

# Inhambane's bigger Big 5

Who needs lions and buffalos? In the warm sea off the coast of the Inhambane Peninsula, you'll come face-to-face with some of the most majestic inhabitants of the sea.

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**T**here must be something in the water. While holidaymakers snooze under umbrellas on the beach at Tofo, the ocean at their feet is bustling with life. Due to a combination of geography, favourable currents and other factors that scientists are still investigating, marine behemoths simply love it here.

The passing traffic includes manta rays, whale sharks, humpback whales, leatherback turtles and even the rare, deep-water smalleye stingray. With a little luck, you can meet all of them!

Exclusivity is guaranteed. On an ocean safari or scuba dive you won't have to share your sighting with hundreds of other tourists like you do in Africa's terrestrial parks, and you certainly don't have to stay in a five-star lodge. The Tofo ocean experience is for everyone.

So come on, slap on a pair of fins and join us under the waves...

PICTURE FIONA AVERST

## **1** Whale shark

There's a high concentration of whale sharks in the waters off Inhambane Peninsula. No matter what time of the year you visit, you stand a good chance of seeing one. The name is confusing: It's not a whale, but a shark, the biggest in the world, yet it poses no threat to humans. It's a gentle filter feeder, sieving plankton and krill through its gills as it cruises along just below the surface.

Despite its enormous size (up to 12 m long and weighing 20 tonnes), scientists know very little about this fish. The Manta Ray & Whale Shark Research Centre at Tofo Beach (🌐 [www.marinemegafauna.org](http://www.marinemegafauna.org)), headed up by Dr Simon Pierce, aims to remedy this. Using satellite imagery and radio tags, Dr Pierce is tracking the movement of a number of whale sharks to aid in their conservation.

Swimming with a whale shark is an experience you'll never forget. On a good day, you have the chance of seeing up to five on an ocean safari. You may look as much as you like, but never touch one.

**DIFFICULTY RATING:** Medium. If you know you get seasick, you'll have a hard time on the boat. You need to be able to swim; and it's a great advantage if you can free-dive and hold your breath under water.



**Tim Bloemraad & Koen Boterman**  
On holiday from  
The Netherlands

"We did 12 dives with Tofo Scuba. They run a very professional operation and we would recommend them to anyone. We especially enjoyed diving at The Office – a coral reef with overhangs that form a series of caves. You see huge schools of fish there, plus turtles and manta rays, if you're lucky.

"While we waited on the boat after one of the dives, a pod of inquisitive dolphins surrounded us. We grabbed our snorkelling gear and spent a good 15 minutes swimming with them."





PICTURES: FIONA AYERST



**Joanne Friend-Smith**  
Dive instructor,  
Barra Dive

"Diving conditions are best from March to May. Easter gets a bit chaotic, though. In winter the water is cold (we instructors are sissies!), but the arrival of humpback whales makes up for it."

## 2 Manta ray

The sea off Inhambane Peninsula remains one of the best places in the world to scuba dive with manta rays, even though their numbers have shown a worrying decrease in recent years. What's a manta ray, you ask? Picture a giant underwater bird or a swimming pterodactyl with enormous triangular wings, gliding through the blue.

It's possible to catch a glimpse of a manta on an ocean safari, but you have better and longer interactions when you're scuba diving. There are two manta "cleaning stations" near Tofo, Manta Reef and The Office, where mantas cruise in to have parasites nibbled off their wings by a host of small fish.

Recently, in what was the ocean equivalent of discovering a new elephant, Tofo-based marine biologist Dr Andrea Marshall identified a new species of manta: the giant manta, with a wingspan measuring up to 7 m.

**DIFFICULTY RATING:** Advanced. The cleaning stations are relatively deep (25m+), so you need to have a PADI Advanced Scuba Diver qualification or similar to dive there.

## 3 Humpback whale

Worldwide, the population of humpback whales has bounced back to nearly 100,000 after years of whaling. They spend the summer months feeding in the Southern Ocean and migrate north to spend winters in the warm waters off Mozambique, where they nurse their newborns.

The distinctive nodules on their heads are known as "tubercles". Each has a hair protruding from its centre that acts as a sensor. Put your head underwater in winter and you're likely to hear the male humpback's complex song, which can last up to 20 minutes at a time.

Whales are often seen at close quarters on an ocean safari, but if the idea of bouncing around in a rubber duck sounds too strenuous, grab a pair of binoculars, order a sundowner and park yourself on a deck chair at Dino's Beach Bar or Bamboozi.

**DIFFICULTY RATING:** Easy.





#### 4 Smalleye stingray

Tofo is the only place in the world where the mysterious smalleye stingray has been seen alive, captured on film in 2009 by a film crew making a documentary about manta researcher Dr Andrea Marshall. Previously, this fish had only been documented when caught in fishing nets.

The largest of the stingray family, the smalleye can grow to more than 2m across and is thought to prefer deep water. Not much more is known about it.

Just another underwater monster that calls the reefs of Mozambique home...

**DIFFICULTY RATING.** The smalleye is not a whale shark. If you see one on a dive, you'll be incredibly lucky!

#### i Paradise under threat

The Inhambane Peninsula is a world-class dive destination, but it is under enormous environmental pressure. Overfishing is damaging the reefs, and commercial long-line fishing vessels operate just over the horizon with silent efficiency, far from tourists' eyes.

Sharks are indiscriminately hunted for their fins, which are exported to Asia; manta ray numbers are dwindling; and turtles, despite being protected under Mozambican law, are routinely poached.

If you want to help or to learn more about the conservation work being done on the Inhambane coast, visit [www.marine-mega-fauna.org](http://www.marine-mega-fauna.org), the website of the Foundation for the Protection of Marine Mega-fauna. Dr Andrea Marshall and Dr Simon Pierce conduct fascinating information sessions at Casa Barry in Tofo. To find out about the next session, visit [www.casabarry.com](http://www.casabarry.com).

#### 5 Marine turtle

Although they nest further south at Ponta do Ouro and Kosi Bay, marine turtles are regularly encountered on the reefs of the Inhambane Peninsula. Loggerhead and green turtles are most commonly seen, but 2011 saw a boom in leatherback sightings, too.

The critically endangered leatherback is the biggest marine turtle – it can grow

to more than 3 m in length. Individuals have been tracked swimming nearly 10 000 km between their nesting sites and foraging grounds, and diving to more than 1 000 m on a single breath.

You might see a turtle while snorkelling, but you're more likely to encounter one on a scuba dive.

**DIFFICULTY RATING.** Easy.



PICTURE AARON GEROSKI

## OCEAN ADVENTURE 101

#### Go on an ocean safari

The best way to see whale sharks and humpback whales is to go on an ocean safari, which is basically like a game drive on water. Lasting about two hours, its main aim is to spot whale sharks, dolphins and humpback whales (June to October).

You can snorkel with the whale sharks and dolphins, but boats are not allowed to approach the humpbacks, which is a good thing: a 16 m, 50 tonne breaching humpback will give you a worse headache than a Tipo Tinto hangover!

All of Inhambane's scuba diving operators offer ocean safaris. All snorkelling gear is provided.

**Cost:** Prices vary from Mt1500 (R430) per person to Mt1800 (R514) per person. Look for specials in season, when prices drop to as low as Mt1200 (R343) per person.

#### Book a dive

The scuba diving at Barra and Tofo is world class. Besides the chance of bumping into a manta, you're also likely to see turtles, white-tip reef sharks, anemone fish, Moorish idols, parrotfish, moray eels and beautiful hard and soft corals.

If a dive course is on your life list, this is a good place to do it. The water is warm and there's plenty to do on land when you're not finding Nemo.

**Cost:** Expect to pay about Mt2 000 (R570) per dive with equipment rental. It gets cheaper the more dives you book. A PADI Open Water Diver course that includes four sea dives costs about Mt18 000 (R5 143).

#### How to choose a dive operator

There are five main dive operators in and around Tofo and Barra, all offering similar diving experiences at similar prices. They all offer "ocean safaris", too, where you go snorkelling of swimming in the open sea.

How do you choose? Well, unless there's a blonde Swedish instructor who looks good in a wetsuit working for one of the operators, it doesn't matter. Choose the one that is closest to where you're staying. Here are all the details:

- **BARRA DIVE** (at Barra Lodge): ☎ 011 023 9901, 🌐 [www.barradiveresorts.com](http://www.barradiveresorts.com)
- **LIQUID ADVENTURES** (at Bamboozie Beach Lodge) ☎ 00 258 84 060 9218; 🌐 [www.liquidadventures.co.za](http://www.liquidadventures.co.za)
- **TOFO SCUBA** (next to Dino's Beach Bar, Tofo) ☎ 00 258 82 826 0140; 🌐 [www.tofoscuba.co.za](http://www.tofoscuba.co.za)
- **DIVERSITY SCUBA** (in Tofo itself) ☎ 00 258 82 468 5310; 🌐 [www.diversityscuba.co.za](http://www.diversityscuba.co.za)
- **PERI-PERI DIVERS** (next to Albatroz Lodge, Tofinho) ☎ 00 258 84 266 6885; 🌐 [www.peri-peridivers.com](http://www.peri-peridivers.com)



### Tips for underwater photography

**GET CLOSE.** Even the clearest water is full of little particles that can spoil a photograph. The closer you get, the less water there is between you and your subject and the greater the chance of a clear shot.

**LET THERE BE LIGHT.** The reason it looks blue or green underwater is because reds, yellows and oranges are absorbed in the first few metres. Greens and blues penetrate much deeper. Because of this, most underwater photographers dive with big flashes, called strobes, to bring back all the wonderful colours you find underwater. If you don't have a strobe, don't worry, just turn on your camera's built-in flash.

If you're snorkelling, shoot with the sun behind you to get the best colours.

**LOOK AFTER YOUR GEAR.** Salt water is a harsh environment for cameras. Always check the seals on your housing or camera before you jump in, and rinse your gear in fresh water afterwards.

PICTURE FIONA AVESHT