

# Sea slugs, sand and sun!

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Strange things happen these days on Gamba beaches. Many large and unusual shells are being found on the beach, as well as a number of other sea creatures. This might be due to modifications in the local sea currents because of the transition between the dry and the rainy seasons. The most amazing among this season's discoveries, besides some large jellyfishes (Terminal and Nyanga beaches) otherwise rarely seen in this part of Gabon, was a massive stranding of several thousands of small alien-looking animals. Stranded on the beach, they looked at first sight like small black and white blobs, and from some meters away they were even first mistaken for small oil pellets by Ed de Jonge (blackspots projects). Immediately after Ed reported them to the HSE Environmen-

tal team, on Friday September 24th, several hundred meters of the beach left of the Jetty was inspected.

Not only did these ugly blobs turn out to be live beings, but, once put in sea water, they extended their body and their numerous tentacles to reveal an extraordinarily-shaped and sophisticated organism. Since many of these exotic sea creatures are venomous, they were photographed and photographs immediately sent to specialists of the Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences in Brussels where a whole scientist team works on tropical sea invertebrates. While the exact species identification is still under investigation (it is probably *Glaucus atlanticus*), it is already clear that they are sea slugs, belonging to the family Glaucidae. They are pelagic animals, normally living far offshore, and floating near the surface. They feed on venomous invertebrates, such as the Portuguese-man-o-war, and are able to ingest and even re-use the venomous cells of their preys! The venom is then more concentrated than that of Portuguese-man-o-war. This makes these sea slugs redoubtable animals that one should absolutely avoid to touch, even when they seem dead (same as with jellyfish). The next day, they had all disappeared from the Terminal beach, and were also absent from Colas and Pont Dick beaches, so the event seems to have been geographically limited and short-lived.

It seems that several strandings of Portuguese-man-o-war are seen each year on Gamba beaches (we observed several already), and although their colours and shapes are very attractive, they are very dangerous. In any case, everytime you encounter such animals you do not know, especially stranded on the beach, do not touch them! And if there is a massive stranding on the beach, there are certainly more in the sea, so do not swim!