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2010 - 1

It has been a long time since we last sat down to do a newsletter. Our sincerest apologies to all of you that have been waiting with bated breath for the next one. The ocean has been keeping us so busy, along with raggies that just do not want to leave Aliwal Shoal (more about that later).

We are in the middle of an incredible season as we speak. I don't quite remember summer being this hot and not even the north easterly winds or the south westerly winds seem to be able to cool it down much. Saying that though, we would all surely grumble if we were freezing cold, so best we just continue with the fans, shorts and sandals and keep quiet.

We would like to thank the many new diving faces that have joined us, especially over the December period. We had a bumper December and it was loads of fun. To all of you, it has been great to meet you and to dive with you and hope to see you again soon. To all our regular "friends" that have been diving with us, it has been wonderful to spend time with you again and we look forward to more amazing dives and sightings with you on the boat.



Paper fish : Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona



Banded Pipefish : Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona

DIVE CONDITIONS - DIVE SITE NEWS - SIGHTINGS

Diving of late has been fun as it has been slightly unpredictable whereby the viz would change from one dive to another, along with the current speed. Saying this, we don't listen to what the report backs are these days from other divers and we prefer to make our own judgement calls on what the viz and current speed is doing as most have different perceptions of viz and current strength. We have had certain dives where we expected a howling current, to find that we can move just about anywhere. Or we have expected 8m viz to find at least 15m and in places 20m. This is always a standard joke in the industry and we do use it as a gauge, but don't take it seriously until we are out there ourselves.

We have had incredible dives of late and have been visiting the following sites frequently:

Raggie Cave
Shark alley
Cathedral
South sands
North sands
Inside edge
Outside edge
Chunnel
Pinnacles



Anchor The Produce wreck

On a recent dive to the Produce wreck, this must rate as one of our best dives ever to the wreck. We had at least 30m viz with a moderate S – N current. The current was diveable but was border line for the wreck. Needless to say, we had an absolutely amazing dive here. The entire wreck was visible to us, with the port holes, ropes and various other hugely interesting pieces that wrecks have to offer. We could see right out across the sand and watched fascinated as all the fish life went about their business. Truly a stunning dive!!

We have spent a lot of time at Raggie Cave, Cathedral and Chunnel, observing the ragged tooth sharks that have again, for the 2nd year in a row, remained on Aliwal Shoal. (More about this under conservation & research section).

On a few visits to Cathedral, the raggies were not present and divers were able to scout for shark teeth. We found teeth buried under the sand, some small teeth and some huge teeth. We found teeth within the cave section and also out in the open. We found a massive potato bass at a cleaning station on the ridge at Cathedral and this was fascinating to film.

The tiny domino fish that are living in the gorgonian corals constantly are an underwater photographer's dream. From time to time we will spot hawkfish there too, although more shy than the little domino fish.

On one dive, as we were leaving Cathedral, we spotted an enormous manta ray, which circled us and then disappeared again. It was, by far, the largest manta ray that I had seen to date.

Raggie Cave has produced lovely paperfish, yellow and white in colour. We have also had between 2 – 8 raggies in the cave and these numbers change daily as they are constantly moving around on the reef and visiting some of their other favourite spots. Lots of raggy scorpionfish in this area and lots of nudibranch sightings too.

Chunnel has 5 raggies at present, along with a beautiful banded pipefish that has had its share of being photographed by us, but still puts in an appearance, much to our delight. On a recent dive here we were lucky enough to spot a free swimming honeycomb moray eel that was not small by any means.

As it anxiously poked this way and that to find a hide-hole, we watched in fascination as it just floated across the reef, this way and that, until it found the spot of choice and quickly disappeared.

On a recent drift dive from Raggie Cave down towards south sands and beyond (yup almost a 1km drift on this day) we spotted no less than 30 juvenile manta rays. It was an amazing sight to see. On top of this, we had 2 tiger sharks on this drift dive and a blacktip come and pay us a visit. Wow was all that we could say!!!!!!!

On another drift dive in the opposite direction, from Raggie Cave up towards the Pinnacles, on this day the weather was a bit upside down so we avoided the Pinnacles completely and towards the end of the dive I had the divers swim out to sea so that the boat could avoid collecting us on the Pinnacles, which is a very shallow reef and has caused the demise of the likes of The Produce. We found 8 scalloped hammerheads all swimming near the surface. We were so excited we could not begin to imagine our luck at finding them here.

At Inside Edge, we heard a lot of dolphin clicking sounds and started to turn around madly to see where they were, as you all know that sound travels faster underwater than it does on land.

We turned to witness 8 bottle nose dolphins bobbing their heads at us and cruising north. Some divers were not in time to see this as the dolphins were in a hurry to move off, but others caught all the action and it was a very excited bunch that surfaced to tell the story to the others that had their heads inside caves and missed it all.

Hawksbill, green and loggerhead turtles have been a regular sighting of late and have made spectacular photo models for photographers as they have been totally unaware of our presence and have carried on eating, or just floating across the reef.



At the end of a spectacular dive on a northern drift up towards Pinnacles, we witnessed a massive shoal of pick handle barracuda, which is always an exceptional sighting as they appear unhurried and break out of the group to form smaller groups and then re-form again into one massive group. These barracuda are so special to watch as they effortlessly cruise midwater.

And then, as if all of these spectacular dives and sightings are not enough, on our way back from the reef, as we were about to stop to check fuel levels, we spotted a whale shark. Just as we were getting hugely excited about this, we spotted another one, about 1m behind the first one. And then, wait for it.....as if we could not be any happier, a manta ray put in an appearance in the same zone. How often does this ever happen we ask???????? To us, never, but I am sure someone else will say that they had a sighting of all 3 within one vision of the eye at some spot around the world. To us though this was bliss and we could not stop chattering about this amazing encounter of 2 whale sharks appearing to swim one behind the other and then this manta ray to one side of them. Andrew (skipper) nearly fell off the boat with excitement, so when a skipper gets like this, you know that you have something special to report on!!!!!!



Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona



Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona

In a nutshell, Aliwal Shoal has produced some spectacular things for us recently and every dive in this special place is a new dive. You can do 2 dives in a day and no two dives will be the same. You can never ever snooze and not be observant on a dive, otherwise all this life will just pass you by and you will be none the wiser that you have missed such incredible sightings. **Thank you Mother Nature and thank you Aliwal Shoal.** No wonder you are rated up there as one of the top 10 dive sites in the world to dive!!!!!!

CONSERVATION & RESEARCH NEWS

We have taught a few Ragged tooth shark, Tiger shark & blacktip shark awareness courses of late and the education has been incredibly well received by these "student shark" divers.

From a research point, yes we promised we would talk about it more, we STILL have ragged tooth sharks out on the reef. This is the 2nd year in a row that we have had raggies remain behind when the bulk of them have moved off. At this point, the raggies are moving around quite a bit and on any dive you can see different numbers at different times. Currently we have 5 raggies at Chunnel, 2 males and 3 females. Of the 2 males, one is very juvenile in that you can just see the small claspers, whereas the other male is more mature and you can see the claspers easily. At Raggie Cave we have between 2 – 7 that appear, all are females and there is one large female here at present. Dives to Cathedral either present no raggies (on one day) to at least 2 raggies on other days. So we cannot confirm to divers that we will be able to enter Cathedral and scout for teeth until we get down there and find out whether there are still sharks present or not. Divers have also been seeing raggies as far down as Eel Skin and Howard's Castle, which means that they are moving around quite a bit but it also means that there is a substantial number still present in the area.



This is of huge interest to the scientist that we are working with on raggie research and he has no comment for this behaviour as to why they have not all moved off. All we can do is continue to monitor, photograph and document data and see what happens further.

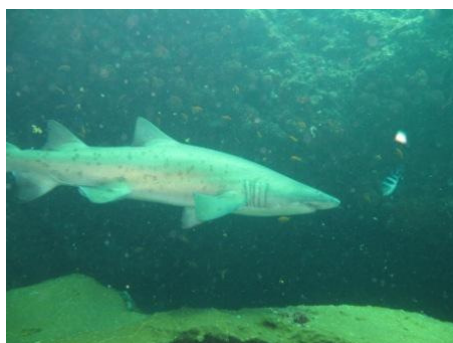


Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona



Photo courtesy of Franco Cremona

MOBILE DIVE TRIP REPORT BACK

We have recently returned from a 10 day mobile trip with clients to southern Mozambique and Rocktail Bay. It has been the best trip that we have ever done thus far. We had superb weather, outstanding diving and superior service all round. We spent 3 nights at Ponta d'Ouro and did 6 dives there. Each day we would do the Pinnacles in the morning to sight sharks, of which we got Hammerheads, Zambezi (Bull sharks) and on the 1st day we had one particular Bull shark that came in a few times to get a closer look. She had a cut off dorsal fin which made her easily identifiable. She came as close as she could on numerous occasions, making this deep dive an exciting one indeed. The 2nd dive of the day was a reef dive and we had great encounters with macro and larger specimens at Checkers, Aquarium & 3 Sisters. We must give a special thanks to our hosts for accommodation O Lar do Ouro, Janice & Terry, who made us feel so much at home that we did not want to leave. From our air-conditioned accommodation, absolutely amazing food, relaxing swimming pool, cosy pub environment, to the sundowners at the lake and our efficient transfers, this made our stay so enjoyable and hassle-free. Thanks ladies. To the staff at The Whaler Seaworld, Hilton, Louis, Trav, Enoch, Antonio, Carlito and the others, our dives were effortless, well organised and we were able to do whatever we wanted and at whatever time suited us. All dives were safely organised, well briefed and well executed, even with the 4 legged children joining us on the boat for an excursion, which made it feel like we were back at home. Well done to all of you for amazing dives and very special attention.

The next portion of our trip was to Rocktail Bay, an hour south of southern Mozambique. We stayed at the new Beach lodge accommodation and wow – we cannot express how utterly amazing this accommodation and place is. Having spent many years assisting in getting the diving up and going in this area, it was an incredibly nostalgic trip for me to make back here and dive reefs that I had helped to find and name so many years ago. We enjoyed incredible tented tree house accommodation with magnificent views of dense dunes, vegetation and ocean views. Service was excellent all round and meals mouth watering. Diving was exceptional. We did 5 dives in this magnificent place, diving Gogo's, Aerial, Pineapple, Yellow Fin Drop and Elusive. We had brilliant sightings of ghost pipe fish, harlequin shrimps, porcelain crabs, paper fish, nudibranches, white tip reef shark, potato bass, eels, a purple jelly fish, a massive crab hiding underneath a rock, round ribbon tail rays and an 8m whale shark on the last day.

If you have not been here, you are missing out on a truly beautiful place in paradise. An incredibly luxurious pool awaits you once you are away from the ocean for the day.

To top it all off, we were here for turtle hatchlings, turtle season being from October through to March, with the first few months being turtle nesting season and the last portion when the hatchlings come out and make their first steps to the ocean. We were lucky enough to see 2 loggerhead stragglers that had been left behind whilst their siblings had already made their way to the ocean. On top of this, gazing at the absolutely amazing sky and stars with no lights to detract from their brightness was a gift above all others.



Thanks to all at Rocktail Bay and more importantly, at Rocktail Bay Dive Centre (Mokarran Dive Charters) for an amazing time, amazing company, superior service and incredibly beautiful dives.

Our clients from Holland left with very sad hearts after the most memorable time of all. Frances & Rijk, we miss you already.

GENERAL

As we write this, we still have many summer months left, we are still in tiger shark & blacktip shark season and we have raggies here until the next stock arrive late May. So it is still sharks, sharks and sharks at Aliwal Shoal. Aside from this, we have outstanding macro stuff on the reefs to delight the avid photographers and of course, we have a lot of surprise sightings that pop in and out to keep us on our toes and stop us from just focusing on the reef.

Until next time, happy diving and take care.

Debbie

DIVING WITH SHARKS

