



THE SHARKS OF ALIWAL SHOAL

Blacktip sharks have become one of the pre-eminent species around Aliwal Shoal, and the team from Frogfish Photography look at the changing behaviour of this awesome animal

Photographs by NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN





Adrenalin time as you get up close and personal



Safety freediver above a shark during a bait stem experience

“When there were what appeared to be 100 dorsal fins surrounding the boat, the skipper gave the word to backward roll into this seething mass of apex predator”

Just to the south of Durban in South Africa lies a small town called Rocky Bay. Several miles east of here is an underwater formation where the current wells up, bringing nutrients in the cooler water. It is here that Blue Wilderness - founded by Mark Addison, one of South Africa’s leading exponents of shark conservation, and now run by Ryan Johnson and his team - operates for both research, the media and for tourism. The large blacktip sharks in this area have undergone something of a major behavioural change over the past few years. These animals are naturally solitary beings, but in this area large numbers of them have aggregated into a single shoal. The other strange aspect of this behaviour is that they are all female and there is a clear social structure among them. There is one large female who is clearly the alpha. All the other sharks in this

pack can be observed giving way to her. What has actually caused this behavioural change among these magnificent animals is not entirely understood, but it is quite possible that the regular chumming of the blacktip sharks for photo-tourism by the several operators who work this part of the coastline has contributed to this phenomenon. There is also a lot of evidence to suggest that the huge number of game-fishing boats that operate here have encouraged the sharks to follow the fishing boats and grab the catch from the lines. It is most likely that there are other factors too, but these crafty female blacktip sharks have certainly learned how to enjoy a cheap dinner.

Whatever the reasons for this aggregation of two-metre-plus blacktip sharks, it makes for spectacular diving with large numbers of magnificent predators. If you are lucky and the conditions are right, you may find a tiger shark or even a bull shark entering the melee to see what is happening.

If you have never dived with schooling sharks in South Africa before, then this as a first experience could probably be described as ‘a leap of faith’. First up is the launch. The large RIBs are launched from the beach by a tractor with a long pole on the end



Boat launches South Africa style can be hairy!

that pushes you out into the surf, where the waves may be 4-5m. The RIB captains here really earn their crusts as one wrong move can very easily flip the boat, and there are usually several thousand pounds worth of cameras on board. The RIBs have straps on the floor for your feet and you hang on to the handles and stringers along the side for all you are worth. Once you are out past the surf line the seas generally calm down, however, to get past the surf involves





Fishing line trails from this shark's mouth



A shiver of sharks under the boat



Sharks in formation



several somewhat exciting moments as the captain looks for the gaps, or 'gates', in the surf lines. When he sees a gap, the powerful twin motors on the back are gunned and you head for that gap at full pelt. You may not realise that the captain has already seen the 'gate' on the next wave heading towards the shore, and if that closes, you run away very quickly. These guys are really good and the chance of a mishap occurring is slim, but should you choose to go to South Africa to dive off the southeast coast, then make sure you're comfortable with the operator you have chosen.

Once you have cleared the surf lines, it is a relatively flat ride as the RIB hydroplanes across the waves. All the same, it is not for the faint-hearted. It is fast and furious and you are hanging on with your feet in the stirrups for some time before you reach a suitable chumming site off Aliwal Shoal.

Once you have arrived at the site, you can relax and start to get excited at the thought of diving with 40-60 two-metre black-tip sharks. The first thing that happens now is that the boat is anchored up and chum, which is broken-up sardine or mackerel, is thrown into the water. Because the boat is anchored, the current carries a fish oil slick along the surface and within a few minutes, the slick is over 100 metres long. It seems like an age before anything else happens, but usually within 40 minutes or so, you will see those familiar bronze dorsal fins creating a wake as they cruise around the RIB seeking the source of the fish oil. At this point it is time to start donning your scuba gear, but you will not be entering the water just yet. Blue Wilderness had a washing machine drum filled with sardines which was attached to a large buoy by a ten-metre line. He threw this over the side attached by a tagline to the anchor line and we waited some more. The dive boat comes off anchor and now drifts along with the current. When there were what appeared to be 100 dorsal fins





WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...



SOUTH AFRICA

HOW TO GET THERE

You can fly into Durban and then it is a short drive, less than an hour, to get to the Rocky Bay area. This is the best location to stay to visit the sharks of Aliwal Shoal, with short boat rides out to the dive sites and shark dives too.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

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ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

If you have a British passport then you will not need a visa, but you will need to have 2 free pages and at least 6 months left on your passport on the day you travel.

CURRENCY

Rand (£1 = 17.611 ZAR).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

In South Africa, this should really be titled Where to Eat & Meet! They love their meat here and we were treated to a great BBQ on a couple of evenings. You can eat at your resort restaurant or venture into nearby Scottburgh for a wider choice of bars and restaurants.

VERDICT

This is a high adrenalin experience of a lifetime that gets you up close with a shiver of apex predators underwater. With a great choice of land safaris, the sardine run and great white sharks that can be added on to the trip. Make sure you spend as long as possible in this amazing country.

It is up to the diver how close they want to get!



"Diving in South Africa with the right people in the right places is an unsurpassable experience for divers and underwater photographers alike"

surrounding the boat, the skipper gave the word to backward roll into this seething mass of apex predator. For those who've never done this, it is a leap of faith, but one that is so worth it. You use a negative-entry technique so that you can immediately drop down to be looking up at the circling sharks. If you have a camera and you are there to take images, then all you have to do is wait. Most operators use a diver or a freediver to pull the sardines from the drum and, at the same time, the captain or one of the crew will steadily throw sardines into the water to keep sharks interested.

Whether you have a camera or not, the best plan now is to try and line yourself up so you get to see the shark coming at you head on. It is certainly easy to do if you have a camera with strobes, as the high-pitched recharging noise the strobe makes seems to attract the sharks. I'm not sure whether this is because they like the noise or that they dislike it, but both Caroline and I had our strobes grabbed on several occasions by these inquisitive, magnificent animals and even had to nudge one on the side to encourage it to release it. It is all very exciting. One of the main points to bear in mind if you are planning on taking images is, when you are lining-up your shot, you need to try and keep the sun behind you. If you are not on wide-angle with strobes, then you will need to set a high shutter speed. Another great dive and photo opportunity is to dive the nearby Proteus Banks, where the raggies hang out

with their toothy grins.

If you are looking to holiday in South Africa, there is a host of other underwater photography experiences, including great white cage diving and seal colonies near Cape Town, or reef diving further north at Sodwana Bay. It also offers wonderful safari trips to experience some of the wildlife above the waves, and around June there is the opportunity of 'the greatest shoal on Earth', the Sardine Run. In summary, South Africa is a fabulous place for the photography trip of a lifetime. We had an amazing time, but having done it, what would be our advice to anyone wishing to follow our experience? Firstly, I strongly advise that you select a reputable tour company and guides. Get recommendations from people you know who have been there, and this will help to give you the peace of mind that goes with it. Above all, get fit! All the boat diving is from RIBs, with challenging surf launches and big seas that can take it out of you. If you are lucky then your boat rides to the dive sites will be interrupted by snorkelling with whales, dolphins, manta rays and whalesharks, which combined with underwater photography can get very tiring. Also, get some time in at your local swimming pool to try and improve your freediving skills. This will help you to get the most from your large animal encounters. Diving in South Africa with the right people in the right places is an unsurpassable experience for divers and underwater photographers alike. ■