

GOING TO EXTREMES' ISSUE

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Over the EDGE

**Extreme diving
is all in the mind**

Mafia COMEBACK

**Whale shark
island revisited**

Freshly SUNK

**First dives on world's
biggest artificial reef**

SUMMER **7**

**UK locations to keep
instructors happy**



THE MAFIA connection

Thirteen – unlucky for some. Gavin Parsons tested that theory when he returned to Mafia Island, Tanzania to see if the area had improved or declined in the 13 years since his last visit

ALMOST 13 YEARS TO THE DAY. I am standing on the same stretch of beach, looking over the same bay. The view is much the same but with one exception – the bay and much of the water outside it are protected.

What's more, in a small way, I helped. I was part of the Mafia Island Marine Project run by Frontier. In 1993, I spent three months living in a *mukati* (palm frond) hut, collecting baseline data with other research assistants for a team of scientists.

They used this information to create a report that played a big part in the Tanzanian Government's decision to turn Chole Bay and surrounding waters into a multi-zone marine park. That was in 1995. So how has the area fared?

As we pull out of the capital, Kilondoni, and into Mafia's heart, the memories of the place come flooding back almost as fast as the kids rush from doorways to wave and shout "*jumbo*" – a Swahili greeting.

I am heading for Utende, a small village on the other side of the island close to the Chole Channel, which separates Mafia from Chole and Jibondo islands. Here, close to where the original Frontier camp was, is the luxurious eco-friendly retreat of Pole Pole (pronounced *po-le po-le*) and Mafia Island Lodge, where the dive centre is located.

Pole Pole is a beautiful resort run by extremely friendly people who can't do enough for you. Voted one of the world's top 25 eco-resorts by *The Times*, it has 10 bungalows that blend into the African coastline. It has a beautiful lounge and dining room, massage facilities and a chill-out area. It is an amazing place in which to unwind.

Just around the corner and looking out over Chole Bay, Mafia Island Lodge, though bigger with 40 rooms, has a similarly chilled atmosphere and stunning beach-front, and is ideal for groups.

Funny who you meet

The dive centre is run by Moez, a Tanzanian I remembered meeting the first time. The centre is a new building with new diving equipment, and uses a locally made *dhow* as its dive boat. It is well-suited for the job.

The first day sees us heading for one of my favourite sites – Kimsi Pass. Before departing I read my old logbook entry: "*Descended the anchor line, current fairly strong. We rounded the first bend and came face to face with a f^{***}-off*

huge barracuda – gulp! Let's swim away. Oh my god there's a huge shoal of barracudas to the left forming a pincer movement. But we escaped. Saw other fish, which seemed larger than the fish on the reef. Vis wasn't too hot, but OK."

My language was more colourful back then, and the words make me smile as I recall the scene. So I feel excited as I slip below the surface.

We reach the bottom at 19m and head for the pinnacle out in the channel. It's slack water and a neap tide, so the current is almost non-existent as we reach the rock edifice, which is probably why the barracuda are absent.

Moez says they are generally here. My bad luck holds with the giant grouper with attending pilotfish that also calls the pinnacle home – she comes in for a look, but doesn't come too close before heading off to the far side of the pinnacle.

It's a good reintroduction to Mafia, but without the current, the pinnacle's "slap in the face" appeal is less intense.

And to number two

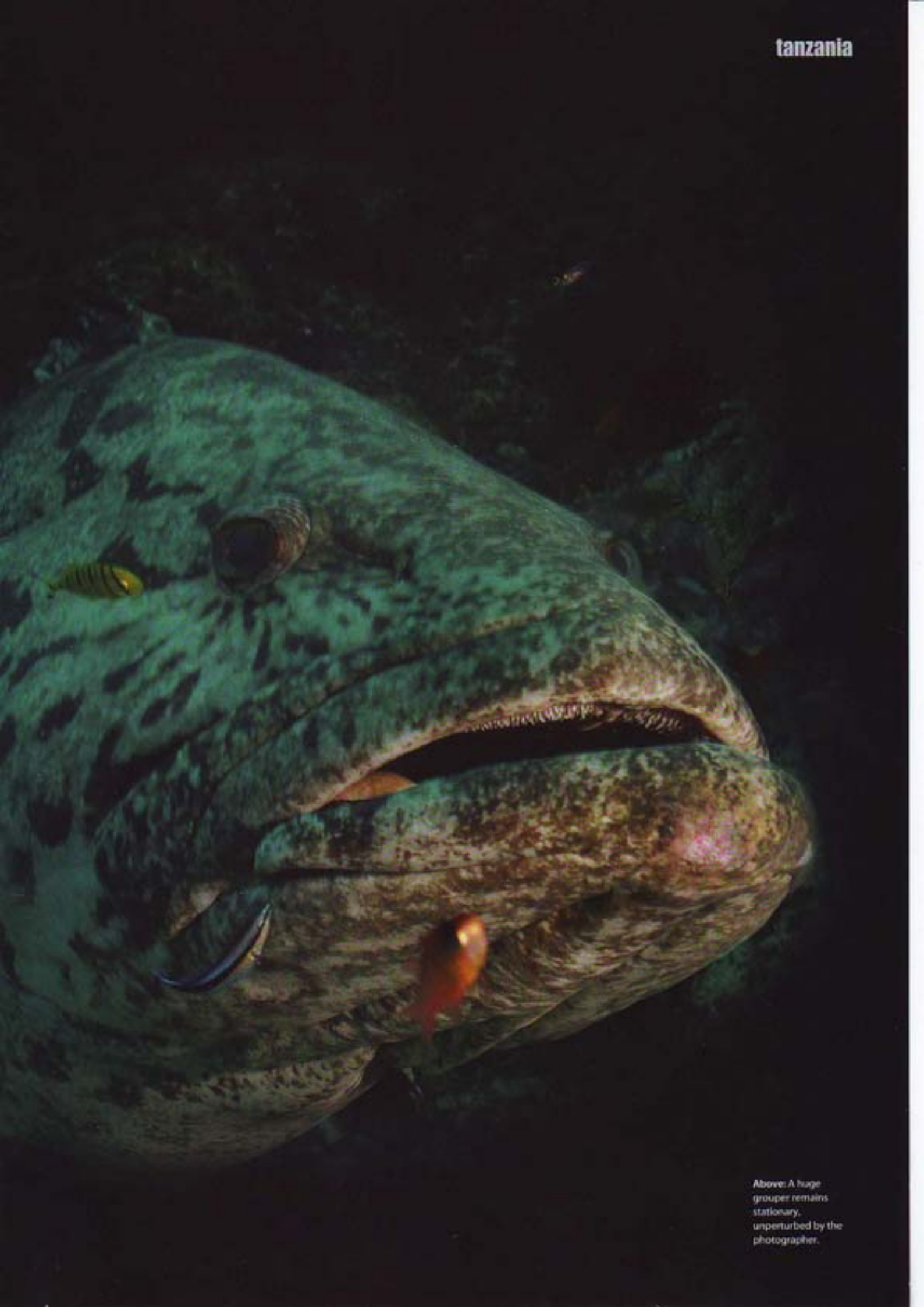
The diving on Mafia is generally a two-tank affair with around an hour's surface interval. During the break, I sit on the *dhow* looking out over the land and sea on which I once spent so much time.

I can't work out why I don't feel more emotional. I was almost in tears when I left Mafia, but I no longer feel that sort of connection. Perhaps, it was the sunburn I'd picked up, or the lack of a comfortable bed, or memories of being attacked by huge centipedes or giant red ants.

Inside the bay, the vis is generally poorer than in the ocean. That doesn't stop the corals growing, however, or the fish multiplying.

Chole Wall, the second dive, is packed with both. The hard coral is in exceptional condition, and not just down at depth, as in many other parts of the world since the last big El Niño event.

The hard coral here goes right up to the surface. Perhaps it's the water movement, lack of pollution or pure luck, but the corals around Mafia are pristine from



Above: A huge grouper remains stationary, unperturbed by the photographer.



the bottom of the reef to the surface. My Frontier log entry for Chole Wall read: "S**t dive - NOT! Crystal clear water, fish in abundance. Huge brown surgeonfish, large emperor angelfish; saw large shoal of unicornfish, fair-sized peacock groupers plus other angels, butterflyfish, wrasse and parrotfish. Best dive so far and by far." The site has a lot to live up to.

Chole Wall shows me what a layer of protection on an area can do. The reef is stunning, and the fish life even more abundant than before.

Darkness falls

Night dives were something we didn't do on my previous visit, as reef fish are hard to see in the dark, so this evening is my first nocturnal visit to Chole Bay.

We choose Millimani Reef, as it is in the safe reaches of the bay, gently sloping and packed with life.

The boat anchors, as always, over sand and we drop to the bottom at about 8m. The reef edge is alive with soldierfish and a living soup of zooplankton attracted by our lights.

In many crevices I find sleeping parrotfish in their mucus cocoons. I shine my light over the reef, and the coral glitters with hundreds of pinpoint points of light.

These are the eyes of coral shrimps - small red-coloured crustaceans with what appears to be Scottish ancestry, their eyes forming a tartan pattern under my strobe lights.

I also find cleaner shrimps in several places, plus numerous soldierfish, rabbitfish and several large puffers.

I break the surface, the boat a fair distance away. The lamp on the mast

is a speck, but it's looking up that makes me feel small.

The African night sky balloons above - the lack of light pollution putting a spit and polish on each star so that it shines radiantly. Few places on the planet can now provide such a celestial spectacle.

A new dawn

Daylight creeps in at around 6am this close to the Equator. I am sitting in a *dhow* on Chole Bay under a steely grey sky, watching the world transform as the sun billows light from around a cloud. Ibis and egrets fly from rocky islets and an osprey dines on a fresh fish breakfast. The sea turns iridescent blue, the clouds become white and fluffy and the African morning begins to heat up.

Soon afterwards, I am sitting on the edge of the *dhow* over Jima Wall, ready to roll in. I recall the gist of the entry from my old logbook: "Gentle dive with numerous soft corals on seabed. Saw red, blue and green nudibranchs plus lots of reef count species."

The vis isn't fantastic, but we have timed the dive to coincide with high tide, so it's pretty good for inside the bay.

I swim over the healthy corals, picking out the same fish species I saw back when, but am struck by the numbers of grouper species, from small rock hinds up to large moontails.

Groupers, being large and extremely tasty, are often the first to be targeted by fishermen, so on many reefs around the world they are scarce. Not here. The dive is gentle and we don't go much below 20m, so have time to enjoy the scene.

Soon after, I am back on the side of the *dhow*, regulator in, fins crossed and

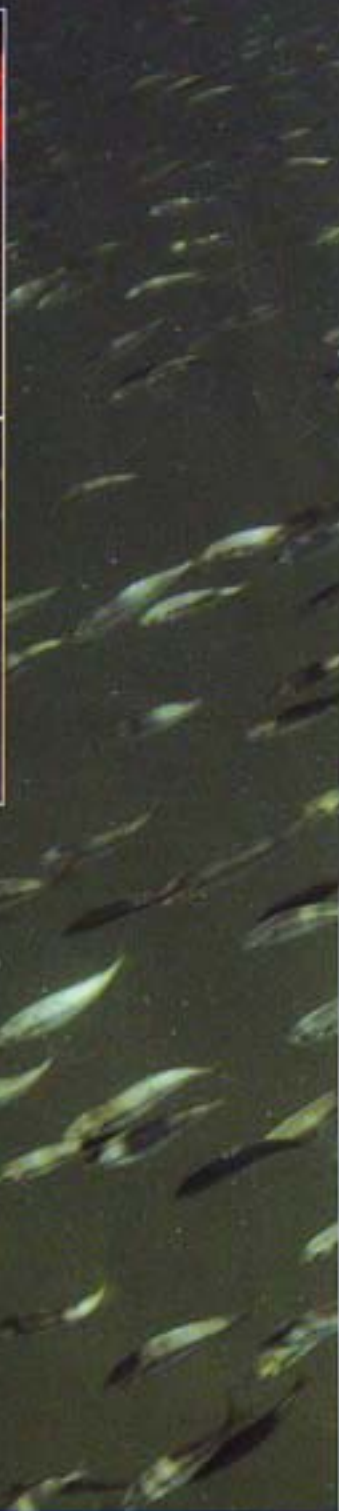
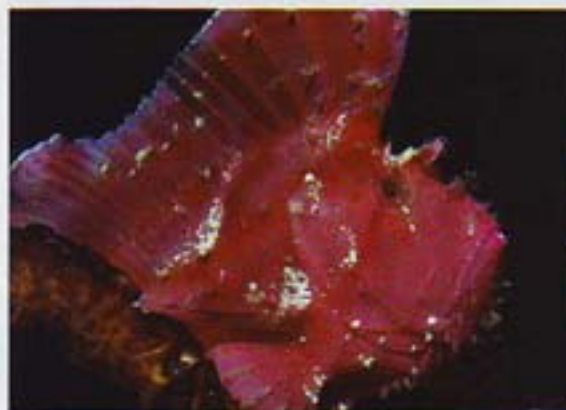


holding onto my mask and gauges. I am set to dive on Kinasi Reef.

The site is an extension of the wall that comes up from the pass, a mound reef surrounded by rough coral rubble.

Again, grouper numbers are impressive. On one pinnacle sit three rock hinds that make no attempt to get away from us, as groupers usually do. 🐟

Top: The islets in the mouth of Chole Bay. Middle: Grey sweetlips on the reef at the edge of Kinasi Pass. Above: The African equivalent of a white-van man.



Above, clockwise from top left: Red leaf fish sitting on seawhip coral; the brilliant red of long-spined sea urchin; exquisite butterflyfish were one of the indicator species that Frontier divers had to count; honeycomb moray eel in Kinasi Pass.

Right: Whale shark surrounded by a shoal of fish.

Below right: Whale shark with snorkeller in shallow water just off Mafu.

The entire reef is like that. The fish see few divers, and aren't bothered by us.

The dive finishes over the reef plateau at 6-8m. The corals are as superb as the fish numbers.

I even find another red, blue and green nudibranch. Nudibranchs were not a target species for us to monitor before, but I am soon to find out just how widespread they are here.

Under sail

As the kit is stowed, the boat crew unfurls the cloth sail and hauls it up the *ahow's* mangrove mast. The wind snaps it full and we silently move towards the shore. This is something I have missed, though I didn't know it until I hear the boat creak and the water lap the bow.

The engine stowed, the captain steers the wooden rudder with his foot, changing the ballast position (a bag of sand) to even the vessel's trim.

It is a simple sensation. I come from a world of technological stress and it's all brushed away in an instant.

The journey back takes around an hour, and I sit and reminisce. This is when my heart reconnects with Africa. It's like meeting my first girlfriend from school again, and finding out that she's still hot!

Into the blue

The Mafu chain is perched on the edge of the Indian Ocean. Between the island and the mainland, the sea is fairly shallow and dotted with reefs and sandbanks. On the other side, however, the ocean licks at the shoreline and has

created a series of coral walls that thrive in stunning visibility. The dives here, to the north of Chole Bay, are referred to as "Outside". That's where we head next.

Dindini Wall tops off at about 7m, then the seabed falls sheer to 19m before levelling off at about 22m.

As oceanic walls go, it is not what many divers would expect. The seabed doesn't drop hundreds of metres, but that is what gives it its charm.

As I descend, the swell pushes me back away from the drop. I have to fight pretty hard to reach the lip, and then fin hard to get past it. Once below the reef line, however, the current ceases and I drop to the boulder-line at the bottom of the wall and into a massive shoal of snappers.

The fish circle as we make our way slowly along the wall. The first tunnel we come to is obscured by a plug of gussy sweepers filling the orifice.

Peering inside, I can just make out a tunnel stretching back into the wall, but it's too small for a diver.

We carry on to the next one, and again it's full of sweepers. This one is large enough for a diver, but a sting ray is already at home and doesn't look pleased at the intrusion, so again we carry on.

The third tunnel is again large enough, and we swim a short way in to investigate. Another large sting ray lies asleep in the chamber, and we leave him to it.

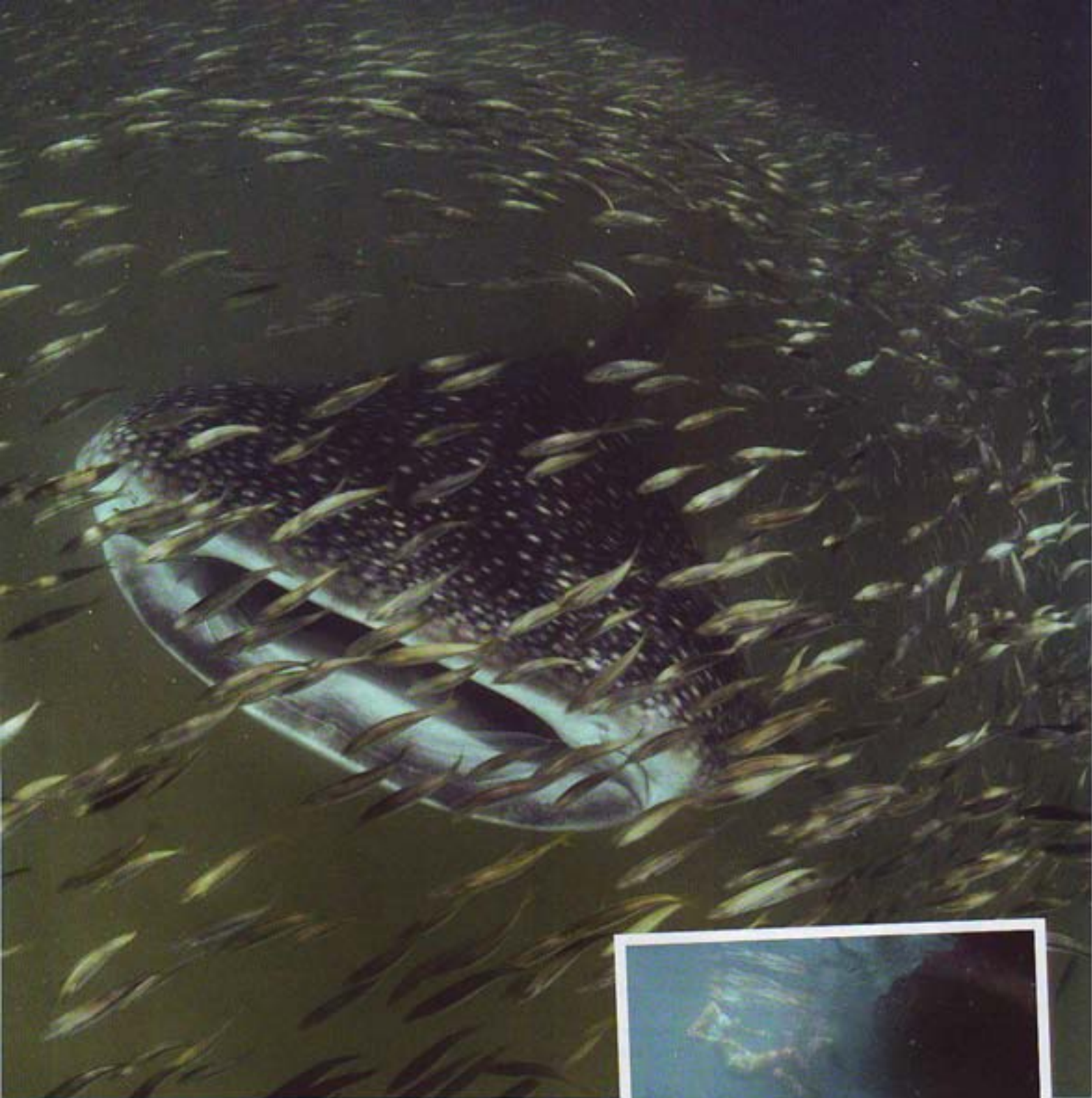
Outside, the grouper numbers are again healthy and we find a thornback sting ray beneath a large boulder, and then a small female hawksbill turtle that

gives us a wide berth. A large stingray under another boulder has an unlikely friend in the form of a rock hind – the two seem to be snuggled up like Morecambe and Wise, which makes me smile.

We rise from the base of the wall to the top as time starts to run short, and spend the remainder of the dive there.

The swell buffets this region pretty badly at times, so the coral is a bit like bushes on a windy hill – stunted. As we drift along, however, we can see lots of groupers on the seabed below. I count 20, but Mox is convinced there are more like 50.

We're both wrong. The next day we return to the spot and come across more



than 100 groupers. Moez doesn't take many people to the spot, as the battering swells have taken their toll on the coral, but even he has never seen so many groupers.

The broken-rubble seabed butts neatly into the bare rock wall, and the little coral that does grow is pretty pathetic compared to elsewhere. Yet the groupers are everywhere.

Inside every cave are quite a few large fish that retreat whenever we poke our heads inside.

The glassy sweepers don't look bothered, but the red-mouthed groupers trying to live in the area look as hassled as if a biker gang has just moved in next door.

One giant leap

From the big to the biggest: whale sharks come to Malla in November and stay until February. They are found over the shallow sandy bottom on the other side of the island facing Kilondoni.

Fishermen use them to find shoals of small fish – they don't catch the sharks, but at least one of them makes money out of taking guests of the island's three lodges out to see them.

His fishing boat is undeniably rustic – the sort of boat the Health & Safety Executive would have a hissy fit over if it tried to operate in the UK, but I think it's great. The boatman manages to keep bailing the water out almost as fast as it comes in, so that's good.





Top: Pole Pole's locally made dhow, used to transport guests around the area.
 Above: Moez enters a cavern full of glassy sweepers.
 Right: Local girl from Utende village.

We head towards a couple of fishing boats, and almost instantly find a small female whale shark feeding at the surface. As we draw level, she slows and stops. The captain kills the engine and we sit silently, watching the shark come closer. Then she vanishes under the boat and doesn't come out the other side.

I slip on my mask, stick my head in and find her – standing almost vertically under our hull. She looks back at me, so I grab my camera and fins and slip over the side.

The poor water clarity and light, sandy-coloured seabed make the water glare, which is a little off-putting. I reckon the shark feels the same, and is using the boat as a rudimentary pair of sunglasses.

I enter the water, and she swims very close to look me over. As the other seven humans enter, the shark simply circles the boat, checking us out. It does that for around half an hour before moving off and starting to feed again.

As the wind picks up, we head for shore. Mafia has proved to be even better now than it was before.

The next morning, my flight to Dar Es Salaam touches down on time and, as

the only passenger joining on Mafia, I walk out onto the airstrip and jump on board the 12-seater aircraft.

It immediately turns round and roars off down the sandy runway – it's the quickest and most hassle-free flight I have ever taken.

We climb over Kilondoni and finally over the sea, heading for the mainland. I look back as the island grows smaller behind us, and smile. I have returned to Mafia, and it has reaffirmed its place in my heart. ✎



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: Gavin Parsons flew direct from London Heathrow to Dar Es Salaam with British Airways, and onwards with Coastal Aviation to Mafia Island. A three-month visa from the Tanzanian consulate in London costs £38 and can be arranged within three working days.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION: Mafia Island Lodge Dive Centre (www.mafialodge.com), Pole Pole eco-resort (www.polepole.com). For bookings go to Mafia Island Info Point, a company based in Dar Es Salaam, www.mafiaislandinfo.com

WHEN TO GO: The best months for diving are September to March, which are also the hottest months. Mafia Island Lodge is closed during the rainy season, April-June.

MONEY: Tanzanian shilling, US dollars.

PRICES: A luxury bungalow at Pole Pole costs from US \$200 a day full-board. Marine Park fees are \$10 a day. Mafia Island Lodge single rooms start at \$52 a day with breakfast. A 10-dive package with the MIL Dive Centre costs \$330.

TOURIST INFORMATION: 020 7407 0566, www.tanzania-web.com