

A DAY AT THE BEACH

By Graham Vivian Lancaster

My annual week's holiday at Sodwana Bay in Northern Zululand falls in winter, which is fine as ocean visibility is clearer without muddy rivers coming down in flood on up country downpours.

Being one of the top one hundred dive sites of the world there is never a bad dive and it is always a unique experience. Top instructors at the dive charter I use, know exactly where to find a special Nudibranch or a seahorse under the right conditions.

Buried deep in my tracksuit and our African winter, it was eleven and a half degrees inside the truck on the fifteenth of June 2011 as I stopped at the exit gate of the lodge. My annual week's car guard, Raymond, with a few others climbed on and made themselves comfortable on the back for the ride to the beach.

I stood between the bushes at the top of the dune with cold sand pushing up between my bare toes, admiring the magnificent expanse of deserted beach, and across the bay, with the ocean still tinted in pinks of the rising sun on the pewter waters. Foaming pink waves rolled to shore in photograph moments of early morning splendour.

Raymond and I lugged dive kit the short distance from the car park, down the dune to the gazebo on a cold desolate Sodwana Bay beach.

Raymond went off, ostensibly to watch the car, but to chat with his friends while I sat on the sand deep in thought, absorbing every moment of my isolation in the crisp salted air.

Slowly the beach began to show signs of life with tractors and four wheel drive trucks towing diving and fishing boats, and smiling Jeffrey loaded up with three large snap lid plastic boxes, peddling an assortment of delicious donuts he had baked the night before. Apple custard breakfast it was to be as Cathy arrived with a flask of scalding coffee.

Our truck arrived with 32% NITROX dive cylinders (oxygen enriched air for longer down time at depth) and we put our equipment together for loading onto the boat before standing round the undersea map for the briefing.

The launch was kind, visibility top to bottom through the blue water and we were soon kitting up about thirty three meters above Rooney's Reef. This had been my choice of dive as

I wanted to see sea horses again and even though the water was still a bit warm for them at twenty two degrees, there was always a chance of finding them in a cold thermocline.

“One, two, three go,” the skipper counted off and four SCUBA divers bailed backwards out of the dive duck.

Thousands of tiny bubbles rose as I went under and ‘free fell’ for the bottom, setting my watch and ensuring the dive computer was functioning.

We searched the tree ferns for the elusive little sea horses but there weren’t any.

There were magnificent Gas Flame Nudibranchs; deep violet bodies with golden ‘flames’ which I hadn’t seen before.

Two huge potato bass watched us from mid water with large judgemental eyes and then I suddenly became aware of something approaching from the distance, but couldn’t make out the wispy white outlines. Then I saw the oval mouth with a cephalic lobe on either side for channelling plankton.

The non-migratory Reef Manta Ray’s lobes are white on the inside, whereas the migratory Pelagic Manta Ray has black inside, grow much larger up to some seven point six meter wingspan and can reach one thousand three hundred kilograms.

Manta Rays are closely related to sharks, with a larger brain body mass and enjoy interaction with humans, which I was to experience for the first time in eighteen years of SCUBA diving.

The computer read 31.7 meters, with not much space to drop down as it came straight at me, so I just lay there absorbing the incredible sight of the \pm four meter wingspan with the tips curling up and down in easy ‘flight.’

Some five hundred kilograms of Reef Manta Ray rose above me, swimming through my bubbles as I turned on my side to watch them hitting its underside and rolling off. It turned behind, coming back overhead at less than five meters.

It was the first time I’ve been close enough to one, to see the unique individual spots on the under body and what an incredible and privileged sight it was as it swam back through my bubbles!

The Manta hovered around us at a distance throughout the forty three minute dive and there was no further thought of finding sea horses.

The magnificent fish rose slowly with us to our five meter safety stop and swam round us for the three minutes before dive computers confirmed safe ascent.

I watched with a sense, almost of bereavement that I might never experience such magnificence of the huge gentle fish again as it ‘flew’ gracefully back into the depths and couldn’t help thinking, there is so much we will never know of life, but there are times and privileges sprung on us that no amount of money can ever buy, nor repeat at will.

Bio:

South African Writers Circle Quill Award winning author and 2010 American Pushcart Poetry nominee, 2010 English Academy of Southern Africa poetry judge, 2011 English academy of Southern Africa Gold Medal proposal, he writes in ten genres from the many eclectic facets of his adventurous life. Widely published in anthologies, with thirty five published books of his own, his teenage adventure series and poetry are being taught in schools.

One of his poems was chosen to represent South Africa at the Dec 2010 World Poetry Festival in Canada.

Translated into Spanish, Romanian, Hindi and French, read on radio in Argentina and Puerto Rico. Published in *Fullosia Press, A Hudson View, Labyrinth, Convorbini Literare, Seventh Quarry Press, Nord Literar, Axiom, World Anthology Of Love Poetry, Crossroads Of The Century, Sailing Through The Mists Of Time, Across The Long Bridge, Journeys, Skyline.*