

Coral gardens and shark alleys – SA's best dive sites

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South Africa's coastlines are a dream destination for international divers looking for a variety of underwater adventures. With the warm Agulhas current from the Indian Ocean flowing down the eastern side of the southern-most point of the continent, and the cold Benguela current of the Atlantic Ocean on flowing up from the Antarctic, South Africa has all manner of dive sites to be explored.

Here are some of the most popular places to dive in the country.

Sodwana Bay

Located close to St Lucia on the east coast of South Africa, Sodwana Bay has a 50km reef that attracts close to 40 000 divers a year. Famously, the reefs have been named for how far they are situated from Jesser Point, which is a launch site – they are referred to as 2 Mile, 5 Mile, 7 Mile and 9 Mile. Diving conditions are warm, with the minimum temperature being 20 degrees Celsius in August and September each year.

Pregnant ragged-tooth sharks (or 'raggies') come in close to the beach in the summer months, and turtles nest along its shores, with eggs hatching from December to April under the safety of night. Some of diver's favourite spots along Sodwana's coastline are Raggie reef, Stringer reef, Wayne's World, Coral Gardens, Zambi Alley, Anton's, Ramsey and Hot Spot.

You are likely to encounter a huge variety of colourful marine life on your dives, with many species of Butterfly fish, ribbon-tails, trigger fish, Goldies and Devil Fire fish. There are also whale sharks, honeycomb and Guinea fowl moray eels, and white tip reef sharks in the area.

Aliwal Shoal

Named for the captain of the first ship to strike the reef, Aliwal Shoal is well-known for two things: sharks and ship wrecks. Located off the coast of Durban, Aliwal Shoal attracts thousands of divers every year who come to swim among the ragged-tooth sharks that live in

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abundance on the reef. Huge whale sharks are also quite common, as well as the dangerous Zambezi shark. This small reef has a maximum depth of 27m, and divers sometimes prefer a 5 to 7mm wetsuit in the colder months of the year.

The wreck of the MV Produce, which has lain on ocean floor here since the Seventies is in two pieces, simply referred to as the Bow and the Stern. Living in the wreck is a school of Brindle bass, which can reach size of up to 600kg each, as well as large manta rays. Divers also like to visit the Amphitheatre, the Cathedral, Castle Reef, Inside Ledge, Tiger Ledge and Cowrie sites on their Aliwal adventures.

Sardine Run

From May to July every year, sardines in their millions swim northwards up South Africa's coastline, sending coastal predators into a feeding frenzy. Enormous shoals of sardines are rounded up by bottlenose dolphins into 'bait balls', and whales, sharks, game fish and even birds attack this tightly packed sardines with gusto. Specialist dive operators can take you on an expedition where you can dive near a bait ball and see all the action up close. That's why the Sardine Run is jokingly referred to as 'the greatest shoal on earth'.

Cape Town

Often touted as being the place where the two oceans meet (the warm Indian and cold Atlantic), Cape Town has three launch sites for boat diving, as well as many sites that are accessible from the shore. The Cape coastline has wondrous kelp forests and ship wrecks. For instance, Smits Winkel Bay is a deep dive (up to 40m), and there are five wrecks clustered in this one location. Don't forget the shark cage diving in Gaansbaai – your chance to see a Great White up close!