

# AFRICAN

> ALI WAL SHOAL, 7.00 AM. WE SIT ON THE EDGE OF THE RIB, FULLY KITTED UP AND READY TO ROLL BACKWARDS INTO THE WATER. BEHIND US, THE SEA'S STEELY SURFACE IS CHURNING, SLICED AND DICED BY THE KEEL SHAPED FINS OF SHARKS ATTRACTED BY THE BAIT. IT LOOKS FRENETIC AND FRIGHTENING, AND IT TAKES A FEW MOMENTS TO SUMMON THE COURAGE TO FALL BLINDLY BACKWARDS OVER THE SIDE...

: ALICE GRAINGER

Seemingly unaware of the awestruck divers in their midst, large grey reefs and oceanic black-tips swagger past with impressive grace, and with just a frisson of a reminder that they are here out of predatory curiosity. Light from above catches the definition along their perfectly evolved musculature as they shoulder through our streams of bubbles, appearing on the periphery of our masked vision with little warning. These sharks are bolshie and inquisitive animals, occasionally bumping us as they make their way to the bait bucket.

About 20 minutes into the dive, a shadow appears from below – a large silhouette circling cautiously beneath this activity near the surface. As it approaches, this new arrival dwarfs the boisterous black-tips and we can make out the distinctive dark stripes and blunt head that characterise this misunderstood member of the shark family; the tiger shark.

As she moves languidly towards the bait bucket, I am struck by how intelligent and serene this animal appears to be. With a restrained analysis this tiger moves in to tussle with the bait. She stays with the bucket for the remainder of the dive,

absorbing my attention so thoroughly that I forget all about her rowdy cousins, the oceanic black-tips.

With shark populations the world over on the verge of collapse, locations where one has the opportunity to see these iconic fish up close and in any great number are becoming rarer every day. For years much attention has been paid to the terrestrial Big Five, to their protection and celebration. Yet now, with many of our ocean ecosystems on the verge of collapse, finally the giants of the deep are also being granted a well-deserved place on the itinerary.

By virtue of their position along the migratory routes of the ocean's 'Big Five', South Africa and Mozambique can boast some of the world's best dive sites; sites which environmentally savvy tour operator, Nomad Adventure Tours, are now including as part of the quintessential African safari experience. This really is the stuff that bubble blowing dreams are made of – Nomad's Southern Africa Dive Tour package promises encounters with whale sharks, bulls, tigers, hammerheads, raggies and manta rays. With perhaps a whale or two thrown in for good measure!

Departing from Johannesburg in the early morning, we leave the city behind and head along the Panorama Route. The first few days are filled with wonderful terrestrial wildlife encounters as we explore the world renowned Kruger National Park, in search of the notorious 'Big Five'.

The diving begins in Praia Do Tofo, Mozambique. On the way out to the first dive site we stop over at the tantalisingly named Whale Shark Alley – a stretch of coast with a shallow sandy bottom, home to one of the world's largest populations of whale sharks. Cruising slowly across turquoise waters the guide scans the horizon looking for tell-tale shadows. In disbelief that I could be just a few short minutes away from this encounter the rib slows, and sure enough, not five metres

# SAFARI



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Left: Swimming with the whale sharks of Praia Do Tofo, Mozambique.  
Above: White rhinos of Hlane Royal National Park, Swaziland.  
Right: African elephants of Kruger National Park, South Africa.



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from the boat, a huge freckled zeppelin of a fish is cruising just below the surface. Awestruck, I fin towards the shark. She is easily seven metres long and swimming deceptively fast, her improbably spotted hide reflecting the halos of light refracted by the gentle waves above. Time stops, the encounter eternal in its significance.

The trip continues to present, at breathless pace, further incomparable experiences. That same day, Manta Reef provided the Technicolor backdrop for a train of 13 mantas, giant and reef. Hiding behind the lip of a pinnacle at 22 metres, surrounded by swirling schools of yellow

snapper and patrolling blue fin trevally, we watch the huge rays trailing each other through this year-round cleaning station; some form of silent communication irrefutable as they choreograph their way through the water column, cephalic fins furling and unfurling with inexplicable intent.

The next day is a photographer's paradise. The diversity is overwhelming and, snap happy, I bounce from one subject to the next – harlequin shrimp, torpedo rays, orangutan crabs and nudibranchs peppering the sea floor, all making it impossible to commit to too much shutter time with each rare and extraordinary discovery.

It's then back into our custom built and homely feeling Nomad adventure truck for the drive across the border into the Kingdom of Swaziland for two days of land based safari in Hlane Royal National Park, home to large rhino populations.

Moving down the coast into South Africa to Sodwana Bay we spend two days diving some of the most unique underwater topography I have ever seen. A vertical wall dropping from 25 to over 100 metres encrusted with corals and sponges and festooned with enormous gorgonians, giant coral trees giving the place the sense of a sub-marine forest. Out in the deep blue, we can see the dark shadows of great sharks closing in to investigate this intrusion from above. These are pelagic elasmobranchs – tigers and bulls – and for the remainder of the dive I keep one eye on the deep water



below, whilst making regular furtive glances back over my shoulder. Further along we drift through a labyrinthine reef formation of Romanesque towers and columns with resident groupers and eels playing sentinel, holding sway over this coralline metropolis.

Venturing further south we hit Protea Banks and the dive that has been playing on my mind since I decided to make this trip. This baited dive is designed to properly introduce divers to the infamous Zambezi shark. Otherwise known as bull sharks, these legends of the ocean are renowned as the fearless inhabitants of both fresh and saline waters.

The bait bucket is lowered into the water and after about half an hour the action begins and the Nomad guide calls us in to the water. In a flash, I find myself below the surface and thankfully right in the middle of our tight little huddle of divers. From this position, I can relax just enough to pay attention to the sharks and, heart in mouth, I watch as we are repeatedly circled by four very large bulls, clearly curious and clearly unafraid.

After this, the goofy raggies seem like pussy cats. At Northern Pinnacles we peer into the series of caves that these toothy sharks call home. An orthodontists' dream, raggies cannot help but display their uneven and menacing looking teeth, giving them a fearful appearance that belies their tranquil nature.

By this point we are all becoming quietly blasé about Southern Africa's sharks, but diving the Southern Pinnacles catapults us

right back to rapt esteem for these unbelievable fish. Coasting through the blue water parallel to the reef, we drift through a school of around 1000 scalloped hammerheads, all moving serenely together. The atmosphere here is in sharp contrast to the baited dives at Aliwal Shoal, with these creatures lazily carving through the water with hypnotic sweeps of their unlikely heads.

Towards the end of the dive we re-join the reef, looking for Billy Bob, a celebrity in these parts. He's is an overtly gregarious potato grouper who will insist on divers' attentions. The four humpback whales we had the privilege to snorkel with on the way home finished our perfect day.

The cold green waters of Gansbaai await us next and I once again forget to breathe as out of the murky water comes the most intimidating animal in the world. The Great White cruises up to the cage and watches us with her steely black eye. My heart pounds in my chest and I feel tears well as I finally come face to face with the most famous predator in the world. She is majestic and terrifying at the same time.

There are certain dive sites that those in the know speak of with reverence. Praia Do Tofo, Sodwana Bay, Protea Banks and

Aliwal Shoal are amongst them. The opportunity to dive these places is unspeakably precious, especially considering that these areas are amongst an ever decreasing number of locations where big sharks and rays can still be found in large numbers.

Nomad's South African Dive Safari is a must for any diver with a passion for the misunderstood giants of our oceans. With the addition of the fantastic land based safari and the amazing and informative conservation talks provided, Nomad Adventure Tours showed itself to be a superbly operated and conscientious group with a tour that was simply breathtaking. Fern Perry, creator and operator of this incredible tour is a knowledgeable guide, experienced diver and true shark fanatic. Her presence on this trip added true value to our experience and inspired us to go fiercely into the shark protection fray.

Perhaps it is only this kind of truly responsible tourism that can raise awareness, give these animals more value alive than dead and assist in setting an economic precedent for their conservation. I for one rate this Nomad tour as one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

*Top left: Up close and personal with the bull sharks of Protea Banks, South Africa.  
Bottom left: The bolshie boys, oceanic black tips of Aliwal Shoal.  
Below: Into the lion's den, Kruger National Park, South Africa.*



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