

Going BIG

Being rather a fanatic about both underwater and topside wildlife photography, I've managed to do some fair wandering around southern Africa over the years, where both pursuits are world-class, and often very close together – rather a 'where safari meets the waterline' kind of place. And, when you get the chance to combine the two pleasures into easily organized trips, it's something special, indeed. I tend to use Johannesburg as the centre-point, driving to dive destinations in Mozambique and Durban, South Africa, and with an easy flight to Botswana, all which provide unique big-animal diving and big-game photography.

PONTA DO OURO, MOZAMBIQUE

With a favourite African ocean-diving destination being Ponta do Ouro, Mozambique, an incredible dive/game park travel experience is simple to organize - fly into Johannesburg, rent a four-wheel drive vehicle, grab a map and head north-east.

Over the 700km journey, you can spend a couple of side-trip days in South Africa's Kruger Park, with its incredible host of lions, leopards, cape buffalo, rhinos,

elephants and all the rest. Travelling on, after passing through beautiful scenery and remote villages, you can spend another couple of days at coast-side iSimangaliso Wetlands Park, with its lakes, bayous and rivers entering the sea, where elephants, hippos and other marshland species abound. The last leg takes you into Mozambique, with its rolling, sandy grasslands and its own incredible game parks, such as Gorongosa – known as a place to spot 'the big five' – and Limpopo.

You'll meet the sea at your final destination, the village of Ponta do Ouro – 'Ponta', as it is familiarly called by South Africans – along the curving, sandy beaches of the Mozambique Channel, just north of the South African border. It's what lays offshore that makes this secluded spot so amazing. The sea here, after all, is the warm, Indian Ocean, with all the exotic life one would imagine, with swarms of schooling fish and colourful reefs covered in hard and soft corals, sponges and gorgonians. And, out a few kilometres where much of the diving takes place, the water is also Indian Ocean-clear, with vis of 25 metres and more.

As enjoyable as all that is, it's what's on the big end of the life spectrum that makes this place so special... like sharks – Zambezi (bull sharks), silvertips, whalesharks, hammerheads and the occasional tiger, plus turtles, mantas, eagle rays and, on the bottom, huge blotched rays. If that isn't enough, there is a resident pod of Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins commonly seen just off the beach (who aren't shy of snorkellers) and, from May through November, migrating humpback and southern right whales can be watched offshore. ▶

An avid topside photographer as well as underwater shooter, Al Hornsby is a regular visitor to Africa – and here he waxes lyrical about Mozambique, South Africa and Botswana

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL HORNSBY

in Africa



Whaleshark



Manta ray



Blue-striped snapper



Tiger shark



Baby crocodile

“ The resulting footage was priceless – the shark’s open mouth and teeth over-filling the frame, with the accompanying soundtrack the shriek of those sharp teeth scoring the aluminum housing as it pulled away ”

Throughout my dives around Ponta, a special place called Pinnacles remains my favourite. Just a quick 3.5km ride out from the beach, Pinnacles is a collection of mounds that rises up from a 50m sand bottom, the shallowest top at 30m. It is action-central from the very beginning... huge schools of blue-striped snapper meander over the brightly-colored coral slopes, large honeycomb morays extend from crevices and huge, resident potato grouper – seemingly curious of divers – appear on cue as you reach the bottom.

Most exciting, however, especially from September through May, are the many sharks that can be seen. Lovely silvertip sharks usually show up first, and when you are lucky (we always were), large Zambezi sharks soon follow. In our dives here, we always had several, big Zambies hanging around, nearly three metres in length and nearly a metre across the snout. Not aggressive, but definitely not shy, they seemed interested in us, especially in photographers (and really-especially) our buddy with his large beta-cam system (as if the electronics were noticeable). On one dark, sunset dive, a particularly active Zambie bumped the cam’s dome port several times before opening wide and trying an exploratory bite. The resulting footage was priceless – the shark’s open mouth and teeth over-filling the frame, with the accompanying soundtrack the shriek of those sharp teeth scoring the aluminum housing as it pulled away.

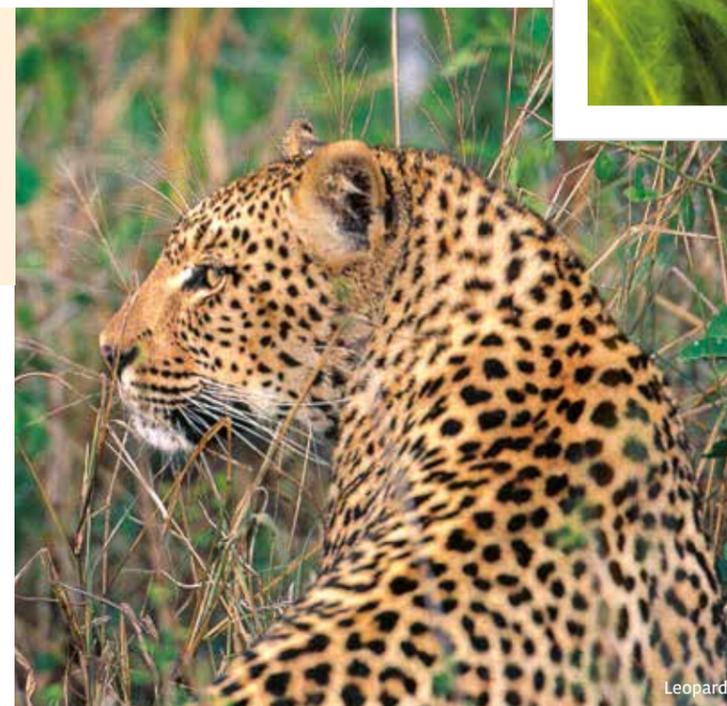
DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

Just 500km south of Johannesburg, the city of Durban enjoys both remarkable wildlife viewing, in the nearby Kwazulu-Natal Nature Reserve area, and exciting diving, especially at Aliwal Shoals, located just offshore, about a 50km drive to the south. In open water, the shoals have a maximum depth of 30m, with boulders, swim-throughs and coralline overhangs.

While it has lots of marine life, including dolphins and many species of fish, it is most known for sharks, especially large oceanic blacktips in the water column and ‘raggies’ (ragged-toothed sharks) and grey nurse sharks congregating around the bottom. But far more impressive at Aliwal are the large Zambezi sharks, tiger sharks and whalesharks; with even an occasional great white. And, when a feed-drum is added to the dive, things quickly become action-packed indeed.

I have never forgotten my first dive at Aliwal, a most unusual one, many years ago. As we motored out, the normally-blue sea began turning a perfect, pea-soup green hue. Our Divemaster said it was very unusual, but that a wind-shift the day before had caused an upwelling and the green water had come up; but, not to worry, that it cleared up upon reaching depth.

As we descended at the shoals, vis was no more than a metre, if that. We stuck close together, in order not to separate, being able to see nothing of our surroundings



Leopard

except impenetrable, deep-green colour. It was weird, heading down like this in a place we had never been before; past 10m, 15m, and more... at 20m, we broke through the underside of the murk, to find very clear water extending in every direction, and to the bottom some 10m further below us.

What we especially could then see were sharks, tens and tens of them, rapidly cutting in and out of the murky curtain, in every direction, mainly big blacktips and raggies. It was a sudden, remarkable sight after having seen nothing at all since we left the surface. The dive that followed was a great one, with as many sharks as I have seen anywhere.

Then, bottom-time expended, we headed up... I know we all paused as we reached the opaque, green boundary above us, watching the sharks cutting in and out, all around, at high speed. Then, it was into the murk, this time knowing full-well what was surrounding us, just metres (and less) away. I doubt history has ever recorded a closer-knit diver group on an ascent and deco stop... or more accidental tank bangs ever heard on a single dive. Further to Durban’s regular diving, don’t forget that it is also only a five-hour drive up the coast from South Africa’s famed, annual Sardine Run, which occurs in June-July each year.

THE OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA

The Okavango Delta in Botswana, Africa, known as one of the most-exciting wildlife and bird-watching locations on the planet, turns out to also be one of the most-fascinating diving locations conceivable. In July-August, the dry, winter season in Botswana, it’s the one time of year when you can dive with Nile crocodiles... the nights and water are cool, slowing their activity; the water is not muddy, clear enough for image-making; the previous season’s young crocs have moved away from protective mothers; and it’s not quite mating season yet, so the males are at their least-aggressive (for big crocodiles, anyway) – at least, that’s the story.

Imagine spending your days in a small boat, travelling along the delta’s central river and hundreds of small tributaries, the banks lined with tall stands of papyrus, cane and arching trees; sandbars and grassy banks here and there. As you move, searching, you pass birds by the thousands - African fish eagles, kingfishers, storks, bee-eaters, egrets, herons... ▶

the sightings go on and on. And there are big animals as well, including elephants, hippos, antelopes, buffalo and many more. Then, you spot what you have been looking for – a four-metre-long Nile crocodile, basking in the sun at river's edge. At your boat's approach, it slides into the water, disappearing from sight. You watch carefully to see which direction it heads then, out at mid-stream, three divers - two guides and you, the photographer - back-roll simultaneously and go straight to the bottom. There is no time spent on the surface when silhouette-hunting crocs are near.

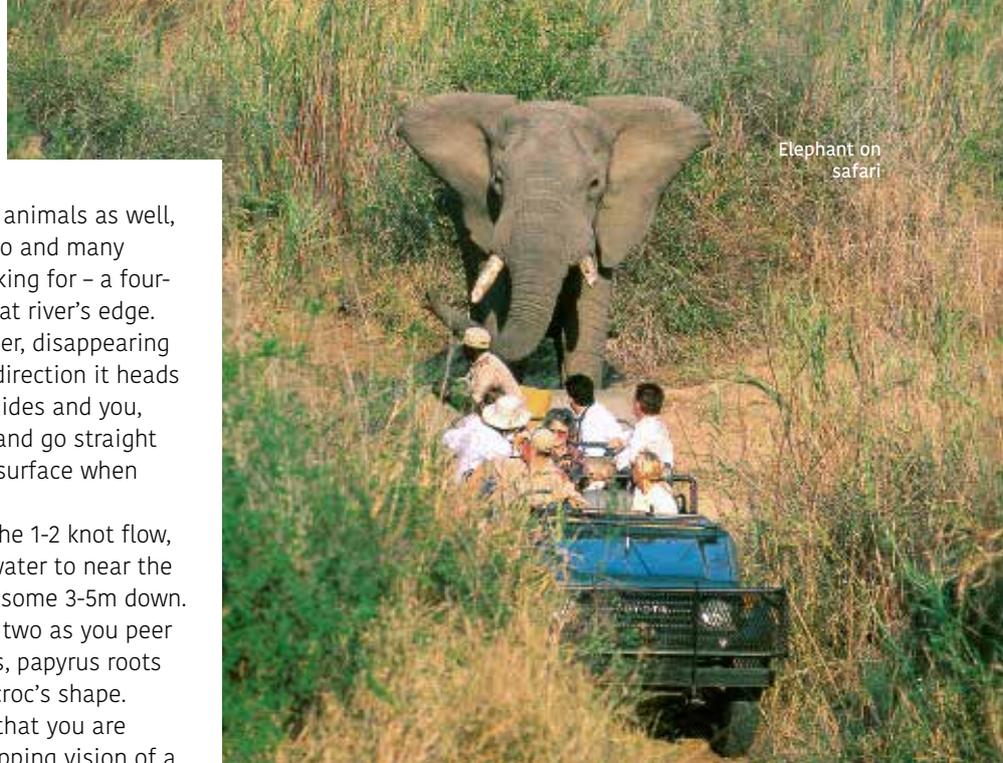
Slowing yourselves on the clay bottom in the 1-2 knot flow, you make your way through the 13 degree C water to near the bank, where the crocs will go to hide, usually some 3-5m down. The visibility is but a greenish body-length or two as you peer hard through the murk among the fallen trees, papyrus roots and irregular bottom terrain, searching for a croc's shape.

Suddenly, there's the startling realization that you are staring at the superbly camouflaged, jaw-dropping vision of a prehistoric creature, somehow right in front of you, huge on the bottom, its rough, leathery hide dinosaur-like, its glare-white teeth shining oddly in the gloom. With a four-meter length, it seems gigantic, the legs and feet oddly muscular and over-sized, toes spread to grip piercing, black claws into the bottom in the fast-moving current. The face is that of a cold, primitive predator, seemingly all jaws, with a dragon's yellow-slit eyes. The animal simply exudes strength and power. Oddly, on the occasions when one does allow you to approach closely, it sometimes seems fairly oblivious to your presence, permitting many minutes of image-making before it rockets away, with a sudden whip of its powerful tail.

Once the croc has moved on, or if you hadn't found one within 10-15 minutes, you move back out to mid-channel to about 6-10m of depth, where the boat moves in above you. Again simultaneously, the three of you take off your scuba gear at the bottom, ascend straight up under the 'shadow' of the boat (ahem, still no silhouettes allowed), hand up your cameras and equipment, and immediately pop over the side. There, grinning uncontrollably if you had found one, you catch your breath for just a moment... before starting the search for your next croc. Whew.

Averaging five to six dives a day under these circumstances is interesting of itself, but when combined with the incredible natural beauty of the environment; the utter electricity of photographing crocs underwater (and we saw crocs every day); the intense focus on the dive protocol (with the dramatic,

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Elephant on safari

potential ramifications of technique failure); and the sheer physicality of the long, diving days, this was a unique and unparalleled dive experience. Indeed, a high-adrenalin state was evident from the moment of awakening each morning until falling asleep each night, without surcease, and that ongoing thrill became a part of the very fabric of the adventure.

And, once a diving day was over, the exhilaration didn't really diminish. Most late afternoons, just at sunset, our second boat's captain, Bart Young, a well-known professional fishing guide, would quickly catch a few fish for photographing fish eagles - throwing a fish into the river under an eagle's tree-top roost was all it took for a wild, 60km per hour snatch to immediately occur in front of you. On some nights, we went out among the quiet tributaries with lights, and spotting the orange-glow of crocs' eyes, learned the special technique for catching baby crocs by hand (and, don't worry - they are fierce, tough little guys, and after being examined and photographed, they were released, completely unharmed).

Plus, every chilly night, there was a great, safari-style dinner, followed by drinking and croc stories around the ever-burning campfire, all under the incredible blaze and swirl of millions of southern stars hanging just above us in the clear, utter-blackness of an African night. ■

FACE TO FACE

Face to Face – Up Close with Mother Nature is a collection of Al Hornsby's most-exciting underwater and topside wildlife encounters, as captured through his camera and words. With forwards by two longtime friends and dive buddies, Jean-Michel Cousteau and Amos Nachoum, the colour and B&W images feature sharks, whales, crocodiles, grizzly bears, leopards, cobras and many more of nature's most lovely and exciting creatures. The accompanying text, Al's first-person impressions of the encounters that led to the images, share his feelings and emotions during those oft-times intense, face-to-face moments. Available at www.alhornsbyproductions.com

