

## **Trip Report: Africa, 27<sup>th</sup> August – 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

*Rob Wilson*

The random nature of the Universe always puzzles me, some days you take a walk and at every crossroads of life you seem to turn down the wrong road and wind up in grief or sorrow. But then there are those events in life where you literally throw those pieces of jigsaw up in the air and by some crazy series of events all the pieces fall to the ground in their correct order and make a wonderful image, and that really sums up my magical trip to Africa, or "Afrika" in Afrikaans.

Diving really is something that brings people together from all over the world, and this is just how I met the lovely Tina de Villiers both of us infected with the same waterborne virus, both addicted to the ocean realm. Having seen some of her amazing pics from everywhere from Raja Ampat to Mozambique I knew she was someone that definitely knew her dive sites and really had an eye for something amazing, so sooner rather than later we decided that I should board a plane and get over to see her and explore Africa and the waters of South Africa.



Before you knew it I was in 42 degree weather traversing this vast country, and what an amazing place it is, one look left and your are in vast sugar cane plantations, next vast desert like plains, soon after Pineapple plantations, Banana plantations, orange and macadamian nuts plantations, mango's and I can go on.... within 10 mins you are watching the earth literally on fire as they burn off the dead grasses to make way for the rain fall and the fresh new green grass of revival.

We then headed through the incredible Kruger National park where we saw everything from Lions to Kudu-Bucks, and all in between. The park was just sensational, everywhere you looked there was creatures big and small. Some of the birds colours alone were sensational. We then had a bit of a stop over at a place called "Elephant whispers" and a 6 tonne elephants whisper is like a fog horn, Tina and I watched these magnificent creatures right up close, I even fed the Elephant. Next thing you know Tina had organised that we go for a bit of a safari on the Elephants back, I actually though she was joking until they motioned us towards the huge platform with the 6 tonne Elephant beside it. We were off...it was simply crazy...like sitting on top of a bus with square tyres as it drives about...an experience of a lifetime.

Our first trip had lead us through the Kruger National Park and then through Swaziland where the fiery sunset was the best I have seen anywhere in the world and then up to one of Africa's dive Mecca's Sodwana Bay famous for its fabulous offshore reefs, 2mile, 5mile, 7mile and 9mile.

We arrived at Reef Teach diving lodge, Sodwana Bay, owned by Brian & Corlia Ring, the first night late to rise early to delve into our first dive on Simons Reef, and for a Kiwi diver this was a bit of a shock. First thing was that I had never even heard of a "negative entry" and the second was I had no idea just how strong the currents were that the African people dive in, the currents are absolutely ripping through there, for that time of the year, and the storm that was going somewhere in the Atlantic

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ocean, the effects we got in the Indian ocean. Most parts of the year the vis is "as far as the eye can see" and the currents are not as strong. We dived Simons Reef, Bikini Reef and Antons Reef.

Anyway the "negative entry" ....that was a laugh, the 3-2-1 dive call was made and we all back flipped off the custom rib and into the water, I surface and give the puzzled skipper the traditional A/ok on the surface and then look around and there isn't another soul on the surface with me, "Huh!" I thought confused and dipped my mask into the absolutely crystal waters and look straight down to 27m and see everybody looking up at me, "Oops" I laughed and dumped my remaining air from my Halcyon wing and rocketed down to my buddy's side. She just smiled with her hazel eyes, and the first adventure began. (I was told later sorry.. we should have told you it was a "Negative Entry", I laughed.)



Now I have dived some amazing sites in the world but this was really something, literally "Fish for Africa" and some incredible visibility, the current on this first dive was strong but nothing to the dives to come where even the Sodwana Reefteach boss Brian Ring said the currents were unusually strong, however Brian loves the strong current as the current brings a lot of fish to the party. And finning through this incredible blue the fish were everywhere, many

of the species I was unfamiliar with apart from the huge schools of Blue Jack's and scores of big Barracuda that drift in their predatory mode mid water.

We saw many varieties of Morays, pink, white and black paperfishes, The beautiful Ribbon Eel, huge potato basses, lots of sharktooths laying around on the sand. and huge Rainbow Grouper and hundreds of vibrant coloured fish, and nudibranchs ( Tina's favourite) just washing around in the 22 degree water, my Tri-lam dry suit was just right with a t-shirt and 4th Element leggings, it was bliss. Hanging just above the thousands of year old coral reef and barely needing to frog kick we just skimmed along as the awesome underwater world washes past in a whirlwind of colours and amazing natural formations.

Watching Tina effortlessly glide to and fro in the current was impressive, this lady was no stranger to currents and diving, I have never seen a diver so committed to getting underwater pictures, she rocketed about and I followed and watched as she swept the ocean floor for interesting creatures and fish. She constantly pointed out amazing and new fish to me, everything from Unicorn Fish to huge turtles, nudibranchs and small see-through shrimps, that are barely the size of your thumb nail. Her eyes scanned the ocean floor and missed nothing.



In fact while Tina and I watched one of the huge turtles we gasped in awe as we saw why it was suddenly deciding to hit high gear and run for it. "Why?" you ask, .... it was being chased by a 5m Tiger Shark which swam right towards Tina and myself, the Tiger's teeth were bared, I was frozen as it swept its incredible tail and shot at us. Tina was no stranger to large sharks so simply outstretched her arms and kept snapping as the shark came within 3m of us, at this stage my SAC rate had gone from average to 0/litres per minute, I just watched as this majestic creature slid past us like an unwanted guest on a dance floor. In my head I was thinking.. "Err.... that's a big Tiger Shark".. tick, tick, tick...as my brain tried to get around what I was seeing, "Wow!!!! ... 4 meter Tiger Shark" Hell yeah, I think I

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was stunned by its might for at least 2-3mins, what a beautiful awesome creature, almost like a torpedo)



After that whatever I saw was just icing on an already incredible cake, and on the dives to come it did just that...icing for Africa! We saw everything from Leopard Rays to Blue Spotted Rays and Dolphins made their appearance, I must admit I have never seen a Shark in the water and it was beyond words, but there is nothing quite like watching a Dolphin swim, playing in circles within inches of your mask and literally smile at you and tear off again into the blue. Had I not been at my 5m safety stop I would have likely thought I was narc'd.

The diving just got better day by day and the currents just got stronger and stronger, it was incredible, I have never experienced drift diving like this. Sadly on our last day a cold upwelling came with the currents and dropped the vis down to almost Burnham Wharf, but being a Wellington Harbour Diver I was far from a stranger to low visibility, so it was just another day at the office.

The next few days the conditions worsened and the swells rose higher and higher, so we just sat back and enjoyed the warm Sodwana sun and decided to head for Mozambique a few days early for a taste of the diving there.

But that's another story...

Huge thanks to Tina de Villiers (see you soon in NZ)