

South Africa 2004

Planning for our holiday to South Africa started in 2002 when Reon, who runs Dive South (<http://www.divesouth.co.za/>) visited our BSAC club during his own holiday in the UK. The pictures he showed of the sort of tours and diving facilities which he could provide whetted appetites and I have to say that he delivered on all those promises when we finally went in March 2004. To set the scene a little, Dive South provide a fully escorted holiday and take care of all the accommodation, transport and diving cum sporting activities. For virtually the whole holiday they also provide all food and drink (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) so spending money was only needed for presents, souvenirs and the odd opportunity excursion. Dive South are also very flexible and we built our own itinerary based partly around their standard offerings but encompassing things that we particularly wanted to do. In our case it was further complicated by the fact that 2 of the party were only doing 14 days while the other two were doing 20 days. Getting to South Africa is easy with regular flights to Cape Town and Johannesburg but not cheap (the air fare alone costs as much as a week in the Red Sea) so it is worth trying to pack in as much as possible and not to concentrate solely on the diving.

We started in Cape Town, deliberately arriving a day early to get a chance to acclimatize and this gave us a chance to do Table Mountain and some retail therapy in the V&A complex where we also had a splendid dinner. This was in fact the only place where we paid for our own food but we found it remarkably good quality and very cheap. The next day Reon turned up with the transport drove us to Kleinbaai via Cape Point a farm near Stellenbosch where we had a wine tasting and lunch and numerous other places of interest. During the drive he gave a huge amount of background information about the new South Africa and this stood us in good stead for the remainder of the holiday. At Kleinbaai we did 2 days shark cage diving with the White Shark Diving company (<http://www.sharkcagediving.co.za/>). and stayed at the Great White House (<http://www.thegreatwhitehouse.co.za>) in Kleinbaai. Both are highly recommended and if you ever stay there, try to get involved in a drum session, fantastic fun. We were lucky enough to see a number of the Great Whites, not perhaps at their best as the visibility was not good but exciting. Next we went to Mosselbaai for a 3rd days cage diving. Regrettably this was cancelled due to strong winds but the ever resourceful Reon took us to the Congo caves a 5km complex full of the most fantastic stalagmites and stalagtites. They also have an adventure trail which is great fun even if a tight squeeze at times for my 15 stone frame. We stayed at the Old Post Office Tree Manor Hotel and tried ostrich in their restaurant for dinner. Rooms and food both very good as is the fish restaurant opposite the hotel. It was en route to Mosselbaai that we came across the Bungee jumping at Gouritz which one of our number tried. This wetted the appetite so en route to Port Elizabeth (PE) via the garden route, we stopped at the Bloukrans bridge which reputedly has the highest bungee jump in the world at 216m. Two of our number went temporarily insane and jumped. The other two did the official photography bit and thought they had escaped the madness.

We flew from PE to Durban where we were met by Reon's wife and partner Karin who was our hostess for the next 5 days. We stayed at the Dive South owned Kwamnandi Lodge at Umkomaas just south of Durban. This provides a range of rooms from back packer to full en-suite and meals as required (www.kwamnandi.co.za). They really make you feel part of the family and meals are often al-fresco cooked on the on an open fire (the Braai). While at Umkomaas we did 4 dives on Aliwal Shoal and 4 dives on Protea Banks. The diving facilities at Umkomaas are provided by Aliwal Dive Charters (<http://www.aliwalshoal.co.za/>) and are done from very large ribs carrying 10 divers comfortably; this was the standard type of boat for all our subsequent diving. Launching and recovery was an experience, the boats have to be maneuvered through strong surf and lifejackets are mandatory. Launch site is in the river about 5 minutes from the lodge and time to site is about 10 minutes. Aliwal Shoal is quite large and has loads of sites of which we did only 4 at depths from 14-28 metres. There are no walls or shallow reefs so dives tend to be 35-45mins max with deco stops mid water. The fish life was prolific including big rays including manta, morays and turtles with attractive rock formations hiding many types of shellfish and other smaller stuff. The viz was mostly good 10-15m, but it can be affected by muddy water from the Umkomaas river if it is in flood and the wind is northerly. March is not the right time for sharks at Aliwal and we did not see any.

Launching for Protea Banks is from Shelley Beach, which is about 45 minutes driving time from Umkomaas. Protea Banks is the place to see sharks and we were not disappointed though you have to be patient at times. These are typically 30m dives and often if open water but usually with phenomenal viz. Locally

they are rated as advanced dives and you do need to be confident and have good buoyancy control. We saw Zambezi and Tigers sharks and a cave where we found ragged tooth shark teeth but not actual sharks, a hammerhead would have been nice but they come later in the year. We also saw free swimming remoras and very big rays. On the return the boats are driven at high speed straight up the beach to avoid being swamped in the surf; adrenalin time again. Diving services for Protea were provided by African Dive Adventures (<http://www.cybercraft.co.za/dive/>). Returning from our dives at Protea, Reon kindly took us to Oribi gorge which houses an adventurous activity centre offering white and black water rafting, canoeing etc and what is reputedly the biggest gorge swing in the world with a 110m vertical drop. The other two members of the party now went insane and did the swing. Perhaps I should add at this point that the youngest member of the party was approaching 50 the oldest was well over 60, all old enough to know better. Incidentally, there is a crocodile farm about 5k from the Kwamnandi lodge. This is well worth a visit having far more to see than just crocodiles and in a beautiful setting.

The holiday now changed gear again and we packed the Landrover and acquired Stefan as our driver/guide for the remainder of our time. Three days were spent at the Hilltop lodge in Hluhluwe Game Park where we did the safari thing having spent a morning on St Lucia looking at hippos and crocs en route. Our lodge was excellent and provided full self catering facilities so with Stefan as cook we did not need to eat out the whole time we were there. The author is a veteran of many holidays to Kenya and this safari was top class and one of my personal highlights in SA. Sadly this was the point where 2 of our party had to return to the UK and they left for Johannesburg by road on day 15.

The other two were driven by Stefan via the Dumazulu village to Sodwana bay for 4 days of diving. Dumazulu is well worth a visit with lunch thrown in. Sodwana is not far from the Mozambique border and the difference from Aliwal is staggering. There are a number of sites all offering staggering fish life and exotic corals that rival the best the Red Sea can offer. We did 8 dives variously at 2 mile, 5 mile 7 mile and nine mile reefs. The viz was never less than 20m and often better, I took over 300 pictures plus some video on my digital camera and though a totally incompetent photographer, it was hard not to get some superb shots. We were lucky enough to find a small group, of ragged tooth sharks still in residence on ¼ mile reef and this was an experience to cherish. We dived with Triton Diving (<http://www.tritondiving.co.za>) who also ran the camp where we stayed. This is about 10k from the beach in a forest setting. The rooms are basically log huts and very simple but adequate though a mosquito net would have been appreciated. Self catering is the order of the day, the camp provides a large cooking area with full facilities and a bank of fridges to keep your food fresh. Excellent food shopping facilities are within 5k. Stefan did the catering and we ate like kings. We shared the communal loo's and shower facilities. Posher rooms with en-suite are available but personally I would settle for the basic log hut. The site offers a swimming pool as well. A visit to Lake Sibaya is a must while at Sodwana.

Finally we had to depart and face what is perhaps the only downside to the holiday, an 8-9 hour drive to Johannesburg for the flight home. It's a long way over indifferent roads initially and with little of interest. The normal Dive South holiday actually runs the opposite way too our trip and starts at Sodwana. In retrospect, this may be the better way to do it as the trip to the coast would probably seem more exciting at the beginning than at the end.

























