



Diving Tanzania - Mikindani, Mtwara Province

Words by Claus Gregersen and photos by Lene Kim Slengerich

Mtwara Province doesn't take up much space even in the best of guide books about Tanzania. Apart from a few development NGOs only a few tourists find their way to this region, though deep sea fishers and divers (and those who have to get as far away as possible from everything) are awakening to the challenge. The local communities are poor and resources are scarce but if you're willing to improvise, to take things as they come, you're in for a great experience. You can come a long way with a few selected phrases in Kiswahili and a bit of understanding of the state of things.

A bit about Eco2 and Ten Degrees South (food and lodging)

In March 2005 Dr. Martin Guard and his buddy Drew Sutton officially opened Eco2 in Mikindani as a PADI International Resort. Martin Guard has lived in the area for more than 10 years, is a marine biologist with a PhD in octopus fisheries and biology and has 15 years of experience as a PADI Dive Instructor.

Apart from being a fully equipped dive centre with training from PADI OWD to Divemaster and equipment rental, Eco2 does marine research and development in Mikindani Bay and in the nearby Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park. When we visited, Martin was busy describing a new species of octopus.

Martin speaks fluent Kiswahili and is deeply involved in ensuring a sustainable development of the local community. For each dive a sum is donated to a community fund, which is counselled by locals, who then decide on for instance the purchase of new school books or uniforms or something completely different.

Eco2 also endorses locally crafted Makonde wood carvings. Half of the sales price goes to the artist and the other half to the community fund.

Ten Degrees South is next to the dive shop. It's a cosy little place with five double rooms with king-size beds, mosquito nets and fans. Toilets and showers are located at the end of the hallway. The Michelin Guide would most likely not award any stars, but everything is kept nice and clean and it's a really friendly place with wild monkeys in the backyard.

On the other hand, the food is so delicious that ex-pats come from far and near to enjoy their dinner at Ten Degrees South. Even guests, from the more luxurious and much more expensive The Old Boma, pop in.

On our way back from the first day of diving we stopped by a fisherman in a small wooden canoe. The fisherman had just reeled in a 40 kg tuna which Martin bought on the spot. In the evening we had the most delicious, most tender and largest tuna steak ever - delicately marinated and served with mashed potatoes, absolutely yummy.

Ten Degrees South is owned by Eco2 but managed by Babu Ali and his crew. Sometimes the English language gets the better of them but there's definitely no sparing of friendly smiles and willingness to help.





Selected dive sites

Diving is conducted on Eco2's boat "Uchawi", which means black magic in Kiswahili. At an official ceremony the local witch doctor cast a spell on the boat with the result that a possible culprit will end up with a frog's head. And it has worked so far...

The fibreglass boat is equipped with 2 x 75 hp outboard engines, VHF, oxybox, life vests and not least fresh water to rinse off photo equipment.

GPS is required to locate most of the dive sites as the reef tops usually lie some 12 to 14 m below the surface. Martin Guard gave very thorough briefings and talked extensively about the underwater topography, corals, fishes, and how the dive was to be carried out. Since there is a difference of 4 metres between high and low tide all diving is planned using tide tables.

Mikindani Bay is open toward the North East and the Indian Ocean, and often big pelagics drop by to have a look. From August to November it's even possible to "whale watch" as the humpback whales pass by.

The Monoliths

The Monoliths rise from the sea floor some 150 m below as a large limestone formation with columns (monoliths), gorges, and channels that give the site a very dramatic air. If we were lucky, Martin said, we would be met by one of the resident giant groupers (*Epinephelus lanceolatus*) that often rises from the deep to check out the intruders. But we needed to go down fast to ensure that the grouper didn't get enough of us before we even saw it. So we threw ourselves over the side, gave the ok signal, and headed downward. The reef appeared at 18 metres. We continued down alongside one of the monoliths and at about 35 metres we slowed down and stared intensely into the deep.

At first yellow flashes distracted our attention but it quickly turned out to be a 2 metres long, 150 kg heavy black-greyish monster fish surrounded by a school of bright yellow juvenile golden trevallies (*Gnathanodon speciosus*). Our meeting lasted for perhaps 40 seconds in which we sort of eyed each other. Once satisfied that we didn't intend to take up permanent residency the grouper disappeared again with its yellow entourage. Looks aren't on the side of the giant grouper, one must give him that. But he did very much emphasize the dramatic atmosphere of the Monoliths.

We ascended to the top of the monolith, crossed a deep gorge to the next monolith that stood a bit taller. In this way we had the perfect multilevel dive from one monolith to the other and ended at 11 metres in a cloud of black pyramid butterflyfish (*Hemitaenichthys zoster*).

Normally, Martin said apologetically, as we once more found ourselves at the surface waiting for the dive boat, we should have seen this and this and this. Cool. But I'm still excited about the monster fish, the giant grouper.

One way to check the health of a reef is to note the number of groupers. Not a dive went by without seeing several different species. One of the more curious species is the Chinese grouper (*Plectropomus laevis*). It's a bit difficult to take a predator seriously when it resembles a zebra with yellow lipstick. But then, I wasn't the prey.

Crypto Mania

Crypto Mania is very different to The Monoliths. The site is situated in the narrow inlet to Mtwara Harbour and consists mainly of sandy bottom with small coral patches, scattered rocks and sporadic sea grass. Maximum depth was about 15 metres - quite suitable for the third dive of the day.

We started by examining a small, hollow rock, which had just enough room for a peppered moray (*Siderea grisea*) and a stonefish (*Synanceia sp.*) side by side. That set the pace for the rest of the dive. Martin wanted to show us a rock formation with a small cavern that usually housed a pair of yellow leaf scorpionfish (*Taenianotus triacanthus*). He stuck his head inside and the leaf scorpionfish saw fit to hop outside where they sat very still waving back and forth in the current. In front of the cavern was a flock of seven baby volitans lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) and a bit further away an African lionfish (*P. mombassae*).

On the same dive we found a crocodilefish, loads of different pipefishes, a seamoth (*Eurypegus draconis*) and



some really good-looking nudibranchs including *Halgarda* sp. and *Nembrotha* sp. And one we thought to be a *Glossodoris symmetricus* - although this one had white rhinophores instead of red/orange ones. According to those who know, even slight colour variations in this species usually turns out to be a new species when dissected, so Martin has added this to his list of potentially new species to be examined more closely. Another interesting find was the *Nembrotha lineolata*. Hitherto it has only been found in the Pacific Ocean and around the Indonesian Archipelago - not in the Indian Ocean. Finding it in Tanzania suggests that distribution is much wider than believed till now. Exciting. 75 minutes later we surfaced - contented and very happy.

[Source for the *G. symmetricus*: Bill Rudman of Australia Museum's Sea Slug Forum]

Namponda Corner

Mnazi Bay-Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park was established in 1999 and comprises 200 sq km of water and wetlands and 400 sq km of land inclusive of 15 villages. What East Africa is concerned bio diversity is booming, and so far 400 species of fish and 260 species of corals have been discovered.

The trip from Mikindani Bay to Mnazi Bay in the marine park takes about an hour on "Uchawi". Msimbati Beach in the marine park must have been the original Bounty Beach. Kilometres of chalk-white beach, palm trees, and the merciless sun that bleaches bones and turns haphazard tourists into red skins in no time at all.

We had barely left the surface before a school of about 50 blackfin barracudas swam closely by. Once we had recovered from that we discovered that we had landed in the middle of a colony of aurora shrimp gobies (*Amblyeleotris aurora*). For every square metre two or three gobies could be seen each guarding its own shrimp. In return the shrimp was very busy cleaning their joint dwelling for sand and coral rubble. Small enclaves in the colony were occupied by garden eels, though these were so shy that I couldn't see much more than the heads sticking out.

Martin had prepared us for the fact that not all fishes in this area behave in accordance with what the books say. One of the species he hoped to be able to show us was the yellowmargin triggerfish (*Pseudobalistes flavomarginatus*). Like most triggerfish this one ought to prefer its own company but in the marine park they congregated in large schools. We saw them all right but unfortunately they kept their distance.

Namponda Corner is a flat site filled with rubble but interrupted by rocks and coral formations of various shapes and sizes acting as magnets on most life forms in the area. The current gently took us past small bommies with morays, Moorish idols, bannerfish, snappers, damsels, and a huge variety of butterflyfish. We even had a tuna and a hawksbill check us out. Twice we encountered a huge school of jackfish that - according to Martin - contained five different species.

A large boulder on the bottom functioned as a cleaning station, and here we had the privilege of watching a large potato grouper (*Epinephelus tukula*) getting the full treatment by a couple of cleaner wrasse.

Outtro

The diving alone makes the trip to Mikindani worth your while, but the whole area has a virgin like quality. There are still lots of places and species to discover - both above as well as below the surface. The southern most border of the marine park is formed by Ruvuma River, which also marks the border between Mozambique and Tanzania; a place well worth a visit in its own right. And shame on you if you didn't catch a wildlife safari once you're here.

In 1866 Dr. David Livingstone stayed in Mikindani for a fortnight before he embarked on his third and final expedition to discover to the source of the Nile. Only his heart was returned - in a wooden box. On the other hand, we arrived at home safely - but left our hearts in Mikindani.