

SA scientists head for the deep unknown

BOBBY JORDAN

SOBAHLE Somhlaba grew up chasing *goggas* among the waving grasslands of rural Transkei. Next week he will be chasing sea *goggas* among ocean swells the size of the hills he used to explore.

The 32-year-old scientist has been included in an elite team of researchers about to set out on a 118-day deep-sea expedition to explore a little-known stretch of ocean off the east coast of Africa. The team is hoping to find previously unknown — and unusual — species of sea life.

But for Somhlaba it will be just another journey in an extraordinary career path, from Bizana Primary School north of

Port St Johns to a master's in applied mathematics under one of South Africa's leading mathematicians. Now he must overcome his greatest challenge: seasickness.

His job aboard the 57m Norwegian research ship Dr Fridtjof Nansen will be to analyse data from sensitive monitoring equipment that scientists use to "see" the sea bed and the things swimming — or crawling — down there. The ship is fitted with hi-tech sonar and oceanographic sensors, as well as several types of nets that are trawled at different depths as the ship sails along.

Another local due to take part in the mission is Tendani Marimba, 33, who graduated from the

University of South Africa with a BTech degree. Mariba said it was his love of nature while growing up in a Limpopo village that steered him towards nature conservation. He first worked for the Kruger National Park, then moved to Marine and Coastal Management.

Mariba's success was partly thanks to sponsorship from the Sabi Sabi Private Nature Reserve, who recognised his potential.

The UN-funded research will be divided into four stages, each with a new team. It is part of a multinational oceanographic study called the Agulhas and Somali Current Large Marine Ecosystems (ASCLME) project.

In addition to scientific dis-

covery, the research findings will help governments to more effectively manage their marine resources.

Another scientist taking part is Grahamstown-based James Stapley, an ASCLME consultant who has helped to catalogue several new species from unknown parts of the ocean.

Previous missions into deep sea areas west of Madagascar have netted some curious beasts including a type of dragonfish that has two sets of lights on its head — one green/blue behind the eyes like other fish, the other red below the eyes that other fish can't see.

This helps dragonfish secretly hunt down their prey and impale them on huge front teeth.



SEA LEGS: Sobahle Somhlaba sails for Madagascar on the Dr. Fridtjof Nansen research vessel to explore the ocean. Picture: ESA ALEXANDER