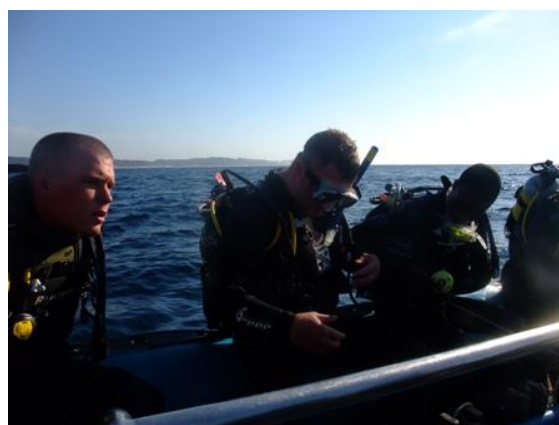


## Marine Guiding – trading the bush for the beach

I look around at my one year Nature Guide students, they have been with me now for three months. Their faces are alive with a mixture of nervous expectancy. Three months ago when I took them for their first nature walk in a dangerous game area, their faces were full of the same excitement as they are now. The difference this time, is that I am not in control of the situation. My .416 rifle is locked away in a safe back home in the bush. We are all in the same boat now, or should I say Rubberduck (rigid inflatable boat) as it launches through the surf towards 2 Mile Reef. Our mission is to dive the corals of Sodwana Bay. This forms part of the Bhejane Nature Training practical for the FGASA Marine Guiding Qualification, and will enable us to experience the Coral Reefs and their abundance of marine life. One of the most diverse eco-systems on earth.



*Pre-dive briefing by Dive Master, Rudolph*

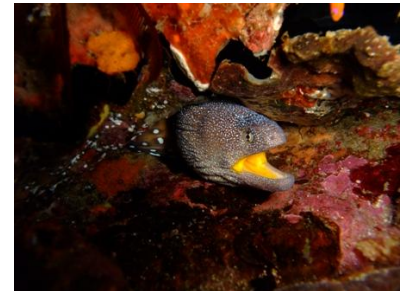


*Getting ready for the drop*

Our Skipper slows down the boat and brings it to a stop over 4 Buoy, a well known dive site. He asks us to take off our life jackets. We are now in the hands of PADI Dive Instructor Jarred Hodgson and PADI Dive Master Rudolph de Villiers, who instructs us to start kitting up. Once everyone has got their SCUBA gear on, BCD (Buoyancy Control Device), masks, weight-belts and fins, we start going over a thorough pre-dive safety check. Students have been trained well in the pool sessions and all dive gear has been checked and is working well. The Dive Master gives us a quick repeat of the dive briefing he gave us on the beach, and again stresses vital points such as communication signals and emergency procedures. With regulators in our mouths, the skipper starts the countdown and we all fall backwards from the side of the boat into the waiting Indian Ocean.



Once we are in the water, the only means of communication is by sign language, which we have learn in our classroom and pool training sessions. We start our descent, 18 metres down to the reef. We descent in a group, taking care not to get separated by the current. The visibility is very good – at least 25 meters. What we see takes our breath away. Colourful corals arranged in all shapes and sizes as far as the eye can see. Some look like flowers, others like giant mushrooms jutting out on top of each other. It is like a beautiful underwater garden, but instead of birds and butterflies, we see the most amazing sea-creatures. Coral Reefs eco-systems are characterised by intense competition for resources, and the result of this is an absolutely amazing array of colours, shapes and sized in the various fish, marine reptiles and invertebrates found here.



My eye catches something large swimming by in the distance, and we can just make out the shape of a Loggerhead Turtle, before it disappears behind a coral pinnacle. Our Dive Master, who is leading the dive signals for us to follow. We all look around for our dive buddies, and pair up to move. The more experienced divers ascend a little and carefully control's their buoyancy with regulated breathing to enable them to glide over the corals and amongst the schooling fish. Some of us are still inexperienced and need to add some air to our BCD's to achieve neutral buoyancy. This is very important and keeps us from accidently bumping into any corals or other marine life due to lack of control. The fish do not seem disturbed at all by our presence and some of them even come closer to investigate. The Old Woman Angelfish come closer and seems to be playing in our air-bubbles. Our instructors signals for us to come closer and points out a crevice. We each take turns to have a closer look at the Starry Murrelet Eel that is hiding there. We all take caution not to get too close. He also points out a Blue-spotted Ribbontail Ray laying in the sand between two reefs. There are fish everywhere. From little Sea Goldies to large Potato Basses.

Over 1200 species of fish has been recorded as living between these corals. The diversity is almost frustrating since you are sure to miss a few exciting species every time you turn to look at the array of life in front of you. I remember how long it took me as a beginner birder to identify birds – and this with the help of field guides and other books at hand. Underwater, it is a bit more difficult to have visual aids to help you identify fish. The secret lies in getting to know your families before you start to dive. As with birds, JIZZ is generally similar in most families. From there you can try to remember the easily recognisable ones and start adding little by little to a species list. Like any other field exercise, diving is always followed by a lot of time searching through reference books to correctly identify the species you saw.

Rudolph, our dive master, beckons us frantically and we all swim toward him. He signals the sign for Paper Fish and points toward where the fish is located on the reef. We struggle to make out the fish at first as it is so well camouflaged against the reef. When we eventually see the fish, we notice that there are in fact two next to each other. We also get to see a juvenile Emperor Angelfish – an interesting fish that looks strikingly different to the adult. The juveniles are patterned with concentric blue and white lines on a black body. As they grow, the colour changes quite dramatically with a lot more yellow towards the tail.

I look around to make sure that I am still next to my dive buddy, and realise that we are being surrounded by a school of Crescent-tail Big Eyes numbering in their hundreds. An amazing experience.



Once we are all in sight of each other again, Rudolph signals to let us know that we must get ready to start our ascent. We get together and start ascending slowly to our first safety stop where we hang in the water for around 5 minutes at the same depth to allow our bodies to get rid of excess nitrogen. At the 5 meter safety stop, Jarred inserts some air from his cylinder into an inflatable, brightly coloured tube. This floats to the surface and is the visual communication signal to let the skipper know where we are, and that we are about to surface. This also warns other boats that there are divers in the water that are surfacing.

Once back on the boat, the excitement is too much to contain with all round chatter and laughter as everyone expresses their sightings and experiences. I look around at the happy faces, and the visible sense of accomplishment on them. It is difficult not to feel proud to be associated with an organization like FGASA, that through their new Marine Guiding Qualification, made this new experience possible. The skipper turns toward Jesser Point and we head back to land. On our way back I can't help but think of the many new exciting environments that the new FGASA Marine Guiding qualification is opening up for guides. Many of our students are now considering specialising as Marine Guides and will come back for further training with Bhejane Nature Training and Coral Divers to advance both their diving and guiding skills for this diverse environment. For more information, contact Bhejane Nature Training on 035 562 0034 or [info@bhejanenaturetraining.com](mailto:info@bhejanenaturetraining.com).

