

## **Seen open water? I've lived it.**

The rubber duck motorboat bounced constantly over the large swells, nose reaching up to the sky and then crashing down, again and again. I clung to the handles on the side of the boat to stop from falling either into or out of the boat and looked back at the beach we had launched from to avoid getting a face full of wind.

The beach nestles under the towering beige concrete legs that carry the Old Main Road over the mouth of the uMkhomazi River as it flows into the ocean. The estuary was once a nursery for whales - hence it's Zulu name meaning 'the place of the cow whales'. The largest river on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast, the uMkhomazi springs to life just south of Giants Castle in the Drakensburg Mountain Range and journeys the 298km to the Indian Ocean.

Here at the river mouth the small seaside town of Umkomaas sits on the south bank, a patch of suburbia edged up against the sea, surrounded by rolling green hills. Formed in 1861 when a harbor was built to export sugar, the town is now a popular seaside resort, especially for scuba divers and whale watchers.

Scuba diving was what had brought us to Umkomaas. From our first qualifying dives off the sweltering Mozambique coast, to exotic reefs in Malaysia, and the frigid waters of Knysna, my friends and I had several years of good dive stories behind us. But this trip was different. We were going to experience an exhilarating and terrifying new adventure at Aliwal Shoal Reef - shark diving without a cage.

After a long, bouncy ride, the boat finally came to a stop and dropped anchor near the reef. Then the usual business of kitting up began. The dive master handed each of us our scuba gear and we helped each other slip into the sleeveless jackets, turn on our air tanks and do the routine safety checks.

I had to stop periodically to take deep breathes of air and stare out at the horizon. When the boat rolls and bobs with the movement of the waves and currents I get very sea sick. The motion sickness tablets usually help, but this time, together with the nausea, my stomach was tensing and my heart pounding with angst. I was about to swim face to face with a group of sharks with no protection at all. I must be mad.

With goggles on and last checks of our air done, we took turns rolling backwards off the boat, hitting the water with a splash. Once in the water, I wiggled around to get myself the right way up, surfaced and checked to see where everyone else was. Seeing that we were all in the water I began my descent.

I swam down slowly, stopping occasionally to block my nose and blow air out so I could clear my ears of the pressure build up, the process known as equalizing. I also hovered in the water here and there, closing my eyes and taking long, deep meditation style breathes to calm my very jittery nerves.

The visibility was murky from the sand and debris churned up by the strong currents and choppy water, but I could see the reef reasonably clearly as I neared it. Aliwal Shoal is a rocky volcanic reef about five kilometers off the coast and around 12 meters down. It's almost 400 meters wide to the north, narrower to the south and spreads out towards the coast in a section known as the ridge.

It's a messy, uneven mix of flat, scraggy, sharp rock, layered and staggered, creating hundreds of dark holes, tunnels and hiding spots for a multitude of sea life. Random patches of sand break up the rock, which is dominated by dull purple hard corals, brownish orange sponges and some algae on the shallower edges. The dark and foreboding ridge arches up slowly, reaching towards the weak, dappled sunlight above.

I joined the rest of our group gliding idly around the reef, dispersing the variety of tropical and sub-tropical reef fish loitering about. The small yellow, black, white and silver Bengal Snappers mulled around in large groups and yellow and black triangle shaped Moorish Idols darted from place to place. Their bright yellows and deep blues bring a splash of colour, but do little to lift the gloomy, somewhat foreboding atmosphere.

A large dull red lobster cringes in a rock bed as I drift past. I head towards Raggie cave, a long, narrow indent caused by a rock overhang between the reef and seabed. This is where I expect to find the fearsome creatures I've come to see - Ragged-tooth sharks.

Ragged-tooth sharks, as they are aptly known in South Africa, are the large, ferocious looking sharks most commonly seen in aquariums around the world. Their metallic grey bullet shaped bodies, two meter length, and three rows of sharp, jagged triangular teeth, make them perfect for any horror movie. Between July and October they congregate amongst the rocks and caves of Aliwal Shoal to mate.

As I hovered just above the sea bed trying to get a peak into the cave shadows I noticed a movement out of the corner of my eye. My body stiffened and my heart began to beat faster. A large sleek silver torpedo was coming towards me. The hideous grin baring those rows and rows of teeth. The single small dead black eye boring into my soul. I froze. Time stood still. The only movement, the majestic monster inching slowly towards me.

Seeing him so close was both thrilling and terrifying. I suppressed an insane urge to reach out and stroke him. I welled with pride at how calm and collected I was. Later my friends would joke about how I was surrounded by a cloud of the bubbles from my rapidly accelerating breathing. Clearly I wasn't as calm as I'd thought.

The shark swam nonchalantly past me and out along the reef. Waking from my fear induced daze and looking around, I noticed there were about ten other Raggies swimming amongst us. At first everyone kept a nervous yet respectful distance from them. But as we got bolder our curiosity got the better of us and we came in for closer look at these marvelous beasts.

Despite their bulky and menacing appearance they are relatively docile. But even knowing this doesn't stop me from being constantly tense, always on edge, weary of what might happen next, as I admire their sleek form, white under bellies and reddish-brown spots scattered across their backs.

The time passes in an almost surreal haze – humans and sharks swimming around each other in an unnatural harmony. My angst induced rapid breathing has depleted my air more quickly than normal and the time quickly comes when I need to head back up to the boat. I signal to the dive

master and follow the bouy line to the welcoming sunlight above, stopping only at the three meter mark for my safety stop.

It's almost impossible to explain to someone who hasn't done scuba diving just how utterly, mind numbingly boring the safety stop is. For at least three minutes you have to float around the three meter mark while your body adjusts to the water pressure. If you don't you risk getting the bends from gases in the body releasing bubbles on depressurization.

There is absolutely nothing to do except look around the empty depths of the ocean and try and make an educated guess on how much time has passed. You're almost always wrong.

But this time was different. I was constantly aware of my small, lone figure flailing above a crowd of sharks, like a giant red 'M', beckoning to the predators of the deep, lunch is served!

After what felt like ten minutes but in reality was probably barely two, I couldn't take it anymore. Even the bends can't be as bad as this. I got myself organised and swam up to the surface, the wind and spray hitting my face and momentarily disorienting me. Holding onto the bouy I looked up to see where the boat was. There was nothing there.

I spun around to look behind me. Nothing. I spun around again. Still nothing. A gnawing panic started to rise up inside me. All around me as far as I could see was just water.

For a moment I didn't know what to do. This had never happened before. The boat is always supposed to be with the bouy. And there were other dive boats around. Where was everyone? And then several meters in front of me someone else surfaced. My panic started to subside. I wasn't alone anymore. And then she started to scream.

I recognized my friend Marita's voice immediately. But why was she screaming? Was it because the boat wasn't there or was it the sharks? My panic exploded. My mind was racing. What should I do?

And then from behind a large swell a dive boat appeared to pick Marita up. I probably should have tried that approach, I thought ruefully. It seems the screaming was because our boat wasn't there. They came over and picked me up as well and took us off to our boat. Our captain claimed he had seen a whale in the distance and went to have a closer look, leaving the bouy unattended. Very unprofessional.

While Marita and I released our nervous energy complaining vehemently about the boat not being there, the rest of our group surfaced and clambered into the boat. Then the relief of our successful adventure began to kick in as the adrenaline subsided and we joyfully shared our experiences as the boat took us back to land.