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# SARDINE RUN: DIVING THE GREATEST SHOAL ON EARTH



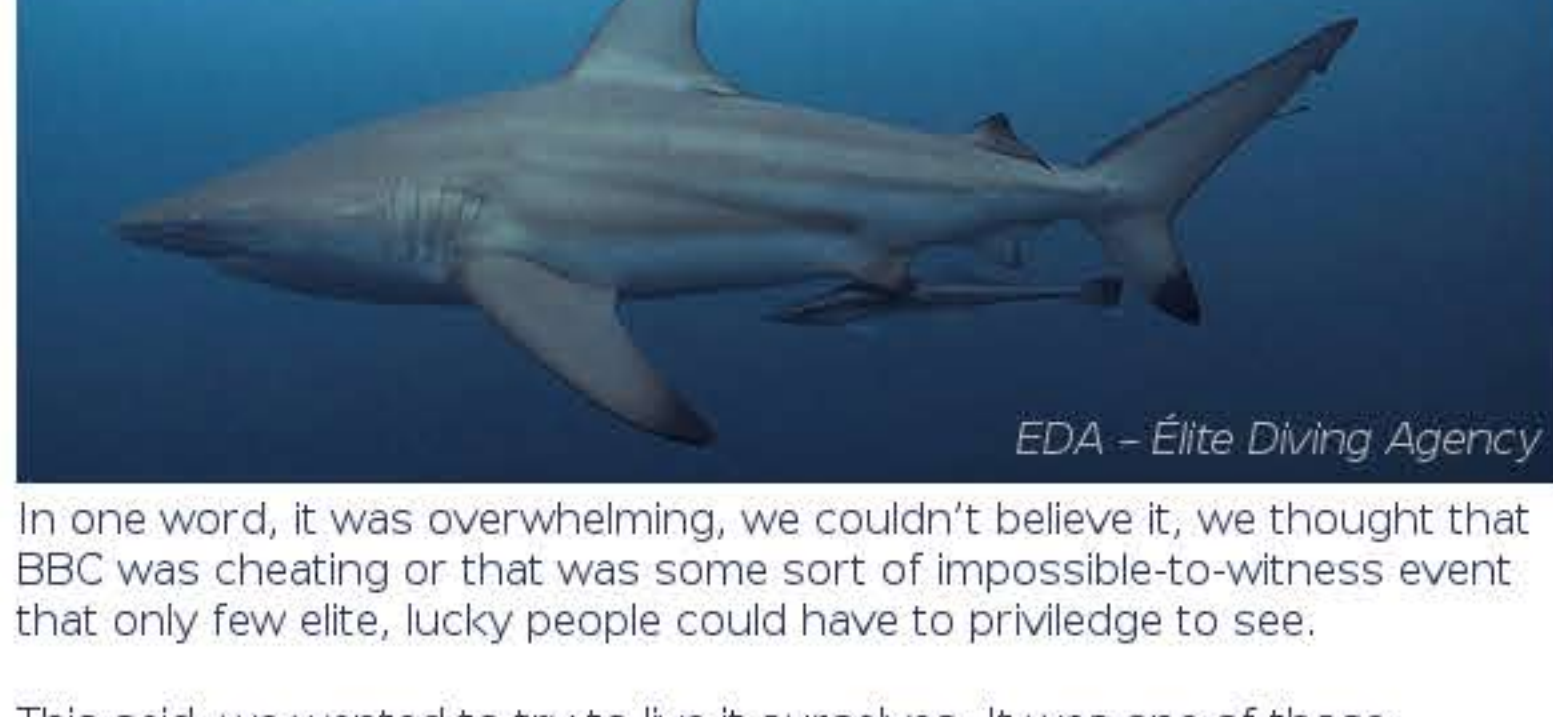
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It all started one summer night, my friend and I were sitting on the beach, having a beer and looking at the documentary that was playing in the open air cinema at the hotel. They were showing [The Blue Planet](#), an Emmy Award documentary by the BBC.

And you know, [when you're a diver](#), each clip that shows the sea and its life **captures you like a magnet**. It cuts you off from whatever thing you were doing and forces you to get deeply absorbed into the footage. Personally it is like being underwater, it gives me the same calm and relax that I have while diving.

It was the first time that we saw that documentary and that we were actually hearing about the Sardine Run; we not only heard about it, we actually lived it by watching at these incredible footages.

It was just unbelievable. The voice-over was talking about **birds diving 30 meters deep, dolphins and sharks** collaborating to hunt down every single sardine in the sea. Furthermore, there were plenty of whales, swimming few meters away from the cameraman and eating more sardines in one bite than what you can eat in a whole year.



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In one word, it was overwhelming, we couldn't believe it, we thought that BBC was cheating or that was some sort of impossible-to-witness event that only few elite, lucky people could have to privileged to see.

This said, we wanted to try to live it ourselves. It was one of those decisions taken on the spot but that you know are going to happen.

We started researching, where does it happen, when, how can you be there, is it dangerous? Plenty different questions surfaced in a moment but the decision was taken and only one was the accepted outcome... participate to the Sardine Run.

## SARDINE RUN KEY INFORMATION

First things first, these are the basic info you need to know to plan your trip.

### WHAT

The Sardine Run is a **migration of billions of sardines** that follow the stream of cold water from [Agulhas Bank](#) and ends up in [Mozambique](#). This massive migration is an annual event that attracts thousands of birds, dolphins, sharks, and it coincide with the humpback whale migration, which, being there in the area, also enjoy the free lunch.



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### WHERE

The best place to enjoy the Sardine Run is along the **Wild Coast in South Africa**; I personally recommend [Port St Johns](#) as the base camp because it has the best facilities and is the most comfortable location where you can launch your boat directly into the Sardine Run madness.

### WHEN

This migration is assumed to happen when the water hits 19 degrees and this usually occurs between the **last two weeks of June and the first two of July**. Thus, it is not guaranteed that it will happen in this period or that it will happen at all. A couple of years in the past there has been no migration at all.

## DIVING AND TRAVELLING INFO

### ARRIVING AND MOVING AROUND

The closed International airport is the [King Shaka International Airport in Durban](#). Several international companies fly there and it's easy to find a departure airport near your hometown.



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Moving around in not as easy as arriving. There are no real public transports and, to be honest, if there are I wouldn't rely on them too much. The best way is to **rent a car with or without driver**, the roads in South Africa are nice and with the aid of a GPS you can easily reach Port St Johns and whatever destination you like.

### ACCOMODATION

**Port St Johns offers different lodges**, the ones around the Mzimvubu River are the most comfortable ones because the diving operations start directly from there, they launch the rubber boats from the river and then jump through the waves to the open ocean.

### WEATHER

Well... it's winter. Even though you may be thinking "Yes but it South Africa it must be warm", it's winter and there is no wind you'll enjoy shorts and t-shirt but, at night or in a cloudy day, make sure to have long, medium-heavy trousers, a nice sweater and a wind-jacket.

### DIVING

The Sardine Run is an experience for both divers and non-divers.

Be prepared to stay long hours on a rubber boat with your wetsuit on, looking for action and when you spot it, be quick to jump into the water, turn your camera on and record the awesome.



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Most of the time you'll jump in the water without the **scuba gear**, just with your **mask, snorkel and fins**. When the action stays long enough then you'll grab the scuba set and go deeper, closer to the baitball to get the shot that will make Your cover of the next National Geographic magazine.

The only two exposure protection I feel comfortable to recommend are semi-dry and **dry suits**.

### Semidry wetsuit

- 7mm semi-dry with whole-body undersuit and a vest with hood
- PROS: You can do **great snorkeling** and some free diving all the times that you'll jump without gear
- CONS: You are the whole day wet and it's not the idea **exposure protection** if you usually **suffer the cold**

### Drysuit

- Trilaminat suit with a pile undersuit or **neoprene suit with lycra undersuit**
- PROS: **You're warm**, the whole day, no compromises
- CONS: Can't do **free diving** and is not the best setting for snorkeling

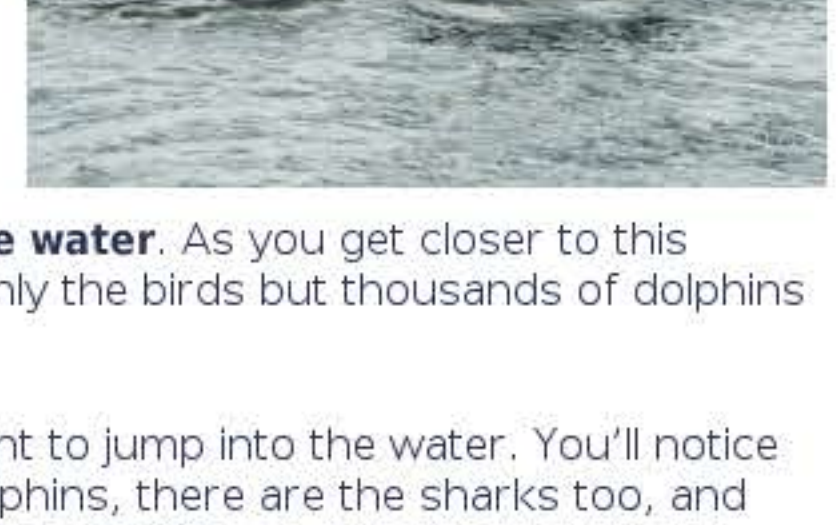
## A TYPICAL DAY AT THE SARDINE RUN

You'll wake up at the sunrise, around 7am, have a hot breakfast and get into your wetsuit. The departure is right at the lodge, the rubber boat is waiting for you at the river: get your camera and jump onboard.

The sleepy mind-set gets washed away very soon when you launch from the river to the open ocean, the ocean of the Wild Coast (and, believe, the name is not random).

Now it starts what we, at [EDA](#), call the Seafari.

We believe **the Sardine Run to be like a Safari**. Instead of a jeep you have a speedboat and instead of the savana you have the ocean.



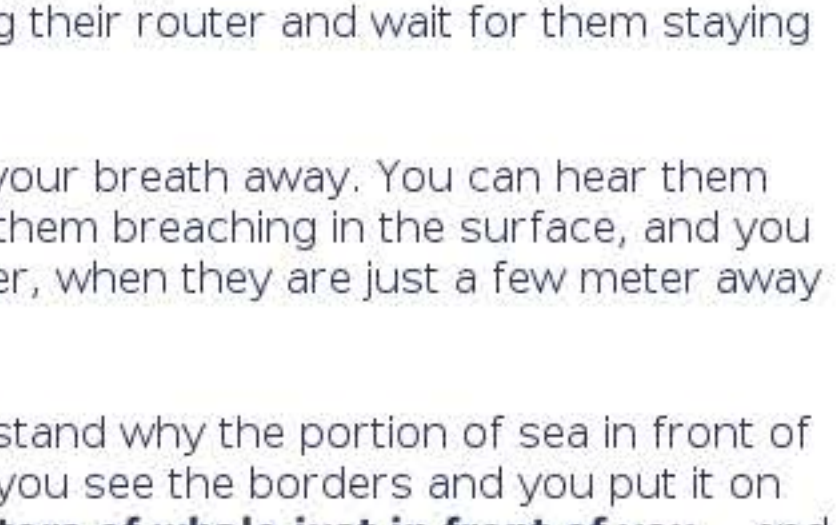
Everyone is responsible to spot the so called "action" even thus the skipper has some proper seaman sight. The term "action" stands for **hundreds of birds diving like crazy into the water**. As you get closer to this madness you'll see that it's not only the birds but thousands of dolphins swim around.

When finally you get the green light to jump into the water. You'll notice that on the bottom, below the dolphins, there are the sharks too, and maybe, if you're lucky, some sail or gamefish or, if you're very lucky, whales.

What you hope to find when spotting the "action" is actually a **"baitball"**.

A baitball is a portion of the huge shoal of sardines that the dolphins have managed to separate from the rest. This very intelligent mammal swim around the sardines releasing air bubbles form their back to disorientate them. The sardines, as a form of defence, compact themselves into the so called baitball. Unfortunately for them, the defensive tactics are poor or missing and, in most cases, none of the poor sardines will survive the slaughter.

This moment of action alternates during the day and when nothing seems to happen is when the magic actually occurs. We love to pursue some extreme-close **whale watching**. Wherever you turn you'll be able to spot one or more whales just having to bet which one is the best group and try to approach them slowly. Alternatively, you can try guessing their router and wait for them staying silent in the water.



This is something that just takes your breathing. You can hear them singing underwater. They can see them breaching in the surface, and you can put them on focus underwater, when they are just a few meter away from you.

At the beginning you don't understand why the portion of sea in front of you is moving so strangely, then you see the borders and you put it on focus and it's a whale! It's **15 meters of whale just in front of you**... and your breathe stops, you smile so largely that the water start to come in from your snorkel but even if it is so salty, you're so indescribably happy!

This is a typical day at the Sardine Run: wanna join?

## ORGANISE YOUR TRIP

As I mentioned before [we're organising this trip](#) and you're more than welcome to join our Itinerary.

If you rather go on your own, **plan at least one week** because you're not sure when exactly it is going to happen and it might also occur having few days of bad weather when it is not possible to launch the boat.

I personally suggest to **go the first or second week of July**. Book a boat on the river and **contact a local diving center** to jump on they speedboat.

I'm happy to **reply any question** in the comments below so, don't be shy, share your experience and your thoughts.

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## THE AUTHOR



**SANDRO LONARDI**  
Sandro is co-founder of [EDA](#), a tour operator specialized in scuba diving holidays. Sandro started diving when he was 14 and never stopped since, he accompanied divers underwater in Italy, Red Sea, Maldives and South Africa.

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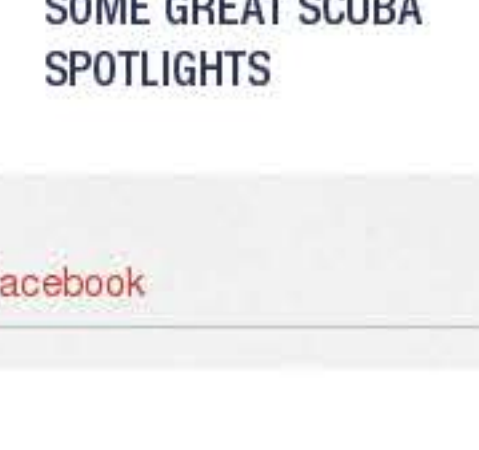
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