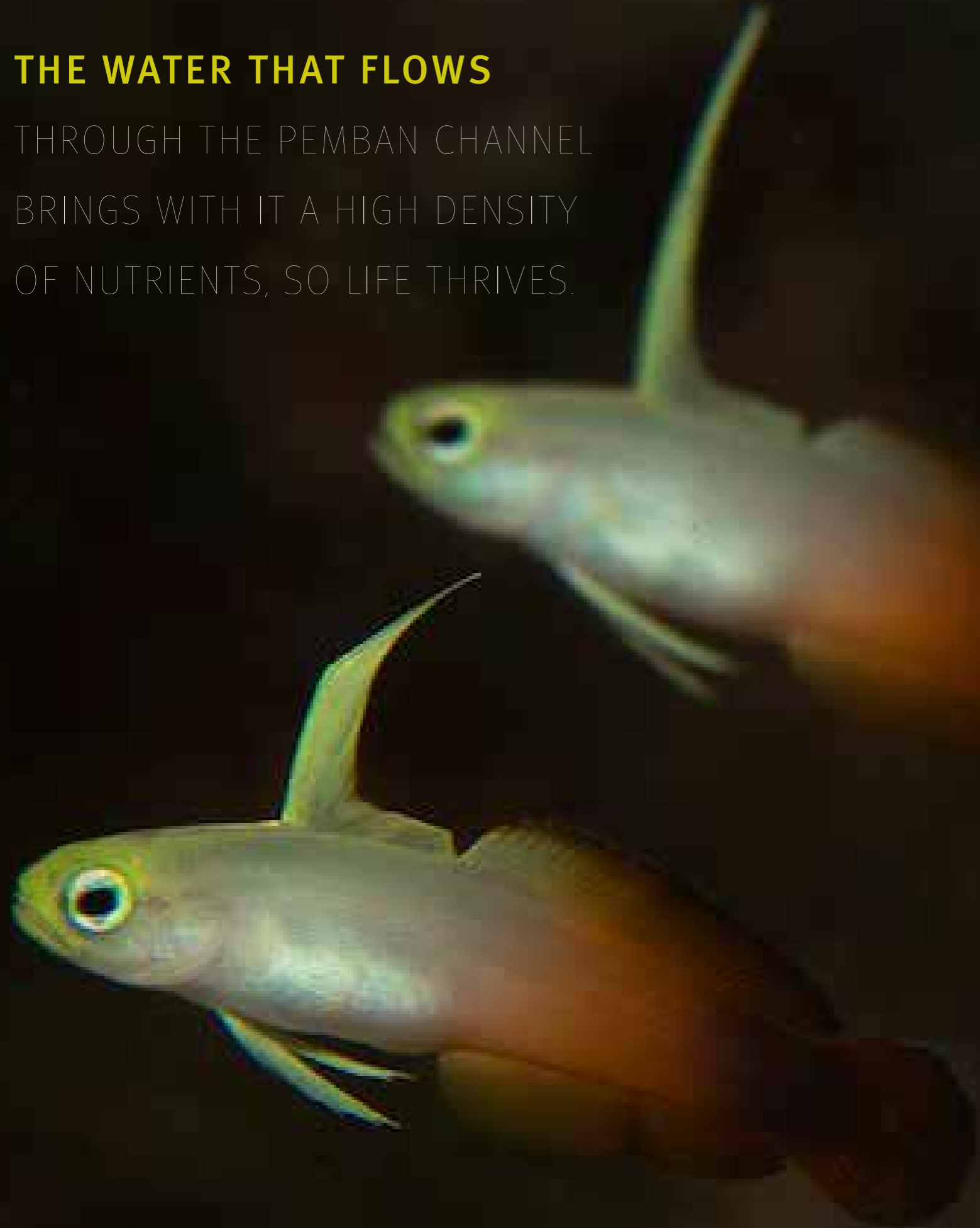


## THE WATER THAT FLOWS

THROUGH THE PEMBAN CHANNEL BRINGS WITH IT A HIGH DENSITY OF NUTRIENTS, SO LIFE THRIVES.



# GREAT WALLS OF PEMBA

Off the coast of Tanzania lies a dive experience like no other. **Aaron Gekoski** takes a plunge on the wild side.

PHOTOS & WORDS / **AARON GEKOSKI**

*Fire gobies are funny looking, almost like 'painted fingers'.*



**WE BREAK UP DIVING** WITH A VERY COOL, SPOOKY KAYAKING TRIP THROUGH THE MANGROVES. YOU GET THE FEELING THAT WITH ONE WRONG TURN YOU MIGHT NEVER FIND YOUR WAY OUT.



**I** m sitting in a stationary taxi, being stared down by an ox. Behind the stubborn beast is a toothless man, perched on a cart laden with coral rock. My feet twitch: it's an intriguing scene, but after an hour and a half's drive from the airport through forests and bumpy dirt roads, I'm itching to get down to business.

With the ox seemingly unwilling to budge, I reach for my camera to document the scene. The rider perks up and shouts gummy abuse at me in Swahili. It would appear that he doesn't want his photo taken: unless money changes hands first, of course.

In case I was under any illusions, Pemba is no ordinary dive destination. Although it lies just 50kms north of Unguja, its tourist-saturated neighbour, the difference between the two islands couldn't be starker. Despite having a landmass of 1,000km<sup>2</sup>, Pemba remains remarkably underdeveloped: there are only a handful of hotels on the island and very little in the way of infrastructure. Pemba has, in fact, evolved little in hundreds of years and I'm told that many of the island's half a million inhabitants would like it to stay that way.

### REINVENTING THE WHEEL

Beneath the waves, the contrasts continue. Pemba is all about strong currents and steep underwater walls, as opposed to cruising, shallow dives on Tinseltown reefs. One thing it does have in common with Zanzibar is over fishing. With a rapidly expanding population, most of whom live below the poverty line, locals remain heavily reliant on the ocean for protein. The use of dynamite, long lines, gill nets and spears means that the dive site Manta Point no longer contains mantas, the schools of pelagics are shrinking, and turtles are rarely seen. It's an all too familiar tale for Africa's vast coastline.

Pemba has adapted to these pressures and partly reinvented itself as a place where miniature life blossoms amongst great walls of coral. Thankfully, whilst I'm partial to big things – big fish, big hamburgers, big pay cheques and even the occasional big woman – I'm also a fan of macro photography. Everyone knows what a dolphin looks like, but what about a harlequin shrimp, a feather duster worm, or a dragon moray eel?

Instead of considering my choice of lenses, I need to focus on actually making it to the dive centre. After a couple of hefty slaps on its juicy looking bottom, the ox finally lumbers past, clearing the way to Swahili Divers.

### SWAHILI DIVERS

Swahili Divers is, without doubt, the most rural dive centre I have come across in my time working as an underwater journalist. The accompanying lodge, Kervan Saray has a slightly salty, wind swept feel to it. Whilst the dive centre itself is not without charm, it might benefit from a lick of paint here and a dab of cement there. We are, however, in deepest Africa - why pretend otherwise?

I'm met by the instructors - fellow Englishmen - Darren and Craig, an incredibly thorough and professional duo who have clocked over 6,000 dives between them. Over breakfast Darren pulls me aside to chat through the diving. The majority of dive sites, he explains, are concentrated in the gaps that separate Pemba from the tiny islands of Fundo and Njao.

There are 8 sites in each gap, some with walls that plunge down over 100m. Unlike Mafia and Zanzibar, Pemba is not part of the continental shelf. The water that flows through the Pemban Channel brings with it a high density of nutrients, so life thrives. It's these huge volumes that also account for visibility that can reach 50m on a good day.

Disappointingly, this isn't one of those days and the water at Njao Gap, a 15-minute ride away, looks ominously green. Darren kick starts proceedings at Trigger Wall, which contains a number of staggered coral plateaus, caves and tight swim-throughs.

After years of reading about them, I'm finally here, exploring Pemba's illustrious walls. Like a kid in a candy store I find myself at the

*OPPOSITE Instructor Darren paddles through the eery mangroves. BELOW The iridescent eye of a trumpetfish; A composite shot of a 'dancing' flatworm.*



## FISH SWAMP A LARGE OUTCROP

OF TABLE, WHIP AND BRAIN CORAL. FROM THE BANDED AND BEARDED, TO THE SPOTTED AND STRIPED, THEY'RE EVERYWHERE.



*Tony the trumpetfish, using a diver as cover to hunt.*

back of the group snapping various colourful treats. This means I'm the only one to witness a black and white shape contorting and dancing its way towards me: a flat worm in full flight.

Finally catching up with the group, I see Darren - regulator out, mask off - sporting a face full of white-banded cleaner shrimp. As we wind the dive up, he points to a whip coral goby. Just when I grab focus, this tiny, nippy, sneaky fish darts off to another part of the coral. It's a game of cat and mouse, which the cat eventually wins.

Our second dive is to Egger's Ascent. Here a brisk current eases us towards a steep slope that's lined with coral bommies. In the deep, gardens of cabbage coral await. But it's the third dive that really catches my attention. The site is, of course, called Aquarium. Fish swamp a large outcrop of table, whip and brain coral. From the banded and bearded, to the spotted and striped, they're everywhere. We see three leaf fish, unicorn fish, damsel fish, dusky cave sweepers, numerous juvenile grouper, pipefish and parrotfish.

And then there's Tony, the resident trumpetfish. Tony is an affable animal who uses divers as cover to hunt tasty morsels amongst the coral. A tame trumpetfish? I've never seen anything quite like it.

Along with all this I see a mantis shrimp who has built his lair out of coral, a clown shrimp that lives on a sticky anemone that retracts if touched (*not that divers should ever touch anything* - ed), some fast moving nembrothas (a species of sea slug), a couple of angry morays and lots more goodies I'm too excited about to even recall. It is, quite simply, the best macro dive I have ever done.

### BORN TO ANNOY

The only blot on an excellent first day's diving is the arrival of a rude and irritating Scotsman. When he's not complaining he talks incessantly about himself. He informs us when he's going to put his mask on (before a dive), what his bowel movements are like (loose), where he was on New Year's Eve, 1982 (Bangkok), and many other trivial details from the 65 or so years he's spent on Earth annoying people. The team collectively groans when we hear he's going to be with us for five more days.

We arrive back at the dive centre in desperate need of a sundowner on the gorgeous deck overlooking the Indian Ocean. As

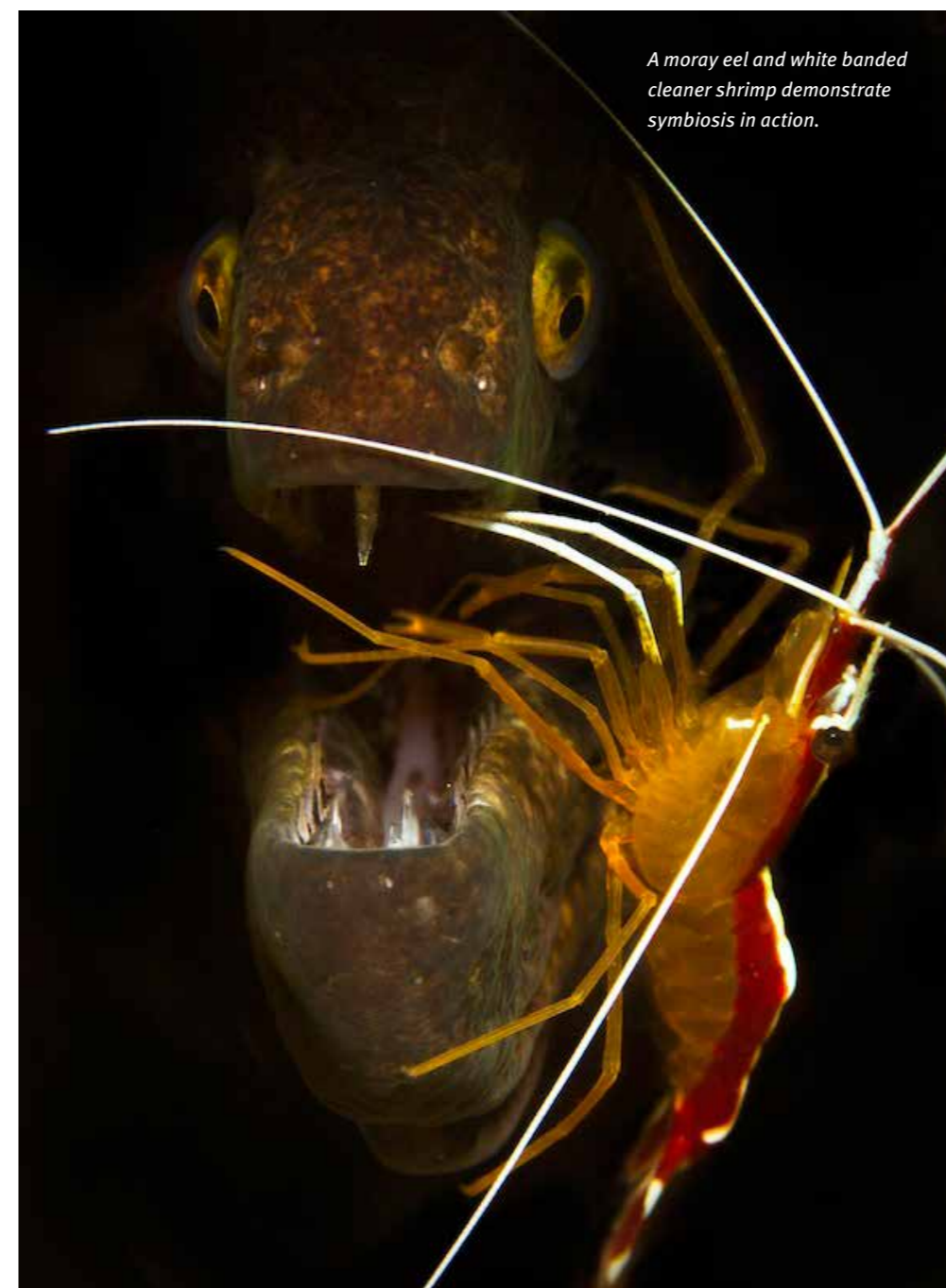


*Nembrothas add yet another splash of colour to Pemba's vibrant walls.*

the sky blackens it awakens the bush babies who fight (or fornicate - I'm not sure which), in the trees above. Craig, Darren and I share a *Kilimanjaro*, one of Tanzania's local, tasty beers. The Scotsman won't pay the \$3 required to purchase one - it's much more fun to sit and grumble about the price, clearly.

Dinner here is usually a simple, yet plentiful affair - often soup, followed by fresh fish with local veg, topped off with doughnuts in custard for desert. There are no frills and definitely no *Pringles* or chocolate bars on offer: if you want a snack, you can eat some roasted nuts like the locals do. I head off for eight of the soundest hours sleep I've had in a long time.

Over my breakfast of omelette and fruit, assistant manager Tiffany explains that they have to preorder eggs a couple of days in advance,



*A moray eel and white banded cleaner shrimp demonstrate symbiosis in action.*

which gives the villagers time to round up the roaming chickens. Now that's free range. Coffee is an odd, muddy concoction and chai tea is brewed here with cinnamon and cloves. With 3.5 million clove trees on the island, Pemba supplies 70% of the world's market.

We return to Njao Gap after breakfast. It's still murky, but we spot a large napoleon wrasse in the deep. I also become rather enamoured with fire gobies, which look a little like red and white fingers painted with bright yellow faces.

Our second tank is used at Aquarium again - as it's not located in the gaps, visibility is more consistent here. *Braveheart* first complains, before saying "I'm going to put my mask on now." This time, I'm fortunate to see a moray having its teeth cleaned by more white banded cleaner shrimp. Darren is less lucky: he gets too close and the said moray bites him on the finger with his sparkly clean nashers.

In the evening, Darren, bandaged finger and all, takes us along the beach to find a coconut crab. The largest land crab in the world, this globally endangered species can weight up to 4kg. We find a juvenile and watch it scale the restaurant's beams, as I perform a "vis dance" in the hope of bringing in clean water for tomorrow's dives.

The gods don't respond. Craig counters their snub by taking me north to dive around the lighthouse. It also means I get to see nearby Manta Resort's newly installed underwater bedroom. From the surface it's an unprepossessing wooden concoction, suspended in the middle of the ocean. However I'm sure the room itself is nice (for \$1,500 per night it should be). The water's definitely cleaner, but a ripping current whisks us past anything of note.

Back at the gaps, at Rudi's Wall, Craig is first to find a large blotched fantail ray resting in a swim through. After this he spots an octopus that would rather sit in a hole than pose for a picture: quite sensible. The safety stop - a bed of seagrass with lengthy, rope like sea cucumbers and gigantic orange nembrothas - beats hanging in mid ocean for three minutes.

With no divers the following day, Craig and I set our alarms for 5am and head out to the deep blue for a fishing trip. Despite his best attempts, even using flying fish as live bait, we fail to catch anything. It would seem my luck's not with me on this trip - just a few days before Craig hauled in a 2.2m sailfish and regularly snares tuna, wahoo, kingfish and other pelagics. Pemba's a great destination for deep-sea fishing.

With conditions still not playing ball, I concentrate on the macro life that Darren and Craig are so adept at unearthing. They take me to dive sites with some rather peculiar names, including Emilio's Back Passage (great vertical walls covered in corals and sponge that plunge



Drinks time on Kervan Saray's deck.

to 45m), DF Malan (stepped walls with a couple of 'underwater islands' along with 50 uninterrupted metres of large table corals), Snapper Point (lots of nudibranches in the shallows and schools of big eye snapper), Manta Point (challenging currents and an underwater mountain that rises to within 5m of the surface, with great macro on top) and Aquarium several more times. I'd like to think that Tony recognises me by now.

In Arabic, Pemba is known as '*Al Jazeera Al Khadra*', which translates as the green island. Along its rocky coastline there are countless mangroves, lagoons, inlets and coves to explore. Surface intervals are spent on tiny beaches lined with baobabs, plus mango, cashew, papaya and banana trees. They're simply idyllic places to eat sweet pancakes and drink muddy coffee.

We break up diving with a very cool, spooky kayaking trip through the mangroves. You get the feeling that with one wrong turn you might never find your way out. On return to the lodge and with the tide out, we search for nocturnal goodies amongst the jaggedy rock pools – a toe-stubbers paradise. Craig's torch reveals a flounder the size of my fingernail, a baby octopus that uses its tentacles to hunt amongst the crevasses, a leafy green nudibranch and some huge brittle stars.

In true Hollywood style, we save the best dives until last. The vis Gods have finally brought in clear water. They've even put on a leaving party at Eggars Ascent, inviting a school of eight giant trevally that hurtle towards us for a good stare. Following them, a school of great barracuda fly by, watched on by fusiliers, unicornfish and surgeonfish. And as we begin our ascent, Craig spots a cuttlefish on the wall.

In the clean water, Trigger Wall is a different proposition and gigantic gorgonian fans beckon us from the deep with spindly fingers. When Cousteau's *Calypso* first sailed here in 1967, he described the richness of these waters and abundance of fish life. As Pemba's famous current sweeps me along, I close my eyes and imagine how this site might have looked nearly 50 years ago. On a good day, the diving here is still excellent; in Cousteau's time it would have been out of this world.

### IT'S A WRAP

It's been a hardcore and relentless week of diving with all things marine. If I haven't been photographing the fish, I've been discussing them, examining them, seeking them by torchlight, identifying them in books, trying to catch them on hooks, or eating them. Like Pemba's waters, I'm a little bit fished out. Well, for a day or two anyway.

The Scotsman leaves, giving us all a moment to sit and gather

our thoughts. This is what Pemba is all about - no other dive boats, no package holidaymakers, no supermarkets, no gimmicks. Just excellent diving in a place of raw, untamed beauty. As Raf, the owner of Swahili Divers, explained in an email before I arrived, "Pemba is one of the last remaining diving wildernesses." I couldn't have put it better myself. ▲

#### GETTING HERE:

**Fly from Zanzibar to Pemba:** [www.zanair.com](http://www.zanair.com), [www.coastalaviation.com](http://www.coastalaviation.com) Between \$90-110 one way from Stone Town to Chake Chake.

#### BEST TIME OF YEAR TO DIVE:

Conditions are good from July to March, with the best period between July to November when a southern wind brings in clear, cold water. Humpbacks visit the region from July to October.

#### REMEMBER:

Always dress appropriately in Pemba, a Muslim country. That means no bare shoulders or short shorts when you're outside the resorts.

**Language:** Swahili

**Currency:** Tanzanian shillings

#### MISALI ISLAND:

Receives rave reviews for its coral and fish life. Over an hour's boat ride away, it requires a minimum of 5 divers paying an additional \$70pp to cover the fuel costs.

#### PRICES:

Due to its remote location, it's not cheap to dive here. Packages start at 2 nights accommodation plus 3 dives for \$470. More information can be found on [www.swahilidivers.com](http://www.swahilidivers.com).

#### ABOUT AARON:

Aaron's trips would not be possible without his sponsor, Cameras Underwater: [www.camerasunderwater.co.uk](http://www.camerasunderwater.co.uk). View his work on [www.aarongekoski.com](http://www.aarongekoski.com).