



Super Seven by Peter Pinnock



The Kwazulu-Natal coast has become a popular diving destination for

enthusiasts from around the world. It offers a variety of colourful reefs, wrecks and a stunning variety of sea-life. The warm Agulhas current that flows down the Kwazulu-Natal coast allows the worlds southern-most tropical reefs to flourish, with water temperature that seldom drop below 20°C, summer or winter.



The most popular dive site is Sodwana Bay. Sodwana, meaning "little one on its own" in Zulu, attracts divers all year round to its rich coral reefs and warm tropical water. Years ago it was only the adventurous diver and fisherman who undertook the journey to "Sordies". There were few facilities and the long and winding dirt road that led through the Maputaland bushes and forests to the coast was often a challenge to navigate. Over recent years a strong infrastructure has developed and a small community emerged. Hotels, restaurants and pubs sprouted from the Zululand hills. Tar roads now make Sodwana easily accessible and its popularity as a diving destination continues to grow. Over 35 000 divers visit the reefs of Sodwana Bay every

year.



The reefs at Sodwana run parallel to the shore and most are named after their distance from the launch site at Jesser Point: Quarter-Mile lies just beyond the surf launch and is a gathering place for ragged tooth sharks in the early summer months. Stringer reef is a small patch of reef that acts as a sanctuary for the large variety of juvenile fish that congregate there. Two-Mile is an extensive reef system that is over 2km long. This is the most popular reef with the local operators as it is a short boat ride from Jesser point. Two-Mile offers a huge variety of coral and fish life that can be spotted at

areas with interesting names like Antons, Four Buoy, Sponge or Chain Reef. Five-Mile boasts large and expansive areas of extremely delicate staghorn corals while Nine-Mile offers large caves and gullies to explore and perhaps a chance to spot the large pelagic fish that soar overhead.



The unimaginative names belie the beauty of these popular dive sites. Over 1200 species of fish have been identified at Sodwana Bay. Each reef can offer something different to the diver. But there is one very special reef - a reef that stands out above the rest with its dramatic reef formations and abundant marine life: Seven-Mile.



I have dived regularly on Seven-Mile and it has never failed to disappoint: Descending into a perfect sea we glide onto the northern drop-off of Seven-Mile. A myriad of brightly coloured fish hover above the reef. Sea goldies and damsels dart around the reef, going about their daily business of feeding and competing for space. Brightly coloured thistle corals cover the reef combining in a riot of colour, resembling underwater broccoli painted by Disneyland. Finning past vertical ledges and mushroom shaped rocks that rise out of the sandy bottom, a territorial potato bass eyes us carefully, not giving an inch when we approached closer. A sucker fish - best described as the hitchhiker of the open ocean - clings to its potato bass host. Firmly attached by the sucker on its forehead, the remora waits patiently for the bass to feed so that it may devour any leftovers.





Meter long whip corals sway gently in the underwater breeze, their minute polyps extracting microscopic nutrients from the water. Looking up I catch a glimpse of a school of silvery kingfish patrolling the open water in search of hidden prey. Their appearance causes a sudden flurry of activity by the smaller creatures below them. Predation is but one part of life's complex equation for the creatures of Seven-Mile, but often the violence is suspended as different species come together helping one another in acts of mutual benefits. We pause at a cleaning station to watch as an Emperor Angelfish hovers patiently as a cleaner wrasse scours its body removing bits of damaged skin and parasites. The exquisitely coloured angelfish leaves, well groomed and ready for a mate. Nearby a cleaner shrimp performs a death-defying act. Fearlessly it crawls into the open mouth of a moray eel in search of parasites.



Drifting with the current the reef opens up into a wide arena – an amphitheatre. Today the main performers are a school of brightly coloured yellow snappers. They gather together in a flourish of colour, dissolve and then gather again. Slowly they perform large sweeping pirouettes, oblivious of their strange audience. Below them a paperfish clings to the reef and watches them nonchalantly through glassy eyes. Like a leaf of paper, it is tossed around gently in the current. A leopard shark lies basking on a patch of sand. From above the warm Zululand sun pierces the water creating fingers of movement over its long spotted body. This shark is harmless, it feeds on mussels and crustaceans and is easily identified by its long tail which is almost half the length of its body.



Heading out to sea the reef is blanketed in an intricate architecture of soft corals and sponges, all competing for space on which to grow. An old female loggerhead turtle effortlessly glides past us, silently flying the underwater breeze. On land turtles are cumbersome and clumsy, but in the water they are surprisingly graceful. Perhaps she is waiting for nightfall to drag herself up the beach to lay her eggs – an arduous task that is the first step in bringing forth new blood that she will never see.





All too soon our air is finished and slowly we follow our bubbles to the surface. We watch as the reef turns to a dark shadow, a memory below our fins. Minutes later we surface onto an emerald ocean. Whispers of wind gently bob us up and down as we wait for the boat to pick us up.

I have been fortunate to have dived many fine reefs in oceans around the world. But on a good day, Seven-Mile with its rich reef and lavish fish life can compete with the best of them.

Info

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