

# BIG TIME RUSH

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH SHARKS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, FLOATING OVER A FOREST CANOPY LIKE A CLOUD, AND PLUNGING DOWN CLIFFS ON THE HIGHEST GORGE SWING—KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE IS A HOTBED FOR THE ADVENTUROUS OF HEART

**BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**

Among South Africa's acclaimed adventure sports, shark cage diving tops the charts.





The KwaZulu-Natal coast is blessed with stunning beaches that are popular among tourists.

# CAGE AND RELEASE



I feel smothered in the middle of the vast Indian Ocean. Sharks, big and small, dart freely around my steel cage feasting on small fish tossed to lure them. For a fleeting moment, I feel jealous of the predators as they glide gracefully in the incredibly blue waters, but after all, I am the outsider, who has entered their underwater home.

For my adrenaline-packed tryst with the sharks, I wake up at 3.30 a.m. in Zimbali, 50 kilometres from Durban, for the two-hour journey aboard a mini bus to Rocky Bay on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal province. “Jobs fill your pocket but adventures fill your soul,” my guide Fundisiwe Mlotshwa’s words give me a motivational nudge and set the tone for a day that would take me from under the ocean to the belly of a deep gorge.

As my fellow travellers and I chomp on some chicken wraps, anticipation and tension race through my blood; will the sharks be aggressive? How close will I be to them? Is there even a remote chance of a mishap? Stills from *Jaws* resurface from my subconscious.

The 10-minute ride on an inflatable rubber boat to reach the site eight kilometres away is not for the faint-hearted. As the pounding waves fling the craft up and down, the salt water splatters my face and I cling on to the rope for dear life. Two of my companions get seasick.

After the boat stops, John Miller, the owner of Shark Cage Diving KZN ([sharkcagedivingkzn.com](http://sharkcagedivingkzn.com)), a local shark cage diving outfit, crisply reels out the dos and

don’ts: “Don’t take your hand out of the cage. Your nose will be clipped due to the glasses so when you want to breathe, just come to the surface and dunk your head underwater again.” Soon I spot Chiana and Brian, the two helpers, flinging sardines and lowering the chum bucket (with fish flesh, bones and blood) into the ocean. In less than two minutes, a shark glides by, affording me my first glimpse of the famed predators, yet somehow it does not look as fierce as tales would have one believe.

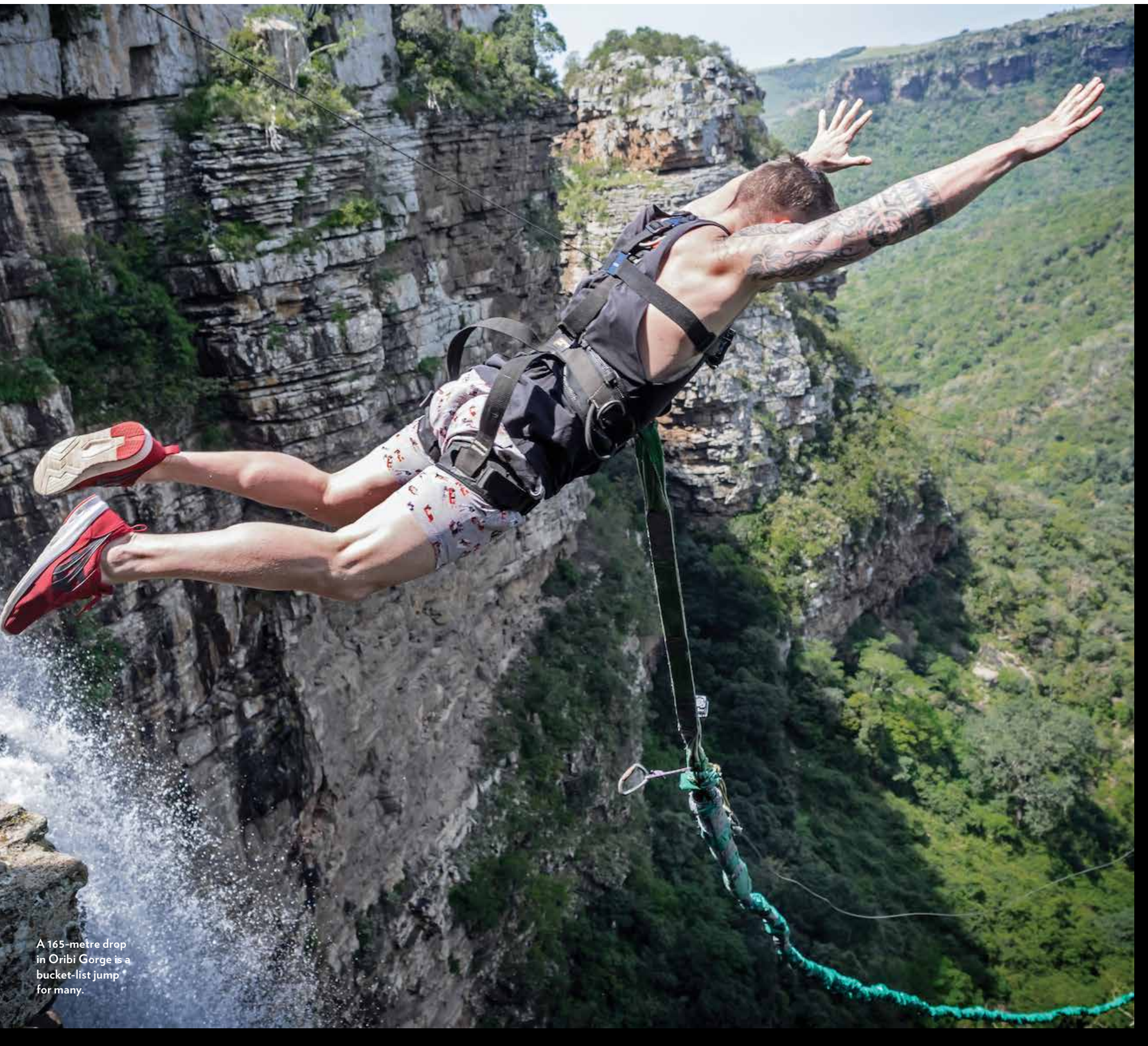
Excitement ripples through me as the cage is slowly lowered into the ocean and Brian shows me where to put my feet. The moment I look down, I am bewitched by the massive, beautiful creatures that within minutes dart towards the cage and circle around nonchalantly as they feed on the chum. There are at least 10 of them, with a couple of baby sharks who stay close to their mother.

The next half hour is surreal. I have several face-to-face encounters as sharks come tantalizingly close to the bars. Their reputation of being among the most fearsome creatures underwater somehow does not square up in my personal experience. Perhaps my apprehension has ebbed from being inside the cage.

I come back up feeling triumphant. I want to immediately tell all back home who had looked askance at me when I disclosed my plans of going shark cage diving, that sighting these marine giants is a quintessential part of the underwater experience.

John, who had been on the opposite side, filming us, later reveals that we spotted blacktip, dusky and spinner sharks. But the great white shark, one of the most difficult to spot, eluded us. I am told that a sighting is a tremendous stroke of luck. It gives me a reason to return for another visit.





A 165-metre drop in Oribi Gorge is a bucket-list jump for many.

# LEAP OF FAITH AT ORIBI GORGE



Have you ever gone from thinking you're going to crash to your death to an exhilarating high that makes you feel on top of the world, all in less than a minute? I oscillate between conflicting emotions as I take a gigantic leap from 165 metres, into the depths of a craggy canyon.

I am at Oribi Gorge, 145 kilometres from Durban, having reached here after driving past sugarcane farmlands and rolling hills. I fill the indemnity form at Wild 5 Adventures ([www.wild5adventures.co.za](http://www.wild5adventures.co.za)) and take in the dramatic vista. At any other time, I would have admired the sandstone cliffs chiselled by millions of years of river erosion, enjoyed the sound of the Lehr waterfall, and basked in the sight of the lush greenery in this 400-metre-deep gorge.

But truth be told, the beauty is lost on me because I am a bundle of nerves at the thought of taking a leap that is the equivalent to jumping off a 55-storey building. Instead, I decide to go first because if I watch someone else take the plunge into the abyss, chances are I might chicken out.

After being secured with a full body harness, I clamber down a ladder to a rock at the edge of the cliff for the momentous jump. There's a lump in my throat, my mouth goes dry and my heart beats so loudly that I can almost hear it. Wiseman, my guide, cajoles me with a much needed pep talk before greenlighting my jump, "Remember, do not, do not, close your eyes when you jump." But I can hardly move forward as my mind momentarily

blanks out. I remember saying, "I cannot do this. No, I want to go back," but before I know it, I am plummeting down the cliff.

The first few seconds is a free fall that makes me scream my lungs out. Petrified, I am telling myself, "I am going to crash," as I plunge down but before I know it, I am swinging away from the trees and the waterfall.

It's called the 'Wild Swing' for a reason. The next few minutes are like a roller coaster ride as I am pulled in different directions at great speed, giving me no time to think about anything. But suddenly the swinging becomes gentle and I find myself deep in the gorge's belly.

It is a moment imprinted on my mind; I feel like a dot in this gorgeous canyon. I gaze at the trees around and take in the sound of the waterfall, and start humming to myself. It is a couple of the most peaceful minutes of my life.

As I am pulled up gently, I brush close to the Lehr waterfall and its spray feels refreshing. I am back on the cliff, spritzed and bemused that I have successfully swung my way in and out of the gorge.

Then it's time for what seems like a more leisurely activity across the canyon along a 120-metre long zipline. It's called the 'Wild Slide' and I am again hanging on a steel wire in the middle of nowhere with just treetops below me. When I reach the mid-point, I spot the cliff from where I jumped and beam with pride.

I get talking to Andre Delpoit of Wild 5 Adventures and learn that Oribi Gorge has become a popular haunt, not just for adventure seekers, but also among birdwatchers, hikers or those who simply want to enjoy one of South Africa's spectacular spots. Durban, the biggest city in KwaZulu-Natal, is proving to be a great launch pad to get my adrenaline pumping.

PHOTO COURTESY: WILD 5 ADVENTURES





Ziplining is a fun way to explore the Karkloof forest. Visitors can sign up for a canopy tour (facing page) of the region with a local adventure outfit.

# TREELINE TANGO AT KARKLOOF CANOPY TOUR



I feel like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* as I swing from one tree to another. The only difference is that I am zooming along a steel cable strapped into a safety harness. The song “George of the Jungle” plays in my mind as I attempt the first of the 10 zipline levels. The Karkloof forest canopy is a veritable feast for my eyes and I try to keep count of the myriad shades of green, but soon give up and just focus on the sight spread below me, much like a magic carpet.

For two hours, my adrenaline levels soar to new highs as I skim the region through 10 ziplines that keep picking up speed; the last one goes up to 65 kilometres an hour.

Once I start, there will be no returning midway, I am told by my guide, Robert, at Karkloof Canopy Tour ([www.canopytour.co.za/locations/karkloof](http://www.canopytour.co.za/locations/karkloof)), where I have come after a 120-kilometre drive from Durban. I start from a platform called Rabbit Hole, not because it takes me down, but because incredible discoveries lie ahead; each of the platforms is tucked between trees giving a rare, close-up experience of the forest roof.

The first 40-metre zipline seems like a breeze, but on the second one, I get stuck towards the end because I clench the cable too tightly, which I was warned would slow me down. After some heaving and cajoling by the instructor waiting patiently for me, I finally manage to reach the next take off point.

As I glide down the steel wires, the forest reveals its many moods. I spot farmlands,

rolling hills, and meadows in the distance, and vegetation of a kind I have not seen before. I learn some of the names of the trees in South Africa’s second largest indigenous forest: the stunning *cussonia spicata*, which look like swollen cabbages, the yellowwood and white stinkwood trees. The unending green contrasts dramatically against the incredible blue of the sky above me.

The most exciting part still remains— at the last and longest zipline, which is 200 metres long, where the incredible speed at which the trees rush past me gives me a real high.

Back in my hotel in Durban in the evening, I raise a toast with my group, of course with South African wine, and remember John, Wiseman and Robert, who helped us take the plunge into the ocean, jump off a cliff and explore a forest top. In a way, they’ve helped us get rid of our fears and fall in love with this country in unusual ways. ■



PHOTO COURTESY: KARKLOOF CANOPY TOUR (MAN); PALLAVI PASRICHA (SIGNBOARD)





## MUNCH ON BUNNY CHOW

Don't be deceived by the name—bunny chow, Durban's best known street food, has nothing to do with a rabbit. On the other hand, this loaf of bread that is hollowed out and filled with curry has Indian connections. The word bunny is apparently a version of *bania*, India's trading communities who made their way to Durban during Colonial times and popularised the dish among the working class. Now the curry is made of meat such as mutton, chicken and beef or simply vegetables. This much loved comfort food is not to be missed. There are many places in Durban where one can get bunny chow, but a popular one is **Hotel Britannia** ([hotelbrits.co.za](http://hotelbrits.co.za)) and **House of Curries** on Florida Road.

## EMBARK ON INANDA HERITAGE TRAIL

Tread in the footsteps of history along Durban's heritage trail that brings you to iconic landmarks linked to two renowned freedom fighters of the 20th century. Visit the reconstructed house of Mahatma Gandhi, who spent nearly 20 years in South Africa; his original home was destroyed in apartheid violence. The white coloured house in Durban represents peace. The Phoenix Settlement on the outskirts of the city is where Gandhi developed his philosophy of non-violence and passive resistance. Also on the trail lies The Ohlange Institute, where Nelson Mandela cast his vote in South Africa's first elections in 1994, a moment that many residents still recall with vivid emotion.



## CATCH THE BIG WAVES

Durban's famed Golden Mile has truly golden sands. The series of pristine beaches spans about six kilometres, offering a range of water sports. The combination of shallow waters and more gentle waves makes South Beach an ideal spot for first-time surfers. The temperatures of the Indian Ocean here hover around 20-26°C through the year. Don't be surprised if children as young as 10 turn up as instructors; these water babies, who have grown up on surf boards, know how to earn extra pocket money. Consider yourself lucky if you spot dolphins in the distance, it's a sight to behold. [101-surfing.business.site/southafrica.learn2surf.net](http://101-surfing.business.site/southafrica.learn2surf.net)