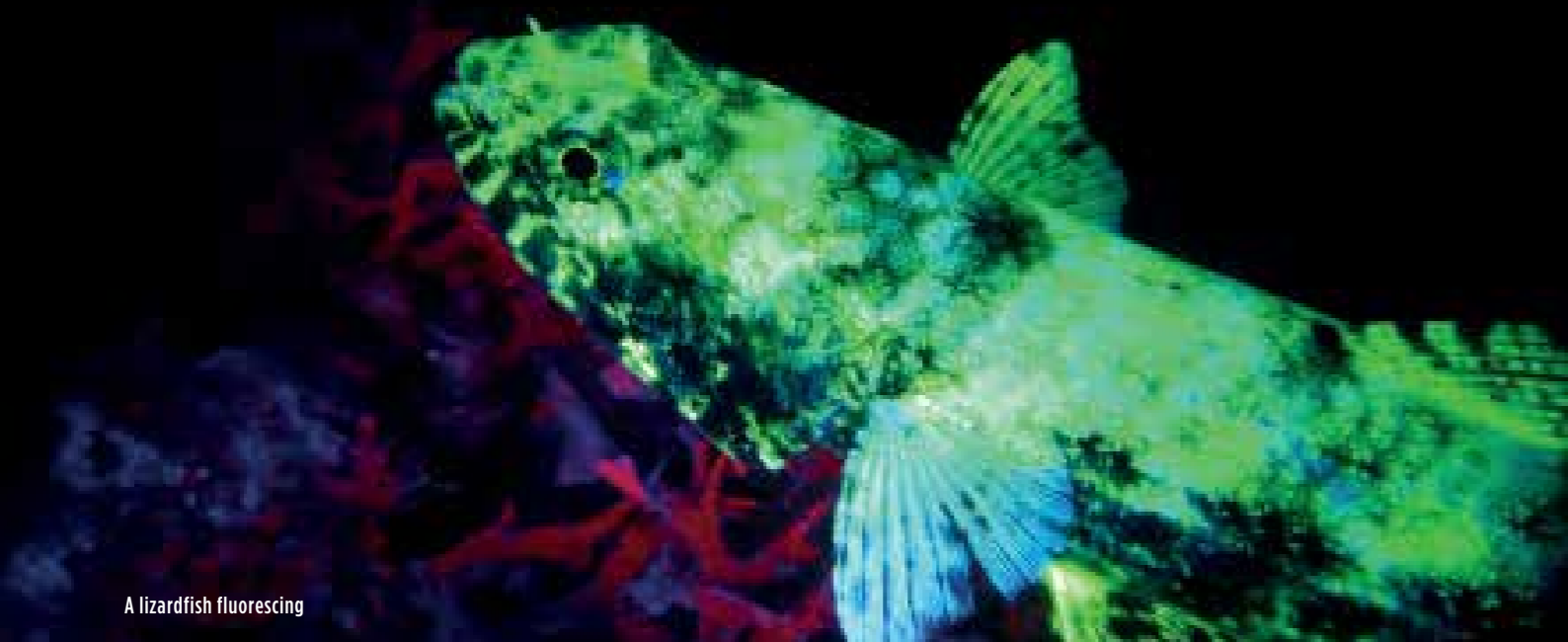


GO WITH THE Fluo

DIVING WITH SPECIAL BLUE TORCHES AND YELLOW FILTERS GIVES A DIFFERENT TAKE ON LIFE BENEATH THE WAVES. WE HEAD TO NORTH WEST MADAGASCAR TO CHECK OUT SCUBA DIVING'S MOST EXCITING NEW SPECIALITY: FLUORESCENT NIGHT DIVING

BY FIONA MCINTOSH



A lizardfish fluorescing

Sitting on the inflatable dive boat, we check our dive equipment, turn on our torches and pull special yellow filters over our masks. Our dive instructor Jacques Vieira counts us down, we do a backward roll into the water, and fin down to the reef. The water is calm, but inky black. All I can see are the beams of the other divers. I concentrate on keeping my breathing relaxed. While diving at night is exciting, I find it disorientating and a bit scary at first.

Suddenly the reef comes into view. Jacques points his blue, ultraviolet light on a coral head. Lurid green tentacles sprout from its gaudy, fire-red core. I scan the reef, catching a dazzling lizardfish in my torch beam. We drift slowly, stopping to inspect a decorator crab sporting an assortment of shells and other decorative headgear that glow vividly in our lights. Spiny flower corals – normally dull by day – fluoresce bright orange, while the sparkling tentacles of tube anemones dance in the current.

WHERE TO STAY

The homely **Sakatia Lodge**, right on the beach, has its own dive centre, and offers a range of marine- and land-based activities. The bungalows are very comfortable, the cuisine is superb, and there's also a spa. sakatialodge.com



Clownfish taking shelter in an anemone

LOOK OUT FOR

- ▶ The marine diversity of the nutrient-rich waters off Sakatia is extraordinary. The reefs are covered in magnificent corals, sponges, fish, crustaceans and a vast array of invertebrates, including many species that are endemic to the region.
- ▶ Seeking out the tiny critters is a highlight. The guides will point out delicate crabs, a variety of well-camouflaged shrimp and leaf scorpionfish and, if you're lucky, you might even spy unusual species such as sea horses.
- ▶ Turtles, rays, dolphins, sharks, whales and whale sharks are regularly sighted.



An anemone glowing at night on a fluo dive



SUBSCRIBE AND YOU COULD

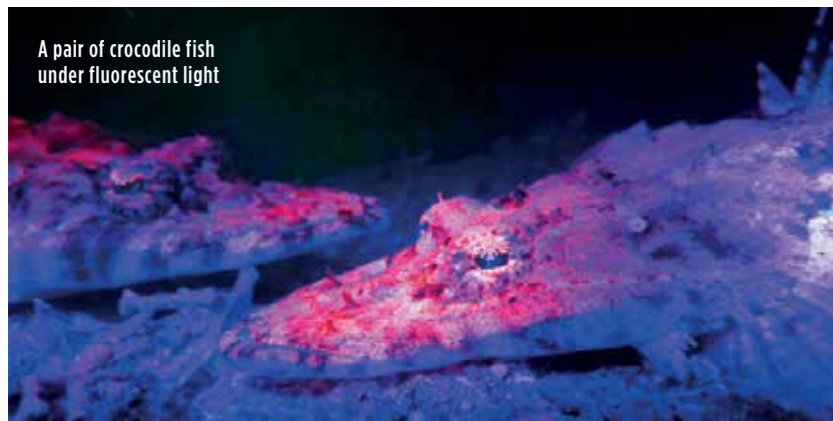
WIN

A WATERPROOF HD SPORTS CAMERA 1080P VALUED AT R999

DETAILS ON PAGE 55



Diving on the Mahavelona wreck just off Sakatia Island



A pair of crocodile fish under fluorescent light



Sakatia Lodge

It's mind-blowing stuff. I'm overwhelmed. In 30 years of scuba diving, I've never experienced anything like it. I take out my magnifying glass and study the detail. The inside of the corals is even more bizarre, a mass of pinks, greens, blues and purples flickering like gas flames. Hovering over the reef, we photograph Nemos (clownfish) sheltering in the poisonous, emerald tentacles of sea anemones.

Our 40-minute dive is over too quickly. As we break the surface of the water, we're all wide-eyed and full of questions. 'Welcome to the wonderful world of fluorescent diving,' Jacques smiles. In the pre-dive briefing, he'd told us to prepare for a completely different view of life beneath the waves. But I hadn't expected it to be so bizarre and psychedelic.

Back at the bar at Sakatia Lodge, where we're staying, we learn more about this extraordinary new frontier in scuba diving. Jacques is one of the pioneers: He wrote the Fluorescent Night Diver specialty course for NAUI (one of the big three worldwide dive training agencies). I'd come all the way to Sakatia, a tiny island off Madagascar's north-west coast, specifically for the experience. And it's already exceeded my wildest dreams.

We spend the next day checking out some of the other dive sites, exploring a wreck and drifting

Turtles are frequently spotted off Madagascar



KNOW THIS

► MadagasCaT Charters & Travel have been specialising in all travel to Madagascar since 2008, and offer travellers the most competitive rates for travel to Nosy Be. Their range of exciting packages includes flights, land arrangements and yacht charters. 084 524 9706, info@madagascat.co.za, madagascat.co.za

► Airlink (011 978 1111, flyairlink.com) offers direct, scheduled flights between Joburg and Nosy Be on Sundays with additional Wednesday flights in peak season.

► Take €25 cash to pay for your entrance visa on arrival.

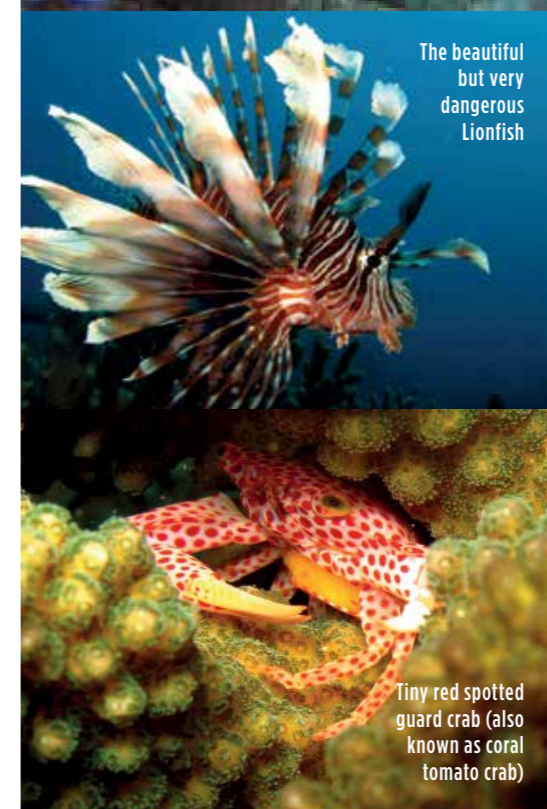
► The Malagasy ariary is the local currency (currently R1 to 270 MGA). Euros and US dollars are widely accepted.

► Sakatia is very safe for travellers, but use your common sense, particularly in the towns and popular tourist haunts of mainland Madagascar.

► Immunisations may be necessary; consult a health professional. Malaria prophylactics are advised.

► Avoid January and February, the cyclone season.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAEN ADEY, JACQUES VIEIRA



The beautiful but very dangerous Lionfish

Tiny red spotted guard crab (also known as coral tomato crab)

over pristine, colourful corals, sponges and reef fish. Eagle-eyed and familiar with every inch of reef, Jacques finds us some rarely spotted treats – seahorses, tiny shrimps camouflaged on whip corals, pencil shrimps hiding in bubble corals and porcelain crabs the size of his little finger nail. Normally, these sightings would have me in raptures, but while I'm excited by these critters, I can't wait for nightfall and my second fluo dive.

It doesn't disappoint. Now that we've got our eyes in, we locate a pair of crocodile fish that glow pink and purple in the UV light. Pretty blue and red feather stars sway in the current, and the light catches the big eyes of tiny shrimps. We observe the way in which different species appear under the light. The eyes of whip coral gobies shine bright pink, while the body doesn't fluoresce at all, and only the outer edges of a turtle's shell glow.

We have several more amazing dives on our week-long holiday, sighting dolphins and even a whale shark. But it is that first fluorescent dive that will stay with me forever. I can't wait to go back for more. ✈