was well-known for its use by certain cartels who preferred moving their cargo by sea. However, the apparently efficient military presence in the area (we



were boarded ourselves by five soldiers armed to the teeth, carrying out a pre-arranged search) provided a vague form of comfort, and so we continued.

### The archipelago

The Miskito Cays form an archipelago spanning both Honduran and Nicaraguan waters. On the Honduran side, 49 tiny coral

islands and sand bars are dispersed across 750 sq km of shallow seabed. The area is named after the indigenous people of the region, the Miskitos, who

inhabit communities along the coast of both countries. The region is known as the Miskito Coast, or more accurately (the name has nothing to do with

the blood-sucking insects) La Mosquitia.

La Mosquitia is in some ways the wild west of Central America. The region is tropical rainforest



LEFT TO RIGHT: Christmas tree worms; Social feather-duster worms; Midnight and rainbow parrotfish

wilderness forming the greatest continuous expanse of tropical forest north of the Amazon. Sparsely populated the area has an exceptionally high diversity of flora and fauna. It is only accessible by water or air and much of it remains unexplored.

Although tourism exists, the region only attracts a few hardy explorers each year, so there is no actual tourist infrastructure to speak of. The area's inhabitants include four indigenous groups (the Pech, Tawaka, Garifuna and Miskito) with the majority composed of Miskito people who live on the coast. With few available livelihoods, many of the men from these remote villages work in the industrial fisheries for lobster and conch, and more recently, sea cucumbers.

### Risky fisheries

For over 40 years these fisheries have continued with exceptionally poor management resulting in unsustainable exploitation not only of the marine resources, but also of the fishermen themselves.

The primary method of fishing

and conch have been driven into deeper waters. Human casualties from diving associated incidents have risen as a consequence, and now there are around 120 diving accidents per fishing season with around 20 being fatal.

Industrial fishing vessels around

is scuba diving, but this remains relatively primitive and dangerous, relying for the most part on basic, poorly maintained equipment with little regard for the safety of the diver. As the populations have been overfished, the remaining lobster

80ft in length are packed with 100 men. Divers, assisted by canoeists, who follow them from the surface, make multiple dives to depths of 120 feet or more. Incidents resulting from incorrect procedures or malfunctioning equipment have become common-place.

Many divers have lost their lives, and many more have permanent, debilitating injuries resulting from decompression related illness. More than 1,000 permanently disabled men are left scattered in remote communities of La Moskitia as a result of diving for these fisheries.

### Proposed protected area

The effect this is having on many communities is now becoming apparent, and now many of the indigenous groups are calling on the Honduran government

to close the waters surrounding the Miskito Cays to industrial fishing. They are proposing an area of 1.45 million hectares to be the exclusive use of a locally managed, small-scale artisanal fishing fleet using improved fishing methods, that don't include scuba.

In order to realise this ambitious proposal, the relevant Miskito communities will not only require retraining in new fishing methods but also a solid management strategy that combines fishing regulations with marine spatial plans. Community leaders have specified these plans must identify and protect critical habitats, nursery grounds and other ecologically important areas.

As with many remote locations, the environmental impact of sustained exploitation of industrial fisheries around the Miskito Cays have,

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to date, largely been ignored. Due to the relative isolation of the area, the past and current condition of the ecosystem and its regional significance is essentially unknown. This lack of information is one of the largest hurdles preventing these communities from developing their plans further.

### Research program

In collaboration with a team of international researchers from the Smithsonian Institution, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, University of Queensland in Australia, University of Manchester in the United



Yellowline goby peering out from a great star coral colony

Kingdom, and a Honduran non-governmental organisation—the Centre for Marine Studies—Dr Steve Box, a marine biologist from the Smithsonian Institution has developed a multi-disciplinary research program in order to provide the missing informa-

tion to enable the Miskito communities to move forward with their sustainable fisheries and marine management proposal.

A central part of this program is to gather essential ecological data of the Miskito Cays region in order to establish a baseline

for the condition of the coral reefs and associated biodiversity. Ultimately, the objectives are to assist both local groups and the government of Honduras move towards the sustainable use of their marine resources and improve understanding of

how these reefs are connected to other Honduran and western Caribbean marine ecosystems. The study will also be used as part of ongoing comparative research programs across the entire Caribbean.

### Research activities

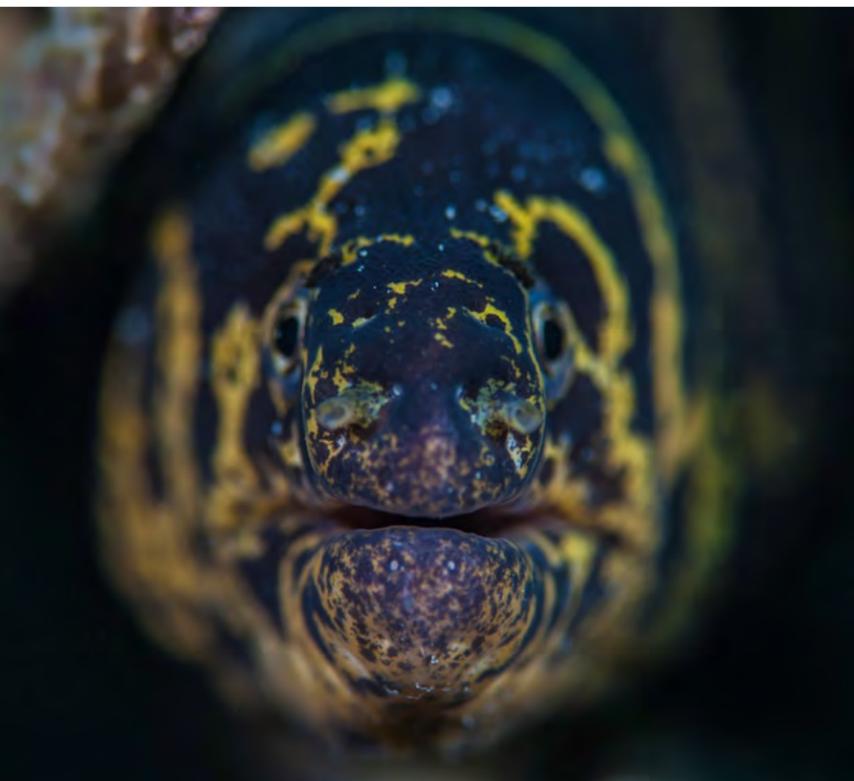
The schedule was rigorous, involving both underwater and terrestrial surveys. A small team took the tender vessel and landed on as many of the cays as possible to ground-truth various satellite imagery and bathymetric charts.

A team of divers conducted surveys to assess the abundance of corals, algae and fishes using a standardised reef monitoring protocol, while individual divers were responsible for collecting various samples for later lab analyses. These were used to assess the severity and prevalence of coral diseases along with the diversity and abundance of sponges and algal communities. Genetic analyses was used to uncover patterns of dispersal for three commercial fisheries species and an endangered coral species among the reefs of the northern and southern areas.

Combined, this research will greatly improve understanding of the physical, environmental and ecological context of the proposed Honduran Miskito Cays marine area.

### Diving

Following our slightly un-nerving run-in with the Honduran Navy, we approached the first of the northern group of cays. Some were no more than slightly elevated patches of sand, only just visible above the water, while others were well-established small islands with



Chain moray eel; Solitary gorgonian hydroid (right)

dense vegetation providing habitat for large numbers of breeding seabirds. Ringed by thin strips of white sand gently sloping into vivid turquoise lagoons, the cays were almost stereotypically beautiful—exactly what one would expect from remote coral islands in the Caribbean.

An air of excitement and anticipation filled the boat as we prepared for our first dive. Due to its relative inaccessibility, this region was largely unknown to divers, and reports describing the

area were scarce. Although not thought to be vastly different from other coral reefs in the Western Caribbean, nobody really knew what to expect.

Many reefs throughout the entire Caribbean have suffered significant declines over the last 30 years. This decline, however, is mostly described on reefs close to areas of human population and thought to be caused partly by a combination of human-induced pressures such as overdevelopment, pollution and overfishing.

Although the Miskito Cays are known for fishing, they are far away from the mainland, which limits direct land-based human impacts. These reefs therefore have the potential to be comparatively healthier than their counterparts in other locations.

Secretly hoping for crystal clear water, whale sharks, manta rays and pristine coral reefs like no living soul has seen before, my descent onto the first reef was one of mixed emotions. While still excited to be diving this unex-



Diver examines life on cliff face; Knobby sea rod (below)

## Miskito Cays

als die, faster growing species such as algae quickly become established leaving little room for new corals to settle. Although a major problem now affecting all the world's coral reefs, the lack of species diversity, in comparison to reefs of the Indo Pacific, means some parts of the Caribbean have been particularly badly affected.

Massive boulder coral forma-

tions were a common feature on many of the dives, some in better condition than others. The last dive of the second day was particularly memorable, not so much for marine life encountered but rather the ancient towering coral colonies, formed from layer upon layer of growth, where the upper surface is alive built on top of previously deposited rock skeleton. The pinnacles formed



cathedral-like structures creating a labyrinth of pillars, caves and tunnels almost eerie in the fading daylight.

Gliding underneath some of these imposing coral masses, I frequently noticed impressive bushes of black coral, a

plored region, my initial reaction was one of slight disappointment. A storm from a few days earlier had stirred up the water, and the visibility was not as good as expected. The main purpose of my visit here was to provide habitat images of the coral reefs, so my intention was to shoot almost exclusively wide-angle. The amount of suspended sediment in the water column was going to make this task slightly more challenging than anticipated!

Impressive reef structures, at first silhouetted in the gloom, came into view, covered in myriad forms of life. The intricate shapes of black coral bushes and delicate wire corals hung from the sides of massive colonies of *Montastraea*, large reef-building corals that provide a foothold for numerous smaller coral species. Sea whips, sea fans, sponges, tunicates, macroalgae, encrusting algae and fire corals also competed for any available space.

### Reef health

These highly competitive interactions are what make coral reefs among the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet. Conversely, they are also responsible for a fundamental, and relatively recent problem. Maybe no more than 50 years ago, coral mortality on well-established reefs was not a major issue. Indeed, mass mortality as a result of coral bleaching or disease is a comparatively new phenomenon. For mil-

lions of years, coral communities have been highly resilient, able to recover from most major environmental disturbances. Nowadays, however, much of that resilience has been lost, most probably due to increasingly frequent and persistent human-induced disturbances. As cor-



Elkhorn coral



Juvenile parrotfish on staghorn coral reef

## Miskito Cays

natural stressors. Due to their dramatic decline, *Acropora* corals have become something of a rarity, so it's always a pleasure to find areas where they still thrive.

Although not as dense a thicket of elkhorn as I

was expecting, there were some massive formations here, some with branches a metre or so in diameter, perhaps the largest I've ever seen. Amazingly, many of the colonies here, as I've seen in other areas, were growing just beneath the surface. Because



species known as *Antipatharia* which, despite their name actually look like giant red sea fans. Unlike other areas I've dived in the Western Caribbean, these striking black coral bushes were a regular sight on many of the dives here and were reminiscent of some of the dense gorgonian forests I've encountered in the Pacific.

Although we encountered a fair share of reefs in less than favourable condition, either besieged by algae, soft corals and sponges, or deteriorating as a result of disease or bleaching, we also noted some encouraging signs of resilience providing a little optimism that the reefs here could have potential to sustain themselves. In many parts of the Caribbean, indications of

healthy reefs or reefs in a state of significant growth or recovery are becoming all too scarce.

### Elkhorn and staghorn coral

A number of fine stands of staghorn coral (*Acropora cervicornis*), intricate branching corals that were almost completely wiped out by white band disease in the early 1980s, were seen on a number of dives. Prior to the 1980s, these corals were responsible for much of the structural complexity of Caribbean reefs providing numerous species with shelter from predation. Loss of this complexity has profoundly altered the biodiversity of many reefs so to see even small, healthy patches of *Acropora* anywhere in the Caribbean is reassuring indeed.

I skipped one dive in favour of a snorkel in shallow water close to a cay called Caratasca. A small team had gone ashore earlier that day and reported a number of elkhorn coral colonies in the shallows. Elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*), like its close relative staghorn, was once an abundant reef-building species common throughout Caribbean reefs providing much of the foundation and structure. Suffering the same fate as staghorn, elkhorn coral also died off at an alarming rate and before long 95 percent of both species had declined. White band disease, which only affects these two *Acropora* species, is still something of a mystery although almost certainly has some connection to increased human and



of the depth, or rather lack of it, I relied on natural light for photography. Hampered once again by fairly poor visibility and struggling to compose shots due to being underweighted, and possibly not as proficient at breath-holding as I used to be, I managed one or two acceptable images.

### Heading south

After two days diving the northern group of cays, we made our way to the group in the south closer to the Nicaraguan border, much to the consterna-

Elkhorn coral (above); Detail of staghorn coral branch (top right)





TOP TO BOTTOM: Shoal of blue tang; Christmas tree worms; Hermit crab

number of striking similarities with more isolated reefs found further to the south around Panama.

Some of the reefs around the southern group of cays, at least the ones we dived, were markedly different from those in the north in that they adhered more to classic 'spur and groove' formations rather than massive boulders and towering pinnacles.

Reef fish abundance also appeared slightly higher, although some species such as grouper were still noticeably absent—not surprising, as they are a valuable fisheries target. Another noticeable aspect of these southern reefs were the sheer number of different species crammed into relatively small areas. Although this was evident on the reefs to the north, as it generally is in any coral reef community, some of the reefs here appeared particularly muddled and chaotic.

In comparison to their Indo Pacific counterparts, which, to me, appear neat, tidy and somewhat well-organised, many Caribbean reefs looked like they had been haphazardly thrown together by a madman. Diversity of sponges on these southern reefs was particularly striking with numerous forms and colours covering many of the *Montastraea* colonies in a tangled profusion of bright purple, yellow and red, often stretching out into the water column like ancient wizened fingers.

Closer inspection on these southern reefs, and most in the north, revealed the usual array of Caribbean macro species. Exquisite feather duster worms gently swaying in the current, yellowline bobies

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capital, our crew were put slightly at ease after we were assured that the Honduran Navy was still on exercises in the area and were nearby should we need them.

Part of the research being undertaken here was to assess whether the reefs around the northern and southern Miskito Cays are connected, not only to each other but also to the Mesoamerican

Barrier Reef System (MBRS). The MBRS stretches all the way from the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico apparently ending at the Bay Islands in Honduras. If data collected during the survey could show that the Miskito Reefs were connected to the MBRS, this boundary could effectively be extended by about 400km. Interestingly, casual observations during the expedition suggested the northern group of cays may well be connected, whereas the southern group showed a



tion of our crew who were becoming more anxious by the day. Reluctant to go much further due to security concerns, we were fortunate that one of our team worked for the U.S. Embassy. Following a quick call via satellite phone to his office in the Honduran





Spanish dancer nudibranch

mon sight on most Caribbean reefs, but others are a little more enigmatic, and in many locations, either completely absent or just downright rare.

Two of the largest and most strikingly beautiful parrotfish species are the midnight and the rainbow, which fall into this category. I had seen one or two midnights before, but only occasionally and only ever at one dive site on an island about 400km northwest. I had never seen a rainbow parrotfish. Imagine my surprise then as I

Stoplight parrotfish cleaned by juvenile bluehead wrasse; Sea lettuce nudibranch (lower right)

was suddenly faced with a roving shoal of 60-70 midnight parrotfish, with a number of juvenile rainbows amongst them, swooping over the reef like a cloak of black, iridescent blue and green.

Undeterred by my presence, the fish were feeding voraciously, scraping algae from rocks and coral heads, circling an area again and again to ensure all food was consumed. This is what makes parrotfish so crucial on coral reefs. In sufficient numbers they can keep large areas of reef clear of algae opening up crucial settlement space for new corals. Without these keystone species, many reefs quickly become overwhelmed by algae, which soon replaces corals as the dominant species—a process known as a phase shift, and one which is very difficult to reverse.

Large shoals of midnight parrotfish were seen on at least three dives.



Miskito Cays

and the highly appropriately named lettuce sea slug, to mention but a few.

A number of docile nurse sharks were also seen and, a real treat for me, were the discovery of two spectacular nudibranchs I had not seen before: a purple-spotted sea goddess and a Spanish dancer, the latter of which provided some great photo opportunities, as it twisted and gyrated through the water column.

## Caribbean parrotfish

Although general reef fish diversity was not strikingly different to reefs in other areas of the Western Caribbean, there were some unusual and encouraging encounters on a few of the dives. Having spent some time studying Caribbean parrotfish and their role in maintaining healthy reefs, I'm always on the lookout for this charismatic species, particularly when in large numbers.

Some species, such as the small and unassuming striped parrotfish, are a com-



Redband parrotfish cleaned by juvenile bluehead wrasse

Photographing them was initially fairly exhausting. I soon realised trying to chase them over the reef was futile and so attempted something a little more strategic.

On each encounter, the fish seemed to circle the area a number of times. After watching them at a distance for a few minutes, I would choose a suitable position and lie in wait, trying

to minimise my breathing to reduce bubbles and hoping they would swim toward me. This ambush technique worked with limited success, as the fish would invariably detect me from a distance and usually swim the other way. As ever, the visibility wasn't great, but I managed a few acceptable images.

## Sea urchins

Another encouraging sign that the reefs here may have slightly higher resilience than those elsewhere in the region with potential to sustain themselves, were higher than average numbers of long-spined sea urchins (*Diadema antillarum*).

With a function similar to parrotfish these urchins are, or rather were, an important herbivore throughout the Caribbean, freeing up critical settlement space for new corals by consuming algae. In 1983, however, the species declined by over 97 percent across the

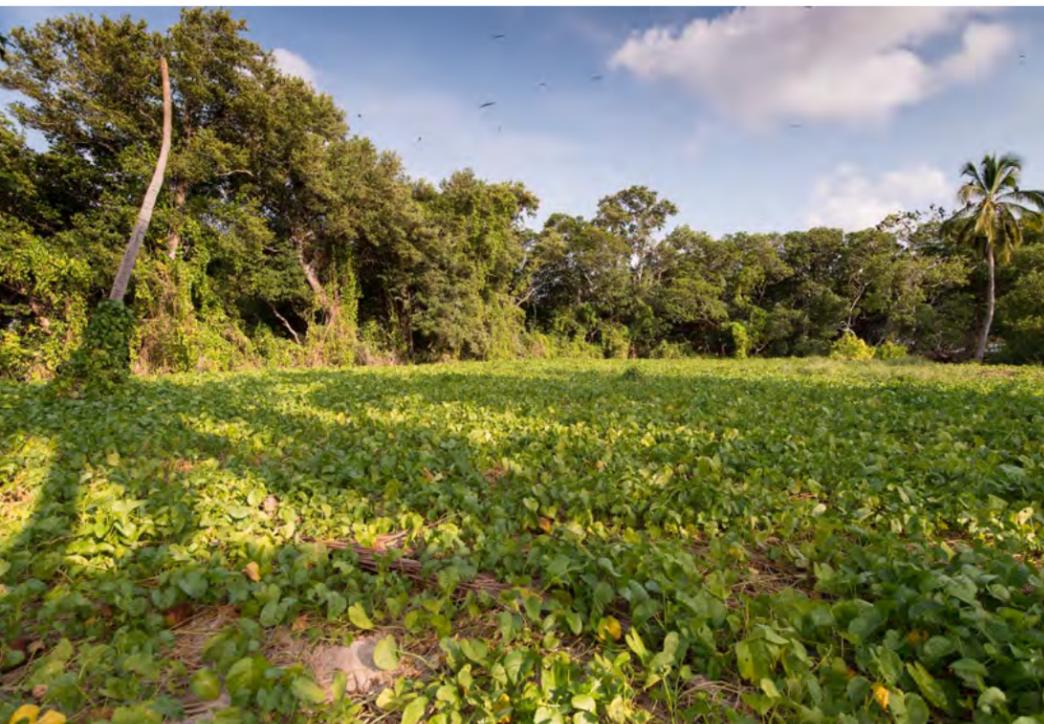


entire Caribbean due to an unidentified pathogen. The consequences in some areas were devastating, as large areas of

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Researcher on Becerras Cay ground-truthing satellite imagery with dive boat in the background; Magnificent frigatebirds roosting on low branches and coming in to land; Extensive roots of mangroves; Forest clearing on Becerras Cay



## Miskito Cays



On the beach, the decrepit remains of an old fishermen's hut provided a perch for a few frigates while the rest sat on nests or branches among the mangroves at the wider end of the cay. It was nesting season, so the majority of birds were tending their young, which sat, dinosaur-like waiting for their next meal.

Frigates, at least when they reach adulthood (the chicks aren't the most attractive looking creatures), are majestic birds, appearing almost spectre-like, as they circle above scouting

for suitable prey. Although commonly using their large talons and hooked beaks to catch fish by skimming the surface of the water, they are also piratical in nature, frequently harassing other birds forcing them to regurgitate their stomach contents, which

they then catch and consume as it falls. Having the opportunity to walk among this colony with my camera and experience the sights, sounds and smells was a rare treat and an absolute pleasure.



coral reef were quickly overgrown by persistent mats of algae.

Although still not recovered to anything like their pre-1983 numbers, some recent reports have described a number of local recoveries and signs of associated regeneration of coral reefs. It is possible some of the Miskito reefs could be included.

### Stinky Cay

During another brief respite from

diving, I had the opportunity to join the terrestrial team on an exploratory excursion to one of the cays. Appropriately named Stinky Cay by the locals, the tiny island was a thin strip of sand and low-level vegetation teeming with seabirds. Magnificent frigatebirds accounted for most of these but there were also a number of brown boobies and masked boobies most of which were nesting on the ground.



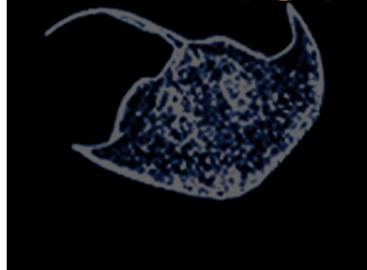
### Afterthoughts

This was hopefully the first in a series of expeditions to the Honduran Miskito Cays. Surveys will need to be repeated throughout the year in order to build up a solid picture of the past and current condition of the area's ecosystems as well as to identify critical habitats, nursery grounds and other ecologically important areas. This information is crucial if we are to assist the Miskito

Communities in achieving their goal of establishing a solid management strategy to protect their fisheries from continued exploitation and their fishermen from further harm. ■

*George Stoye is a marine ecologist, coral reef researcher and underwater photographer based in the United Kingdom. For more information, visit: [Earthinfofocus.com](http://Earthinfofocus.com)*

# fact file



## Miskito Cays, Honduras



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

**History** Named for the Miskito Indians who live in the region, the Miskito Cays are found on the Caribbean Mosquito Coast (or Miskito Coast), which historically comprised an area on the east coast of today's Honduras and Nicaragua. Long dominated by British interests, it wasn't until in 1894 that the Mosquito Coast was incorporated into Nicaragua. Finally, in 1960, the northern part was granted to Honduras by the International Court of Justice.<sup>1</sup> Honduras was itself part of the vast Spanish empire in the New World, and finally gained its independence in 1821. It wasn't until 1982 that there was a freely elected government following over 20 years of military rule. The country experienced conflict in the 80's, as anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist government in Nicaragua used Honduras

as a safe haven. Honduras was also allied with the Salvadoran government against leftist guerrillas. In the late 90's, Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras causing vast devastation and killing 5,600 people. The Honduras economy has made a slow recovery since then. Government: Democratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

**Geography** Honduras is located in Central America. On the east side, it borders the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua. On the west side, it borders the Gulf of Fonseca, leading to the North Pacific Ocean, between El Salvador and Nicaragua. Terrain is comprised of narrow coastal plains, with mountains in the interior. Coastline: Caribbean Sea 669km; Gulf of Fonseca 163km. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870m.

**Climate** Lowlands are subtropical while mountainous areas have a temperate climate. Natural hazards include earthquakes that are frequent but mild, for the most part, as well as hurricanes and floods on the Caribbean coast.

**Environmental issues** Challenges stem from the expansion of urban population; logging and

clearing of land for agriculture result in deforestation; uncontrolled development and farming of marginal lands further degrade the land and erode the soil; mining operations are polluting the country's largest freshwater source, Lago de Yojoa, and many rivers and streams, with heavy metals.

**Economy** With 65% of its population living in poverty, Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. It also has the highest murder rate in the world. Rural and indigenous people in the south, west, and along the eastern border suffer higher poverty rates than those in the north and central areas, where the majority of the country's infrastructure and industries are based. Education, while enjoying nearly 100 percent enrollment, is poor in quality, and hence, slow to improve the situation for the poor. Unequal distribution of income is extreme, and there is high underemployment. Honduras has diversified its export base beyond coffee and bananas to include automobile wire harnessing and apparel. Almost half of the country's economic activity is tied directly to the United States. In 2006, the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) came into effect helping to foster

foreign direct investment. However, political and physical insecurity, crime and the perception of corruption, may scare off potential investors. Modest economic growth from 2010 to 2012 was not enough to improve living standards of a majority of the country's poor. A growing budget deficit, weak current account performance, unpaid salaries of public sector workers, and several hundred million in unpaid contracts to suppliers continue to plague the government.

**Currency** Honduran lempiras (HNL). Exchange rates: 1EUR=27.25HNL, 1USD=20HNL, 1GBP=32.80HNL, 1AUD=17.87HNL, 1SGD=15.74HNL

**Population** 8,448,465 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: Tmestizo (Amerindian and European mix)



RIGHT: Location of Honduras on global map. BELOW: Location of Miskito Cays on map of Honduras



90%, Amerindian 7%, black 2%, white 1%. Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant 3%. Internet users: 731,700 (2009)

**Language** Spanish is the official language, plus there are Amerindian dialects.

**Health** Travellers should talk with a doctor for latest inoculation recommendations and anti-malaria advice.

**Miskito Cays area** At the moment, the area has not established any tourism diving, so no stated limits are in place. In the Miskitia itself, there are no dive facilities, so

guests go by liveaboard from the Bay Islands. When the area is zoned for Miskito use, authorities may charge a user fee for divers, as a way of generating revenue, and then specify dive sites and other things as part of their marine spatial plan, but that is a way off.

**Websites** Honduras Tourism [www.letsghonduras.com](http://www.letsghonduras.com)

Frigatebird chicks in the nest (right and bottom left), Miskito Cays, Honduras



Text and photos by Barb Roy

Over ten years have past since my last dive in Hood Canal. I'm not sure why, probably because I've been so focused on exploring the pristine waters of British Columbia that the extra effort of driving so far south has always deterred me. But when Adventures Down Under, a dive shop in Bellingham, invited me to join their group for a Hood Canal dive charter, I was too curious to say anything but yes. What I do remember from my last visit is seeing a field of tall, spindly sea whips during a shore dive and admiring the amount of octopus on another. I also remember how good some raw oysters were after picking them up from a beach during a community seafood festival, especially when they were covered in red cocktail sauce!

But for this trip our group of seven met up with Don Coleman, owner and operator of Pacific Adventure at the Pleasant Harbor Marina on the west side of Hood Canal,

off Highway 101. It was a typical chilly January day where air temperatures may have climbed to a balmy 30°F (-1°C). I was just happy for the warm sunshine and

pleasant attitudes all around. The distance to carry our gear from the car to the boat was short, and the 38-foot (11.5-meter) boat had plenty of covered deck space

to spread out on. A warm cabin below was great for changing into our dry suits.

During the 30-minute run to Pinnacle, our first dive site, Don

explained a bit about himself and how he got started in the dive business.

"I learned to dive in 1997 in San Carlos, Mexico, with my son

while on a four-year family sailing trip. We crossed to Hawaii in the spring of 1998 where I became an instructor, then we went back across to Washington State in the



*Washington State's*  
**Hood Canal**





Ron Akeson (left) filming a large lingcod at Hood Canal; Pacific Adventure dive boat, *Down Time* (above); Divers Connie and Jay ready to test new drysuits (top right)

### Pinnacle

Fortunately the Pinnacle site yielded calm water, fairly clear visibility and the sun was still smiling! The boat utilized one of the mooring buoys placed by Washington Scuba Alliance (WSA) and tied up to it. The mooring buoy would also be used as a descent line to directly drop onto the pinnacle below.

"Currently we have four WSA buoys in Hood Canal—Pulali West Wall, Pinnacle, Broken Leg and Flagpole," added Don, just before his briefing.

"Pinnacle is my favorite site for the variety of struc-

tures at the location and the abundance of critters. The site is large enough that I don't have to see the same parts each dive. For me it takes at least three 50-minute dives to completely explore the entire site, I move pretty slow."

He continued to tell us more about the site, directions to find critters and depths. As soon as Don mentioned a

pair of wolf-eels with eggs, everyone instantly became enthusiastic about jumping in as soon as possible. Only during a behind-the-scenes tour at the Vancouver Aquarium had I ever seen a ball of wolf-eel eggs before.

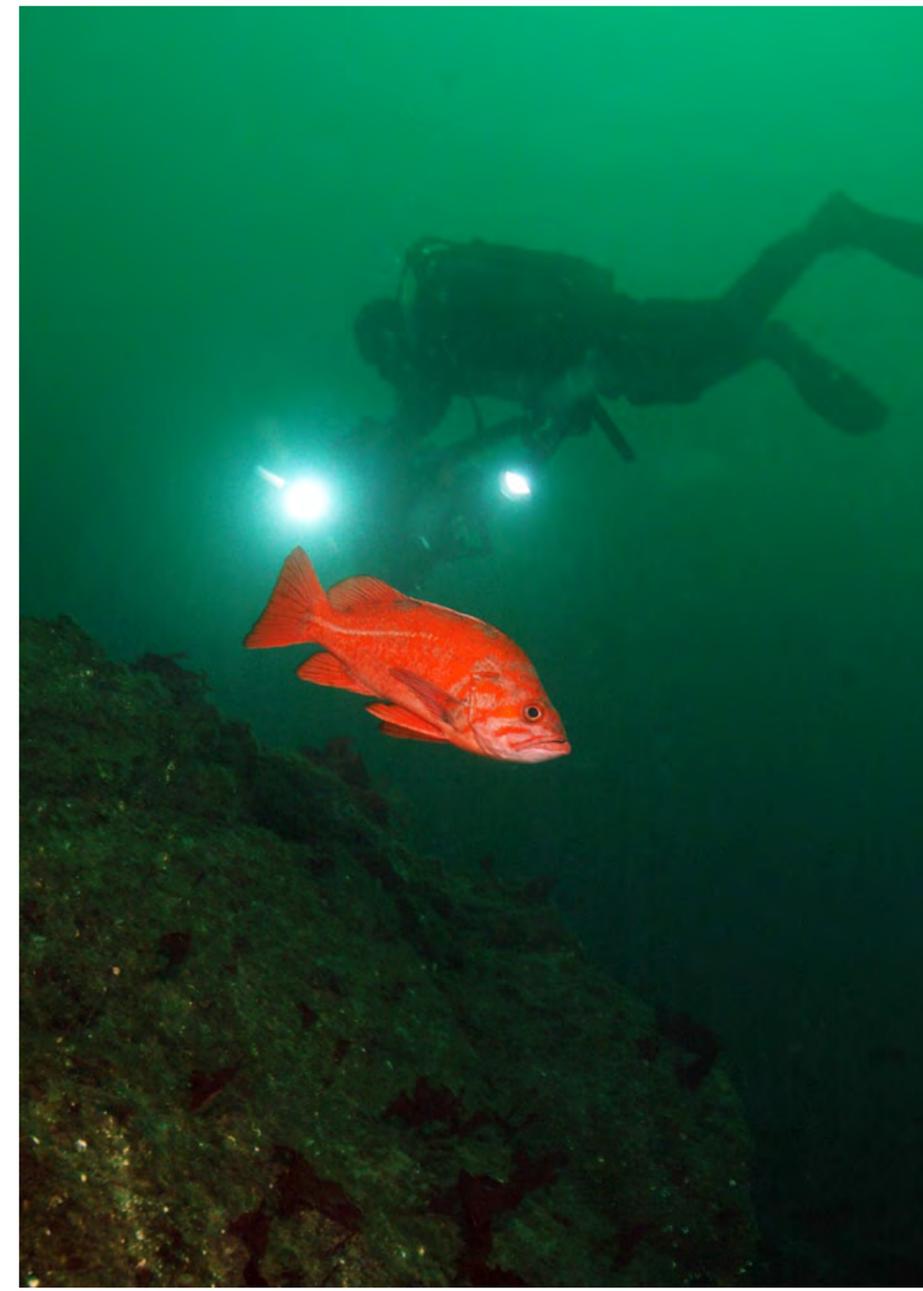
To increase my chances of actually finding the wolf-eels, I joined up with Ron Akeson, the group organizer and a marine biologist, figuring if anyone can find them he could. Although my Nikon camera is housed in a fair-sized Aquatica housing with duel strobes, it seemed small in comparison to his massive video housing with duel lights as they sat next to one another on the deck.

Nevertheless we began our descent to 40ft (12m), passing several immense lingcod resting on slabs of rock—I would guess probably females because of their size, ready to disperse clusters of eggs if the right guy comes along. When I approached for a photograph, they didn't budge. We even came across several small males, already guarding batches of eggs. They too were docile except for one that became fixated on my yellow Force Fins, swimming around several times before

spring of 1999 where I learned to dive in cold water. In the spring of 2002, I started my dive charter business and have had a blast exploring and sharing Hood Canal since then," he said.

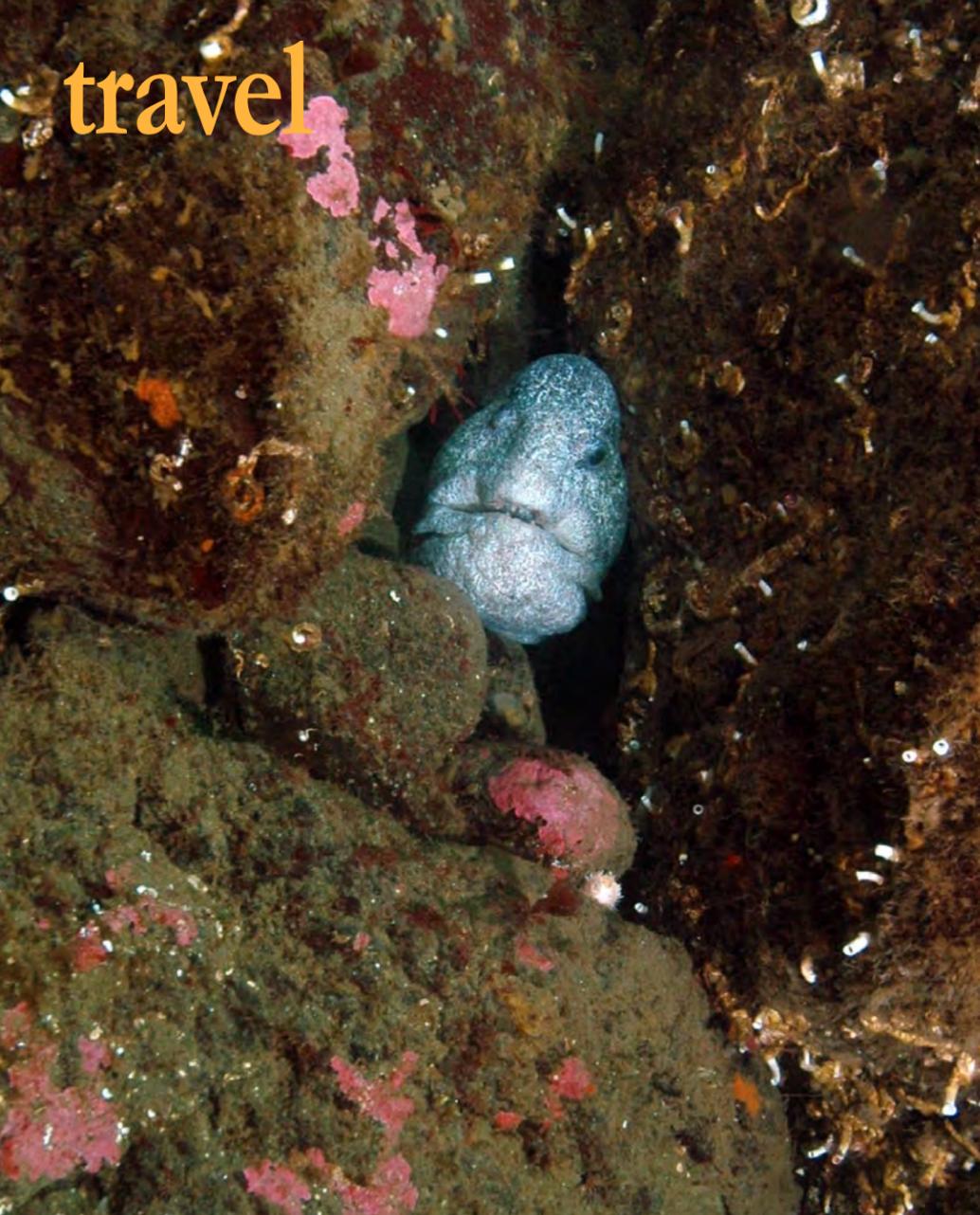
When asked how many boat diving sites he frequents in Hood Canal, he replied, "We have six dive sites that are favorites—Pulali East, South and West Walls, Pinnacle, Broken Leg

and Black Point. Another four we do on request as weather and current allow—Rosie's Ravine, Arrowhead, Flagpole and Elephant Wall. Most sites are not current sensitive except Rosie's and Flagpole. For us, wind is the major factor when choosing a site. Our popular shore dives include Sund Rock, Octopus Hole, Jorstead Creek, and Point Whitney."



Diver with vermilion rockfish





escorting us away.

Large black, copper and yellowtail rockfish were very prevalent at all depths, some free-swimming and some perched on rocky outcroppings of the sloping terrain. Then all of the sudden a bright orange fish swam by. We were both in awe. Probably one of the most colorful of all the rockfish is the vermillion, displaying deep rich colors of red and orange, like this one.

To our delight more appeared. Judging from their size and quantity, this might be a resident population. They didn't seem to mind having divers around, because I was able to collect numerous shots

as they gracefully swam about.

According to the book *Coastal Fishes of the Pacific Northwest* by Andy Lamb and Phil Edgell, a large female vermillion is capable of releasing as many as 2,600 tiny young, usually during the winter.

Since Ron and I were the last ones in the water, we didn't really see much of the others on our dive. I spotted a lone adult male wolf-eel in a den and was taking advantage of its tolerance to my camera when Ron signaled me over. Okay, maybe he found the pair of wolf-eels!

At first I did not see the smaller female wrapped around a yel-



lowish-white ball of eggs, until I got closer. The male quickly let us know where the parameters were and as long as we respected the distance, he was content. The egg mass was about the size of cantaloupe melon. Unfortunately using a wide-angle lens on my camera didn't help much, but Ron acquired some fabulous footage which he later shared.

"I have not done a lot of diving in Hood Canal previously," admitted Ron, "But after doing a day of diving with Pacific Adventure, I wondered why not. Naturally I survey an area for the health of its marine life while diving, trying to note its diversity. Seeing the pair of wolf-eels and lings with eggs tells me this area is doing okay. The wolf-eels were a real treat to see and they were exactly where Don said they would be during his briefing, so it just was a matter of finding them."

The rockfish were a big hit with Ron as well, "The biggest surprise for me was the health of the rockfish populations in Hood Canal. At Pinnacle there were numerous

large vermillion rockfish, a species I rarely, if ever, see in Puget Sound or the San Juan Islands."

Later Ron sent me several images of the wolf-eels with their

them how they enjoyed their dive. Jim Copher and Mike Meagher, also from Bellingham, were out on the boat testing a new housing Mike has constructed for the

## Hood Canal

bundles of life, which he took from his video. Very cool.

### Pulali Point

The second dive location, Pulali Point, was not far away, marked by another WSA buoy. As we enjoyed a hot cup of soup and a delicious sandwich, I chatted with the other divers, asking

GoPro camera.

Mike commented, "While Hood Canal does not appear to have the invertebrate life the San Juans do, I am still looking to do more dives here. I love diving at Pinnacle because there are always wolf-eels and lings when we visit it. And I like Don's boat and his crew. He does a very professional job of briefing the divers, and tells you with great accuracy where to find subjects. That sort of knowledge is beneficial to the underwater filmmaker, allowing us to go right to the subjects we desire to get shots of. Jim and I will be back on Don's boat soon. I do have some decent video posted on YouTube from the Pinnacle site and Hood Canal." [See <http://www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver>]

More of Mike's videos can be found on YouTube by doing a search for "MikeMeagherProduc-



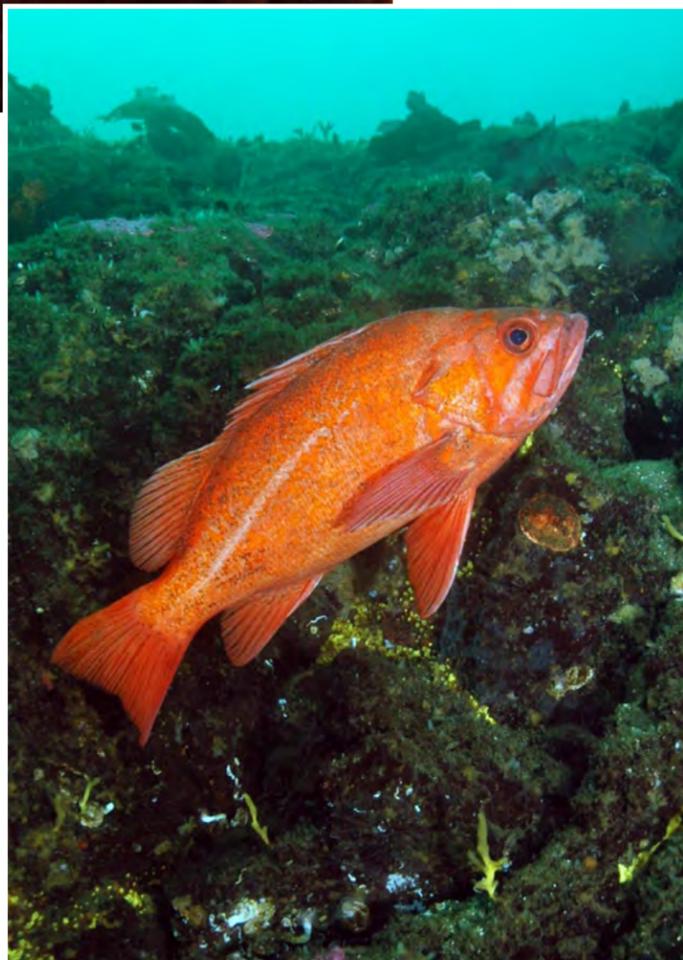
Wolf-eels protect their eggs and nest (above); Male wolf-eel hiding in crevasse (far left); Striped sea perch (top)



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Sunflower seastar;  
Vermillion rockfish;  
Lingcod, starfish  
and sea cucumber  
on rocky reef

in many parts of the world.

When checking out a crab crawling around a possible octopus den, I noticed a small painted-greenling fish, camouflaged upon some dark red and brown pieces of kelp. Sometimes I just like to pause, admiring little creatures like this (I still had my wide-angle lens on) and watch how they go about foraging. Even the huge boulders we found covered with



tions" to locate his channel.

Mike hopes to have his new housing available to market in a few months, which according to him will be "unique in the world". He also states it will have improved underwater optics and oversized controls for divers wearing gloves, not to mention it has already been pressure tested to 330 feet.

Another buddy team was Connie Zastrow and Jay Lonner, testing out their new drysuits. "In my heart of hearts, I'm a tropical water diver," said Connie, "but, that being said, I want to love cold water diving, and I thought Hood Canal was a great place to take the plunge. It really was a good place to start—small boat, attentive crew, no current and plenty of interesting things to see." Both Connie and Jay hope to return this spring for more exploration.

Ron and I entered the water (was it colder?) at Pulali and followed the mooring buoy line down to the site. Tall white

plumose anemones decorated the rocky landscape. Connie and Jay waved as they passed by, heading deeper. The descent was not as steep as the previous dive but a nice stretch of wall allowed me to get below more large lingcod. I've always loved the emerald green hue of northwest water when shooting upwards to frame my subjects in.

Lately I have heard there are dwindling sea star populations in many parts of the northwest, baffling scientists. Some areas have been devastated. Here in this part of Hood Canal they all seemed fine. Many believe pollution is the cause and others feel it is a natural cycle since it has happened before. My bet is that pollution is the culprit, because other marine species are also dwindling in some areas—a trend I am seeing



## Hood Canal

yellow zoanths had tiny critters between their tiny yellow bases when you look close.

After coming across Mike and Jim with their new proto-type on a quad-pod and waving at the camera, we headed for a group of copper rockfish. Each fish seemed to have their own special area on

the reef, as did the vermilions. However, black rockfish were everywhere.

Before long it was time to ascend. While hanging around the 20-foot depth (six meters), I watched a dozen striped perch bounce about from one rock pile to the next like the small groups of fish do in the tropics with coral heads. Their silvery irides-



Painted greenling resting on rocky reef (above); Diver with video camera at Hood Canal

## Hood Canal

needing air or Nitrox fills, Don is able to accommodate at his dock and can provide rental tanks for those diving with him. Be sure to reserve before hand. Divers can also rent gear and have their tanks filled at Hoodspot 'N Dive.

Another oceanfront fill station can be found at Mike's Beach Resort in Lilliwaup, on Highway 101. They offer accommodations and beach access (fee applies to non-resort guests) to the site called Flag Pole. I watched a couple of video clips on their website and now want to dive there to photograph their cloud sponge gardens! Ron ad-

vises to bring a dive kayak though. Next trip...

For more information visit: [www.pacadventure.com](http://www.pacadventure.com) or [www.pleasantharbormarina.com](http://www.pleasantharbormarina.com). ■

rooftop seating."

One of the things I always like to ask local operator about their special segment of the diving world is if they have ever experienced any awe-inspiring encounters. Don answered, "Hard question, too many memories,

like my first yelloweye rockfish, first wolf-eel eggs, first six gill shark, and many special memories diving with new and old friends. But one dive in January of 2011 I sighted three six gill sharks on one dive!"

"Yes, yes?" I persisted.

"I was fortunate to see three six gills on one dive, the site however is at or just beyond recreational limits for depth so I hesitate to say much more. Over the years six gill sightings have not been uncom-

mon at several of our sites. If we wanted to name one site with the most sightings within recreational limits it would be Rosie's Ravine. We have also had sightings at Pualali Point, Rosie's, and Flagpole. Usually the most likely time to see them has been mid to late summer."

I was happy with my one-day dive charter in Hood Canal and plan to return in March when Ron and his group will spend two days exploring the area. I am excited to check out some of the other sites where I can also take my kayak out when not diving. The water is calm enough, at least where we were, paddleboards can also be enjoyed. Don has suggested other activities like a drive up the river valleys or a day hiking in the Olympic National Park.

Just last year I spent a couple of days hiking the Mt Townsend

trail and Hurricane Ridge where I was able to collect some breathtaking imagery of wildlife and scenic mountain views.

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cent blue bodies shimmered in the sunlight to the point I had to catch a few images of them.

### Upgrades, awesome tales and topside excursions

On the way back to the marina, after another cup of hot soup and a couple of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, Don said, "My wife Diane manages Pleasant Harbor Marina. Over the past few years upgrades included replace-

ment of old wooden/Styrofoam floats with composite docks, a new fuel dock, a new pool and hot tub for tenants, remodeled restrooms, showers and a laundry facility. We offer permanent and transient deep-water moorage for boats up to 120 feet. By mid-June we will complete replacement of our old main building with a new building where we will have a restaurant (we're famous for our pizza) and an upstairs pub with outdoor