

Down the friendly play in an

ADD some Bob Marley, a dash of coconut, topped with stretches of white beaches, and you have the heady Ponto do Ouro cocktail, only 650km from Johannesburg.

This town on the southern-most tip of Mozambique unfolds beyond several kilometres of winding hilly 4x4 terrain just past the Kosi Bay border post. It is a contrast of deserted luxury holiday homes and war-ravaged, dilapidated buildings nestling under huge palm trees. But Ponto's real charm is not on terra firma, anyway. It is the abundant marine life in the naturally protected half-moon bay that has endeared Ponto to snorkellers, divers and nature lovers alike. It is also here where a South African couple, Ange and Steve Gullan, stumbled across about 100 mostly bottle-nosed dolphins resident in the bay area while scuba diving there with Ange's brother Pete Wille almost two years ago.

The encounter with the dolphins has so impacted on their lives that it motivated the Parkhurst couple to set up their company, Dolphin Encountours.

THEY now bring small groups of mostly land-bound Gautengers to touch base with nature here.

"We just want people to come here to relax and experience something beautiful," Steve said.

And this is where the Gullans, with their eight-month-old son, Wille, and their assistants Gregor Holzer and Simone Ledtsch can be found for four days every month.

"Man has always had a connection with dolphins; I don't know what it is, but there just is one," Steve said.

Ange Gullan added: "We feel that a close and moving experience with nature is the best way to win people over to an awareness of nature."

An encounter with a wild dolphin is a deeply stirring and spiritual experience. Though the wild dolphins were constantly on the move, every time I was out on the boat, the close sightings of these cetaceans in their own environment was awesome.

We also had magnificent encounters with that gentle giant, the whale shark, which grows upwards of 18m and is often seen gliding slowly through the Mozambican

way where dolphins azure bay

waters.

Experienced divers in our group marvelled at the prolific sea life on the 18 reefs in the area.

The highlight for me

however, was witnessing the birth of a dolphin in the wild and watching the youngster come up for its first breaths. This is a rare sight and one not often experienced by humans.

Conservation of the area is a prime concern for the Gullans. They are involved with dolphin monitoring for the Dolphin Research Centre based in Port Elizabeth, the UK-based International Dolphin Watch and the South African Underwater Ecology Society.

UFRIEDA HO reports on an aquatic haven for dolphins and stressed-out Gautengers

And speaking of food, the tour package includes sun-downers on Friday night as well as two meals of a prawn and fish braai.

Though, over the years, Mozambique has been deeply scarred by war, Ponto's people are friendly, laid-back and warm. What's more, with a return of tourists there is a strong sense of renewal in the area. To visit Ponto do Ouro now is to behold the slow resurgence of a town. Ponto do Ouro means "point of gold" and within its kiss of honey-eyed sunsets and sunrises it embodies some of the great spirits of nature.

☐ The cost for four days and three nights is R920.



DOLPHIN TEAM ... Pete Wille, Ange and Steve Gullan and Gregor Holzer take visitors to the place where the dolphins live.

Dolphin Encountours is working to have the bay declared a marine sanctuary. They also operate on a code of conduct adapted from the rules drawn up by the International Dolphin Watch.

Their snorkelling tour package includes information booklets on dolphins and other marine ecology for each guest as well as informative but informal talks and video shows. Snorkelling training is provided if required. On an occasion when the sea was too choppy, we headed inland to a hippo and crocodile pool, 20 minutes' drive from Ponto. Here, cradled in horizons of pristine vegetation, we saw a fish eagle swooping in for a

You meet up with the team from Dolphin Encountours at the Kosi Bay border post. Unless you have a 4x4, leave your car at the border post where it will be guarded in a locked enclosure for R10 a night. Accommodation is in simple self-catering chalets and camping facilities are available. You must consult your doctor or a travel clinic (011-899-000) about malaria precaution as a chloroquine-resistant strain of malaria exists in the area. You will also need a visa (R100) which the tour group can organise two weeks prior to departure. Bring along a snorkel and a mask.

☐ Dolphin Encountours: tel (011) 447-5362 or fax