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Around dive planning guests tuck into dinner, either braaing in the boma, eating from the resort buffet, or cooking up a storm in the self-catering kitchen. Breakfast is along the same lines, with the kitchens starting up at 5am, because in summer the early launches are just after day-break.

Early launches give Coral Divers the edge in the industry. The resort is within the confines of the marine reserve, and guests at Coral Divers have quick and easy access to the beach which is a mere shuttle ride away – no gate queues and long walks. Shuttles are timed according to launches and on the beach the dive staff are there to assist in any way possible.

Don't go and buy gear

Dive gear is expensive, and for those who are new to diving, they will find the hiring costs reasonable at only R170 for the full kit for a day. There's a diverse mix of people who come to Coral Divers from groups of friends and families, to students, including guests from all over the world.

Take advantage of the safari tents – bring your own bedding – for a really affordable trip, and spend your money on the diving especially the low season special price of R195 per dive. Of course it isn't all sandy and rustic ... cabins with private bathrooms (shower, basin and toilet) are being upgraded with fans, reading lights, floor tiles and ceilings, a glass sliding front door and side windows. In the main building there's an internet computer and guest lounge with TV.

Instructors at Coral Divers have all come through the PADI Career

Development Programme, and have worked on the beach, as well as qualified in PADI specialties here at Sodwana Bay, guaranteeing specialised first-hand knowledge of the reefs and sea life.

And for those looking for retail life to browse or get necessities, there is a well-stocked convenience store as well as The Beach Shop with gear and trendy surf fashion wear.

Dive Highlights

Summer seas at Sodwana have their own charm – the whales have already passed by on their way back to the southern oceans, but the whale sharks are common. It's unpredictable whether they will hang about for the divers to splash off the boat or if they will suddenly vanish with a flick of their tails. Potato bass are big and friendly, and if you are able to get onto a night dive, the cheeky giants use the light of your torch to snap up additional meals. But night dives are a rarity, with the weather best for diving early in the morning before the afternoon winds pick up.

A quick snapshot of the sites includes 7-Mile Reef which is the best reef to my mind, and the dive excess charge is worth the visit, as the reef profile with overhangs and ledges support a profusion of sea-life for advanced divers. Open Water level divers can visit Stringer where the isolated reef means an astounding variety of marine life is crammed into a very small area.

5-Mile Reef has the most diverse array of corals in Sodwana, particularly the ever-rarer mushroom and plate corals. 9-Mile Reef is in fact 14kms from Jessor Point, 500 meters off-shore. There spectacular swim-throughs and overhangs

make for an interesting dive. The distinctive green tree is a giant hard coral, taller than a man from fingertip to fin-tip, and when the sea goldies are hanging about it changes character so you can almost imagine a picture-book fruit-laden orange tree.

Recent dives during Spring saw recorded sightings of the very rare frog fish, the crocodile fish which is uncommon this far south, and the mantis (peacock) shrimp. This tiny character is shy, scurrying for cover once sighted, and never seen in aquariums because one flick from his legs contains enough power to crack thick glass. Sharks abound, and summer brings in the female ragged tooth sharks. Also seen are nurse, black and white-tip, hammerhead and bull sharks, as well as rays, mantas and eels.

Every dive is different, but all dives at Sodwana with Coral Divers offer an amazing experience. **W**

WILDSIDE Fact Tracker

CORAL DIVERS

To book: For accommodated and non-accommodated divers: Tel 033 345 6531 e-mail coraldivers@mweb.co.za.

Cost: Low season special for the Open Water Course is R1 950 which includes 5 nights self-catered tented accommodation, theory, skills, and 4 sea dives.

Accommodation: Christmas season ranges from a special on self-catering tented accommodation R70 pppns to R670ppns on a dbb basis.

Dives: From R265 including tank and weights. Prices exclude the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife park and community levies.

Other specials: Log on at www.coraldivers.co.za and the Coral Divers resort can be contacted directly on 035 571 0290.