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AUGUST 2020
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MISSION LUSITANIA

When everything had to go right

SWEET 18

Instructors share their hot-ticket sites in Local Intelligence 2

GATORS & MEG TEETH

Out of isolation in South Carolina

PALAU PERFECTION

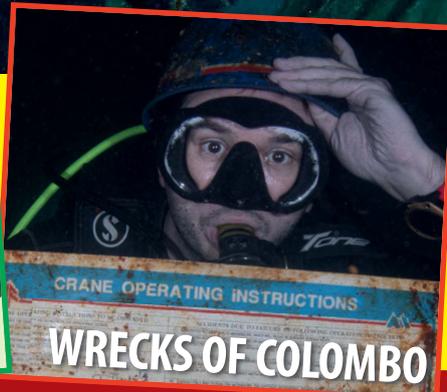
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HURGHADA

RED SEA

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Egypt

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS
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ALEXANDER VASENIN

As well as giving access to the classic wreck and reef dives of the north, Hurghada is a gateway to some of the best sites in the Southern Red Sea. From beginner scuba experiences to deep and cave technical diving exploration, it is a diving destination of great



variety in underwater topography, marine life and wrecks. The area is also famed for having impressive local reefs, particularly within the protected marine park of Giftun Island.

Most of the dive sites around Hurghada can be reached within 40 minutes from a boat, offering an excellent mix of options for full-day and half-day trips.

Unlike Egypt's other major dive resort of Sharm el Sheikh, boats leave from private jetties belonging to the many beachside resorts where centres are generally based.

Many divers also depart Hurghada for some of the Red Sea's most celebrated sites to the south.

The town's new marina has added another level of luxury for liveaboard travellers with a wealth of shops, cafes, restaurants and bars to chill out on the last day of trips – just a short walk from the dive deck.

With the highest mountains of the Eastern Desert in view, daytrips to see nature in Hurghada topside are a must-do. Explore the wadis (valleys) and mountains by foot, camel, jeep or quad bike. Most desert trips include a visit to a Bedouin settlement.

Relax on Hurghada's white sandy beach, surrounded by coral reefs.

Mahmeya Beach is a great chill-out day-trip by boat. The island has a small beach club, which serves up fabulous lunches.

Egypt's windy city is a popular spot for kite and windsurfers, with lots of excellent centres offering lessons and kit hire. It is also possible to join a kitesurfing boat safari.



Air bridge of sighs

THE DIVING WORLD had shrunk overnight like a rudely deflated balloon, and now it was very slowly starting to expand again.

First, we were allowed out of our homes. There was a little tentative shore-diving, followed by the launching of RIBs. It looked as if the bigger boats would get the green light, but it was on-off for some time (see *News*).

Divers around the UK were able to follow England and get back in the water, and there was much talk about the start of July seeing the opening of the way to “non-essential” travel overseas.

It might be non-essential for the government, it might even be non-essential for UK divers – after all, what’s a few months without warmwater diving when we have our whole futures to secure? – but for the specialist dive-travel industry, it’s make or break.

In the weeks leading up to July, I was having dreams about air bridges and travel corridors. Wondering what we would be able to report about visiting the wider diving world in this issue of **DIVER**, I vividly remember standing on some sort of majestic structure spanning half the sky but disappearing into wispy cloud.

And a dream bridge to nowhere was, to some extent, what the real opening of borders at first turned out to be.

The rumours of accessible diving destinations had twisted and turned. First, it would be just four or five popular southern European locations. No, wait, early favourite Portugal was out of favour and Greece was in, even though it had seemed reluctant to accept possible British virus-carriers the previous week. Just a minute, no, Greece was off again.

Then suddenly there was talk of a superbridge all the way to Australia! Forget a handful of neighbours, suddenly there were going to be 50... 60... no, 70 nations with low R-rates to be graced with our custom, many no doubt with seriously good diving available.

Quite a U-turn from a government that had introduced a two-week quarantine for incomers some weeks after the Covid horse had bolted, and sworn that it would be kept in place. But that was fine, we were all going on a diving summer holiday!

EXCEPT THAT CORONAVIRUS is still raging around the world, or has been precariously suppressed. When we sat down to trawl through official advice on all those destinations that (English) divers were free to visit from 10 July, not too many were offering to open their end of the air corridor or travel bridge, at least without complications.

Many were understandably keeping their borders closed to all but returning citizens. Others required the sort of two-week self-isolation arrangements we had just given up – not ideal for holiday-makers – and in other cases arranging flights would just be plain difficult.

Still, it’s a step in the right direction, and some diving destinations are open for business – see *News*. And though things will change if further coronavirus outbreaks occur, at least the exit doors are now open.

Our advice? Consider making this the year to celebrate UK diving; check to see if there’s an appealing overseas trip you can make now, if you can’t wait; and keep in touch with your tour operator about reaching your favourite location – or an unexpected alternative. In the process, you might just make some exciting discoveries!

FIRST IN



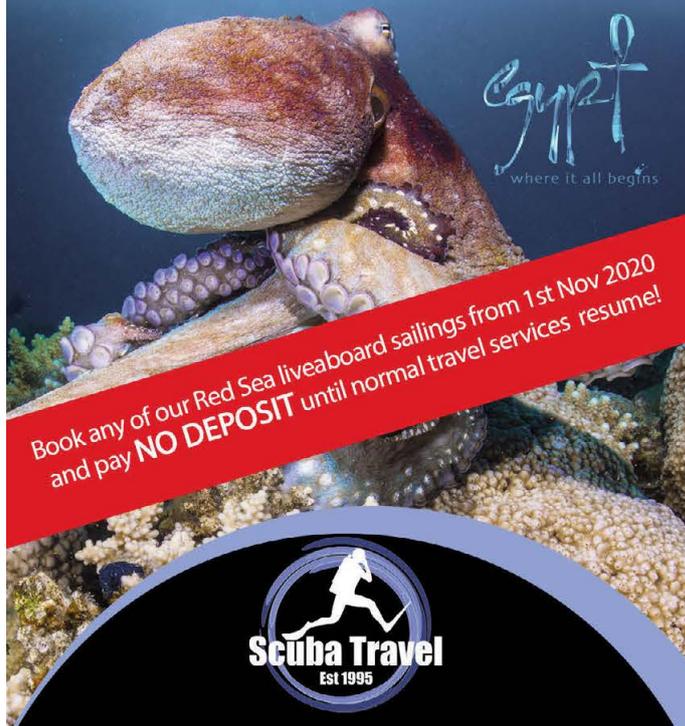
STEVE WEINMAN, EDITOR

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the magazine that's straight down the line...

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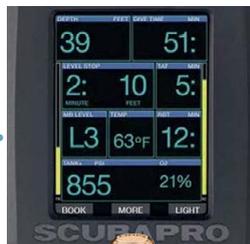
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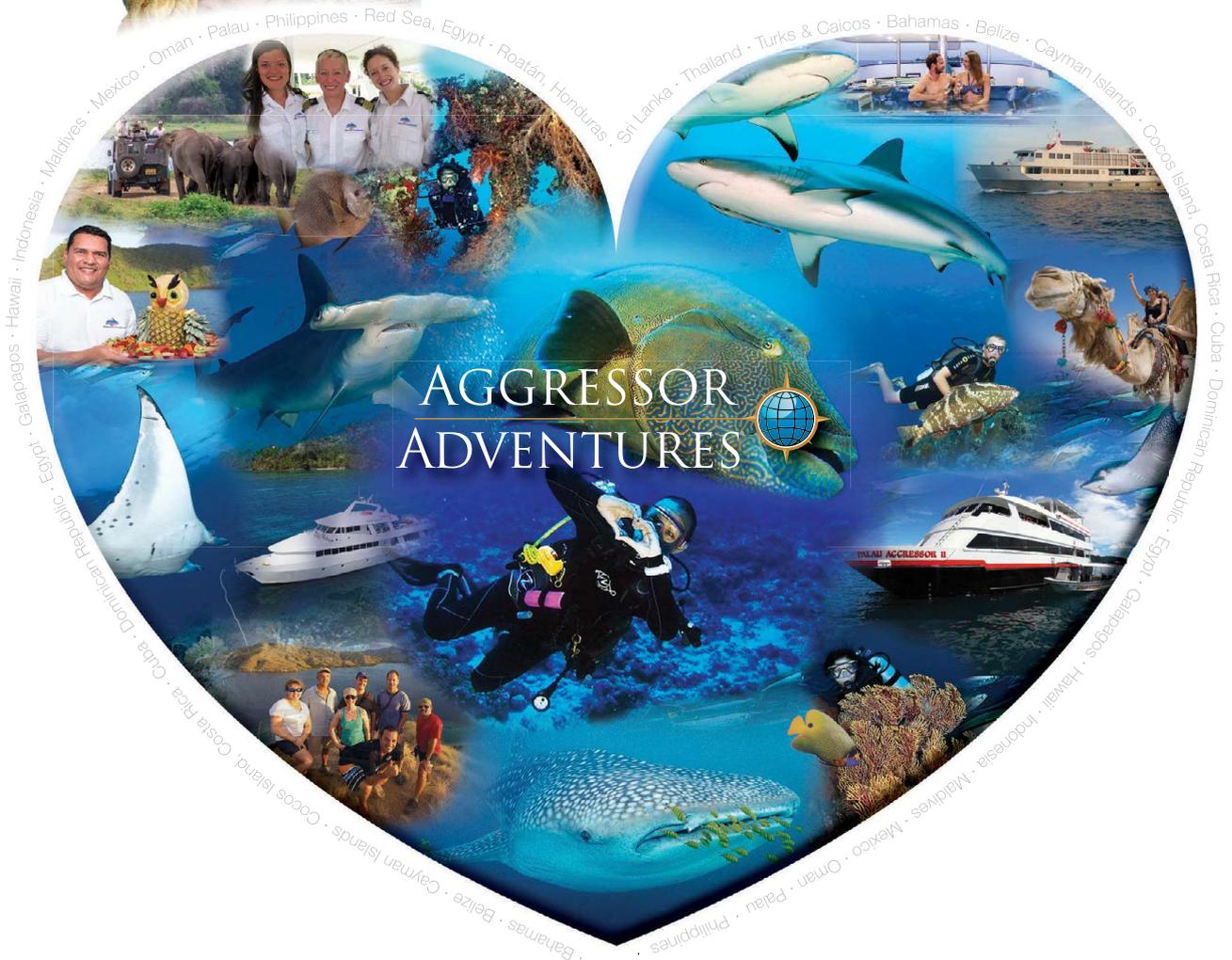


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Ropes off for diving charter-boats after confusing government ban

DIVE-CHARTER BOATS in England were allowed to go back into operation, and club-boats to take larger groups aboard, from the UK government's 4 July "independence day", after it withdrew the ambiguous guidance it had issued on 11 June.

That guidance from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had dashed hopes of an early resumption of charter-boat hire, as the government decided to maintain the ban it had imposed at the start of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown.

Although the document was said to prevent all use of charter boats, it had appeared to be specifically directed only at those operating on inland waters, leading to confusion.

Operators struggled to get a straight answer from DEFRA, British Marine, the Department of Transport or the Maritime & Coastguard Agency, but their certifying authorities and some insurance brokers had made clear that they did not believe the DEFRA guidance applied to vessels at sea. This led to some diving day-boats returning to sea in June.

The July relaxation followed lobbying for clarification from the charter-boat industry as well as scuba and angling bodies, but the finer details had still to be confirmed as **DIVER** was going to press.

Vessels needed to meet Covid-secure requirements, and up to six members of separate households

could now be accommodated as long as social distancing was maintained.

While outdoor social distancing requirements remained at 2m, if that was not always possible on a boat the new "1m-plus" guidance could be applied – as long as "additional precautions" were taken.

The Professional Charter Association (PCA) had been telling its members since 23 June that they could be preparing to resume operations from 4 July with new rules to be disclosed, chairman Ian Winson told **DIVER**.

But he pointed out that a final directive was still awaited from DEFRA, and foresaw problems in managing aspects such as social distancing.

"Opening is two days away with nothing issued bar an email that has no detail, so we have no idea how

members and operators can comply without the notice," he said, speaking on 2 July.

"Dive-boats will depend on size – RIBs will be greatly reduced but a large dive-boat with open decks can achieve good numbers."

Most PCA members planned a return with restrictions, said Winson, "but I also know of others who say they won't open yet because restricted numbers will make it untenable in terms of cost versus income". Many charter-boat owners operate as limited companies with no designated premises, and do not qualify for government relief.

"I believe some associations were driving the DEFRA notice rather than challenging it," added Winson. "Some people we have spoken to will not be renewing with those associations next year, while we have seen a good

rise in new members."

UK diving's governing body the British Sub-Aqua Club, which had also challenged the government on its ruling, had issued preliminary advice on the use of both club and charter boats in its comprehensive *Safe Return to Diving* guidance in May, having expected an earlier return.

"We are all delighted that this change has been acknowledged by DEFRA," said CEO Mary Tetley. "Working together with all of the other agencies has only strengthened our lobbying on conflicting advice."

The 11 June guidance had also covered diving from private or club boats of less than 7m such as RIBs. This had been officially sanctioned in England for single household units or support bubbles as long as 2m social distancing requirements could be met onboard at all times.

Meanwhile Scottish divers welcomed the announcement of a relaxation from 3 July in the five-mile distance restriction on recreational travel.

"This has probably been the biggest obstacle to a return to diving in Scotland," said governing body ScotSAC. "This makes travelling to dive-sites much more viable."

From 10 July, people in Scotland were permitted to meet in extended groups outdoors, though the 2m physical distancing guidance remained in force. The five-mile travel restriction has also now been removed in Wales. ■



COLIN SMITH

Divers unite with swimmers over pool closures

CONTINUED CLOSURE of public swimming pools in the UK because of the coronavirus pandemic has caused problems for dive-club members who don't have ready access to open water, and often depend on them for training.

Swimming's governing body Swim England warned in late June that some pools could stay closed.

"Many of these facilities will not survive without government support and the least they deserve is some certainty about when they can open their doors and start servicing their local communities

once more," said chief executive Jane Nickerson. "The longer pools are closed, the more facilities we will sadly see never reopening."

The government's aspiration to open gyms and leisure-centres by mid-July prompted Nickerson to request clarity on whether or not this included swimming pools.

The British Sub Aqua Club called on divers to support Swim England's #OpenOurPools campaign. It said it has been working alongside the organisation, as well as Scottish Swimming, Swim Wales and Swim Ireland, to prepare for reopening.

BSAC recently published *Swimming Pool Guidance*, which it said showed that despite Covid-19 pools could be well-managed, safe environments that "enable people to be active and improve their physical and mental well-being," according to chief executive Mary Tetley.

"BSAC's network of clubs has been patient, understanding and accepting the initial need to close pools," she said. "However, it is becoming harder to continue to

accept pool closures, while close-proximity activities can reopen."

Divers were being encouraged to write to their MPs using a template letter produced by Swim England, and to sign its petition calling for an urgent review of the decision to delay reopening, and for a firm date to be set, swimming.org ■



FLYING OFF TO DIVE – IT'S STILL A SMALL WORLD

IF COMMERCIAL FLIGHTS are available and pre-entry Covid-19 testing accepted, the Azores, Bahamas, Barbados, Croatia, Gibraltar, Madeira, Spain and Turkey appeared to be the most immediately viable overseas destinations for English scuba divers, as the UK government relaxed coronavirus travel restrictions on 4 July.

Divers eager to book overseas underwater action had a measure more clarity with the lifting of the ban on non-essential travel to a list of

countries, followed by removal of quarantine restrictions when re-entering the UK.

The moves followed twists and turns in what was labelled a "shambolic" attempt by the Department for Transport, Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), Joint Biosecurity Centre, Public Health England and the Chief Medical Officer to work out a workable overseas travel plan together with the UK's devolved administrations.

Travellers from England are now

permitted to travel to a list of countries including most of Europe and others in the Caribbean, Far East and British Overseas Territories without having to self-isolate on their return to the UK. They are required only to provide contact information.

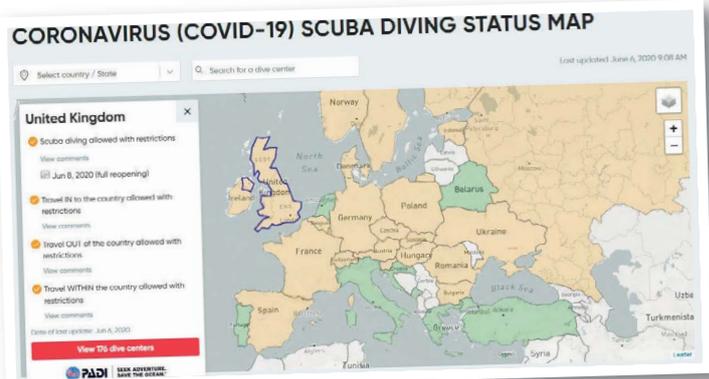
The FCO also now permits travel to a list of 73 destinations for non-essential purposes such as diving. Few "front-line" diving destinations such as Egypt, the Maldives, Indonesia or the Philippines were included on the initial list, though that could change

over time.

Most of the listed diving destinations were either not currently open to visitors, stipulated a fortnight's self-

isolation or could prove difficult to reach by air.

These included Australia, Bonaire/St Eustatius/Saba, Canada, Cayman Islands, Curacao, Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, France, French Polynesia, Greece (which was set for review on 15 July), Grenada, Ireland, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Norway, Seychelles, St Kitts &



Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Thailand, Tobago and Turks & Caicos.

There might also be difficulties in obtaining travel insurance for some destinations, and travellers were warned that the UK could reapply restrictions to countries if coronavirus spikes occurred there – and that accessible countries could also reimpose their own restrictions.

Details of individual entry requirements to the various listed countries can be found on the FCO website at gov.uk.

Individual arrangements were still under discussion in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. ■

Major agencies produce handy dive-travel maps

AS UK DIVERS ARE ABLE to contemplate the possibility of travelling to dive overseas once again, they could find it helpful to keep up to date using two interactive world maps from major training agencies.

PADI has come up with the *Covid-19 Scuba Diving Status Map*, while SSI's online offering is its *Travel Restriction Map*.

Both provide high levels of detail and can be used to determine what travel restrictions apply, accessibility of diving in each country and the latest status for each dive-centre and resort affiliated to the respective agencies.

"As the effects of Covid-19 spreading and receding from each country evolve, local regulations adapt, creating a patchwork of situations and making it hard to stay up to date, even for residents in their own community," says PADI.

It says the data it uses is collated at source from 6750 dive-centres and updated regularly as situations evolve.

"This map is a great resource for information on current guidelines, any potential restrictions and special safety precautions in place to help people safely dive in again locally and across the globe," travel.padi.com

"Since travel is such an integral part of our sport, the diving industry has been one of the hardest hit," says SSI.

"Now that our SSI training centres are finally re-opening and diving is once again becoming accessible, we want to help plan your next travel adventure... SSI has created a *Travel Restriction Map* to give you an overview of where you can and cannot travel to SSI training centres, in real-time." divessi.com ■

Covid scorecard developed for diver safety

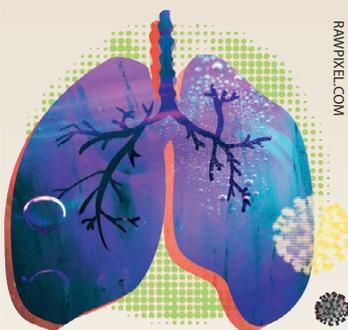
A SCORECARD DESIGNED to help scuba-divers exposed to or infected by the Covid-19 virus calculate whether it is safe for them to resume diving has been produced by the UK Diving Medical Committee.

Divers who have experienced lung or heart changes resulting from the virus could risk barotrauma or other respiratory difficulties by diving, as reported in *DIVER News* in June and July.

They also need to take the coronavirus into account when completing the latest diver medical self-assessment forms.

The UKDMC, a network of 56 medical referees with accredited diving medicine expertise, advises the British Sub-Aqua Club, Sub-Aqua Association and Scottish Sub-Aqua Club on diving-medicine issues.

Its scorecard allocates points for each of eight elements of a diver's medical history in 2020, with the score cross-checked with a table to



determine the current advice.

Negative indicators include new persistent cough, fever, increased shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, known unprotected contact with a proven or suspected Covid-19 sufferer, a positive antibody test or throat swab, and symptoms severe enough to require hospital admission.

For any score between 1 and 7, it is suggested that taking a government-approved Covid-19 antibody test (currently those produced by Abbott and by Roche)

should be considered, because a negative test might alter the score to give the all-clear.

Otherwise the diver is recommended to consult a medical referee no sooner than three months after the most recent illness, and once back to normal exercise capacity. The referee list can be found at ukdmc.org.

Higher scores require testing to be carried out before a return to diving can be considered.

For those with scores high enough to reflect an almost 100% chance of lung changes, divers are normally advised to wait at least a year after being discharged from hospital and feeling fully recovered and back to normal exercise capacity before discussing a return to diving.

They might, however, be able to resume diving earlier if tests can prove that the lungs and heart have not been affected.

Download the scorecard from ukdmc.org/downloads ■

Diver death report delay 'extraordinary' – coroner

TWO INQUESTS took place in England in early June into the overseas deaths of two divers over the same weekend last summer.

Desmond Boucher, 59, from Ebbw Vale, had been on holiday in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. An experienced scuba-diver who would travel to dive up to five times a year, he lived and worked as a currency trader and photographer in Cheltenham.

On Saturday, 6 July, Boucher surfaced from a dive at Gordon Reef complaining of tightness in his chest.

After losing consciousness he was taken to Sharm International Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

At an inquest held at Gwent Coroners' Court and reported in Wales Online, senior coroner Caroline Saunders noted that an Egyptian pathologist had carried out a post mortem examination and concluded that Boucher's death was the result of "severe respiratory failure" – which, as she pointed out, was a mode of death rather than a cause.

The Egyptian authorities had then failed not only to supply a detailed report of the findings but to return the body intact for further examination.

Pathologist Dr James Harrison had carried out a second post mortem once Boucher's body had been repatriated to the UK, but had been unable to establish a medical cause of death because it had been



Desmond Boucher...



...Zeddy Seymour.

embalmed, affecting the tissues, and the heart had been removed and not returned.

The coroner said that further information had been requested several times from the Egyptian authorities, but she had been told that it could take up to four years for the full report to be released.

"I will not make a comment, but I find that quite extraordinary," she said.

She recorded that Boucher's death was from natural causes as a result of cardio-respiratory disease, but said

that if new evidence should emerge to alter that conclusion, another inquest could be called.

The other inquest, at Somerset Coroner's Court in Taunton, was into the death of Alexander "Zeddy" Seymour, 32, born in Canada but whose hometown was given as Frome.

Seymour was an experienced marine biologist and scuba-diver who researched into sharks and rays as a co-ordinator for Belize-based marine-conservation charity MarAlliance. He had been based in Cape Verde off west Africa for seven years, according to a *Somerset Live* inquest report.

On Sunday, 7 July last year Seymour had been diving with his team to tag tiger sharks in Pedra de Lume Bay off the island of Sal.

The others had returned to their boat but Seymour had gone back into the water to freedive, said senior coroner Tony Williams. His body later resurfaced and he was found to have drowned.

A post mortem was carried out in Bath, and the coroner concluded that Seymour's had been an accidental death following an episode of barotrauma, or pressure-related injury, that led to his drowning.

MarAlliance has since set up a Zeddy Seymour Scholarship Fund to support the education of Cape Verde fishermen's children – who were said to have known him as "the man who swims with sharks". ■

When a diver could do with a bigger knife

VIDEO APPEARED online in mid-June of an attempt by a diving instructor in the Gulf of Thailand to free a whale shark from a long trailing rope knotted around its tail.

A dive group came across the slow-moving whale shark near the Sail Rock site off Koh Tao on 13 June. One of the divers, Sarakorn Pokapranan, recorded an instructor's repeated attempts to cut the nylon line with a small knife, but he was unable to sever it and eventually had to give up the attempt as the whale shark swam clear.



SARAKORN POKAPRANAN / REUTERS

It was not clear how the rope had caught around the shark's tail, but because it was cutting into the flesh it was feared that it could lead to a lethal infection. Some reports that it was the diver's knife that caused the injury appeared to be based on a misinterpretation of the Reuters report on the incident.

As the video circulated, Koh Tao marine authorities were reported to be looking out for the whale shark in hopes of being able to free it. ■

DIVERS IN DANGER, CLAIM WIND-FARMERS

STAFF AT A SUSSEX offshore wind farm have issued a warning to scuba-divers driving out to the area.

It surprised local divers because the resumption of boat-diving in England had only just been made official in early June, but according to the operations and maintenance team at Rampion Offshore Wind Farm a number of divers had been jumping the gun.

They said that they had already noticed "an increase" in the numbers of visiting dive-boats. "Our engineers travel out to the wind farm and work on the turbines and substation daily, which means that if divers are also at the site there are dangers for both them and our teams," said a spokesperson.

Rampion lies in the English Channel 8-12 miles from the Sussex coast between East Worthing and Brighton, and covers an area of 28 sq miles.

Operated from Newhaven, it provides electrical power for the equivalent of 350,000 homes a year.

Staff say that risks to divers in the area include high-speed vessel traffic, high-voltage seabed cables, unpredictable currents, sharp marine growth, falling objects, and snag hazards, including shallow buried cables near the turbines.

Divers' presence could also prevent emergency access to the turbines and substation where engineers are working, they say.

Rampion has issued a leaflet to all dive-clubs in the area to raise awareness of these hazards. It says that if divers do risk diving they should not approach too close, and contact the Newhaven control-room when leaving port or before starting a dive.

It asks that they confirm the site, expected arrival and departure times, vessel name and call sign, as well as the number of divers expected in the water.

"We recommend you avoid diving along Rampion's export cable route and within 100m of



Rampion wind farm doesn't welcome divers.

DARREN COOL / DCCOUMAGES

our turbines and substation," said the spokesperson.

"We also request that no vessel ties on to the substation or turbines. We would like to thank divers for their co-operation and help in keeping everyone safe."

Divers can contact Rampion on 01273 514588 or email rampion.controlroom@rwe.com, or use VHF channel 16. ■

Giant cuttlefish rock up in force

MAEVE PLOUFFE



The cuttlefish aggregate annually in South Australia.

MORE GIANT AUSTRALIAN cuttlefish have returned to their breeding ground this year than have been seen since the last century.

Estimates were hovering as high as a quarter of a million cuttlefish, and many divers were being attracted to witness the aggregation. It occurred along a five-mile stretch of rocky reef at Point Lowly in the Spencer Gulf, about 12 miles east of Whyalla and almost 250 miles north-west of South Australia's capital Adelaide.

Giant Australians (*Sepia apama*) are the world's biggest cuttlefish, at up to 50cm long and weighing 10kg. They are nicknamed "rock stars of the ocean" because, with mere 12-18-month lifespan, they live fast and die young.

This makes the May-August breeding season critical, because the number of surviving eggs affects the number of adults that return the following year to breed.

The cuttlefish are thought to be drawn to Point Lowly's dark rocks and crevices because they offer their eggs protection from the sun.

During mating season male cuttlefish combine camouflage to match rocks or seaweed with colour-changing and sparring displays to

win the attention of the females, which go on to lay 100-300 eggs.

When hatched, the thumbnail-sized baby



The cuttlefish can grow to 50cm long.

MAEVE PLOUFFE

BITTER END FOR A SNAKE EEL

WHEN THE SNAKE EELS popular with underwater photographers are targeted by predatory fish, their demise isn't necessarily a quick one, it seems.

The snake eel (family *Ophichthidae*) is found in tropical, temperate waters around the world, and is able to burrow into the seabed with its hard, pointed tail. Divers often see only the head protruding as the eel waits to ambush prey.

The tail isn't limited to drilling through substrate, however – it turns out that it can also be used as a tool in a bid to escape from the gut of any fish that swallows a snake eel whole.

However, once past the fish's soft stomach-lining the going gets tougher, and it isn't known whether any eel has ever succeeded in bursting, *Alien*-style, clear out of a fish.

Scientists in Australia recently reported the first recorded cases of snake eels escaping from a fish's gut but then becoming trapped in tissues in its body cavity – and eventually becoming mummified within the apparently unaffected fish.

The trapped eels were initially found in black croakers (*Protonibea diacanthus*), a commercially fished grouper.

The researchers, from Northern Territory Fisheries, CSIRO Australia, Queensland Museum and the Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, went on to collect 10 other species of medium-to-large predatory fish thought likely to treat snake eels as part of their diet – and found seven fish with eels entombed inside them.

Some of the snake eels could be undescribed species, say the scientists. Their study is published in *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum*. ■



Snake eel.

STEVE WEINMAN

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Son follows father on deepest dive

FIFTY-TWO YEAR-OLD

American Kelly Walsh has undertaken a 10.925km-deep submersible dive in the Western Pool of Challenger Deep – the location famously first visited by his father Captain Don Walsh in the bathyscaphe *Trieste* 60 years before.

The 20 June dive, timed to coincide with Father's Day weekend, was carried out aboard the two-person Triton 36000/2 submersible *Limiting Factor*, piloted by its owner Victor Vescovo. It was the latest dive in this year's "Ring of Fire" expedition, jointly organised by EYOS Expeditions, Vescovo's Caladan Oceanic and Triton Submarines.

Challenger Deep, the deepest location on Earth, lies in the Mariana Trench 200 miles south-west of Guam.

The dive took 12 hours, with Vescovo and Walsh covering almost two miles as they spent hours traversing the seabed at the bottom.

"It was a hugely emotional journey for me," said Walsh, once he was back on the expedition's mothership DSSV *Pressure Drop*. "I have been immersed in the story of dad's dive since I was born – people find it fascinating.

"The leap in technology from 1960 is immense. Dad spent 20 minutes on the bottom and could see very little.

"I had the opportunity to spend four hours on the bottom with excellent lighting and a 4k camera running the whole time.

"We had complete control over our vehicle; great lighting, manoeuvrability and a comfortable cabin, whereas dad had none of those things.

"The *Limiting Factor* is an amazing vehicle; a true platform for exploration and a credit to the 'out of the box' innovation at Triton Submarines."

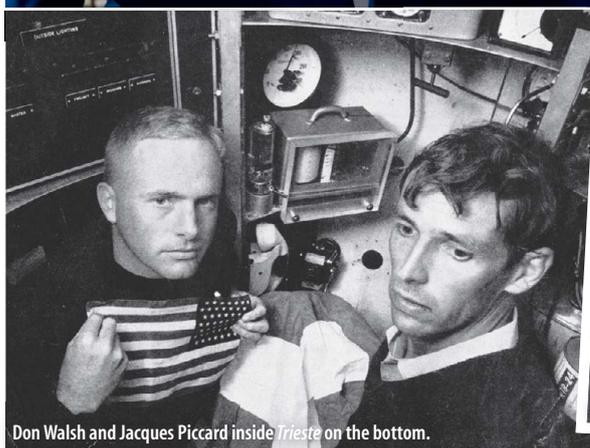
Don Walsh has long been a scientific advisor to EYOS, and was aboard *Pressure Drop* last year when Vescovo became the first person to dive to the deepest point of each of the world's five oceans. "Kelly's mom and I are so pleased and proud that



Victor Vescovo (left) with Kelly Walsh.



Kelly Walsh sets off.



Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard inside *Trieste* on the bottom.



Don Walsh at the surface after the dive.

Kelly got to experience the same adventure I had 60 years ago with the Navy's bathyscaphe *Trieste*," he said.

"He grew up with the continuing story of my history with deep ocean exploration, and now he's part of it."

Kelly Walsh is only the 12th person to have visited Challenger Deep. His father made the first descent with Jacques Piccard in 1960, and it was not visited again until James Cameron made it with *Deep Challenger* in 2012.

Vescovo visited the site twice last year in *Limiting Factor* and has since

returned with various passengers.

On 7 June he was accompanied by 69-year-old Kathryn Sullivan, who as a Space Shuttle astronaut in 1984 was the first woman to walk in space, and is now the first to have visited the deepest point on the planet.

A series of dives in the northern Mariana Trench is next on the agenda for Vescovo's team, working with the US National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to explore a number of sub-10km deeps never before visited by humans.

The expedition is set to climax in a bid to make the deepest-ever wreck-dive, visiting the WW2 naval battlefield off Samar Island in the Philippines at a depth of more than 6km.

"My father and I dived in the same place, but with very different technology," said Kelly Walsh. "My dive heralds the next generation of deep-sea exploration; we now have the technology to explore any part of our ocean. No one could be happier about this than my father or me." ■

A MARINE SCIENTIST at the UK's Marine Biological Association (MBA) has been awarded a major EU grant to help him determine how large oceanic predators such as sharks and tuna will respond to climate-driven changes in ocean oxygen.

Southampton University Prof David Sims, a senior research

EU FUNDS UK SHARK PROJECT

fellow and leader of the Sims Lab at the MBA in Plymouth, has been awarded a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced grant for his Ocean Deoxyfish project, looking at how predators will cope as oceanic "dead zones" expand. ERC Advanced grants, worth up

to 2.5 million euros, are designed to enable established top researchers to explore their most creative, high-risk ideas, says the MBA. "The award of this major grant is thrilling," said Prof Sims. "It will enable new smart-tag technology to be developed for

measuring predator physiology and behaviours in unprecedented detail, which will allow more accurate predictions about how shark and tuna distributions will shift in the face of climate change to aid conservation."

The MBA now holds three ERC grants. It has around 1800 marine-scientist members worldwide. ■

GOOGLE EARTH



DOMINO EFFECT LED TO DEATH OF DIVER

A NEW ZEALAND scuba-diver died through a lethal combination of unsafe practices from which other divers could learn, a coroner has concluded at the inquest.

Fifty-eight-year-old Neil Brookes was on a dive-trip to catch crayfish near Motunau Island off South Island three years ago.

At the inquest, reported by New Zealand news outlet *Stuff*, coroner Marcus Elliot heard that Brookes had been diving for 15 years and had "done a diving course".

He and neighbours Mark O'Donnell and his son Hayden O'Donnell had gone out on a boat driven by David Weston on the morning of 5 March, 2017.

The three planned to dive together and followed the line down to the rocky seabed at 25-30m depth, but on arrival O'Donnell senior had grabbed for a crayfish and was lost from view in kicked-up silt.

The divers continued the dive separately. Hayden O'Donnell ascended with his catch and his father surfaced a few minutes after he was back on the boat.

Brookes also surfaced as Weston headed over to pick up O'Donnell. But while Hayden O'Donnell was helping his father back onto the boat he heard what sounded like a gasp from Brookes' direction.

He looked over and saw him at the surface but could not tell whether his BC was inflated.

Weston told the coroner that he had seen Brookes take his mask off and remove his second stage on surfacing. As he drove over to pick him up, the boat's occupants saw

Brookes leaning back with his catch-bag in front of him, regulator out and arms outstretched.

He emitted a short, loud sound that appeared to be a cry of pain rather than a call for help, before waves covered his face and he started to sink out of sight without a struggle.

The group searched the area and put out a Mayday call. Police divers eventually found Brookes' body on the seabed 24m deep the next day.

An incident report submitted by police diver Constable Seda Clayton-Greene concluded that unsafe diving practices that might not have proved lethal individually had together caused a "domino effect with fatal consequences".

These included Brookes possibly breathing his cylinder empty, not wearing any sort of dive-timer, attaching a catch-bag directly to his dive-gear and continuing a dive solo.

The cry of pain could have indicated that a rapid ascent had occurred, causing decompression illness or an embolism.

The coroner said that Brookes' death had been complicated by the loss of his mask and regulator, being overweighted by both lead and his bag of crayfish, and separation from the other divers.

He said the incident highlighted the need for divers to check their weighting and buoyancy, monitor their air supply and stay with a buddy.

Having considered pathology reports, he found the probable cause of death to be drowning following a possible cerebral arterial gas embolism suffered during an out-of-air ascent. ■

Video-sledging team reveals Greenland's deep coral gardens



SOFT-CORAL GARDENS have been found at depths beyond 500m off western Greenland, the first habitat of its kind to have been identified in this part of the North Atlantic – and they were revealed by scientists from the UK and Greenland using a GoPro.

Existing in almost total darkness, the habitat features abundant cauliflower corals as well as featherstars, sponges, anemones, brittlestars, hydrozoans, bryozoans and other organisms.

The researchers behind the discovery are based at University College London, Zoological Society London and the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources.

"The deep sea is often overlooked in terms of exploration," said UCL doctorate student Stephen Long, first author of the study. "In fact we have better maps of the surface of Mars than we do of the deep sea."

Greenland's deep-sea habitats had until now remained virtually unexplored, because surveys would normally require expensive ROVs or manned submersibles.

The research team overcame this challenge by developing a low-cost towed video-sledge carrying a GoPro camera, lights and lasers in

special pressure housings, mounted on a steel frame.

Used to add a sense of scale to the imagery, the lasers consisted of high-powered green pointers mounted in housings made at UCL.

The video-sledge, about the size of a Mini Cooper, was lowered to the seabed for 15-minute periods across 18 sites. More than 1200 stills were taken from the footage for detailed analysis.

The video-sledge has proved to be resilient. "So far the team has managed to reach an impressive depth of 1500m," said Long.

"It has worked remarkably well and led to interest from researchers in other parts of the world... The development of a low-cost tool that can withstand deep-sea environments opens up new possibilities for our understanding and management of marine ecosystems."

Now the researchers hope that a 188sq mile area off Greenland will be recognised as a Vulnerable Marine Ecosystem under UN guidelines to protect it from deep-sea trawl fisheries operating nearby.

"We'll be working with the Greenland government and fishing industry to ensure that this fragile,



complex and beautiful habitat is protected," said Long.

The study is published in *Frontiers in Marine Science*. ■

German ironclad Channel wreck wins protection

GERMAN "IRONCLAD" the SMS *Grosser Kurfürst*, which sank on her maiden voyage off Folkestone in Kent in 1878 after being accidentally rammed by another German warship, has been scheduled and added to the National Heritage List for England.

Scheduling of the wreck, on which 284 of the nearly 500 men aboard lost their lives, means that recreational scuba-divers are allowed to dive the site but that its contents are given "a level of protection". Historic England

(HE) recommended the move to the UK government.

In May 1878, while preparing for annual summer training sessions in the Channel, the *Grosser Kurfürst* turned suddenly to avoid colliding with a pair of fishing boats and as a result was accidentally rammed by the *König Wilhelm*.

That vessel's ram bow ripped away the *Grosser Kurfürst's* armour-plating and gouged a huge hole in her side, causing her to sink rapidly. The wreck now lies inverted at a depth of 30m.

The *Grosser Kurfürst* (the Great Elector, a reference to 17th-century Prussian leader Frederick William) was built at a time when warship designers were moving from timber to the armour-plated warships with large-calibre guns that would become the Dreadnought battleships of WW1.

The ship had been laid down in 1870 but took eight years to complete, partly because of a midway design change that ended with her being equipped with a pair of revolving twin-gun turrets, more in the style of a cruiser than a battleship.

She was one of only three Prussen-class ironclad warships.



Depiction of the sinking of the *Grosser Kurfürst*.

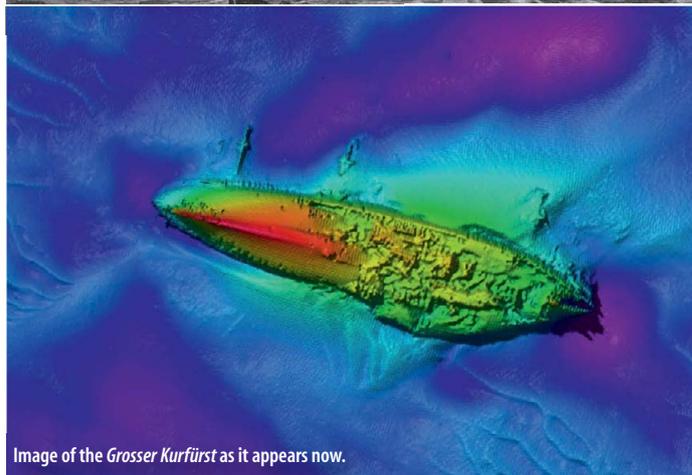


Image of the *Grosser Kurfürst* as it appears now.

HISTORIC ENGLAND



A memorial in Folkestone was also listed.

HISTORIC ENGLAND

These had been authorised under a rebuilding programme designed to strengthen a navy perceived as weak after being unable to break a Danish blockade.

"This historic shipwreck tells the story of Germany's increasing naval strength in the late-19th century at a time when Britain and Germany were on friendly terms," said HE Chief

Executive Duncan Wilson.

"The SMS *Grosser Kurfürst* is important as the only non-Royal Naval warship recorded as wrecked in English waters for the period 1860-1913." As part of the scheduling, a war memorial at Cheriton Road Cemetery in Folkestone, where many of the recovered bodies were taken to be buried, has been listed at Grade II. ■

SCUBA-DIVERS in the Cayman Islands, who had until late June felt they were being sidelined in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, have now been asked to help combat another disease – in corals.

Divers had been expressing frustration about being the last people allowed back into the sea, as coronavirus lockdown restrictions were lifted for other water-users.

The feeling was inflamed when Premier Alden McLaughlin justified the continued ban by referring to "a lot of touching around and sometimes the use by multiple persons of the same goggles and snorkels... also a lot of saliva."

In late June, following a welcomed turnround in the ruling, the government was calling on divers to help look for evidence of a lethal coral disease it feared might have



arrived in the islands since diving ceased in March.

As with that other Caribbean scourge, the invasive lionfish, Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) has arrived via the USA. It was first identified six years ago on reefs in Florida (pictured), where it caused widespread devastation, and turned

up on Jamaican reefs in 2017.

Known to affect more than 20 of the slowest-growing and longest-lived reef-building coral species, particularly brain, pillar, smooth flower, maze, star and starlet corals, SCTLD is believed to be a bacterial pathogen that spreads fast through contact and water circulation.

Infected coral colonies display multiple lesions and succumb rapidly, with mortality rates ranging from 66 to 100%.

"Once a coral is infected by SCTLD and begins to lose live tissue, it is likely that the colony will die within weeks to months," said the Cayman Islands' Department of the Environment in a statement calling on divers and snorkellers to report any evidence they find of the disease.

"The loss of these corals affects overall coral-reef health and can have catastrophic impacts on the ecosystems."

SCTLD's spread through the Caribbean from Jamaica has so far been tracked through Quintana Roo in Mexico to the US Virgin Islands, Dominican Republic, Turks & Caicos Islands, Belize, St Eustatius, Puerto Rico and Grand Bahama. ■

VINICK ZACHAR / NOAA

VICTOR HUERTAS



Coral-cruncher: Sheephead parrotfish at Lizard Island in Australia.

Why big veggies rule reefs

LARGE HERBIVORES are the future of reef-fish, according to new scientific research in Australia. What is described as a breakthrough study has revealed that it's the diets of different fish species that dictate how fast each one evolves.

The researchers had expected geographical location to be the key to reef-fish evolution – so were surprised to learn that it was more about what they ate and how big they grew.

"We found that the fastest way to have more species, or biodiversity, on a reef is to be big and vegetarian," said Prof David Bellwood, one of the research team from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University in Townsville.

"Herbivores such as surgeonfishes and parrotfishes are key to the ecological diversity of coral reefs today."

It was relatively recently in evolutionary terms – less than 23 million years ago – that herbivorous fish developed features that allowed them to explore different areas of reefs.

"Because of this, today's reefs are highly dynamic and have a fast turnover," said Prof Bellwood. "These herbivores are the key element that established modern coral reefs."

The team constructed an evolutionary "tree of life" comprising

the majority of reef-fish species around the world – more than 6000 – including data on aspects such as their diet and range. This database was used to analyse what drove variations in rates of species formation.

Alexandre Siqueira was the study's lead author. "Up until now we knew that many factors could have influenced the pace of reef-fish evolution, but these factors were never examined all together," he explained.

Previous studies had concentrated on numbers of reefs and the species they contained, meaning that little was known about how the reefs functioned and the roles played by individual fish species in maintaining their health.

"By feeding on the algae that compete with corals, herbivorous fishes may have also helped corals to expand through time," said Siqueira. "In turn, this expansion in the corals allowed the diversification of other reef-fish groups that depend on them."

"Understanding how reefs are constructed throughout their evolution means we can reach a better understanding of the fundamental processes that maintain them in a healthy state today."

The study is published in *Nature Communications*. ■



Another large vegetarian: a lined surgeonfish.

VICTOR HUERTAS



Freda's Diver Dishes

I have chosen to take this month's recipe from our *40 Dives, 40 Dishes* book, because flapjacks have been a staple for Al and me during lockdown and they have always been a *Salutay* favourite. As the months go by, we keep wondering when we will be back running charters again. We hope we will be welcoming divers again soon.

I was reminiscing recently about a trip we ran back in 2003, when we took the owner of the *Lusitania*, Gregg Bemis, to dive the wreck. He was 76 at the time and I remember that he loved our flapjacks! Sadly, he passed away in May. You can read the story of his *Lusitania* dive in the book.

Flapjacks Feeds 12 divers



Ingredients

The dish has only five ingredients and is super easy to make: 250g butter; 200g demerara sugar; 2 level tbsp golden syrup; 420g rolled porridge oats (in a large container); 50g Omega mix seeds

Method

Melt the butter, sugar and golden syrup in a saucepan and bring to the boil until everything is dissolved. Remove from the heat and pour over your oats. Mix well. Tip into a 28 x 18 x 3cm baking tray lined with magic non-stick silver foil.

Smooth down roughly and then sprinkle your seeds evenly over the top. Press the seeds down flat, using the back of a spoon.

Cook in the centre of the oven at 180°C gas mark 4 for 30-40 minutes. Check after 30 minutes and, if it looks golden around the edges, then it's done.

Leave to cool down in the tin, covered with a tea towel. Once cooled, take out of the tin, peel off the silver foil and cut into 12 pieces. Store in an air-tight container.

Top Tips

You can add almost anything to these flapjacks, although we like them best just as they are. But you could try adding 3 level tsp of chopped ginger in syrup with pecan nuts, or even drizzle in melted chocolate. You can also freeze your flapjacks and keep them for your next dive-day.

* Freda Wright is a diver and chef on British diving liveboard mv *Salutay*. Find more of her recipes in the book *40 Dives 40 Dishes*. It costs £16 plus £1.95 postage, with £1 from every sale going to Oceans Plastics Greenpeace, salutay.co.uk



Dolphins pick up 'shelling' habit from friends



A dolphin shows off a trick it probably picked up from observing its peers.

DOLPHINS ARE LIKE the great apes in that they learn foraging techniques not only from their mothers but from their friends – that's the surprise finding from a new scientific study carried out in Shark Bay in Western Australia.

Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins have been closely studied in Shark Bay for more than 35 years, and their foraging tactic known as "shelling" was first noted in the mid-1990s.

Dolphins know that prey hides inside the large empty shells of giant sea snails, so bring the shells to the surface with their beaks. They then shake the food into their mouths – like the last crisps from a packet.

Dolphin foraging techniques are typically taught to calves by their mothers, and this "vertical social transmission" between generations, practised by most animals, had long been considered the only way they learnt. Another technique typically passed on by dolphins only in this way is "sponging", the placing of sea sponges over their beaks to protect them while foraging.

But now it has emerged that the transmission of shelling is horizontal, with the dolphins learning it by



SONJA WILD / DOLPHIN INNOVATION PROJECT

imitating the behaviour of their close associates, a method previously associated only with gorillas, chimpanzees and humans.

The study was carried out by an international team of researchers led by Dr Sonja Wild, a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds and now a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Konstanz in Germany.

The team conducted boat-based surveys for 11 years up to 2018, identifying 1035 individual dolphins from 5278 group encounters.

The shelling behaviour happens so quickly that it is difficult to observe, but 42 such events performed by 19 individuals were documented. Behavioural, genetic and

environmental data was then combined to model the different transmission pathways of shelling.

"These results were quite surprising, as dolphins tend to be conservative, with calves following a 'do-as-mother-does' strategy for learning foraging behaviours," said Dr Wild. "However, our results show that dolphins are definitely capable, and in the case of shelling, also motivated to learn new foraging tactics outside the mother-calf bond.

"This opens the door to a new understanding of how dolphins may be able to behaviourally adapt to changing environments, as learning from one's peers allows for a rapid

spread of novel behaviour across populations."

In 2011 Shark Bay's seagrass habitat was wiped out by an unprecedented marine heatwave, killing off many fish and invertebrates – including the gastropods that had lived in the giant shells. It's thought possible that this encouraged the dolphins to adopt new foraging behaviour from their friends, with the abundant dead shells boosting learning opportunities.

"The fact that shelling is socially transmitted among dolphin peers rather than between mother and offspring sets an important milestone, and highlights similarities with certain primates, which also rely on both vertical and horizontal learning of foraging behaviour," said the senior author of the study, Prof Michael Krtzen of the University of Zurich.

"Despite their divergent evolutionary histories and the fact that they occupy such different environments, both dolphins and great apes are long-lived, large-brained mammals with high capacities for innovation and the cultural transmission of behaviours."

The study is published in *Current Biology*. ■

ITALIAN DIVERS DISCOVER 16TH-CENTURY WRECK NEAR GENOA

RASTA DIVERS



Wreckfinders: Gabriele Succi and Edoardo Sbraraini.

THE WRECK OF the *Santo Spirito & Santa Maria di Loreto*, one of the biggest Italian merchant vessels of the 16th century, is believed to have been located by two scuba-divers at a depth of 50m off the north Italian coast near Genoa.

The shipwreck was reported to have been found in the marine protected area of Porto Pidocchio by Gabriele Succi and Edoardo Sbraraini, who run the Rasta Divers centre in nearby Santa Margherita Ligure.

The discovery was made in February but was announced by the Archaeology Superintendency of Italy's Ministry for Cultural Heritage & Tourism only in June. The ship, built in the style of Ragusa,

a maritime republic based around what is today Dubrovnik in Croatia) was wrecked on 29 October, 1579.

If its identity is confirmed it would be the first discovery in Italian waters of a vessel from that period with hull timbers still intact.

Archaeological and police divers were carrying out surveys and working with maritime historians to positively identify and date the wreck.

The superintendency said that the divers expected to find ceramics, coins, navigational instruments, cannon and anchors, and that the discovery provided a rare opportunity to study in detail the naval architecture of the time. ■

Gold-miners' bodies located on 'fallen leaves' wreck

THE REMAINS OF hundreds of people are claimed to have been located on a 120-year-old shipwreck off New Zealand – but the documentary-makers who found them knew that they had already been long dead when the vessel sank in 1902.

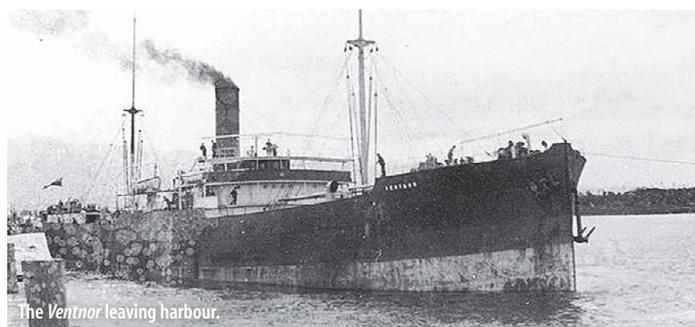
The discovery has now provoked a row over cultural sensitivities.

The remains of the Chinese immigrant workers were located by a ROV-mounted camera exploring the wreck of the *Ventnor* in the Tasman Sea, 13 miles off North Island.

The deepest wreck in New Zealand to have been visited by scuba divers, it lies at a depth of 147m.

The 105m steamship was built in Glasgow in 1901 and chartered the following October for the mass repatriation of the bodies of some 500 Chinese men, mostly gold-miners, to southern China. They had contributed to a community fund to cover the costs of being returned home after their deaths to be close to their families, as Chinese culture dictates.

The bodies were loaded onto the *Ventnor*, which was also carrying coal



The *Ventnor* leaving harbour.

and other cargo as it left Wellington, but the ship never made it to China. It struck a reef and, while trying to reach Auckland for repair, sank off Hokianga Bar. The captain and 12 crew died when their lifeboat capsized, though the rest of the crew made it to shore.

In 2013 an ROV investigating an echo-sounder mark obtained footage that positively identified the wreck as the *Ventnor*. Technical divers carried out a number of challenging dives and recovered artefacts, although the human remains stayed hidden.

Weather and sea conditions made diving the wreck difficult, and exploring what was seen as a grave-site was culturally sensitive. Heritage

New Zealand declared the *Ventnor* a protected archaeological site to prevent unauthorised diving, and the

New Zealand Chinese Association (NZCA) took over the heritage project, working with local communities.

The NZCA has now expressed concern that the documentary-makers who claim to have found and filmed the bodies in May had not kept it informed, and told press that "the story is not the film-makers' to tell".

Auckland-based Definitive Productions is working on a documentary about the *Ventnor* story called *Fallen Leaves*, the title referring to a Chinese proverb: "Falling leaves return to their roots." ■

Underwater internet a step closer



XAVIER PITA / KAUST

CAN'T WAIT to surface before sharing your latest underwater photos or videos? Scientists in Saudi Arabia believe they have found a way to provide a sub-aquatic Internet service.

Recreational divers might not feel the need, but for those working underwater the Aqua-Fi system could provide a welcome breakthrough.

It uses LED or laser light beams to transmit data, allowing multimedia messages to be shared in real time. Divers could also communicate between themselves underwater instead of using hand-signals or conventional comms systems.

At present radio can transmit data underwater but only over short distances, while acoustic signals have a limited data rate. Visible-light communications overcome these distance and volume limitations – but depend on a clear line of sight between transmitter and receiver.

Prof Basem Shihada's team at King Abdullah University of Science & Technology have built a prototype, that they tested by simultaneously uploading and downloading multimedia between two computers a few metres apart in static water.

They recorded a data transfer speed of 2.11 MB per second and an average

delay of 1 millisecond for a round trip.

In practice Aqua-Fi would use radio waves to send data from a diver's smartphone to a small "gateway" computer attached to their kit. Photos and videos are converted into a series of 1s and 0s, then into light beams turning on and off at very high speed.

A light-detector connected to the receiving topside computer, linked to the Internet by satellite, senses the variation and converts the binary code back into the original footage.

Low-energy LEDs would be used for transmission over short distances, and more power-hungry lasers for longer-distance communication.

"This is the first time anyone has used the Internet underwater completely wirelessly," said Prof Shihada. "We have created a relatively cheap and flexible way to connect underwater environments to the global Internet."

Now the researchers are working to boost link quality and range by using faster electronic components. They plan to use a spherical receiver to keep the light beam aligned with the receiver in moving waters.

"We hope that one day Aqua-Fi will be as widely used underwater as wi-fi is above water," says Prof Shihada. ■



MORENA FILMS

this month DIVER likes...

Sanctuary Greenpeace wants to share this 74min documentary that follows Spanish actors Javier and Carlos Bardem to Antarctica to tell the story of an ambitious bid to create the world's biggest marine sanctuary. Spectacular viewing on YouTube.

Skyfall It's an event now when a new Simon Pridmore book comes out and his biography of Palau phenomenon Francis Toribiong, *The Diver Who Fell from the Sky*, is ready and looking good. Review soon.

Elevated Our contributors are getting back under water however they can, experiencing the excitement and heightened awareness that follows a period of deprivation. Good examples: Brandi Mueller in South Carolina this month – and Lisa Collins in the Cayman Islands next time.

Comms Horror We enjoyed the horrified social-media reaction to the story on the right (*Underwater Internet A Step Closer*). We did point out that working divers would be the main beneficiaries of this breakthrough, but OK, we like being incommunicado under water too!

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Wine with water

Speaking as a wreckie and someone who enjoys a glass of wine, I think I might have found my perfect dive destination.



Of course, it might have to wait until the Covid-19 world stabilises, but that won't matter, because the wine should just be getting better. A year or three back there was



a flurry of publicity about wine-makers ageing their products under water. The publicity has gone away, but the underwater wine hasn't, and the Croatian winery of Edivo Vina has

taken things a step further by offering visiting divers the opportunity to join guided tours of its underwater wine-aging facility. Its wines are aged in clay

amphoras, just like wot they used in olden times, only locked in cages to prevent the uninvited and light-finned helping themselves.

But, and this is the bit that really interests me – I mean, seen one amphora, seen 'em all, right? – is that the better vintages are stored in a sunken boat. Yup, fine wine, in a shipwreck!

And even better, the wine is called Navis Mysterium! How cool is that?

The tours are offered daily winter and summer and Edivo can be found in Drace, which is an hour's drive from Dubrovnik. Yet another destination on the (ice-) bucket list.

ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

My, but doesn't absence make the heart grow fonder?

My pal's last dive pre-lockdown happened at an inland site on a day with glorious sunshine and not a cloud in the sky.

The water was flat-calm and the vis easily 10m, maybe more. Yes, the water temperature was only 5° but that's what drysuits are for, she said. Anyway, she was there only to stay in practice for summer.

There followed four months without a dive. Those months included some of the nicest spring weather this country has ever experienced. We had seemingly endless warm, calm, sunny days.

It was so pleasant that there were concerns about the weather enticing people out of lockdown early. But there was no diving, obviously.

Then diving resumes, so my pal, like the rest of us, grabs the first chance she gets. Same site as before, but on a day that served up a howling gale and thick cloud with intermittent rain. There was half a metre of swell on the lake surface, and the bottom was so stirred up that there was just a metre of vis.

The fish-life was profuse, when you got close enough to see the beggars, and water temperature was now 19° – that's wetsuit warm.

In any other year she still wouldn't have bothered, she said, but this year hasn't been any other year, has it?

Solo with a wetsuit

We all know there was a lot of fuss around scuba as an activity during lockdown, what



with stories of people ignoring travel restrictions to test their eyesight off the Cornish coast, or not being allowed to dive because spitting in your mask will potentially spread infection over a distance to which the term "blast radius" is appropriate.

Now things are easing and the inland sites have got back to work, but with some interesting rule changes. No groups is an obvious one – tough for scuba schools, yes, but understandable.

My favourite rule, however, is one I saw at the weekend, to allow wetsuits only. Presumably the idea is that you can get in and out of a wetsuit on your own, so there are no problems with social distancing. But what about front-zip drysuits?

And have you ever tried to get out of a properly fitting front-zipped wetsuit?

Anyway, be that as it may, all I have to say is that if there's a better social-distance model than a solo dive, I've yet to hear it.

Bit more to do

The trouble is, people simply don't think things through properly. Or at all, sometimes.

Take the latest idea for underwater communications, an underwater Internet that would allow divers to message one another while under water, or send messages to the surface cover (Be up in 10 minutes, get the tea made!). The idea is to use either LEDs, if you're at 10m or less, or lasers, if deeper, to carry the messages, and it all sounds very plausible.

Except that as soon as you think about the practicalities it falls apart, because it all depends on sending the data up to a receiver on the surface that can then be sent along to wherever it needs to go, which means you need to be able to see the receiver, which means you need good vis, and even then you can't go very far away because even gin-clear water isn't really very clear at all.

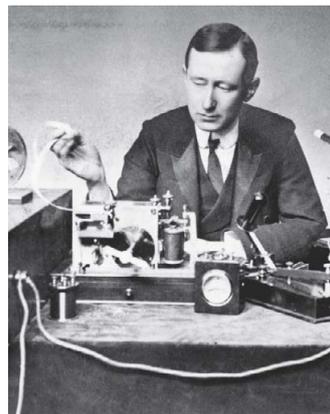
Get back to us when you've done a bit more work on it, eh, guys?

Still, when trying to do something new it does help not to know how difficult it's going to be.

Radio activity

So, bringing stuff up from wrecks. Good idea, or better left where it is? I ask only because an expedition is being set up to recover the Marconi telegraph from *Titanic*.

I get the historical interest. It was the



first set ever to transmit the new SOS, the signal that replaced the older CQD, and it did so from the sinking super-liner that's the most famous shipwreck there is, so people would be interested to see it.

But at the time it was just another commercially available Marconi set. There are others to be seen in museums already, the years under water will have seen it deteriorate massively, and the expedition organisers themselves admit that they'll need to damage the wreck to get it out.

Yes, but then again, the wreck is deteriorating and won't be around that much longer, so does it matter if it's damaged a bit?

I suspect that the final decision will actually be made based on the anticipated profit from the inevitable exhibition versus the cost of raising it.

Rope trick



KANSASPHOTO

You've heard the saying about money for old rope? Of course you have, and so has Ben Williams of Sunchaser Scuba in the British Virgin islands.

Ben looks after the mooring lines for Bitter End Yacht Club, which in itself is a very nice punning name for nautical rope enthusiasts.

He replaces the ropes every five years or so, and has now decided that instead of discarding them he and his team can turn them into arches and forests for divers to swim through.

Making the old ropes into a dive-site, to which he takes diving clients. Good thinking there, Ben.

WORLD CLASS

ARRIVING IN KOROR late at night, I was quickly shuttled to *Solitude One*, a liveaboard I had last experienced while exploring Tubbataha in the Philippines. The service level aboard this comfortable ship is regal.

Aside from diving and eating, you barely have to lift a finger as the crew does everything from transporting camera gear to washing and hanging your wetsuit after every dive.

I almost felt guilty.

Spanish cruise directors Silvia and Alfonso have been with the vessel since its inception in 2013, with virtually all the crew remaining since then. The result is an ultra-smooth operation with a friendly, familial vibe.

Diving kicked off with the Jake Seaplane, the famous wreck of a Japanese scouting aircraft – a surviving WW2 relic sunk for the enjoyment of divers.

It isn't especially impressive in size, but it has a magnetic appeal to underwater photographers.

It was the perfect setting for a check-

dive, on which we could verify that all our dive and camera gear was functioning properly while ticking off one of Palau's signature sites. Those who tired of looking at rusted metal went off to explore the surrounding hard corals, giving me an opportunity for a clean shot without too many divers in the frame.

A hearty lunch later and we were off for a different type of dive at Chandelier Cave. Just beneath the canopy of greenery that fringes the island you swim through a large opening in the rock just a few metres beneath the surface.

Four chambers and a unique experience awaits, as you dip down and then up to the surface in each area of hollowed-out limestone.

Stalactites hang from the ceiling of these grottos, their tips occasionally dipping into the water. A chorus of "oohs" and "aahs" accompanied the removal of regulators, as our group admired the breathtaking formations.

The third chamber is considered the most spectacular by connoisseurs, and

bursts of strobe light accompanied our arrival there.

It was like a surreal underwater disco for a moment, as we danced around the chamber in search of that perfect frame.

The next day we were the first divers at Blue Corner, and anticipation was sky-high at the prospect of visiting a site that makes every list of the "best dives in the world".

Francis Toribiong was the pioneer of diving in Palau, establishing almost all the sites there, including Blue Corner.

As the story goes, he was leading a group of Italian cameramen who had just dived the nearby Blue Holes.

They asked Francis if he had anything better, and after a moment of reflection he pointed them to the corner.

On ascending from the dive the Italians seemed very upset, and were even seen throwing their cameras down on the deck. Francis asked why, and they replied that they had just had the very best dive





of their lives, and were frustrated because nowhere else would ever match that experience! Blue Corner was born, and news of it would soon reach diving communities around the world.

THE BRIEFING FOR Blue Corner is a little intimidating, with a strong focus on staying safe amid the sweeping currents. It's traditional to hook in on this dive, and an area at the top of the plateau is designated for divers to do so.

It's possible that the use of current-hooks originated from diving in Palau, and a whole set of etiquette accompanies the practice.

It's vital that you always drift behind a set of hooked-in divers rather than in front, or risk a stream of bubbles and hand-gestures from some angry people!

The current varies at Blue Corner, with more water movement being a positive in terms of the marine life it brings.

It can certainly get very strong, but those who have dived in currents in the

Maldives and Indonesia will find the experience comparable. Within moments of dropping in on the site I had sharks, a turtle and a bumphead parrotfish in frame, summing up how rich the marine life is at this site.

Blue Corner is like standing by a fish highway, watching as everything and anything goes past. It might be one site, but each dive is different, with a rotating set of characters appearing.

It is also home to a very friendly Napoleon wrasse, although sadly its inquisitive nature is the result of divers feeding it boiled eggs.

Conservation of marine resources has long been part of the Palauan ethos, with tribes historically allocating certain areas of the coastline as no-take zones to maintain fish populations.

More recently, Palau became the first national shark sanctuary in the world, and has banned commercial finning since 2009.

In 2015, the Palau National Marine Sanctuary Act created a protected zone



HENLEY SPIERS ventured to Palau with high expectations, daydreaming of iconic sites such as the Jake Seaplane, German Channel and Blue Corner.

Did it live up to expectations?

Short answer: yes, this upper-echelon, bucket-list spot delivered a varied array of dive-sites with rich marine life, sumptuous seascapes and a unique animal-behaviour event of immense proportions. The long version follows...

across 80% of Palau's waters. Diving in Palau is an unmistakably fishy experience, and you quickly grow accustomed to this healthy state of affairs.

What might be star attractions in other areas are so commonplace there that it feels natural for each dive-site to have its own set of reef sharks, Napoleon wrasse and schools of jack and barracuda.

Grey reef sharks are the most commonly sighted, with the classically pleasing shape of a requiem shark.

The problem I always have with them is their annoying tendency to stay firmly within "logbook" territory rather than the proximity required for successful underwater photography.

Throughout the week my game of cat-and-mouse with these sharks continued, but I finally caught a break at Peleliu Cut.

Spying a group of greys patrolling the reef, we hung close to the wall and hoped for a close pass.

As patience and air reserves dwindled, we turned back and swam away without the hoped-for encounter. 🐡

Left and below left:
Solitude One in Palau.





Above, from left: Diver beneath the stalactites in Chandeller Cave; grey reef sharks at Peleliu Cut.

Below, clockwise from top left: Napoleon wrasse; squid; the ever-shifting scene at Blue Corner.

A few fin-kicks later, I glanced back to find the pack of sharks following us. Excitedly I turned and drifted onto them, finally bagging some satisfying images.

Palau is famous for its marine wonders but also its violent history. Peleliu Island was the site of one of the bloodiest and toughest battles in the Pacific during WW2. It was intended by US forces to take over the island's Japanese airstrip, but the invading troops encountered a radically altered defensive strategy.

Meant to be over in three days, the battle dragged on for a devastating two

months, and in the end the airstrip proved to be of little strategic importance.

The only positive for the American victors was that it prepared them for their future attacks on Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

With so much animal action on offer, it can be easy to forget about Palau's beautiful underwater scenery.

Blue Holes and Siaes Tunnel force you to slow down and enjoy the impressive architecture of stone eroded by sea water over thousands of years.

The full immensity of Blue Holes is



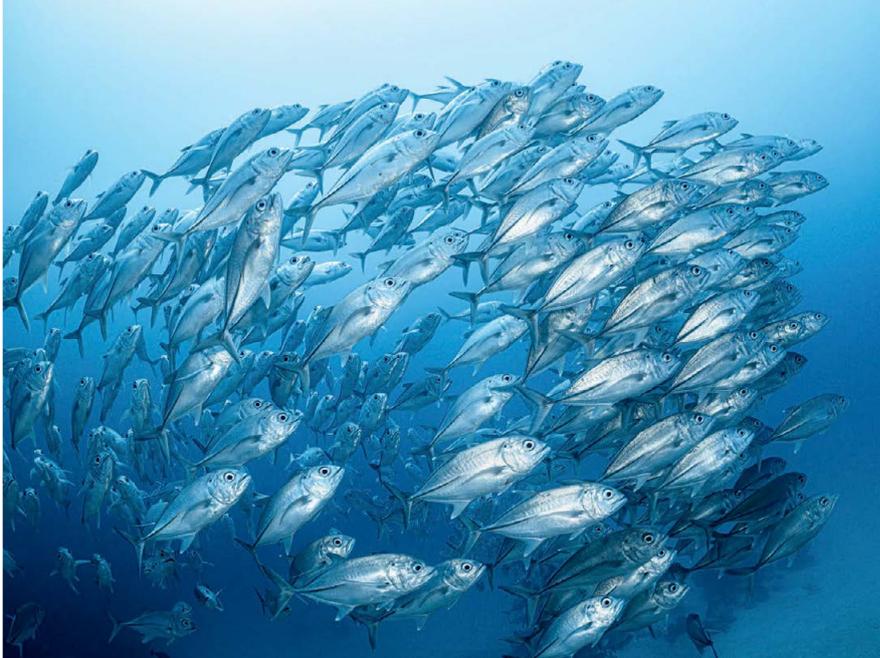
best enjoyed when it's empty, so try to ensure that you are either the first or last buddy-team left at this popular site, both from an experiential and photographic point of view.

Siaes Tunnel is strewn with seafans, and I delighted in trying to match these to the blue openings around the wide tunnel.

German Channel is considered another of Palau's key dive-sites, mainly because it is home to several cleaning stations visited by manta rays.

Sadly, our good fortune ran out during our two dives there and we failed to





encounter any mantas, although a grey reef shark dropping by for a clean made for a good alternative.

At Sandy Paradise's cleaning station we would finally tick off the yearned-for manta sighting, with one individual dropping by for a lengthy bath.

That came as no surprise, because the cleaner wrasse on this site are the most enthusiastic I have ever witnessed.

Passing their service area, I suddenly felt uncomfortable nips at my neck as they sought out non-existent gills. Those divers willing to remove a regulator and

offer themselves up for service were immediately swarmed with cleanerfish in their mouth and ears. It made for a rather bizarre yet fun experience!

SANDY PARADISE was also where we bore witness to one of the most awe-inspiring underwater scenes of my life.

We arrived in the early morning, and Alfonso jumped in to check conditions below. Our timing was perfect, with thousands of bumphead parrotfish arriving for their appointment in the blue water beside the reef.

The bumpheads were there for a mass spawning event that takes place around every new moon. Somehow, out at this remote site, divers in Palau have unlocked the equation to reliably time and witness this spawning every month.

Several other boats were there with divers too, but whereas our commute took only 10 minutes, theirs was a couple of hours from Koror.

The sheer mass of the large, beach-creating coral-crunchers is awesome to behold. As the sexual tension rises, the faces of the bumpheads turn white,

Above, from left: Schooling jack; bigeyes and barracuda.

Below, from left: Diver with blue-lined snapper; in Blue Holes.





with a white band appearing on their bodies too. Males jostle in the search for a female, sometimes butting heads with a loud thump.

When a male and female finally unite, they race up into the water column, with other competing males desperately trying to force their way into the embrace.

Like a fishy firework, they explode in a mass of sperm and eggs at the top, and quickly disperse back into the deeper water, ready to try again.

The action is fast and furious, requiring good stamina to keep up with the parrotfish as they swim around in the blue. At times you completely lose

visibility as you swim through the clouds of fertilised eggs. The diving in Palau was world-class before we came to this part of the itinerary, but the bumphead spawning took my breath away.

We closed our trip with a visit to Jellyfish Lake, which involves snorkelling so provides a perfect way to stay wet until



Above, from left: Bumphead parrotfish gather to spawn; climactic moment; coral grouper on the reef.

Right: The Jake seaplane.

Below from left: Siales Tunnel; a school of barracuda.





hours before the flight home. On the trip out we stopped at Milky Way, where the sulphurous mud collected from the seabed makes for an enriching but slightly pungent skin treatment.

Jellyfish Lake was closed down a couple of years ago as rising temperatures were leading to the jellyfish dying. Happily the jellies have now returned in numbers (more than a million at the last count) and the lake is open to visitors again.

You'll find two types of jellyfish, moon and golden, with the former being more numerous. Although they have stinging cells, these are so weak that most people don't react to them, so the jellyfish are usually described as stingless.

They have only one known predator in the lake, a white anemone that attaches to branches and roots on its fringes, so they try to avoid these areas as they follow the sun's path.

Arriving early is advised because the lake can get extremely busy. In the morning the jellyfish bloom is at the opposite end to the entry-point, so we swam for about 15 minutes to reach it.

It was yet another wonderful scene on a trip full of them, looking down at this galaxy of jellies. The sheer abundance of these charismatic subjects makes Jellyfish Lake a fantastic place for photography, and two hours passed in what felt like the blink of an eye.

I was amazed at how much great diving we managed to squeeze into a single week

in Palau, with such varied underwater scenes. The bumphead spawning was the cherry atop an already world-class trip, and I'm eager to return.

Other spawning events are also regularly witnessed and, if you pull it all together, Palau must rank as one of the very best dive destinations you could possibly experience. **■**

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ There are five major gateways into Palau's Koror Airport: Manila, Taipei, Narita, Guam and Seoul. At the time of writing, the best option from London appeared to be with BA and China Airlines via Taipei.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ *Solitude One* runs itineraries in Palau from November to March, solitude-one.com

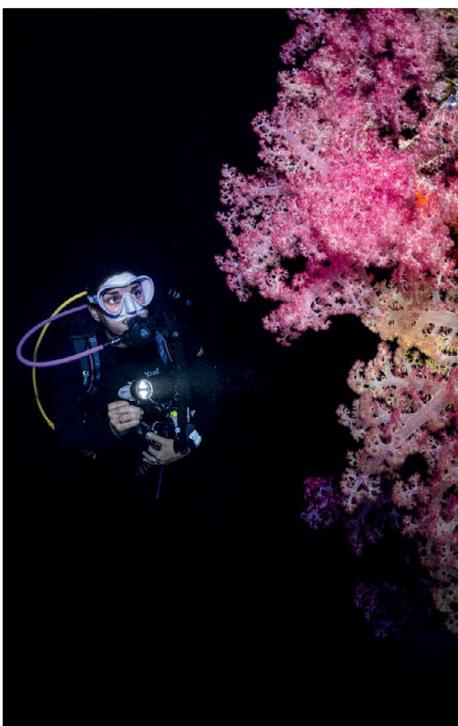
WHEN TO GO ▶ Diving is good year-round but encounters with sharks, mantas and schooling fish tend to be most abundant December-March because of cool water upwelling and fish-spawning events. Water temperature 27-29°C.

MONEY ▶ US dollars.

HEALTH ▶ Two-man hyperbaric chamber in Koror.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from around £1000. Seven-night itineraries on *Solitude One* start from US \$3710.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ pristineparadisepalau.com



Above: Two hours were happily spent in Jellyfish Lake.

Left: At Sandy Paradise divers can use a cleaning station too.

Far left: Soft corals on a night-dive.

DESPITE WARNINGS from the German embassy published in the US press that the *Lusitania* should not embark on her transatlantic crossing, the liner was brought under steam on 1 May, 1915.

On board were 1257 passengers and 702 crew under Captain WJ Turner. The passengers weren't that bothered about the crossing, because it was assumed that the Germans wouldn't dare to torpedo a ship carrying so many American civilians.

The 30,400-ton, 240m ocean liner had been built by John Brown on Clydebank in 1907. The first-class passengers certainly appreciated the luxurious trappings of the beautiful Cunard ship.

One of them, Sir Hugh Lane, was director of the National Gallery of Ireland and was said to have brought lead tubes containing US \$60 million-worth of paintings by the likes of Monet and Rubens aboard.

As the *Lusitania* approached the Irish coast after a trouble-free passage, a German submarine was reported to be lurking nearby. Captain Turner doubled the look-out – a week before, three ships had been torpedoed in the area and he didn't want to take any risks.

AT 2.15 ON the afternoon of 7 May the *Lusitania* was about 10 miles south of the Old Head of Kinsale when a torpedo exploded between the first funnel and the bow.

This was immediately followed by a second powerful explosion that badly damaged the engine-room.

The ship listed heavily, making it difficult to lower the lifeboats. At 2.26pm she sank, drowning 761 people including 94 children. Of the victims 124 were American, but Germany told the furious US government that because the ship had been carrying ammunition during wartime the attack was legitimate.

Capt-Lt Schwieger, commanding *U20*, mentioned only a single torpedo in his report. There was much discussion in the press about the second explosion, but the Germans attributed this to the cargo of ammunition aboard the ship.

The torpedo strike would be a major factor in the USA later joining the war effort to defeat Germany.

MY LUSITANIA

I had been looking for an opportunity to dive the 90m-deep wreck of the *Lusitania* for quite a few years but couldn't find a team to go with me until, in 2017, I heard about an expedition being organised by Irish deep-wreck diver Peter McCamley.

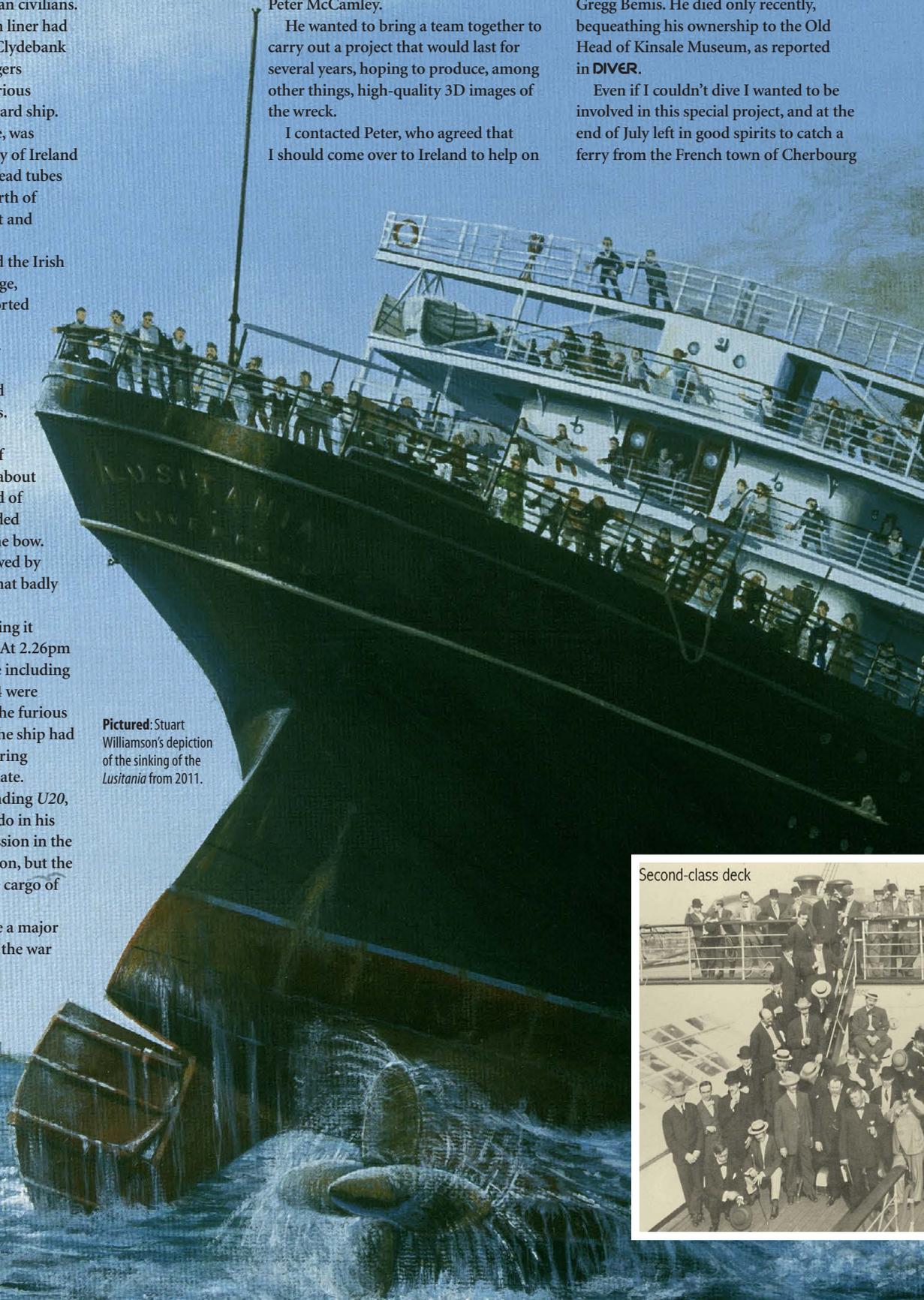
He wanted to bring a team together to carry out a project that would last for several years, hoping to produce, among other things, high-quality 3D images of the wreck.

I contacted Peter, who agreed that I should come over to Ireland to help on

the boat. Unfortunately I would be unable to dive, because I had not been among those listed in the permit application.

It was impossible to dive on the wreck without the approval of the Irish government and the long-time US owner Gregg Bemis. He died only recently, bequeathing his ownership to the Old Head of Kinsale Museum, as reported in **DIVER**.

Even if I couldn't dive I wanted to be involved in this special project, and at the end of July left in good spirits to catch a ferry from the French town of Cherbourg



Pictured: Stuart Williamson's depiction of the sinking of the *Lusitania* from 2011.

Second-class deck



DREAM



After the *Titanic*, the wreck of the *Lusitania* could be the most keenly imagined of shipwrecks for divers around the world. "It was a great challenge for me to be able to see it with my own eyes," says **VIC VERLINDEN** – but there would be obstacles to overcome

to Rosslare in Ireland. I had a 400-mile drive to Cherbourg and still had some 40 to go when I decided to pull off the motorway for a coffee stop. I hit a narrow road and suddenly heard a loud bang.

When I stopped and looked under the car I could see oil running out of the carburettor. An iron pole in the road had rendered my car unusable. I had insurance but would never make the ferry on time. My planned trip was over.

THAT WINTER Peter McCamley put together a new team – and this time I would be on the diving list.

I prepared for the trip carefully – physically, mentally and equipment-wise, everything needed to be perfect.

This time my crossing went ahead trouble-free and I was able to bring my equipment aboard the expedition vessel, which was complete with diver-lift.

The weather was very good, sunny with a soft breeze, on 24 September, 2018, the day of my first dive. First into the water were Dave Gration and Kari Hyttinen who, as in the previous year, were after 3D film footage of the bow. I was in the second team with Steve Saunders.

We were at 70m and still descending when we ran into the first team, who pointed out that the anchor was not fastened into the wreck, so we would have to return. It was a severe setback, and there was no possibility of diving again soon because bad weather was setting in.

It was five days before the weather improved enough for us to be able to try again. The line was shifted, and once again I was descending to the wreck. I had waited years to realise this dream and now I would finally see the *Lusitania* for myself.

Visibility at the bottom was no more than 5m but it was clear that there were a lot of fishing-nets on the wreck. 🐟



2d EXTRA The Washington Times 2d EXTRA
 WASHINGTON, FRIDAY EVENING, MAY 7, 1918. PRICE ONE CENT.
 NUMBER 8507.
LINER LUSITANIA SUNK BY GERMAN SUBMARINE FLEET RUSHES TO AID
 PASSENGERS SAVED



I decided not to swim too far from the ascent-line.

The treble hook was not far from the bridge, but I found it difficult to orient myself. I could see one of the iron davits for the lifeboats at the edge of the wreck

Top: Portholes on the *Lusitania*.

Above: Some of the fortunate survivors.

Below: Stuart Williamson's 2020 depiction of the wreck.

and a row of round portholes still intact in the side. I decided to follow these, because there were fewer nets there.

Doing this, I suddenly came on one of the large entrance doors that would have welcomed the passengers on board.

I saw only large round bronze windows in this area – hardly surprising, because a big liner like the *Lusitania* would have had hundreds of these.

I decided to turn and swim back in the direction of the treble hook. As I proceeded I could see that the wreck had

suffered heavily over the century since the sinking from the effects of currents and salty water.

It was high time to start my ascent – 20 minutes of bottom time had passed quickly, and a long decompression time awaited.

The next day we dived the wreck again, but our reconnaissance was limited, because I didn't want to take any risks.

IN THE SUMMER of 2019 I returned to Ireland. I had prepared myself well and Karl Van Der Auwera, my dive-buddy of many years, was with me this time.

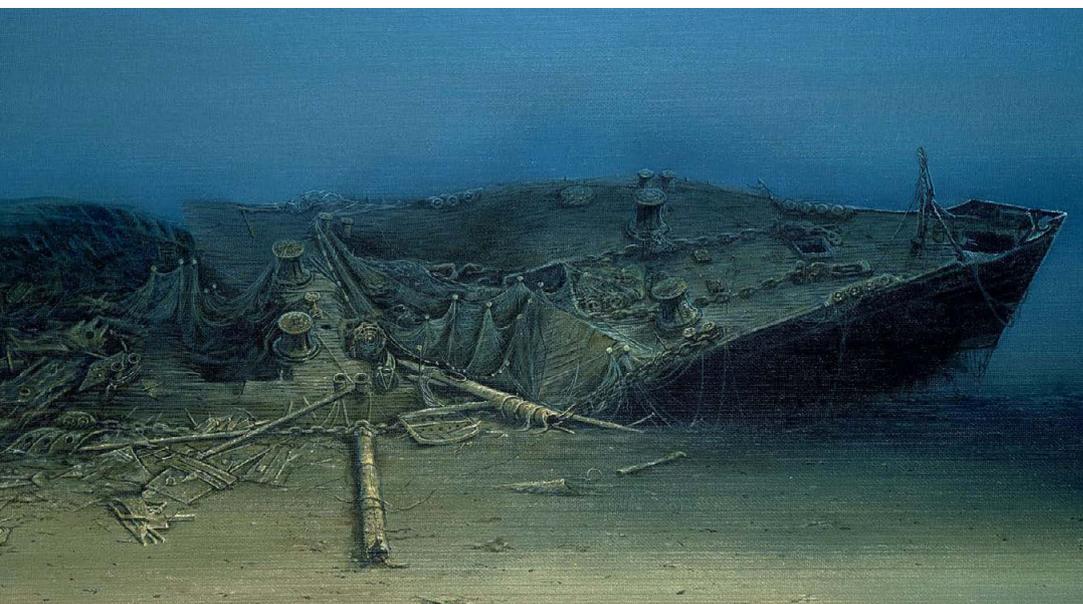
However, at the start of the trip the weather was poor and diving wasn't possible. It took five days before it had improved enough for us to risk it.

Karl and I were both using APD Inspiration rebreathers, with a 10/50 bottom gas, 18/38 travel gas and 11/53 bail-out.

The treble hook was on the bridge again, and as we arrived on the wreck I could see that the visibility was much better than it had been the year before. At around 8m it was exceptionally good for the *Lusitania*.

Karl used a reel so that we would be able to find the line again easily and explore the wreck with peace of mind.

Near the treble hook were several rectangular bronze windows, marking the cabins of first-class passengers.





We also saw one of the water tanks that had stood on the deck and, not far away, two showers and a piece of mosaic floor from the bathrooms.

As we swam towards the bow we saw pieces of wreckage littered with portholes of all shapes.

On the bow itself we could make out the anchor-chain and the anchor-winch. We also saw two bollards with rope still coiled around them. Pieces of timber floor from the foredeck remained intact.

Over the next few days we carried out

more dives and the various teams captured thousands of images. Four days of consecutive 90m dives were enough for me, however – I had to take a rest, but it had been a priceless experience to participate in this wonderful adventure.

Next year we will try to return to explore even more parts of the *Lusitania*.

We also hope to bring artefacts from the wreck up in an archaeologically responsible way – to be exhibited in the new *Lusitania* museum that is being built in Kinsale. ▣

Above, clockwise from top left: The dive team; anchor-winch; one of the ornate bronze windows; lifeboat davits; bollards with rope still in place; remnant of the mosaic floor; another of the bronze windows.



OUT OF LOCKDOWN, INTO GATORS AND MEG

REMEMBER A TIME (feels like ages) when the best ideas came from a night in the pub? Some of my best travel-adventure plans were dreamed up around midnight surrounded by friends and certain beverages.

Well, in this new world an idea came during a Zoom happy hour with a bunch of self-quarantined scuba-divers.

We had whinged to each other about the latest round of dive-trips cancelled, the local beach closures, and the excessive number of days our dive-computers had calculated our surface intervals (mine had never seen such a high number.)

As the drinks multiplied we reminisced about past trips and happier times.

Then, some time after midnight, the conversation on how and when we could dive again became a bit desperate.

We were all quarantining in America, which had different regulations for each state. How the pandemic was handled in the states is up for debate, but we started searching these rules to our diving advantage. Which states were allowing

diving? We came across South Carolina.

It got later and the rectangular screen images of each other grew a little blurry (maybe the connection, maybe the gin).

But our woes about being dry for so long changed into a flurry of eager planning. We could dive the Cooper River to search for megalodon teeth. (Seriously, the kind of plan one would come up with only under the influence).

One of the divers had family with a house in South Carolina – we might be able to stay there. We would go in three weeks' time.

WHEN I WOKE THE NEXT morning with my head aching (it's so embarrassing to have a hangover after spending a night alone talking to your computer) the details started to come back. I smiled, figuring it was just talk – until I received a text message a few hours later outlining the details.

We could stay at the house. A guy with a pontoon boat ran river tours, and we could hire the boat – us and the captain.

I spent two days obsessing over this idea. I badly wanted to go, but I also strongly felt that travel was probably not a great idea yet.

After much mental debate, I declined the invitation a few days later and forced myself to pretend it didn't happen so that my FOMO complex didn't take over.

Two-and-a-half weeks later, I found myself, gin in hand, on another Zoom call with the same group of dry divers.

They were leaving in a few days and somewhere around midnight (it's always around that time) I had decided to join them again. The state in which I was quarantining was completely open (though I was still not leaving the house) and South Carolina was mostly open too.

The dive operator had regulations in place: a log of daily temperature-checks had to be presented when we got there, temperature checks were done each morning before boarding, masks were to be worn at all times between dives and social distancing observed etc.

There was still room for me, and I was

Pictured: The group are delighted to be diving again – though there are misgivings...

Inset right: One reason for those misgivings – a lurking alligator.





BRANDI MUELLER plots a tentative escape from coronavirus restrictions,

TEETH

but has she made a sensible call?
Photography by **NATHAN PIERCE**

soon packing for a dive-trip (that feeling alone was amazing). The collective sadness of months of cancelled trips had been dragging me down and I suddenly felt a spark of happiness – adventure was about to happen.

Next morning I did a little Googling on where we were going and what we were doing. One word in the search results caught my eye: “Alligators.” Wait, what? I texted a few of the group in an “lol” sort of way: “Gators?” All I got was “lols” back. Another text conversation went like this:

Me: Anything weird I need to pack?

Nathan: Weird stuff would be knee-pads, collection bag, mechanic’s gloves and maybe garden tools, though I think I have some of those for you.

Me: Wait, garden tools? Lol. Mechanic’s gloves? What have I gotten myself into? Also, I was reading about gators.

Nathan: Haha... it’s different. Haven’t bumped into a croc yet.

Later that day:

Nathan: I’m running to the store, do you need knee-pads?

Me: Ummm... do I need knee-pads? What had I gotten myself into?

Arriving a few days later in Charleston, just seeing some of my dive-buddies in real life again was worth the effort.

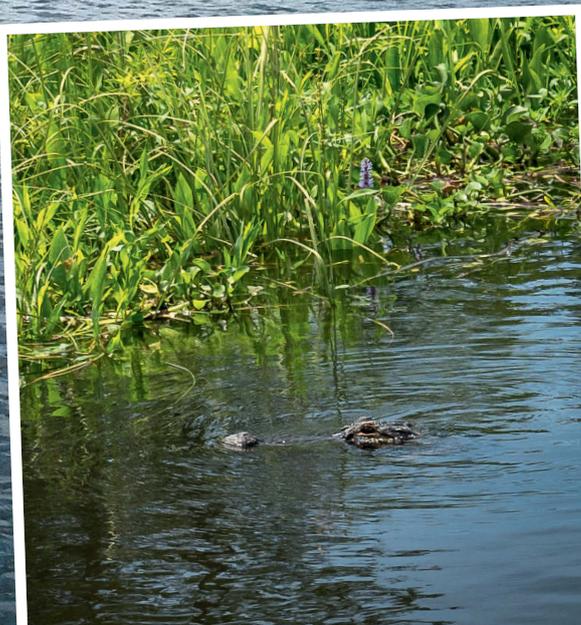
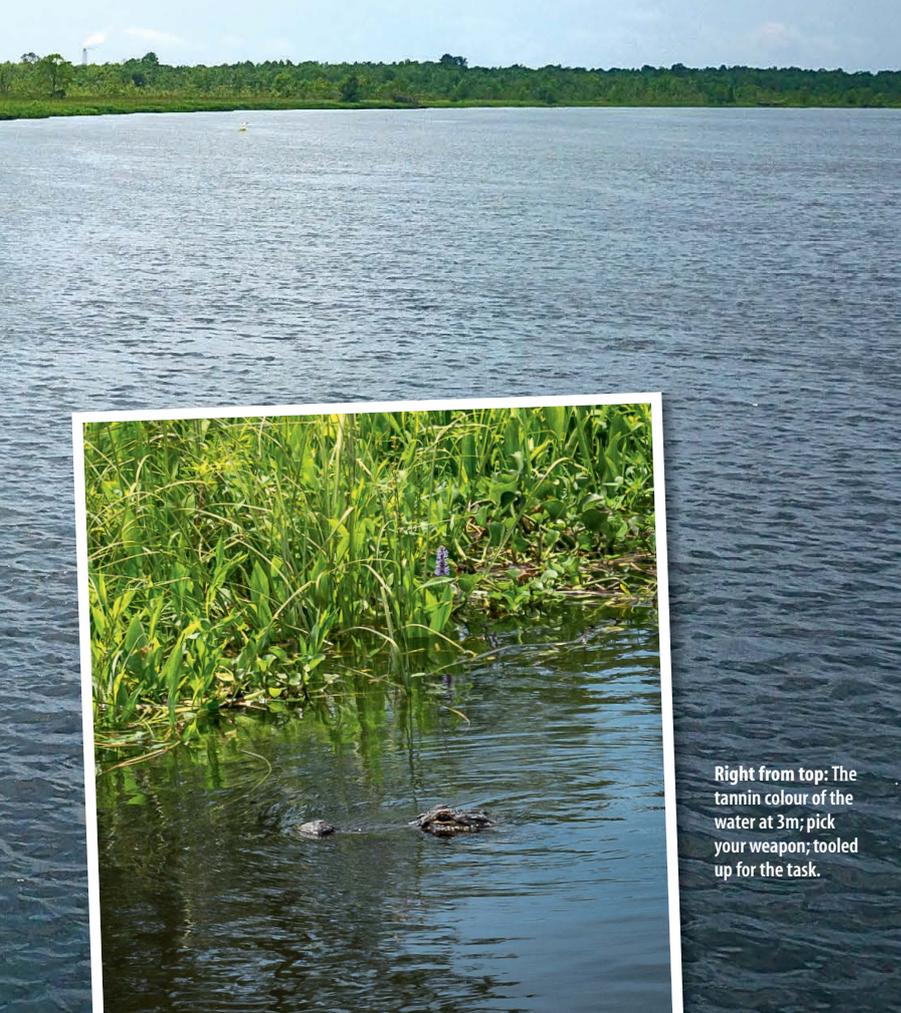
We packed the gear in a van for an early-morning departure and, after some real-life gin-and-tonics, went to sleep.

OUR DEPARTURE TIME was set for 6.30, and after staying up quite late revelling in being around other humans, morning came quite early. I woke to the sounds of pouring rain.

The captain called and said perhaps we should wait until around 11 to see if the storm passed.

The storm would turn into the second named tropical storm of the year. As we drank coffee and waited for the rain to pass, we wondered if our whole trip was ill-fated.

Eleven came and passed. The captain said maybe today wasn’t our day, but if we wanted to drive over to the river we could do the paperwork and drop off our



Right from top: The tannin colour of the water at 3m; pick your weapon; tooled up for the task.



gear, so we headed out. Our mysterious bad luck seemed to follow us. A ladder almost fell off a truck directly in front of us, and then an artic tried to change lanes into us. Was this bad karma for travelling too soon? We hadn't even got to where the alligators were yet.

We arrived safely and, shockingly, the rain had stopped and the sun was almost out. We filled out the paperwork in our captain's garage, which doubled as a mini dive-shop. His pontoon boat was out back at his private dock on the river.

His collection of Cooper River finds took over most of the space in his house. There were piles of teeth, bones, pottery – and gators. Gator heads, gator skins, gator tablecloth – gators everywhere.

I sent a couple of wide-eyed glances to Nathan and pointed to the skins. He just laughed at me.

The captain showed us what to look for and explained some of the artefacts and fossils. He had massive meg teeth bigger than my hand, along with fossilised fish vertebrae, mastodon bones and teeth, artefacts like clay pots from hundreds of years ago, antique glass bottles, and pipes from the 18th or 19th century.

It was difficult not to drool over this collection. It took me back to childhood days of wanting to be an archaeologist digging up dinosaur bones. I hadn't realised you could find them under water.

Our captain asked if we wanted to try a dive (and of course we did). Paperwork signed, temperatures taken and masks on, we headed upriver.

The alligators were definitely on my mind. I'll admit that they are animals for which I have a healthy respect (translated, I'm scared). They are giant, evil, mindless lizards that bite on instinct. Surround me with sharks any day and I'm thrilled, but being surprised by an alligator in a zero-vis river – no, thank you. I tried to act tough and not go on too much about this.

WE GEARED UP at the dive-site. I think we all felt a bit like Discover Scuba divers as we tried to remember how all this stuff worked.

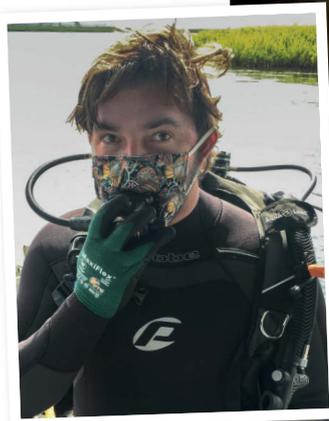
Plus we had lots of fun extras, including additional weight. We would be crawling around on the bottom and the river was subject to current, so being overweighted was important.

We strapped on knee-pads, which were stylish in either mechanic's or volleyball-player style. It was time to choose our weapons. I wanted something big and sharp for alligator defence... OK, it wasn't for that. It was for digging in gravel and helping us stay in place should the current pick up. I even had a very fashionable helmet mounted with flashlights, a new design from the captain.

Once we all looked like Christmas trees

Right, from top: Finding a meg tooth; the size can be appreciated when held in the palm; Brandi's collection from day two.

Below: Nathan forgets that he's wearing a mask!





of non-PADI-approved dive-gear, we got ready to jump in. And I promise I'm not making this up, but there was an alligator on the surface, no more than 25m from where the boat was anchored.

I sat back down, assuming that we would move the boat. Several others uttered disbelieving expletives. Our captain just laughed and said it would be fine. We jumped in, me last.

There was a current and I used the line to pull myself to the front of the boat and started descending on the anchor.

My trendy helmet turned out to be problematic when the weight of it pushed on the top of my mask, leading to a constant inrush of water.

The light gave way to a dark red tannin colour, then to black. Soon I felt my knees on the bottom at around 9m.

I couldn't stop the mask flooding, however, so I went back up, returned the helmet and descended again.

During those two minutes I had lost my buddy and remembered that I'm a terrible dive-buddy. Blocking my light source for a minute to see if I could see any other light, I couldn't. Even with my high-powered video light I couldn't see much further than a foot in front of me.

The river was silty and particles were creating a fog in my light. I had foregone diving for three months to come back to this?

CHECKED MY computer to see how long I had been down. We had planned a 90-minute dive and I figured I had to stay down for at least 60 minutes or my friends would make fun of me. Three minutes and 47 seconds had passed. Oh man, it was going to be a long, dark dive.

I looked around, wondering how I was supposed to find anything; I could hardly see my hand in front of my face.

Then I made out the sound of another diver breathing. To my left I saw a hint of illumination. I got closer, hoping it was the buddy I had abandoned earlier. It turned out to be Nathan.

He started talking to me. I couldn't

follow, but he was clearly trying to give me advice on finding the teeth (I was just ecstatic to be close to someone – maybe the sound of two sets of exhales would scare away the gators; safety in numbers.)

Then Nathan just reached down into the gravel and grabbed a tooth, proudly displaying it to me.

I was like – what? How did you find that? Then he left me, swimming off in another direction, and I was alone again, in the dark... with the gators. Was this worth the risk of getting Covid for?

OK, so I'm being (a little) dramatic. With my nose to the sand I crawled on hands and knees over the riverbed.

I was glad the vis was so bad that no one could see me. My tech-diver friends would be so disappointed in the terrible lack of buoyancy and trim on display.

I used my pickaxe both to hold myself in the current and to steady myself on the bottom and then, something sent off a hint of a reflection. Like an old lady without glasses squinting at small text in a book, I got closer to the bottom and, sure enough, it was a shark tooth!

About the size of my pinky nail, it probably wasn't a meg tooth (perhaps it was from a baby meg) but it was a tooth.

The strange activity had suddenly become fun – and the addiction began. I wanted more teeth.

I spent the rest of the dive having a fairly humorous internal conversation with myself, going back and forth between being terrified by the prospect of a gator behind me and being ecstatic each time I came across a tooth.

I couldn't decide which would be less attractive to an alligator – should I keep my limbs in close so that I looked like a big ball, or spread them out to look larger – but then, would my legs look like an appetiser? I also consciously exhaled a lot. The noise should scare them, right?

Returning to the boat was like junior school show-and-tell, each of us revealing our best teeth and our stashes. We also drilled the captain: "What's this? Which shark species did this come from? Is this

Above: Dive-boat in front of the Old Rice Mill on the Cooper River.

Below: Nathan finds a catfish – or did the catfish find him?

anything, or just a piece of the river?"

He kindly told us that: "Everything was something, but yeah, that might just be part of the riverbed." And he ooo-ed and ahhh-ed over our finds as if it was the first time he'd seen teeth, even though he saw this every day. He was lovely.

WE HAD ALL FOUND an impressive haul of teeth, especially given that a tropical storm had passed through that morning and we didn't think we'd be diving. I wanted to know how this place and its conditions led to it being such a hotspot for fossils and ancient objects.

It was probably due to the alteration of the river by humans. For years we have created canals, extended the banks for boat traffic and connected different parts of the river, increasing dramatically the flow towards the ocean. Its speed has created continuous erosion of the river banks, so the pockets of fossils previously buried deep in the Earth were opening up and falling into the river.

The area also consisted of slave-worked rice plantations in the 1700s and 1800s. Artefacts found from those times included clay pottery and pipes. More recent, though still old, bottles could be found (we found modern beer-cans too).

Day two was sunny, warm and our best day of collecting. Visibility was still close to zero, but with fewer particles in the water it was slightly easier to find things.

We found a few palm-sized megalodon teeth, and until you have one of these massive teeth in your hand you can't fathom how big this extinct shark from more than three million years ago was.

It is thought to have grown up to 20m long (the largest great white shark known today was only 6.1m). Teeth as large as 18cm have been found and it's estimated that the jaws would be around 2.7 x 3.4m.

Imagine being chased by a monster shark that big on a dive. It made the alligators seem far less terrifying.

I got used to the darkness under water, and the solitary digging soon became almost therapeutic (my gator thoughts slowed down a little). I started to recognise the sounds of my dive-buddies in the distance – the digging and tinkling of equipment and the exhalation bubbles. 🐡



When we did run into each other we usually went off in opposite directions to avoid digging in the same place.

Now there were contests to win. Who would get the largest tooth, who would find the most unique bone, and the consolation prize for the smallest tooth?

Our third and final day also had nice topside conditions – as well as a few more gators. Our captain off-handedly mentioned that it was mating season and the gators were quite territorial.

I sent Nathan another glare about this not being in the pre-trip briefing, although I don't think he saw it through my sunglasses and mask.

It reminded me a lot of muck-diving, nose to the sand, squinting to try to make something appear in a collage of sand particles. Each time I found a tooth, big or small, I couldn't believe it could just be sitting there. A million-year-old fossilised shark-tooth just sitting on top of gravel in a river in South Carolina – who would have thought?

HAD GONE into this little adventure mostly to get out of the house and back under water, with low expectations of even finding a tooth. I was blown away by how many we found from multiple

shark species, including great whites, tigers, mako and snaggletooth, as well as other goodies including fossilised turtle shell, mammoth teeth and bottles we dated back to the 1950s.

When it was time to pack up and go home, we carefully packed our prizes in our suitcases, noticing the added weight. I couldn't believe how much we had

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ The closest airport is Charleston, South Carolina and the site is a 30-minute drive from the airport.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Dive the Cooper, which also offers alligator-hunting seasonally, divethecooper.com. It offers shared accommodation but Charleston also has many hotels and apartments.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round, but the water is warmer in the summer at 26-27°C – in winter it can get as cold as 5°C. Tidal currents mean that dive-times can vary.

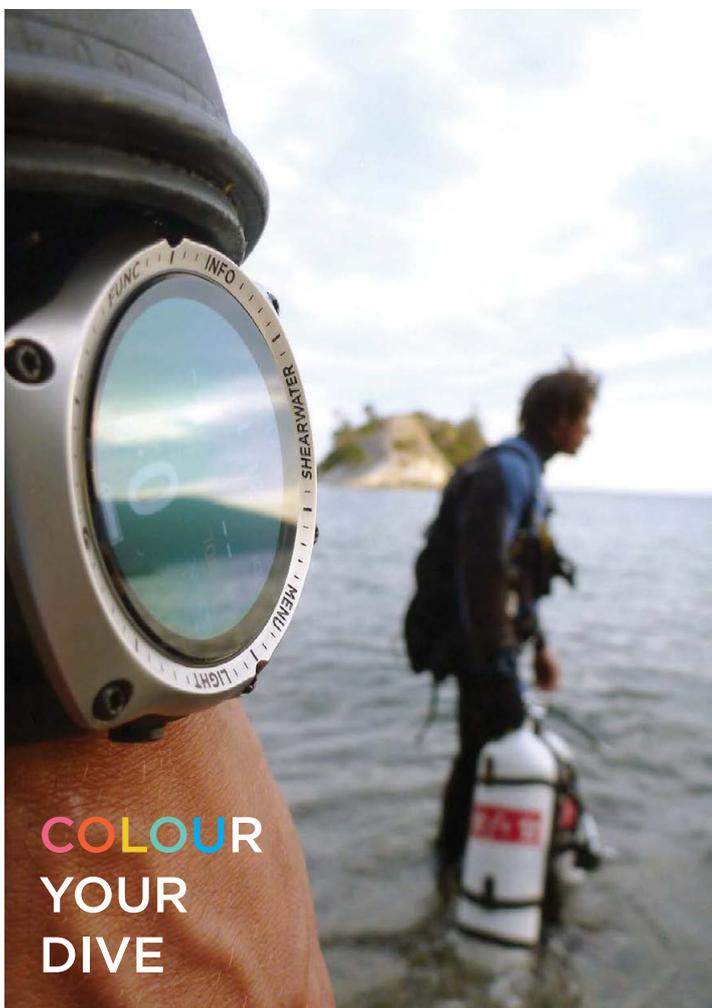
MONEY ▶ US dollars.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from the UK from £390. Diving with Dive The Cooper \$200pp including accommodation, \$600 a day full boat hire, \$15 per air-fill. A six-month South Carolina hobby licence to collect teeth or artefacts costs \$10pp.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ charlestoncvb.com

found, and I could also tell that my quarantine depression had lifted a lot.

Being under water always makes me happier, even if it is in a pitch-black river with alligators. I was starting to feel sad to be going back into isolation, but also hopeful at the thought that things will get better, and soon we would all be diving a lot more like normal.



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GETTING STARTED IN

UK DIVING



Last month **WILL APPLEYARD** was busy selling the joys of UK diving to any doubters out there – now, with UK diving the only practical possibility for many of us, he too gets practical

MY DIVING CAREER began in London in the early 2000s. I scoffed at the suggestion of completing the open-water part of the training in the UK (*whaaat?*) and took what I considered to be the softer option by completing the course in Italy.

Just weeks after my PADI Open Water Diver certification card arrived, I skipped off to join what turned out to be a disastrous Andaman Sea liveaboard trip to gain the Advanced qualification.

I completed the course, not feeling particularly “advanced” but with an escape from a sinking vessel providing added value.

A sobering experience, yes, but not one grave enough to deter me from whatever water-based adventures lay ahead.

Unwilling to wait for my next diving-holiday opportunity, I would have dived anywhere – I yearned to be in the water.

I even contacted the local golf club to

see if it wanted its lake balls collected. It didn't reply.

I'm not one for clubs, so began to scour the Internet for forums, seeking potential buddies. I fell into what was then the go-to place for armchair experts and the curious alike, UK Divers, which still appears to function as a forum today.

Some of the threads I found useful and, through the fog of diving gods, know-alls and no-mark newbies like me, found new friends who shared the same mindset. Off we went to discover UK diving.

STARTED AT THE BOTTOM of the list of available dive-sites. It hadn't occurred to me that I could actually see things of interest while diving in the UK.

So with my eager pals we would trot off to a former naval torpedo-testing site near Portsmouth to get wet, whatever the weather and whatever the season.

Visibility was somewhere between bad

and exceptionally bad, yet we would stay all day, conducting freezing dive after featureless freezing dive, just to enjoy being immersed. We kept working on those seemingly unattainable buoyancy skills, and fumbled with the fiddly art of deploying a surface marker buoy because, apparently, we'd need one.

The initial items of kit I collected were bought secondhand and I amassed a pile of trinkets I didn't really need: a tiny, cheap torch that flooded on its first dive; a second one that did the same; a neoprene hood so small that it made me feel faint and all kinds of rattles, tank-bangers and slates.

I ordered a huge knife and acquired a 7mm wetsuit that looked to have been handed down from Jacques Cousteau himself.

That said, I still use the fins I bought all those years ago and, without wishing to tempt fate, they remain in great shape. 🐡

Above: Preparing kit before ropes-off – keeping all your kit together is likely to be all the more important on boats from now on.

Eventually I worked out what I did and didn't need to dive comfortably in the UK. I didn't need to look like a Christmas tree, sagging with novelty tat.

I moved on to a drysuit, bought a good reliable torch, lost that and bought another, got my weighting sorted and discovered where to find genuinely interesting stuff to dive.

I realised that even a no-mark newbie like me was capable of diving in the sea without a guide and that there were wrecks to suit even my pitiful skill level.

Today, thanks to the many online platforms at our disposal, the path to knowing where to go and what to see seems shorter, the volume of information perhaps even overwhelming.

So once again to discuss the delights of UK diving, I've brought together a selection of divers – peers followed for their fabulous underwater imagery, long-term diving partners, masters of the sea or all of the above – in the hope of feeding your interest.

IF THERE WAS AN annual award for the UK's most enthusiastic and informative skipper, Dave Brown of Porthkerris Divers on England's south-west coast would have a cabinet crammed with silverware.

Cornwall is a great place for the all-round diver. It's out on a limb geographically, but it's a pilgrimage I look forward to making most summers and a location so beautiful that it's difficult to leave when a trip winds to a close.

Stand-out memories for Dave? His answer made me laugh: "A few years back I was taking a mixed group out on a lovely calm day. I dropped the last pair in, side-slung guys with nice, shiny gear, very much looking the part if you like that kind of thing.

"They'd dropped into the water after a considerable amount of swearing, clanging and graceful shuffling. Twenty-five minutes later, I hoisted out one of the guys on the lift, grumpy and confused.

He couldn't figure out why his trim was



Below, from left: Dave Brown – most enthusiastic skipper?; Hat Rock in Devon.

out; he had an obscene amount of drag and he couldn't keep up with his buddy.

"Slowly lifting him, I kept asking if he was missing anything, but he couldn't figure out what was wrong. From the top of the lift I walked him over and presented him with his nice set of very dry fins that he'd left on his seat!

"The atmosphere on the boat after that

between him and his buddy was awful, I couldn't stop laughing, and funnily enough didn't see him for the rest of the weekend!" I might have jumped into the water minus my fins before – but never to the bottom!

Much of Dave's diving career took place in the tropics but "I always missed the Atlantic, finding it more of a challenge





Left: Dan Bolt and underwater friend.

and having a more 'real' feel to it, so wound up back at Porthkerris, completing my instructor's course and started working down there.

"The natural path was to start working on the boats, so I completed all my courses and haven't looked back since."

Dave fuelled my envy of his desirable location further by reminiscing about his

favourite places for UK underwater exploration: "The Runnel Stone off Penzance is always an exciting place to see, likewise anywhere in the Scillies can be a joy to dive. Exploring a blip on the sounder is always exciting for me.

"Though most of the time it'll amount to nothing, the feeling of pulling yourself down the shotline to the possibility of

something new is super-exciting!

"Above all for me the area of the Manacles is always a pleasure –maybe not always so pleasant on the surface.

"The pinnacles are beautiful from the surface down to the seabed, with some nice historic wrecks to nose around in.

"Add to this the big groups of playful dolphins, bluefin tuna, minke whales and blue sharks, and you never know what you'll see when you leave the beach."

I can't wait to get back down to Cornwall in the hope of sharing such experiences.

ALISON TURNER IS a long-time UK and overseas diving partner of mine. She learnt to dive in the UK, rather than taking the soft option as I did.

"UK diving is a bit like walking in the UK. If you dress up for the conditions, take your time and look carefully, you'll be amazed by what you see!" she says.

I concur, although some of us are way better at spotting wildlife than others.

Of course, we all learn by making mistakes. Alison learned the hard way about pre-dive checks, for example: "I hefted my weights, BC and cylinder on, donned my fins and mask, then, with a quick check of gas, I plunged off the platform and into the cool of the water. Hmm, slightly cooler than I was expecting. And considerably wetter.

"Oh, I never got my buddy to do up my drysuit zip! It's amazing how high you can lift out of the water just by finning when 11°C water is trickling down your spine!"

Al's advice to newcomers is this: "Take your time. Nothing in diving is improved by doing it quicker, especially kitting-up. You'll use less air, see more and stay under longer by relaxing and doing things slowly."

Taking time is also sound advice for underwater photographers. I did the opposite and took a temperamental early digital camera with me on that doomed Andaman liveboard trip.

I soon discovered my need to master buoyancy skills first, so left the

Below, from left: Bright colour on a Cornish reef; Alison Turner, zipped up and ready to go.



unreliable relic on the boat for the rest of the trip. I fell back into photography only once diving felt second-nature and I certainly wouldn't get into the water without the camera now. Who knows what might pass by?

UK-based award-winning photographer Dan Bolt would agree. For some time I have followed Dan, a UK diver since 1988, on Instagram (@danboltphoto), enjoying his images taken at local dive sites.

"I had to wait 30 years before seeing my first octopus in the UK, then, like those proverbial buses, three came along all at once," he told me. "On one night-dive last year at Babbacombe, I visited the home of a large common octopus and patiently waited for around 30 minutes, just watching him breathe and explore outside with his tentacles.

"Slowly emerging, just a metre in front of me, he wasn't spooked by my presence, and just wandered around for a while before sloping off into the dark to go feeding. What a privilege!"

Favourite dive-site? Dan gave me three: "Firstly it would be my local site of Babbacombe in south Devon. I've dived here throughout my whole diving life and it never ceases to show up something new each year.

"It's famed for the cuttlefish that come in the spring, though numbers have reduced drastically recently.

"It's a nursery for many fish species – you can find over a dozen species of nudibranch here, as well as the odd octopus and even seahorses.

"Secondly, I'd say any of the stunning sea-lochs of western Scotland. No two are quite the same, and some go to over 100m depth just off the shore. The abundance and variety of life in these cold waters, not to mention the stunning vis at times, in my view makes this world-class diving.

"Finally, seal-diving! I've done this at Lundy and at the Farne Islands, and it's by far the most fun you can have under water! Nothing puts a smile on your face like having half-a-dozen seals fighting over who gets to play with you next."

DAN'S TIP FOR the tentative UK diver is this: "For the past 20 years I've dived only with a camera, and the biggest tip I can give to anyone wanting to get the most out of their diving is to stop, look and listen. You don't have to be a marine biologist, but a little bit of knowledge and plenty of observation will give a fascinating edge to every dive, and you can even bore your buddies with talk of nudibranchs!"

I caught up with my final peer, dive-guide Fraser Cameron and we talked about water temperatures. "Don't worry about the cold," he advises new UK divers.

Right: Fraser Cameron – what cold? (he lives in Iceland).



"I learned to dive in the Mediterranean and have never been colder than in those poorly fitted wetsuits.

"Appropriate exposure protection makes all the difference."

The sea is not always what I would consider cold around the UK, especially from mid-August to September, when we

can expect surface temperatures of 20°C, certainly down south. A properly fitted thick wetsuit and hood will serve you well during these months. I prefer 3mm wet gloves over the chunkier 5mm version, affording more dexterity to operate the camera, SMB and make any adjustments to kit needed under water.

From his home in Iceland, Fraser told me about his most memorable UK dive, on the ss *Kintyre* to the west of Glasgow.

"Climbing down the sharp rocks to get to the water I shredded both drysuit wrist-seals. This became obvious as I swam out towards the wreck, but I mistakenly pushed on. The wreck was

Below, top row from left: SMB practice; exploring a fuselage at the Chepstow inland site; thornback ray.



Third row, from left: Colourful reef; pipefish at Swanage; relaxing after a dive.



fantastic and the colourful sponges and abundant life took my mind off the fact that my suit was filling with water.

“The problem came when I surfaced and had to haul myself and the now significantly heavier water-filled drysuit back up the same steep rocks. Lesson learnt.” Don’t try that at home, kids.

“The west coast of Scotland and the Sound of Mull in particular offer a wide range of wreck and scenic dive-sites,” said Fraser. “I enjoy trying to piece together stories of wrecks and their origins from underwater clues, and if I come across some scallops or nudibranchs along the way, all the better.”

While there are plenty of accessible shore-diving sites in the UK, many top sites are accessed by boat. When conditions are at their best, space can be at a premium aboard some UK dive-vessels. These dives can seem slightly chaotic at times, particularly with more equipment to think about than on a dive in the tropics.

Keeping it all close to you rather than spread out over the dive-deck should eliminate unnecessary stress when the skipper announces that you’re nearing the site, and it’s simply good seamanship.

Apart from a (usually) informative site briefing from your skipper, the vessel is

simply your taxi. Unless you’re diving with an organised group from a club, you’re left to your own devices under water around the UK.

The skipper might ask you to tow an SMB to follow throughout a drift dive, or to deploy one on ascent. To dive without one anywhere in the world I consider unwise. Carry one even if you know how to inflate it only while at the surface for now - it’s far more visible to boat-crew than a diver’s head in a black hood.

UK wrecks are seldom marked with a permanent buoy, so your way to the surface at the end of a dive might also be by reel, line and buoy. Skippers will often put in a temporary marker, or shotline for you to descend, but it might not be left for the duration of your dive.

You will already know about the dive-site’s minimum and maximum depths when booking with the boat-charter company, but consider that a 30m dive will be a more challenging in the UK than at some of those warm, bluewater overseas sites.

MANY OF MY FAVOURITE UK dive-sites are within 15m, with plenty of natural light. If you want to explore deeper, in more benign conditions, there are plenty of quarry dive-centres, which you can always use for learning how to deploy that SMB, too.

I would be applying too much gloss if I said that UK diving is always a scenic experience - sometimes it isn’t. I remember enduring some cold and very dark dives that I really should have thumbed back in my early diving days, and only slowly learnt when not to go diving.

But visibility can be very good and, as my peers and I have explained, there is plenty to see down there.

To enjoy UK diving to the max, be comfortable in your equipment, build up your temperate water confidence by starting shallow, and be ready for genuine adventure, without a guide and on you and your buddy’s own terms. 



Second row, from left: Searching for macro life – a good torch is a sound investment; a diver comes back up on a boat-lift; shark-tooth fossils from a Sussex dive.



Find them on Instagram or YouTube:

- Dan Bolt @danboltphoto
- Fraser Cameron @fraserhcameron
- Will Appleyard @willappleyard
- DIVER @diver_magazine

Gorgonian Gardens

Alonissos, Greece, Aegean Sea

by Nikoletta Efstathiou



THE NATIONAL MARINE PARK of Alonissos Island is an underwater gem, and 15 minutes by boat from the port of Alonissos, on the deserted island of Agios Georgios, Gorgonian Gardens is a wall-dive with a stunning garden of yellow and red soft corals.

These species are part of a coralligenous marine habitat that hosts the highest concentration of biodiversity in the Mediterranean Sea. They thrive in places with strong currents that create a nutrient-rich habitat for native species, and a passing refuge for migrating schools of fish. Gorgonians grow only 2cm per year, so it's a real natural monument.

You submerge along a rocky wall with a steep slope covered in red algae, complex pink and purple structures that build biogenic clusters, a base for the growth of other organisms.

The wall is full of cracks and holes in which you can find crabs, molluscs and sea-squirts. You'll be amazed by the plethora of different nudibranchs, with their extraordinary colours.

At 26m you start seeing the yellow gorgonians. As you reach 32m these start entwining with the purple ones, creating a surprisingly colourful scenario for the Mediterranean.

The deeper you go, the richer the gardens become. Be alert, because here you can encounter grouper, forkbeards and red scorpionfish camouflaged on the algae.

On ascent, don't forget to look out into the blue, because this site is a passage for migrating fish.

You might see yellowfin tuna and amberjack – sometimes in groups of as many as 30-40 individuals.

Nikoletta is an instructor at Alonissos Triton Dive Centre (bestdivinggreece.com)

LOCAL INTELLIGENCE

2

As we plan back-to-reality overseas trips, no fewer than 18 dive-pros from all over the world pitch their favourite sites to visit – will one of them sway your decision?

BLUE MED



CHRIS BESSON

CHRIS BESSON

Emily & Waterlily Wrecks

Mauritius, Indian Ocean

by Francois Besson



OVER MY 25 YEARS as a diving instructor, many fellow-divers have asked me to name my favourite dive-site in Mauritius. Without hesitation I say: “My yoga dive.”

This reply tends to generate a certain amount of curiosity, so I explain about the *Emily* and *Waterlily* wrecks, two small sugar barges that were used to create artificial reefs in the early 1980s.

They were sunk about 10m apart

on a sandy patch of seabed just off Trou aux Biches, and lie 25m deep.

Nearly 40 years on, I can say that they are the epitome of how an artificial reef should look.

This is not a large dive-site, the barges being only 12m long, but the compact nature of the sites makes for a very interesting dive because a multitude of critters, large and small, can be found there.

The proximity of the barges to

any of the hotels situated in the north-west of the island makes the site a quick 10-15-minute boat-trip out, and the fact that there are no rivers in the vicinity ensures that the water is always clear.

It is also sheltered from the prevailing south-easterlies, and there is never any current under water. That’s why I love this site: loads of fish, including some very rare sightings, no current, crystal water – it all makes for the perfect yoga dive.

Francois is director of Diving World Mauritius (diving-mauritius.com) ●

obvious as you approach. A sharp, jagged rock rises above the surface and it looks black!

Even though the area around this rock is quite extensive, we tend to dive one particular part.

To the north of the rock that breaks the surface is a long ridge. It rises, then slopes down again as it extends north, some parts coming all the way up to 5m deep at low tide.

We usually jump close to the rock on the west side and then head north out to the ridge. On the way we swim through a forest of big, bushy black corals. There are also many small, colourful seafans.

The ridge is where all the fish congregate. Baitfish shelter within the black corals and big schools of surgeonfish, butterflyfish and sweetlips hang out here.

Barracuda, tuna and mackerel patrol when the current is running.

Coral heads, also known as bommies, are scattered around the plateau. We can look under these for wobbegong sharks and higher up, hiding within hydroids, Pontohi pygmy seahorses (*below*).

Another highlight of this



CHRIS BESSON

Black Rock

Raja Ampat, Indonesia



by
Debbie
Arriaga

BLACK ROCK IS ON the western side of Kawe Island in Raja Ampat. It is only just in the Southern Hemisphere – the Equator is very close!

We always make sure to visit Black Rock on our day-trip to the Wayag islands, before crossing into the Northern Hemisphere.

The origin of the name of this dive-site is very



JERRY ARRIAGA



JERRY ARRAGA

spectacular site are the manta rays that can often be seen swooping around the ridge and cleaning on the plateau.

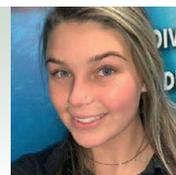
There's nowhere else in Raja Ampat that looks like Black Rock.

It's an adventure to get there and an adventure to dive there!

Debbie is cruise director of the *Coralia* liveaboard by Papua Explorers Eco Resort (papuaexplorers.com) ●

Blue Springs State Park Florida, Atlantic

by Olivia Nycz



BIRDS SINGING, leaves rustling in the trees, the sound of divers sipping their coffee and talking in low voices as they wait for the gates to open – these are all typical things to hear while waiting to enter Blue Springs, our local state park and spring.

The gates open at 8am, and because of the popularity of the dive-site, the best bet for getting in the water is to get there 30-45 minutes early. This also means that the best parking will be available.

After assisting each other into

our gear, my dive-buddy and I walk down to the diver's entrance.

I'm wearing my 5mm wetsuit, and sweat begins to bead around my forehead. All I can think about is how good that 22°C water is going to feel.

Once in, there's a short wade against a small current to reach the head of the spring. The spring is Category 4, which means that there is a strong upward flow. The spring head is shaped similarly to a bowl, sloping downward until the entryway is reached.

A few fallen logs cover the entrance, and then the spring begins to take on an hourglass-like shape, opening up before closing in, then opening and closing in again. Photographers should be quite excited about the wonderful photo ops, because you can look up and see the rays of the sun peeking through the logs.

At about 23m, the spring opens up into a cave, perfect for those with the proper certifications.

Afterwards, divers can float along with the current to the exit, where there is a whole lot to see!



The Invisibles Necker, British Virgin Islands

by Ben Williams



THIS DIVE-SITE is located just off Necker Island. A lot of people hear about it but only a few get to dive it, because the weather conditions need to be right.

It consists of two underwater pinnacles teeming with marine life, big schools of fish swirling in and around the crevasses.

Start your dive at a depth of 11m, swimming through soft corals towards the pinnacles. Once you reach the first underwater rock, which towers up towards the surface, you start circumnavigating in a clockwise direction.

You'll be greeted by lobsters hiding in the cracks and schools of grunt under the overhangs. Occasionally look out into the blue

for sharks or eagle rays passing by.

Then it's time to start looking up at the big schools of bar and horse-eye jack and barracuda.

After a couple of ledges with more schooling fish, the chub will come to greet you. It's time to make your way into the big boulders with tons of grunt and some beautiful yellow cup coral along the big boulders.

Next head into the deeper water to the sand in about 18m and wait for the spadefish to swarm around you before waving them goodbye and starting to make your way back shallower towards the pinnacle wall.

Big trumpetfish blend with the

soft corals along the wall, pointing you towards your final turn to the cresting-wave rock formation for a farewell on your way back to the boat.

Not only is this an awesome dive during the day but it is also the best night-dive I have done anywhere in the world.

It's also where the local turtles find a bed for the night – divers see up to 15 sleeping turtles on a dive.

Ben is an instructor at *Sunchaser Scuba* at the *Bitter End Yacht Club*, Virgin Gorda (sunchaserscuba.com) ●





PAUL SHEPHERD

Lots of freshwater turtles munching on vegetation, Florida gar floating along right next to you, and of course, the manatees (above)!

Although touching them is not allowed, they have no problem swimming right up to you, and

nothing is cooler than getting to dive with baby manatees.

Olivia is a divemaster at Seminole Scuba, Lake Mary (seminolescuba.com) ●



PAUL SHEPHERD



EBRAHIM HAMDY / E-B PHOTOGRAPHY

Elphinstone Reef Egypt, Red Sea



by Mo Soady

THE ELPHINSTONE REEF is one of the most famous dive-sites in the southern Red Sea. It's more than 300m long and around 25m wide and is located in blue water around 15 miles from the reef coast of Marsa Alam and reachable by boat.

It's one of the few places on Earth where you can dive with oceanic whitetip sharks (above) as well as, if you're lucky, hammerhead sharks.

The main reef starts directly beneath the water's surface and offers you the whole colourful

world of the Red Sea from the moment you enter the water.

Thousands of orange anthias dance from a metre down, which makes the safety stop really special. Several plateaus in the north and south and walls full of healthy hard and soft corals swarming with fish make every dive different.

Those clouds of anthias, butterflyfish, hundreds of fusiliers, trevally and barracuda surround you and make you feel part of the ocean. If the current allows, you



EBRAHIM HAMDY / E-B PHOTOGRAPHY



EBRAHIM HAMDY / E-B PHOTOGRAPHY

can move to the end of the plateau in the north.

Looking down to 45m, you can enjoy beautiful formations of fan corals, and look into the blue to spot sharks of all kinds. Elphinstone is a must-do for any experienced diver.

Mo is manager / instructor-trainer at Scuba World Divers at the Hotelux Oriental Coast, Marsa Alam (scubaworlddivers.com) ●



ERRAHIM HAMDI / E-B PHOTOGRAPHY

Blizzard Ridge Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia



by Heather Kay

WE PULL UP AT the mooring in Lighthouse Bay. The water is clear and inviting. The white beaches of the bay lead up to the picturesque Vllaming Head Lighthouse that marks the tip of Exmouth Cape. Below wait the marine residents of Ningaloo Reef.

We descend the mooring-line to the sand at 9m and swim east to the ridge. A maximum depth of 14m makes this site accessible to all and allows for long bottom-times.

The abundant glassfish become prey for bigger mouths, with feeding frenzies of mackerel, trevally and tuna adding excitement.

Whitetip reef sharks rest on the sand while wobbegongs hide under ledges. Creep up on the resident silver pearl perch and they might accept you into their school.

For the keen-eyed there are nudibranchs of all shapes and sizes, egg cowries and hermit crabs, juvenile waspfish, scorpionfish and octopuses.

Look out for the sailfin catfish, a species endemic to Ningaloo, 



AFTER MORE THAN 25 years and 11,000 dives in Puerto Galera, known as the centre of marine biodiversity, of all the amazing dive-sites I'm still enthralled by the Canyons. Divers from all over the world come for that big wow moment diving Puerto Galera's signature site.

The Canyons is often an exciting heart-pumping drift-dive that brings out all the bigger schools of bigger fish, and you really get that feeling of flying.

At slack tide I've been able to appreciate the beauty of the topography and the colourful soft corals that are so abundant. That's when you can take your time and get the photos you want.

The three "canyons" are

The Canyons Oriental Mindoro, Philippines

by Allison Manis



textured in gorgeous corals and sponges. As you drift to the dive-site you look up to see giant trevally and schools of tuna.

You duck into the Canyons, take a break from the current and can then just cruise through the site and enjoy the show.

Primarily it's the large schools of drummers, snapper, emperors, sweetlips, barracuda, jack, trevally and even sharks that make this such an exciting dive.

It ends at a 1.5m anchor embedded in the coral, where the

group can gather before being swept off for a bluewater ascent to the safety stop in the current.

The Canyons makes a great wide-angle dive because of all the photogenic seafans and whip corals – but sometimes it's nice to bring a macro lens and look for pygmy seahorses and nudibranchs too.

Allison is marketing manager, instructor and mermaid at the El Galleon Dive Resort with Asia Divers (asiadivers.com) ●



BETH WATSON

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dark with a tall dorsal fin and six whiskers upfront. They can be shy under table corals or out foraging in the nearby sand.

The site is also frequented by manta rays in the winter months, gliding by effortlessly or circling over your bubbles, and the occasional dugong sighting will give you bragging rights for life.

From July to October your dive will be a noisy one, as humpback whales sing constantly to you. Might you be lucky and see one cruise by?

The ridge is a magnet for life. Sand surrounds the site for hundreds of metres on either side and the variety and number of fish living there is thrilling.

Sting rays hide in the sand. Turtles sleep under ledges, waking to swim alongside you before heading to the surface for the first breaths of the day. As you ascend, the mooring-line provides entertainment for your safety-stop. Life on the line can



include juvenile batfish, crabs and small gobies, juvenile squid showing off their colours, nudibranchs and colourful sponges.

You'll be amazed by the diversity of life at Blizzard Ridge – it's a surprise and a delight.

Heather is an instructor at Exmouth Dive & Whalesharks Ningaloo (exmouthdiving.com.au) ●



Kalimaya Canyon Komodo, Indonesia

by Eric James McAskil



WE'RE THE ONLY operation offering day-diving to West Komodo, Sangeang and the Sumbawa coast, and it's been our pleasure to explore the surrounding islands and find new playgrounds. We discovered Kalimaya Canyon while searching for dive-sites during our soft opening in 2016, and it's a thrilling mix of surge timing and pristine coral beauty.

Located in the middle of the



Sape Strait that separates Komodo Island from Sumbawa, the site benefits from both Pacific and Indian Ocean influences.

Accessible only for a few days each month when the current is just right, this split island presents an unforgettable diving experience available to divers at any level.

Back-rolling in front of the rock face where the water appears calm, we descend a sloping coral reef to

reach a cavernous entrance and bottom out at 22m.

The entrance is populated by bamboo (*left*) and whitetip sharks, with the occasional turtle swimming through.

As we enter the canyon the rocks overhead gradually close in, leaving us one way to go and a small window of light to swim towards. We enjoy the scenery as the animal life switches to macro, with numerous crabs and nudibranchs coating the walls.

As we approach the exit, the rocks close in overhead and the canyon narrows to a cave only a few metres wide. We slowly swim forward, enjoying the majestic topography as the surge picks up, propelling us forward and back, forward and back, until in a final blast of energy it spits us out.





Emerging into the light, we arrive safely on a shallow reef protected from current and surge.

The rest of the dive is spent exploring this protected coral ecosystem and looking for critters taking a break from the current,

including banded sea kraits, marble rays, peacock mantis shrimp and schooling anthias, while pelagic fish swim past in the blue.

Eric is the owner of Kalimaya Dive Resort, (kalimayadiveresort.com) ●

Atun Wreck

East New Britain, PNG

by Klinta Dunska



ONE OF THE MOST popular dive-sites in this region, as well as my favourite, is the Atun Wreck. It's a simple site in a way, suitable for everyone, but what makes it great is that it contains at once all the possible environments a diver could want.

There is sandy bottom all the way to the wall, with a great area in which scorpionfish and stonefish like to hide, then a wall-drop on which to look out for pelagics such as sharks and mackerel.

The very good-sized wreck lies right on the edge of the wall and is magical for wide-angle photography because of the great visibility, and for macro



opportunities right across the wreck.

It sits in a perfect upright position with the bow at about 15m depth and the bottom at about 25m. It's been under water for 30-plus years, so coral growth has slowly been taking over. Beautiful carnation, toadstool, *alcyonacea* in stunning purple and tree corals grow all over the wreck, especially around and inside the wheelhouse.

I enjoy searching for *flabellina nudibranchs* all over the wreck, and sometimes challenge my students to see who can find one first.

It's fun to watch new divers zooming in and scanning every inch of the wreck for this tiny 2, 3 or 5cm-long creature.

Angelita Cenote

Tulum, Mexico, Caribbean

by Marcus Fleischmann



OUR GUESTS OFTEN ASK which is our very best dive-site and, while the question is difficult to answer, this *cenote* is a place like no other. It lies about 10-15 minutes' drive south of the small town of Tulum through lush green jungle. In this part of the Riviera Maya there are few cars, traffic or people. It's off the beaten track, which we like!

Angelita is not a typical overhead *cenote*, but more like a water-filled open crater that allows sunlight to penetrate deep into the water.

People are captivated by the magical atmosphere of the site and the awe-inspiring deep blue water, surrounded by lush green tropical forest. At around 30m depth you reach a hydrogen sulphide layer, and tree branches mystically reach up

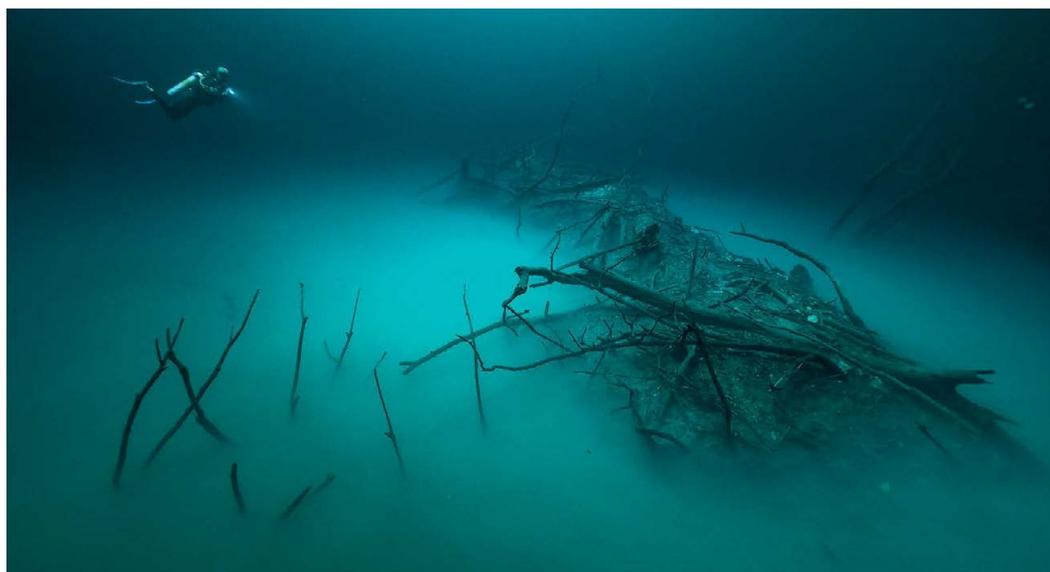
through it from below.

Because the water is so clear, hovering here feels like being in the sky above clouds. The layer is about 2m thick, and once inside or below it gets pitch-black, as the cloud filters out all the sunlight.

Yes, it's a sulphur cloud so you get that rotten-egg smell or taste, and if you're carrying silver jewellery you'll notice after the dive that it's turned black. It's a beautiful dive but it is also an advanced one, and we don't do it with our divers on day one.

It extends far deeper than 30m and we do provide the training for those who want to do it.

Marcus is CEO of Pro Dive International dive-centres (prodivinternational.com) ●





Of course, there are many other nudibranchs but this species' outstanding colours make it slightly easier to spot than others that are even less than 1cm long. Bring your magnifying lens when coming to visit.

That's not all. This site also offers great macro for when you end your dive over the shallow part of the reef, which is perfect for safety-stops. Tiny photogenic creatures include sexy shrimps, porcelain crabs, at least five types of anemone, glass shrimps,

nudibranchs, pipefish, garden eels and even the occasional mantis shrimp peeking out of its home.

And when you come out of the dive in calm, crystal waters you're treated to the eye-candy of Rabaul Tavurvur volcano on one side and Little Pigeon island with its white sandy beach all the way around on other side.

That's the lunch spot sorted!

Klinta is dive department manager at Rabaul Dive Adventures (rabaul-dive-adventures.com) ●

Big Fish Country Maratua Atoll, Indonesia

by Kurt Gehrig



AS THE POPULATION of this atoll east of Borneo is only about 2000, the magnificent reef remains in pristine condition.

Big Fish Country is just around the corner from the small diving island of Nabucco, and it lives up to its name.

The current is strongest around full moon and is matched at that time by huge fish action. For safety we dive the channel only when the current is incoming.

The dive starts a little way away from the channel entrance, so guests slowly approach the action. When all the divers have reached

the edge of the channel, current-hooks are unpacked and the big-fish spectacle begins.

In addition to tuna, eagle rays and jack, various species of shark patrol the site, mostly grey, whitetip and blacktip. At the end of the dive our guests can simply drift inside the channel to be picked up by the dive-boat.

Early-morning dives at the site will, with a little luck, offer a special highlight, with the chance of hammerhead sharks out and about in the channel.

Big Fish Country originally became famous for its huge

Manijin Island Cyprus, Mediterranean

by Pascal Socratous



LOCCATED ON THE south-west coast of Cyprus, in the Paphos region, this tiny island has a lot to offer. This is the perfect dive for a wide range of divers from novice to experienced, with depths ranging from 6-18m.

The island is small enough to dive all the way around, while still having time to take in the beautiful features it has to offer.

Drop below the waves into crystal

waters, following the island's reef wall, keeping an eye out for rays, cuttlefish and the loggerhead turtles known to the locals as *Caretta caretta*. Keep tight to the wall, being sure to take in each feature of the site, beginning with a small notch in the wall filled with calciferous algae.

Continue as the wall leads you to the cave-like entrance of a large swim-through at around 12m.

Make your way inside, being sure to shine your torch on the surrounding walls for a further look at the algae and any of the grouper that make their home there.

Photographers



can make use of the picture-perfect archway, which leads into the natural crater that we call the Bowl. You'll find yourself surrounded by overhangs and guided towards the blow-hole.

When the water is slightly rougher and there's movement beneath, you can take advantage of the surge and shoot out of the blow-hole like a champagne cork!

Swim along the top of the reef

amid a variety of sea bream, damselfish and beautiful wrasse, with the occasional sighting of a moray eel as you head back towards the boat.

For me the topography of this dive-site, with its unique natural feature and beautiful seascape, makes it one of a kind.

Pascal is a staff instructor at Cydive, Paphos (cydive.com) ●





resident school of barracuda. When this cloud of fish approaches and the sun darkens, even the best-travelled divers are thrilled.

Because the barracuda are used to humans, they sometimes gather directly over the heads of the divers and can be viewed up close – providing the perfect photo



opportunity.

Kurt is manager of Extra Divers, Nabucco Island Resort (extradivers-worldwide.com) ●



Bullenbaai Curaçao, Southern Caribbean by Andhiela van Hoof-Buso



AFTER 23 YEARS of diving so many beautiful Curaçao sites it's difficult to pick a favourite, but Bullenbaai is right up there. It's in an uninhabited area reachable by boat only, but within 20 minutes of the dive-shop. Few divers go there, so the reef is pristine.

Once in the clear, warm water you see the wall, in the shape of an open hand with sandy patches between the “fingers” and a lot of fish.

The reef starts at 5m and descends almost vertically, way beyond recreational limits. The wall is covered with a variety of leaf and

wire corals and colourful tube sponges, highlighting the reef.

Usually there is no current, making for a relaxed dive. I love to cruise around, watching the schools of bogas swimming in perfect synchronicity, and creole wrasse “torpedoing” out of the blue like a river of deeper blue.

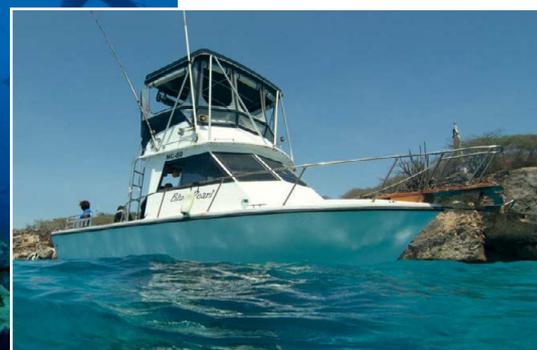
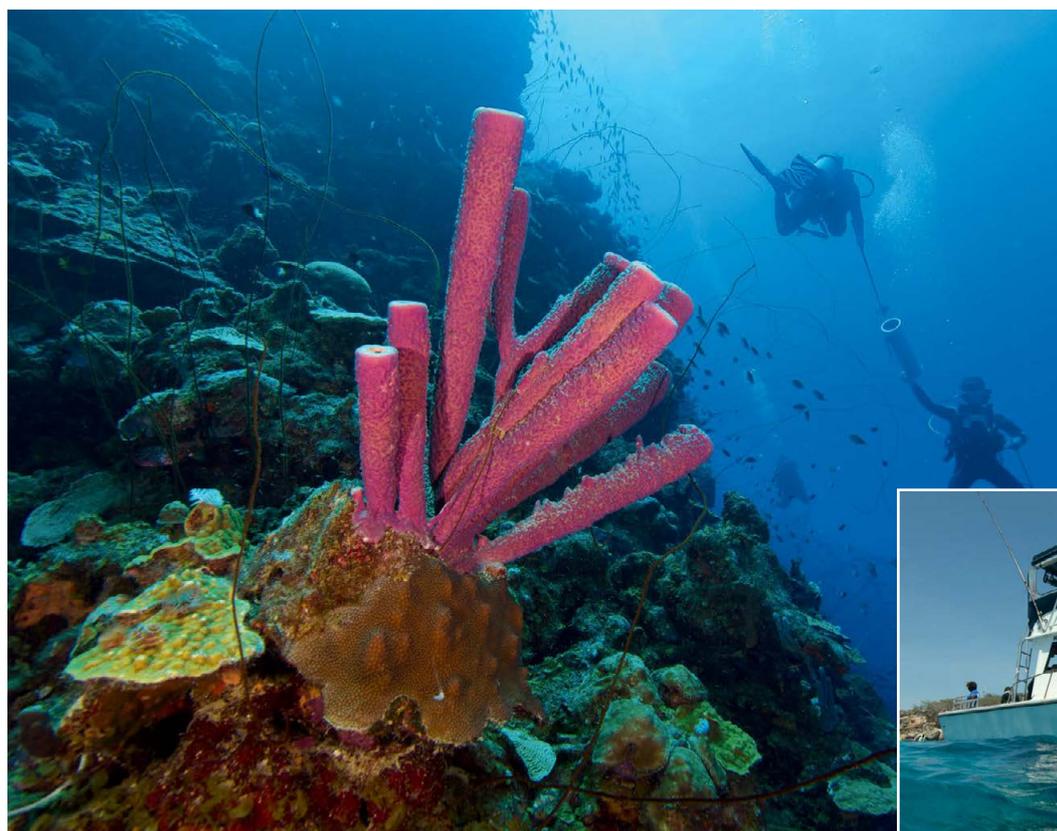
I peek into the crevices, finding lobsters, morays and more. Eagle rays frequently cruise over the deep reefs, hawksbill turtles love to hang out, and spotted and Pederson cleaner shrimps lurk in anemones.

There are French and queen angels, and a resident porcupinefish that always hangs out with me.

This dive is always full of surprises and great for photography. It is also perfect for technical dives, teaching and exploring.

The sandy patches are ideal for staging deco tanks, and one can go to 100m and beyond, following the steep drop-off. Even after all the dives I've done here, it always makes me happy. It would be great to explore it with you!

Andhiela is MD, instructor and boat captain at Goby Divers (goby-divers.com) ●



Chupis Zanzibar, Indian Ocean

by Kirstie Bose



WE'RE EXTREMELY LUCKY here in south-east Zanzibar to have amazing dive-sites right on our doorstep. Tides determine our route out, either leaving directly from our dive-centre or through the natural channel.

One of my personal favourite sites is Chupis, which means underwear in Kiswahili! This spot

was found by the first underwater explorer of the coast, starting out in 1997 in bad weather conditions, in a 5m boat with one decrepit 35hp engine, no radio, no GPS, no staff but a lot of faith!

Looking down to see where the corals were starting, with his face at the surface and a very old pair of underpants floating past (hence the name), he found something amazing.

Chupis is perfect for any diver. It consists of three sections of reef.

First is Chupis Garden, 3m sloping down to around 16m and full of beautiful corals and exciting life.

Usually a mild northern current makes it easy and relaxing to drift and find numerous octopuses, different species of scorpionfish, ribbon eels, many nudibranch species, mantis shrimps, titan triggerfish, sting rays and more.

We finish over orange sponges, where we have a very good chance of finding giant frogfish (*above*) despite their camouflage.

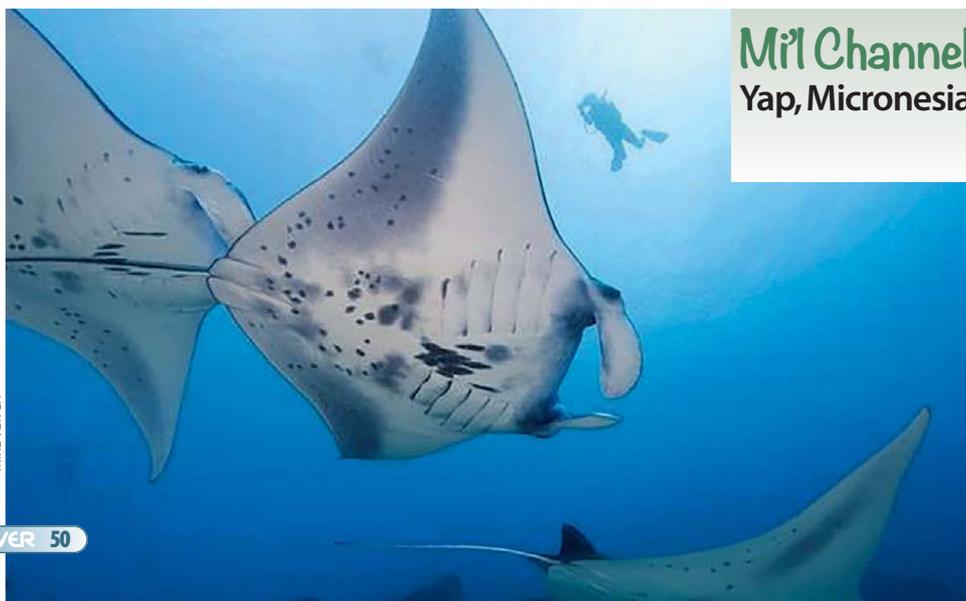
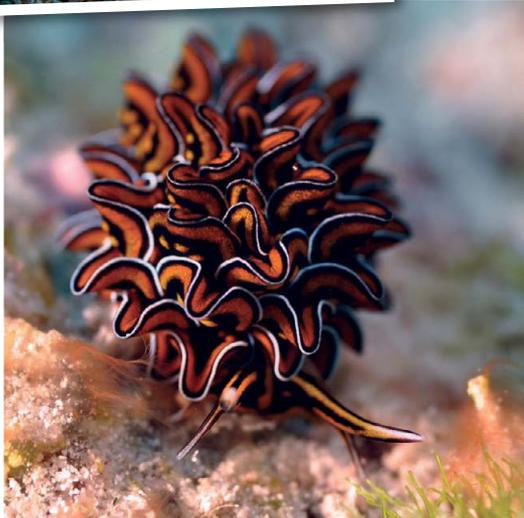
Adriano Chupis has corals from around 14m to 22m and is also full of life. There are always schools of redtoothed triggerfish and many snapper along with the macro life.

This is a perfect place to descend before drifting over and shallowing up to Chupis Garden. At around 15m we have started a coral nursery and many new residents have already moved in, including a couple of Indian Ocean walkmen.

Finally there is Chupis Deep at around 30m, where you can find many moray eels (*left*) and blotched fantail rays along with large schools of barracuda above and butterfly and parrotfish below. It's full of cleaning stations around large barrel sponges – look out for the shrimps and cleaner wrasse.

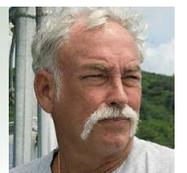
Diving Chupis is exhilarating, but also check into the blue for surprises. Bottlenose dolphins sometimes visit the reef, along with the odd eagle ray or turtle.

Kirstie is an instructor at Rising Sun Dive Centre at Breezes Beach Club & Spa (risingsun-zanzibar.com) ●



Mil Channel Drift Yap, Micronesia

by Bill Acker



ONE OF THE WORLD'S great dives can be found on the north-west corner of Yap Island, between the municipalities of Rumung, Maap and Fanif.

Mil Channel snakes its way from the reef and eventually connects, via German Channel, with the eastern side of the island. On an incoming tide, with lots of clear blue Pacific Ocean racing in, divers can roll into a very

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pleasant drift of more than an hour and cover more than half a mile.

One can clearly see the bottom some 27m below, and on a nice day you can see from one side to the other. The famous manta rays use this channel to come into the lagoon for their daily cleaning, as do reef sharks, turtles, schools of trevally jack and every other known tropical fish resident in Yap.

Come with me, as we back-roll off

our boat *Silvertip Express*.

I have four divers with me today, and as we chat about the dive and what to be on the look-out for, we are also doing our pre-dive safety checks. Everyone ready? Let's go and meet under the boat.

Here at 5m is a flat, sandy area perfect for getting adjusted, and there just happens to be a big anemone with a beautiful green underbelly. A couple of photos from

the group and it's off to Tzimoulis Ridge. As we drift along, I point out a sleeping zebra shark.

Then we spot a group of four mantas swimming past in a leisurely manner on their way to the cleaning station at Stammptisch.

There are sleeping whitetip sharks and a turtle to be seen as we approach the ridge. Here we are met by a school of jack numbering in the hundreds. We also come across a

mother grey reef shark with more than 20 babies. She is careful to keep them away from us, but we are close enough for excellent photos.

Time to go up to the boat for some hot tea and a fresh warm towel as we get ready for our next adventure. Thanks for joining us!

Bill is the owner of Manta Ray Bay Resort & Yap Divers (mantaray.com) ●

Mellow Yellow Rakiraki, Viti Levu, Fiji

by Simon Doughty



THE INCREDIBLY RICH ecosystem and diversity of soft and hard coral, fish life and critters is what draws divers from around the globe to explore Bligh Water (Vatu-I-Ra Passage). It's Fiji's top diving region and the "soft coral capital of the world".

This year we celebrate 30 years diving the Bligh, and with seven regions and more than 80 sites on our menu, picking just one is a tough ask, though wherever we venture we can't really go wrong.

A regular favourite is the genuinely world-class Mellow

Yellow, which has two main pinnacles starting at 3m and sloping off to the seabed at 40m.

As the name indicates the pinnacles are covered in golden yellow soft coral as



well as a myriad of black, blue, purple, orange and red corals adorning the walls.

Divers can also expect to see pygmy seahorses, scorpion leaf-fish, banded sea kraits and countless brightly coloured anthias darting around. Like most Bligh Water sites the tops of the pinnacles are filled with anemones

and anemonefish – a perfect way to spend your safety stop.

Look into the deeper water for schools of barracuda, jack and curious grey reef sharks all awaiting the opportunity of a snack.

Mellow Yellow will remain on many divers' most memorable dive lists for a long time.

Simon is instructor certifier and sales & marketing manager for Ra Divers at Volivoli Beach Resort (volivoli.com) ●



Roma Wakatobi, Indonesia



by
Chris
Gloor

A DIVE-DAY WHEN Roma is on the Wakatobi Resort schedule is most likely going to be a great day. This site is special in that the underwater topography of the reef is between that of a pinnacle and a small wedge-shaped seamount with a long, wide ridge getting progressively shallower and finishing in a shallow plateau.

If my divers are comfortable enough, I like to add a little mystery by having the captain drop us in the blue, directly over the deeper section of the ridge where the bottom is around 25m. From there, we drift in a leisurely way toward the apex of the seamount, passing over rows of lettuce coral.

The real treat is the size of each formation, about 10m diameter, so we're talking a really huge and beautiful colony of coral. With luck a turtle or two will be lying atop it – the cherry on the cake.

Current usually brings us to the shallower section, and we can gently drift there while admiring the brilliant corals and multitude of fish. Experienced and adventurous divers can drop down the sides of the ridge to see some stunning seafans and sponges.

Once we reach about 12m, the slope becomes steeper before reaching the top of this beautiful seamount. With some moderate current, this is my favourite section.



A school of black snapper will hover overhead, with a few trevally. More often than not, a school of blackfin barracuda will be showing off on one side of that slope, while yellowfin barracuda await on the other side.

In this area, there is also a small pinnacle teeming with life and colour. A photographer's dream, it's a place where you're likely to find

one of our dive-guides enjoying his day off with his camera.

If the guests are slowly reaching their gas reserve, we'll make our way to the plateau and finish with an extensive safety-stop before getting back on the boat at the mooring. Otherwise, divers' air allowing, we can drift some more along the reef and the crew will pick us up wherever we emerge.

After this dive one thing is almost certain – our guests will ask: "Can we do it again?"

Chris is manager of Wakatobi Resort Dive Centre (wakatobi.com)





BE THE CHAMP!

THE SPREAD / ALEX MUSTARD

Heavenly angel

ANGELFISH ARE the archetypal reef fish – exotic, graceful and beautifully patterned. Grey angelfish, like this one, are the largest species and can reach 60cm long.

They forego the Day-Glo colours of most of their relatives yet are equally attractive, with a sophisticated neutral tone, large scales and a white mouth, with small flamboyant accents from bright yellow pectoral fins and long trailing filaments on their dorsal and anal fins.

They are also one of less than a handful of angelfish species that seems to become actively interested in us, especially on dive-sites that see lots of divers.

I've always believed in the importance of focusing my camera at the most willing subjects: what is most common and most friendly in a particular place.

I learned long ago on my travels that what is abundant and easy in one place is rare and highly prized elsewhere, so shoot it where it's easy!

For this reason, I always enjoy diving popular shore-dives and spots close to resorts that host lots of diver training, because they're perfect for fish photography.

While the scenery might have seen better days, the fish are used to bubble-blowers and can be unusually co-operative, providing the chance to snare portraits we'd never manage elsewhere.

Grey Angel, taken with a Nikon D700 and Nikon 60mm. Subal housing. Subtronic strobes. 1/100th @ f/18, ISO 200.

THE TUK-TUK IS SWAYING through the busy start-stop traffic of Colombo. I choke on the fumes as I hug my underwater camera rig. The driver drops me off where the road reaches a dead-end by two railway tracks.

I wait for a jam-packed commuter train to pass me before crossing to Colombo's only dive-centre, located on the white-sand beach of Dehiwala.

There are possibilities for diving all around Sri Lanka, though it's hardly celebrated for colourful reefs, an abundance of fish or great visibility. But the capital Colombo has a wreck-dive haven that is not widely publicised and yet it's here, right in front of the city – and in clear water too!

There are more than 15 wrecks within a short boat-ride, and several more might still await discovery.

We push the dive-boat off the beach and zip over to the first wreck-site.

Colombo has historically been an important colonial harbour, and today has a large port. Over the years many ships have sunk in the Indian Ocean not far off the beach. They need to be located by GPS – permanent buoys cannot be installed there because of the amount of boat traffic.

ONCE THE DRIVER has located the wreck, the divemaster drops a small anchor to hook the dive-boat onto it.

Descending the line in clear blue water with sun rays dancing around, at first we can see only a giant ball of fish on the sandy seabed. Schools of yellow-lined snapper, bannerfish and angelfish engulf the small wreck.

The Lotus Barge is around 30m long and rests at 29m. It sits upright, and it's easy to explore the bow, stern and prop, and what's left of the structure of the vessel. A giant honeycomb moray eel protrudes from its cave and eyes us warily as lobsters dance in and out of the artificial reef.

There are several of these barges along the coast. Even before colonisation the natural harbour at Colombo was a trading post with the Arabic and Indian world.

For the Portuguese, Dutch and later English it was an important pit-stop on the long route from South-east Asia, and later a region for growing Ceylon tea. Many ships sank as a result of storms, abandonment and even wars.

One of the funkiest sites is that of the *Thermopylae Sierra*, a 155m cargo-

Pictured: Dharshana at 35m on the wreck of the *Perseus*.



Sri Lanka is not renowned for its natural reefs or marine life, but the many shipwrecks off the south-western city of Colombo attract the fish – and divers too. **SIMON LORENZ** reports

THE WRECKS OF COLOMBO



ship built in 1985. She was abandoned for years, and sank in one of the heavy south-west monsoon storms that plague the area in the summer, making diving all but impossible.

She came to rest at roughly 24m, which was less than her 27m height, leaving the foreposts and bridge above the waterline.

The latter collapsed after years of battering by the waves, but the three sets of foreposts still stick out like abandoned bridges in the middle of the ocean, and can be seen from Colombo's beaches.

The dive is very interesting, because the ship remains largely intact, with its huge load of steel tubes.

Exciting penetrations are possible, including the big galley and engine-room, although on the higher decks the surge sways the divers to and fro, and it's clear why the top ones have already collapsed.

Another cargo vessel, the 77m *Medhufaru*, has been under water



somewhat longer (it was built in 1976) but sank below the waterline with the entire structure intact. She had building materials aboard as well as a front-loader, though that's now mostly covered with debris. But the superstructure holds nice details such as the big galley and the bridge, where you can still see old-school computers, a printer and air-conditioners.

Other cargo shipwrecks display various

degrees of degradation. The 112m car-carrier *Chief Dragon*, also known as the Car Wreck, was loaded with vehicles that remain littered all over the deck.

The wreck, 35m deep, has collapsed in the centre but both bow and stern are interesting, especially the tool-room, which is still accessible and complete with work-bench, compressors

and a large vice-clamp.

The ocean has washed a huge scour around the propshaft and it's filled to the brim with yellow blue-lined snapper.

The *Pecheur Breton* or Cargo Wreck lies on its side and the cargo floors have fully collapsed, creating huge caverns that act as refuges for schools of fish.

"Except for a few offshore reefs, all the nearshore reefs around Colombo have been degraded by coastal development and overfishing, but the wrecks provide

Top, from top left: The Lotus Wreck is engulfed in snapper; the *Thermopylae Sierra* sank in 25m, leaving the cargo crane above the waterline.

Above: The Lotus Wreck.

Below: The beach at Dehiwala.





a unique habitat for marine life and attract large schools of fish,” says marine biologist Nishan Perera, who set up the dive-shop 10 years ago.

There might be marine life around but Sri Lanka’s natural reefs often suffer from poor visibility because most are close to the shore, and from pollution and added sedimentation from river run-off.

As a result, most of the reefs are degraded in terms of coral and fish.

During the civil war that lasted for 26 years, much of the coastline off Colombo was declared a high-security zone. This restricted fishing, creating an unofficial marine protected area.

Since the end of the war in 2009 these areas have been opened up for divers. “As a marine biologist I’ve dived everywhere in Sri Lanka and I can honestly say that the wrecks in front of our capital have some of the best marine life, and offer some of the best recreational diving in the country,” says Nishan.

And we did see a lot of marine life. Aside from schools of fish there were many honeycomb moray eels, sting rays, huge lionfish and big snapper.

While diving the scenic Coal Ship we



Above, from left: The *Medhufaru* sank relatively recently and is in good condition; a diver explores the *Medhufaru*.

Right: An ornate sea snake checks out the camera.

Below: The tool-shop on the *Chief Dragon* became accessible only recently after the deck collapsed.

Bottom, from left: Coral and fish life on the *Chief Dragon*; large fish haunt the *Perseus*.

came across a large ornate sea snake that investigated my camera with great interest.

It’s not clear why, but there seem to be no sharks left in the area, leaving grouper at the top of the foodchain.

Other regulars include various species of turtle – the entire beach fringing the island of Sri Lanka provides nesting grounds for six of the seven sea-turtle species.

One day during the briefing we saw a turtle hatchling work its way out of the sand and towards the ocean. It seemed that a hawksbill had nested right beside the dive-shop – in the middle of the city!

A SIDE FROM BARGES and cargo ships, these waters also hold historic wrecks, and instrumental in finding them was Dharshana Jayawardena. A software professional, he has dedicated his spare time over the past 15 years to diving all over Sri Lanka to that end.

Working down a list of wrecks assumed to be in these waters, he followed up clues. “I talk to the local fishermen regularly and ask for places where they catch more fish or have lost nets,” he told me.

He would go out combing the area, and for the deeper wrecks took up technical diving. Dharshana is probably the island’s only recreational rebreather-diver.

Two of his big finds were the British ships *Perseus* and *Worcestershire*. Both were sunk in World War One by the treacherous mines laid by SMS *Wolf*.

This legendary German raider sank a



record 37 ships, including two warships in one 451-day journey, but commercial trading vessels were her prime targets.

Wolf returned to Germany in February 1918 carrying 467 prisoners and huge quantities of high-value trading cargo.

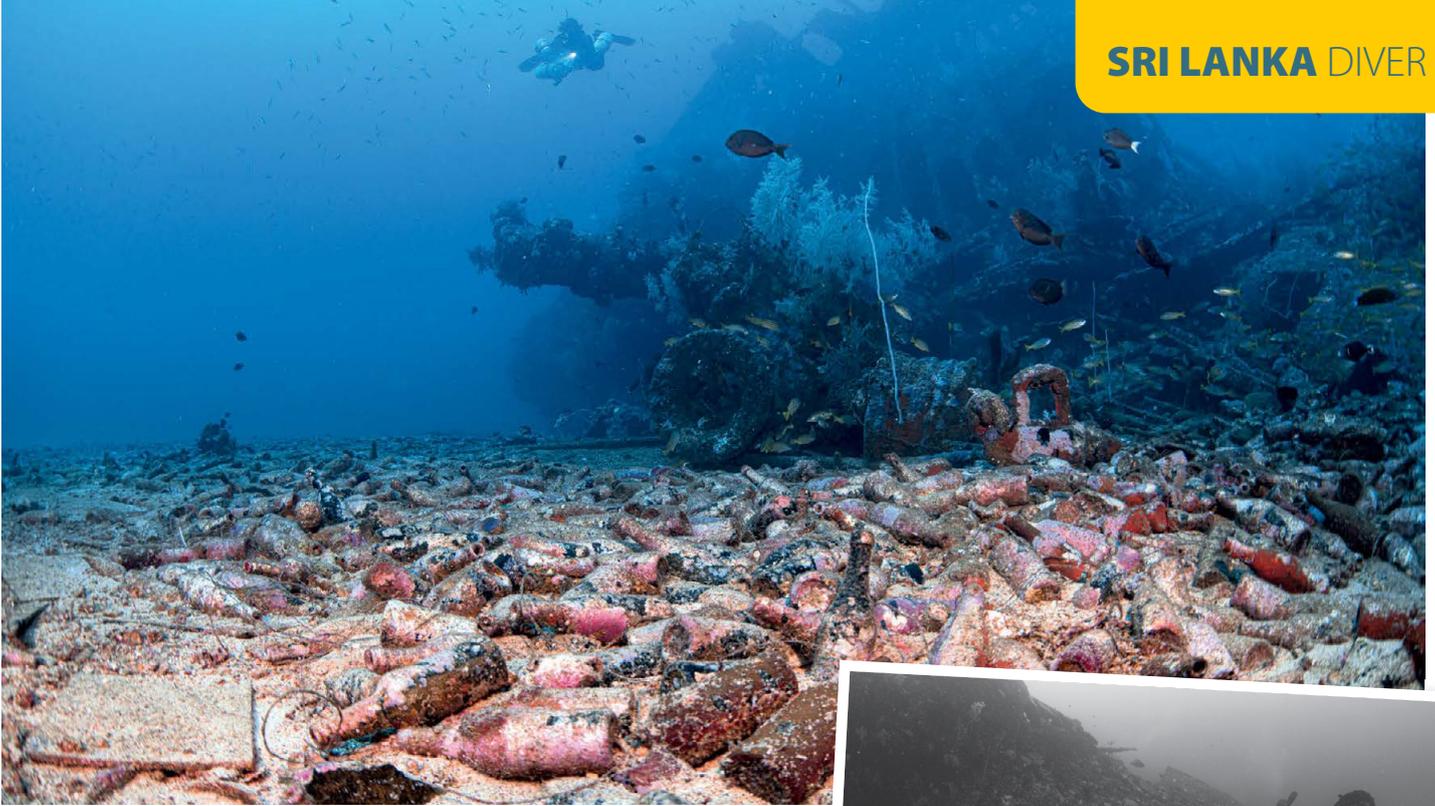
After the excitement of locating the wrecks Dharshana spent years diving them in a bid to prove that they were British. “I had already given up hope, but then I started CCR diving and had more bottom time,” he explains. “So I started searching the ships inch by inch and widening my search patterns, including the debris in and around the ships.”

In 2014, on his 22nd technical dive to the suspected wreck of the *Worcestershire*, which lies at 57m, Dharshana finally found the inscribed ship’s bell near the mast while shining his torch under a thick metal sheet.

Five years later he also located the bell of the *Perseus*, by “visually inspecting every inch of the rubble around the ship”. It was buried in the sand quite a long way from the wreck, betrayed only by a slight curvature in the sand.

Both bells were handed over to the Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) in





Galle. Restored, they revealed the names of the ships engraved on their sides.

I didn't get to dive the *Worcestershire* but my dive on the *Perseus* was the highlight of this trip.

We descend into the warm blue water, Dharshana

10m ahead of me. It's only as we reach 20m that the wreck materialises below us. Sun rays dance on the remains of the 135m armed merchant ship, which hit the mine on her way laden to Yokohama.

Diving with Dharshana on this historic wreck was thrilling. The huge bow with



Top: The *Perseus* at 42m, the seabed littered with its main cargo of whisky bottles.

Above: The propeller and rudder.

Below: The *Perseus*, sunk by a mine laid by SMS *Wolf*.

Left: Nishan Perera opened his dive-shop by the railway tracks in 2010.

both anchors lies at 42m and the prop is intact. Massive schools of fish gather; big mangrove snapper, Napoleon wrasse and giant trevally patrol the area.

The ship is mostly collapsed, its steel beams twisted and ragged sticking out of the wreckage, probably protecting the fish from nets.

But what stands out is the cargo of bottles spilled all over the seabed. My well-read guide says that these are turn-of-the-century Johnnie Walker whisky bottles but, sadly, they're empty.

No surprise after more than 100 years on the seabed. █



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Flights to Colombo with Qatar Airways or Etihad via Doha or Abu Dhabi.

DIVING ▶ Island Scuba is the only dive shop in Colombo itself, islandscuba.net. There are few dive-shops in the wider area and divers can expect basic conditions.

ACCOMMODATION ▶ The historic Mount Lavinia Hotel, once a British governor's residence, is a bizarre and kitschy experience, mountlaviniahotel.com

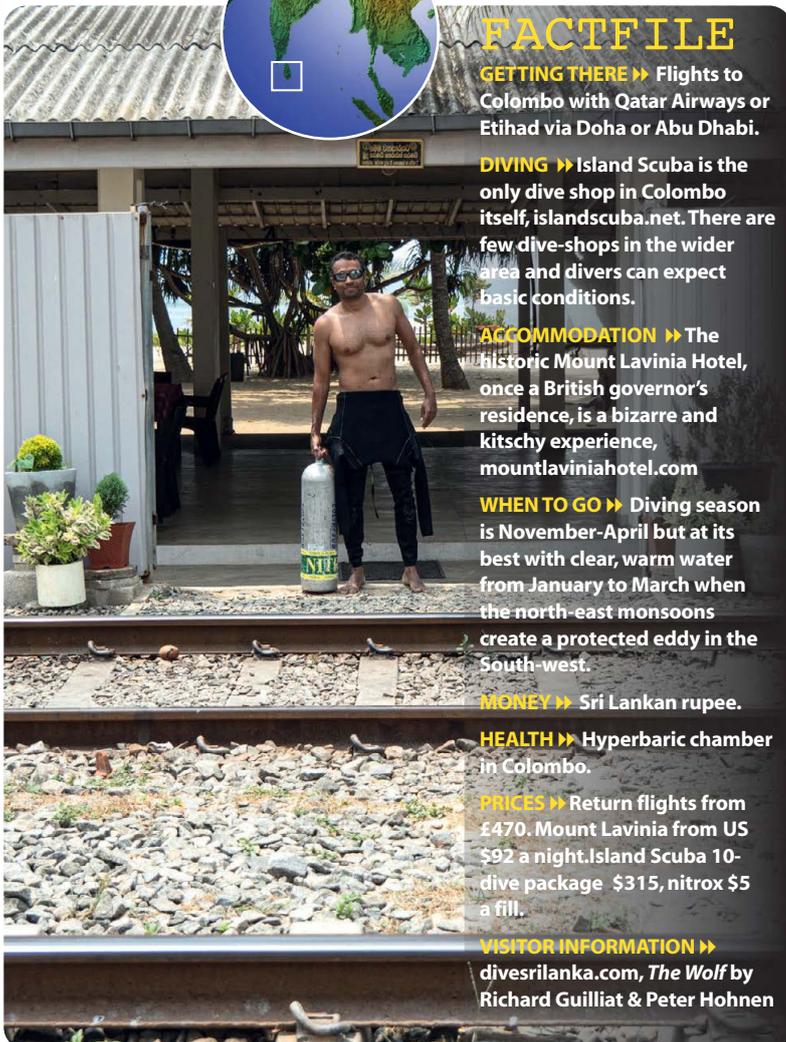
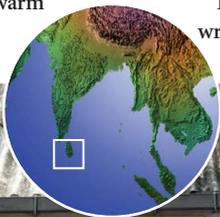
WHEN TO GO ▶ Diving season is November-April but at its best with clear, warm water from January to March when the north-east monsoons create a protected eddy in the South-west.

MONEY ▶ Sri Lankan rupee.

HEALTH ▶ Hyperbaric chamber in Colombo.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from £470. Mount Lavinia from US \$92 a night. Island Scuba 10-dive package \$315, nitrox \$5 a fill.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ divesrilanka.com, *The Wolf* by Richard Guilliat & Peter Hohnen



WORLDVIEW OF THE OCEANS

Every year the United Nations holds a World Oceans Day photo competition. The theme this June was Innovation for a Sustainable Ocean...

THE 30 FIRST, SECOND and third-placed winners of the UN WOD competition were announced during a virtual event that ran through World Oceans Day on 8 June – much of which had to be virtual this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Curated by Ellen Cuylaerts, the contest is hosted by the website DivePhotoGuide and judged by a panel of photographers: Adriana Basques, Adam Hanlon, Jill

Heinerth, Darren Jew, Jane Morgan, Amos Nachoum, Miriam Stein Battles, David Salvatori, and John Thet, with Jim Standing as guest judge for the theme prize, which went to Joanna Smart (see opposite page).

World Oceans Day is co-ordinated by the UN in partnership with environmental charity Oceanic Global. There's more about the competition at divephotoguide.com

Human Interaction winner: Renata Romeo

"I took this shot of a male hawksbill turtle five years ago at the South Laguna site at Tiran in the Red Sea. I remember that moment very well because I had my new housing and it was gently swimming above our group at around 15m for most of our dive, so I decided to approach him gently for some photos.

"I only had the chance for one shot and he suddenly came very close, intrigued by my mask and perhaps by his reflection in it. Wanting to enjoy this strange moment, I used my left hand to raise the housing and took this photo of both of us.

"The turtle stayed close to my face for some time, beat on my mask and in the end tried to bite it. When the other divers approached to watch this rare scene, although very gently, he went on his way. Such a thing has never happened to me again, so I feel lucky to have had such a moment."



ABOVE-WATER SEASCAPES winner
Geo Cloete / Waking Up

“Tidal pools fascinate me. Where most environments on Earth operate on a yearly clock following the four seasons, they follow a twice-daily clock. The creatures who call tidal pools home need to be well-adapted to survive in such dynamic environments, including these sandy anemones (*Aulactinia reynaudi*) on the west coast of South Africa.

“As the tide falls and the water that normally covers and protects them drains away, their appearance changes drastically. They shrink into little blobs that don’t resemble the opened anemones in shape or colour. It’s as if they go into a hibernation stage for a few hours to protect themselves from the harsh topside elements.

“When the tide turns and the crashing waves start to fill the pools with “fresh” nutrient-rich water, the anemones wake up. Now they must rely on the powerful foot muscles they use to cling to the rocks and avoid being swept away. As the pool fills with water over the next few hours they return to their former colourful state. In full “bloom” they are now ready to capture any food the rising tide might sweep past them.”

CLEAN OUR OCEANS winner
Sirachai Arunrugstichai / Crimson Tide

Deep red blood disperses over the sandy beach with the incoming tide, as a team of aquatic veterinarians from Thailand’s Department of Marine and Coastal Resources conducts a necropsy on the 12m-long carcass of a sperm whale at Mu Koh Lanta National Park, Krabi Province.

“The results reveal that the primary cause of death of this pelagic cetacean was likely from organ failure caused by illness. However, there was plastics waste in its digestive system that could have contributed to its untimely death, and shows the far-reaching effects of human behaviour in the open ocean.”



INNOVATION winner **Joanna Smart**

“Ten metres beneath the sea surface in Italy, a gardener tends to his plants. Nemo’s Garden, created by Ocean Reef, consists of six air-filled biospheres and is an innovative experiment in alternative agriculture. Basil, lettuce, herbs, strawberries and tomatoes thrive in this unique underwater environment.

“The hydroponic systems produce their own fresh water through condensation and are powered by solar and wind energy.

“The biospheres might provide an alternative source of food security in regions where land agriculture is not possible.

“Additionally, the garden provides a fantastic experimental laboratory for growing plants in extreme environments, with applications to space travel, including potential future missions to Mars.”



OCEAN ART winner

Francisco Sedano Vera / Going Up In Smoke

“The UN 2019 report about global biodiversity states that extinction rates are accelerating, and that we have already significantly altered 66% of the oceans. However, the Covid-19 crisis has given our planet a break. While we #stayhome, many reports are showing marine species reclaiming their niches.

“Evolution often arises amid a crisis, and this one is giving a clear sign – that we can still repair some of the damage to ensure our coexistence with a rich biodiversity. How many pandemics will it take to keep this world from going up in smoke?”

“The original image is a portrait of a *Serranus cabrilla* grouper. I turned it black and white and, using layer masks, the liquify filter and a smoke brush in Photoshop I achieved this effect with the aim of representing how biodiversity is shrinking.”

REJUVENATION winner
Leighton Lum

This was taken in Maui, Hawaii. I stumbled on this location by accident, during an afternoon swim. I thought it would make a great sunset spot so I ran back and grabbed some gear.

“The tide was rising, so it was only accessible by swimming. I towed everything in a small Pelican case and boogie board – it was quite the adventure!

“I spent several hours just sitting with these guys, waiting for the sun to set. Shortly after this I had to quickly find my way back to shore in the dark.”



SCIENCE IN ACTION winner **Matthew Potenski**

“This shot was taken as part of documenting a project by the Bimini Biological Field Station – Sharklab on Bimini island in the Bahamas. Its research is primarily into the juvenile lemon sharks that use the inner lagoon as a nursery, but from time to time it explores other areas and looks for other species of sharks.

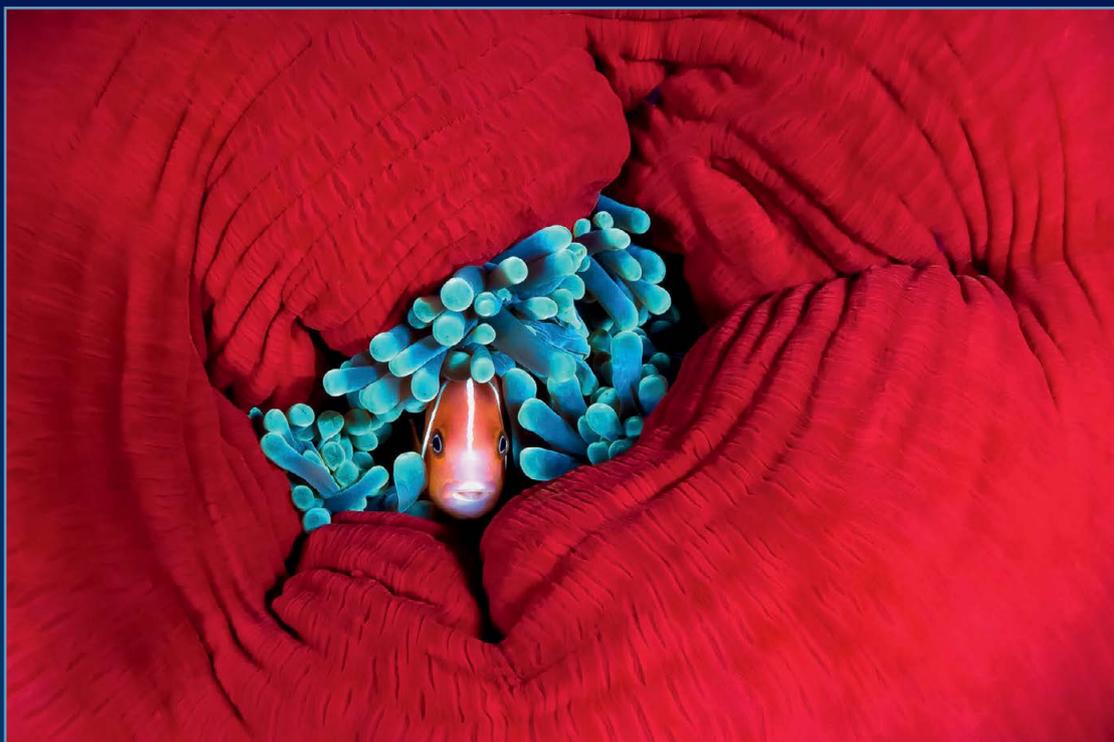
“The Gulf Stream is just to the west of the island, and the depth drops off precipitously. The Sharklab set a deep, vertical line of hooks to see what kind of sharks patrol this wall.

“We caught this almost 4m tiger shark at a depth of more than 300m. We roped the tail and tied it up alongside our boat.

“Tiger sharks can pump water over their gills even when still but the researchers still worked quickly to tag and measure this one. The most delicate part of the process is getting an accurate length measurement. Someone needs to hold the end of the tape on the bitey end.

“Once the work was done they removed the hook and successfully returned this impressive fish back to the depths. This same tiger shark was caught again on a similar deep set two months later, showing that this deep habitat might be important in its movement patterns.”





UNDERWATER LIFE
winner

Michael Gallagher

"I was scuba-diving in the Ngemelis region in Palau in the South Pacific when I encountered this magnificent sea anemone closed up against the current, revealing its vivid red underside.

"As I studied it more closely, this resident pink skunk anemonefish stuck its head out to inspect the intruder in its territory, which is when I snapped this photograph."

UNDERWATER SEASCAPES winner
Hannes Klostermann

"A pair of California sheephead (*Semicossyphus pulcher*) and a giant seastar (*Pisaster giganteus*) in the kelp forest around one of California's Channel Islands. These are incredibly rich habitats and host a surprising range of colourful creatures."



YOUTH winner
Kyla McLay (17)

"I took this photograph while on our family boat on its way to Catalina Island. The water was perfectly glassy when we were joined by a pod of common dolphin surfing on our wake.

"I quickly grabbed my camera and while leaning over the railing of our bow was lucky enough to capture a perfect shot of this young dolphin breaking through the surface of the water."



Brit divers sought for polar trip

The African & Oriental Travel Co ran its second diving expedition to Antarctica and the Southern Shetland Islands last December and describes the trip as “incredibly successful”.

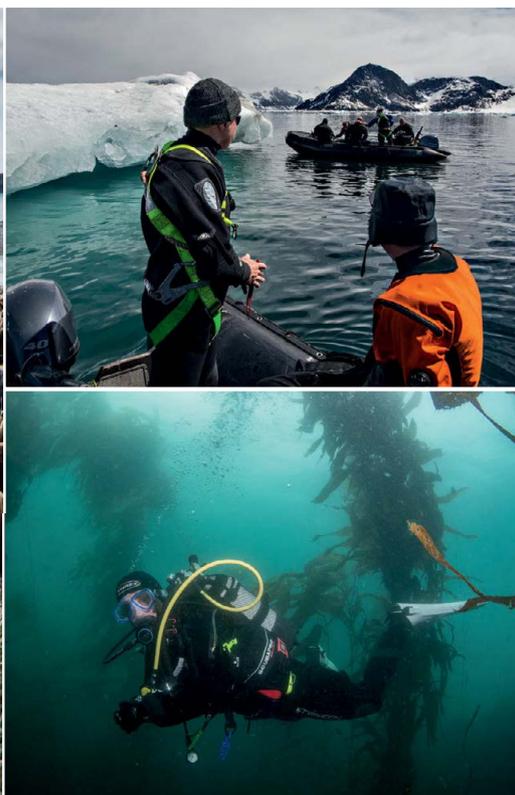
Now it has obtained permission to operate another midsummer polar venture and is planning it for 12-22 December, 2021, to take in the penguin breeding season.

Despite what it describes as “the temporary setback of the corona

outbreak” the operator says there are only five dive-spots left, alongside 10 non-diving and six kayak spaces.

The 11-night cruise aboard the liveaboard *Plancius* is fully guided at the surface, but all diving must be carried out by independent buddy teams.

AOTC is looking for seasoned British divers who already own drysuits and coldwater dive-gear and have experience in home waters to join



the expedition.

AOTC says it is the only company in Britain that escorts its Antarctica diving tours, and that no other UK travel company has such experienced divers on staff as polar escorts.

Places on the “budget” version of the cruise start at £7656pp, including diving but not travel or overnight stays at the embarkation point of Ushuaia in Argentina.

▶▶ orientafricatravel.com

Werner Lau temptations

Werner Lau is set to reopen southern Egyptian Red Sea dive-resort the Oasis in Marsa Alam on 1 October, with a 20% reduction in room rates for new bookings, and no supplement for single travellers with a room to themselves. Both deals apply until 31 March, 2021.

All such hotel reopenings are contingent on a health certificate being issued by the government.

Further north, Werner Lau’s centre in Sharm el Sheikh reopens on the same day. The operator’s familiar “Buddyweeks”, when divers pre-booking a diving package or course pay the regular price while buddies pay 50% for the same package or course, will apply for stays between 17 November and 15 December and 10 January - 15 March, 2021.

Egypt reopened for international tourism at the start of July, with the main summer destinations of Sharm el Sheikh, Hurghada and Marsa Matrouh (on the Mediterranean coast) the first set to open, followed gradually by the other destinations.

These three destinations usually receive more than 80% of European travellers flying to Egypt each summer. As an official incentive for returning travellers, the need for tourist visas has been suspended until the end of October this year.

▶▶ wernerlau.org, gotoegypt.org

The Marlin Hunt, set for 20-30 October this year in Baja California, Mexico, is led by professional underwater photographer and regular DIVER contributor Henley Spiers (below right), who was knocked out by the spectacular experiences there he described in the magazine a year ago.

It’s very rare for divers to encounter marlin but, for a few weeks every year, a large aggregation occurs on the Pacific side of Mexico as the pelagics hunt down baitballs.

That’s when divers can track down the offshore action, as well as looking out for juvenile whale sharks, mobula rays and California sea-lions at Henley’s favourite dive-site in the world, Los Islotes.

Each group is limited to four guests, the captain, an expert guide from Nomad Expeditions and Henley. “Word on the marlin is starting to get out already, with more boats showing up each year, so I would highly recommend getting in now while tourist numbers are still low,” he says.

The trip costs US \$4750pp, which includes all sea-based activities, 10 nights B&B (two sharing), transfers and some meals.

▶▶ thephotographer@henleypiers.com

Pelagic hunt in Baja California



HENLEY SPIERS

BOOKING NOW

Diving into ancient history



BLUE MED

Greece is open, though not yet to UK travellers at the time of writing, but if an air bridge makes the way clear later this summer the Peristera shipwreck, which was discovered in the early 1990s, will be the first ancient wreck to be opened by the government to the public, from 3 August to 2 October.

This is a one-off for the logbooks, because it is considered the oldest accessible shipwreck in the world. Divers are promised a vast vista of an estimated 4000 amphoras, sometimes piled high above their heads as they fin around the wreckage.

While the wreck is spectacular, say those who have dived it, it is also said to have changed archaeologists'

understanding of shipbuilding in the ancient world. They had believed that the Romans invented this type of ship, but the Peristera wreck proved that the Greeks were ahead of them.

Alonissos Triton Dive Centre in the Sporades Islands has a dive package with two options. The first involves seven nights' B&B at the Paradise Hotel, transfers, five days' diving (eight dives plus the Peristera wreck) from 540 to 820 euros pp (two sharing) depending on date.

The second option replaces the hotel with a self-catering apartment, the package costing 499-620 euros depending on date.

▶▶ bestdivinggreece.com



BLUE MED

Big in Maldives South

For divers looking longer-term when booking, Manta Expeditions has plans for a land-based experience in tiny Fuvahmulah Atoll in the sub-Equatorial Maldives next year.

This pelagic hotspot is known as "the Socorro of the Indian Ocean", attracting tiger, thresher, silvertip, hammerhead, grey reef and whale sharks, sunfish, spinner dolphins and, most notably, a 700-plus population of oceanic manta rays aggregating every March and April – one of the largest such aggregations in the world.

Guests will be able to help Manta Trust expert Simon Hillbourne as he studies the mantas using photo ID, video measuring and behavioural observations.

The dates are 20-27 March and 27 March-3 April, with B&B accommodation (two sharing), 15 guided dives with lunches on diving days, local transfers and taxes costing US \$1980pp.

Not included are international flights or the \$290 domestic flight from Male to Fuvahmulah or Gan-Fuvahmulah ferry transfer (\$50).

▶▶ mantaexpeditions.com

Fenides off the beaten track

The *Fenides*, a *phinisi*-style liveaboard, is opening a new route to take guests to less-dived areas of the Indonesian archipelago, in West Komodo.

Described as off the beaten track from the "rather crowded" Central Komodo National Park around Labuan Bajo, the dive safari promises "absolute diversity" under water, including muck-diving off the black sandy shores of Eastern Sumbawa, where there is also a volcanic reef with a

constantly bubbling bottom.

Also promised by the operator are exciting drift-dives with large pelagics such as sharks, manta rays and tuna, contrasting with relaxed diving on colourful coral reefs.

Fenides will run nine- and 10-night trips in West Komodo from April to June next year. As a guide to prices, the 2020 itinerary was charged from US \$580pp per night (two sharing).

▶▶ fenidesliveaboard.com



DISCOUNTS FROM SOLITUDE

Solitude, which has two liveaboards and two resorts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Palau, is offering a 10% discount on existing rates at least up to the end of the year for divers in a position to take advantage.

It is also offering a group special of five paying guests and one going free. The offers apply to all but its Tubbataha cruises in the Philippines.

Standard all-inclusive rates at the two resorts, Solitude Lembeh in

Indonesia and Solitude Acacia at Anilao in the Philippines, start from US \$1525pp for six nights / seven days including all meals, 15 dives and transfers (two sharing).

Liveaboard rates before discounts are \$2430 for the six-night *Solitude Adventurer* North and South Komodo itinerary, or \$2856 for *Solitude One's* seven-night Verde/Romblon itinerary in the Philippines.

▶▶ solitudeworld.com

Shore thing in Curaçao

Goby Divers in the southern Caribbean island of Curaçao is a female-operated dive-shop connected to the Hector Suites hotel in the capital Willemstad.

It says it offers boat- and guided

shore-diving, courses and nitrox but also technical diving with full support for rebreather divers.

Curaçao has a fringing reef system and many shore-sites accessible by

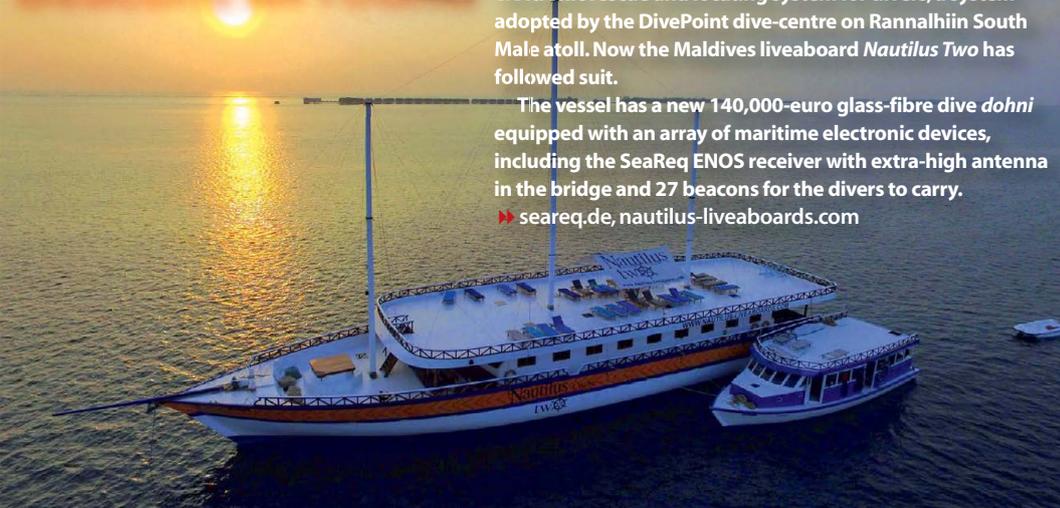
car. Expect a lot of hard and soft coral and sponge life and a wide variety of fish from close to shore, says Goby.

Its special package includes a seven-night stay with full meal-plan, six days of unlimited air, three two-tank boat-dives, car-hire and transfers from US \$1269pp (two share).

▶▶ goby-divers.com



Beacons all round



In June we reported that the Maldives had its first ENOS, the electronic rescue and locating system for divers, a system adopted by the DivePoint dive-centre on Rannalhiin South Male atoll. Now the Maldives liveboard *Nautilus Two* has followed suit.

The vessel has a new 140,000-euro glass-fibre dive *dohni* equipped with an array of maritime electronic devices, including the SeaReq ENOS receiver with extra-high antenna in the bridge and 27 beacons for the divers to carry.

▶▶ seareq.de, nautilus-liveboards.com

Video training in Sulawesi

Peering well into the future, a week-long underwater videography workshop with Julie Ouimet and Michel Labrecque is scheduled for 6-13 November 2021 at Siladen Resort & Spa in North Sulawesi, Indonesia.

The event is designed for videographers and divers at all levels to hone their shooting techniques and ability to edit footage.

The widely travelled experts have worked together since 2014 and have developed skills for shooting award-winning video in remote locations and in harsh conditions. Both received the Explorers Club Citation of Merit in 2018 for "exemplary accomplishments in field science and conservation".

There will be plenty of wide-angle shooting opportunities in Bunaken National Marine Park as well as macro and muck-diving in shallow areas and night-diving sessions too.

A package with seven nights in a villa, all meals and snacks, 15 nitrox boat-dives (two guests per dive-guide on workshop dives), workshop, local taxes and transfers costs from 2117 euros pp (two sharing).

▶▶ siladen.com

DIVERSE CUSTOMERS CAN OFFSET THEIR TRAVEL



CLIMATECARE.ORG

UK dive-tour operator Diverse Travel is now a "Climate Aware" company, having partnered with sustainable development body ClimateCare. Its new carbon-offsetting scheme is, it says, part of a commitment to reduce its environmental impact, with the ultimate aim of attaining climate-neutral status.

The operator says it is committed to offsetting all greenhouse-gas emissions from its operations by taking steps to reduce them

internally while also offsetting those that are unavoidable by supporting ClimateCare's portfolio of projects, such as its Aqua Clara water-filter scheme in Kenya (left).

Divers booking a holiday with Diverse Travel are to be offered the opportunity to make a voluntary payment to offset emissions associated with their trip, initially on Emperor Divers packages.

▶▶ diversettravel.co.uk

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BUT WHERE ARE ALL THE DIVERS?

The Complex Lives of British Freshwater Fishes
by Mark Everard & Jack Perks

THIS BOOK LEFT ME feeling mildly shocked. Why? Because it had been sent to **DIVER** for review presumably because it was full of pictures of British freshwater fish taken by well-known British freshwater diver Jack Perks and yet, apart from the introduction to Jack, the word "diver" is never mentioned again!

I wouldn't mind so much, but a whole chapter is devoted to "fish-twitchers", nature-lovers who apparently take pleasure in watching fish's camouflaged backs from the surface and trying to work out whether they're looking at a roach or a rudd.

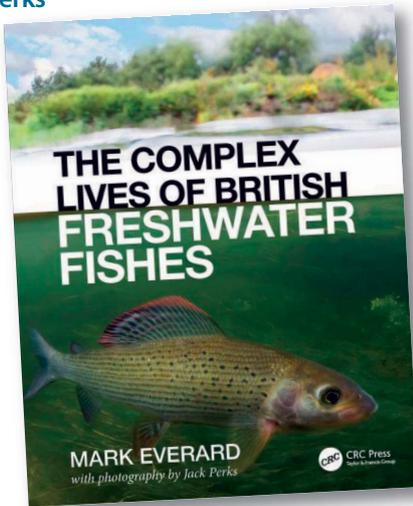
Good luck with that, even if you do have the recommended pair of polarising sunglasses. There is even a reference in this chapter to the intrepid twitcher getting hold of a snorkel or submersible camera for a better view!

So why does a book billed as by Dr Mark Everard (a scientist and angler) and Jack Perks (a diver) not refer to scuba? It's a mystery to me.

I'm aware that there aren't many dedicated freshwater divers like Jack (I remember when he submitted what I think was a definitive article on the art of river-diving to **DIVER** in 2012, but have no way of knowing how many readers followed his advice).

But how many divers regularly explore inland waters in the UK year-round and are grateful for every unscheduled diversion that comes their way, including perch, pike, crayfish and whatever else might cross their path?

So I'm puzzled and slightly offended that the best way to



appreciate freshwater fish (that is, by observing them in their natural habitat on scuba, as opposed to squinting from the surface or watching them gasp in someone's hands as they pose for a photo) is ignored.

I'm assuming that while "Dr Redfin", as Everard is known in the angling community because of his fondness for roach, appreciates Jack's photos, he doesn't really want a lot of divers bimbbling about anywhere near his hooks. But let's get past that and consider this book.

It's excellent. It covers all the angles, if you'll forgive the pun, it avoids unnecessary scientific terminology, it's really well-written and illustrated – Jack's mission to photograph every UK species has paid off richly there, and it's good to see them in wide-angle shots that show their environment, because this isn't an ID book. There is no shortage of those.

Of course it's more likely to appeal to anglers than divers. There's probably only so much we would want to know about the life of the perch, even if we do enjoy seeing

them in Stoney Cove. I remembered a lot of the species and some superficial facts about them from my boyhood angling days and was surprised by how much the scene has changed, especially in terms of new species that have been introduced to British waters, usually in an unplanned way.

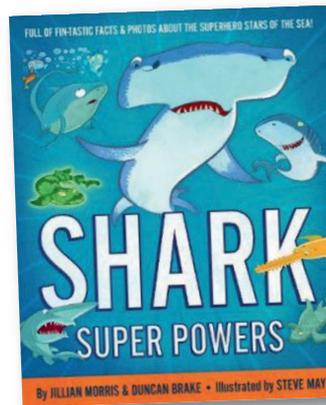
I learnt a lot from reading this book but do us a favour, Dr Redfin – if you get round to a second edition, give Jack Perks a chapter in which to cover the experience of getting up close to freshwater fish without traumatising them in the process!

Steve Weinman

CRC Press
ISBN: 9780367440329
Hardback, 355pp, 24x19cm, £29.99

SUPERSHARKY

Shark Super Powers,
by Jillian Morris &
Duncan Brake



This is a book for children, which explains about different sharks. I liked the idea of sharks having superpowers because it is a great way of explaining why sharks are special animals to the planet and doing it in a fun way. Superpowers make them stand out.

I also liked the fact that they have broken up all the facts and statements, which makes it easier to read, and you can compare all of the sharks as well. I liked that they have

used paragraphs and different sections to split up the information, such as "Fast Facts" and the superpower subject.

They use funny and colourful illustrations which help to make it fun and much more interesting to look at. I liked that they also included real photos of the sharks so I could know exactly what each shark looked like.

I enjoyed the fact that they have got an introduction by Steve Backshall, who I know from TV, which will make people want to read this even more as it made me think it might be an interesting book.

One thing I think they could work on is the speech bubbles on the illustrations, because people can't actually talk under water so they could've used thought bubbles instead.

I also thought that they could change the format of some of the pages or change some of it, because each page always has the same things. They could tell a few stories and not just facts, as it will be more interesting if you put down a story of what had happened to one of these sharks. I did like the maps showing where each shark lives in the world.

It is quite hard to read in one go because there is a lot of information but it is a great book to scan and retrieve facts or to find out about different sharks. This book makes me look at sharks and think how special they are, and not so dangerous.

Other people my age might like it but some might find it hard to read it all in one go, so it's a good book to keep stopping. I learnt a lot of things, eg "great white sharks can reach a length of 6 metres (19 feet) and weigh up to 2268 kilograms".

If I had to sum this book up in three words it would be: educational, funny and exciting.

Sam Weinman-Knight (9)

Uclan Publishing
ISBN 9781912979165
Softback, 32pp, 25x21cm, £9.99

TOP 10 BEST-SELLING SCUBA-DIVING BOOKS

as listed by [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) (27 June, 2020)

1. *Scuba Diving Hand Signals: Pocket Companion for Recreational Scuba Divers*, by Lars Behnke
2. *100 Dives of a Lifetime: World's Ultimate Underwater Destinations*, by Carrie Miller & Brian Skerry
3. *Under Pressure: Diving Deeper with Human Factors*, by Gareth Lock
4. *The Diver's Tale*, by Nick Lyon
5. *Underwater Foraging – Freediving for Food*, by Ian Donald
6. *The Last Dive: A Father and Son's Fatal Descent* (audiobook) by Bernie Chowdhury
7. *Reef Life: An Underwater Memoir*, by Callum Roberts
8. *Dark Descent*, by Kevin F McMurray
9. *Deco for Divers: A Diver's Guide to Decompression Theory and Physiology*, by Mark Powell
10. *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*, by Simon Pridmore

TOP 10 MOST WISHED-FOR SCUBA-DIVING BOOKS

as listed by [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) (27 June, 2020)

1. *Under Pressure: Diving Deeper with Human Factors*, by Gareth Lock
2. *Underwater Foraging – Freediving for Food*, by Ian Donald
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4. *Reef Life: An Underwater Memoir*, by Callum Roberts
5. *The Darkness Below*, by Rod Macdonald
6. *Deeper into the Darkness*, by Rod Macdonald
7. *Scuba Diving Hand Signals: Pocket Companion for Recreational Scuba Divers*, by Lars Behnke
8. *Safe Diving: A Medical Manual For Scuba Divers*, by Allan Kayle
9. *Neutral Buoyancy, Adventures in a Liquid World*, by Tim Ecott
10. *Stars Beneath The Sea: The Incredible Story of the Pioneers of the Deep Sea*, by Trevor Norton

WELL AND TRULY TESTED



Scubaapro's Galileo dive-computer broke new ground and now it is available in console form – giving STEVE WARREN an opportunity to take a long, cool look at some of its attributes

COMPUTER SCUBAPRO GALILEO 2 CONSOLE

UWATEC PIONEERED COMPACT AFFORDABLE dive-computers. Back in 1988, it introduced its first, the Aladin. At £190 (around £500 in today's money) it was about the price of a tank and a decent reg.

This Swiss computer was smaller, lighter and far more advanced than its main North American competitor, which surpassed the £1300 mark in today's money.

Uwatec's success led it to make models for other companies to sell under their own branding.

In 1997, it merged with Scubaapro, one of the world's largest manufacturers of recreational scuba gear. Today an entry-level Scubaapro



keep multi-mix, multi-cylinder users safe. It works as a computer to 115m, switching to Gauge mode below this. Max working depth is 120m.

The Design

To explain the G2C's key features and benefits, I'll look in detail at the decompression, gas-integration and compass functions.

The handset boasts a 50 x 40mm TFT full-colour LCD screen, recessed for protection from impact and abrasion. The body is thermoplastic with glass-fibre reinforcing. Three chromed push-buttons access the menus.

The lithium-ion battery is charged from a USB socket via an external connector on the G2C, so there's no seal to fail.

It connects to your tank via a hose with a quick-disconnect fitting, so the handset can be removed for charging, downloading or storage.

The Algorithm

The ZH-L16-ADT MB PMG algorithm is Bühlmann-based, has 16 tissues, can adapt to changes in breathing and heart-rate as well as skin temperature, and predicts when to change mixes on multi-gas dives.

You can modify this by choosing deep stops (Profile Dependent Intermediate Stops or PDIS) and selecting a caution level.

Scubaapro is a little dismissive of ordinary deep stops made at half your maximum depth.

PDIS, it claims, takes into account many more factors and adjusts the depth around these parameters.

For caution level, you can select from nine allowable microbubble levels, rather than the usual three or so settings for making deco schedules more conservative.

Scubaapro's philosophy seems to lean towards using more technical language and providing more precise choices.

Do that, and you also need to educate the user on what the terms and choices mean. Scubaapro could do more in this regard in its manual.

As I understand it, additional stops are called for on ascent, with one implication being reduced risk of bends caused by a PFO. Your dive-plan should include discussing with your buddy possible conflicts caused by using computers with differing algorithms and caution settings.

The suffix ADT stands for adaptive. The G2C is gas-integrated, at least for your first tank, so it can measure your breathing rate and extrapolate whether you're absorbing more inert gas than the algorithm would otherwise assume.

For example, I carry out a deepwater regulator test at 30m with another diver, both of us breathing as hard as we can from one first stage to assess emergency breathing performance with an octopus. As our breathing rates soar compared to meandering around a reef at slack, gas-loading increases.

I've stepped outside the algorithm's normal parameters and absorbed more nitrogen than it has predicted, so my computer's assumed no-stop limit might now be too long, or deco requirements too short.

The time scheduled to off-gas might not be enough if I just follow the numbers, risking DCI – so I follow the old advice and add time to safety or deco stops. It's called guessing.

The G2C can make its own judgment call and shorten your NDL or increase decompression time on the fly. Decompression is still not completely understood so the computer is

computer costs around £200 – equivalent to £70 in 1988!

But what does £1160 get you in 2020? The answer is the Scubaapro Galileo 2 Console, or G2C, a computer that spans the needs not only of recreational but also of advanced technical divers.

Galileos have been around a while now, though not in console form, so I plan to look at it here from the point of view of a leisure diver doing basic deco dives on air or nitrox.

But many divers will progress to trimix within the lifetime of their computer. For them, when they program in their mixes for up to eight cylinders the G2C stores them and the pressures assigned to them for recall as the dive proceeds.

It prompts them on when to switch during descents and ascents. It keeps them aware of maximum operating depth to avoid oxygen toxicity, and of the risk of ascending dangerously shallow for a given mix.

The G2C has a full armoury of alarms to help

making its best guess, but it's probably a lot more educated than mine.

Though not supplied for test, the G2C package includes a wireless heart and temperature monitor that enables the algorithm to further self-adjust for work-rate and, also, for skin temperature. Hanging almost comatose at your stop and getting cold also affects off-gassing.

Displays

Among the most interesting options are those that change the display, enabling you to select the amount of information shown and how it is presented. You can choose between Light, Classic, Full and Graphic.

The latter presents a graph of your dive-profile. You can see, for example, when you're about to go over the no-decompression line and enter deco. Alongside are the numbers you need for precise dive monitoring, such as depth.

I didn't use the Graphic screen. My first computer had a similar read-out and I always preferred to ignore the graphic, artistic as it was, and crunch the numbers.

Full presents all the data that might be relevant to some divers, including heart-rate if you're using the transmitter.

Classic culls this to present the range of information familiar from most computers – current depth, max depth, no-deco limit and elapsed time for instance, plus ceiling and ascent time if you cross into decompression.

Light is nice for no-decompression dives. If you accidentally or intentionally stray into deco, the screen automatically changes to Classic to guide you through your stop.

The more information required at once, the smaller the digits must be to fit the screen, but Scubapro has done a stellar job of keeping even the Full screen uncluttered and quick to understand. I mostly dived on Classic.

There are also colour options that mix up the display and background colours. These are claimed to improve contrast in different water conditions, so

Display modes:

Graphic combines digital and graphs to represent the diving situation, including deco stop;

Full includes most information, except navigation. Divers can see detailed heart and skin temperature displays;

Classic (main image) shows all the information needed to safely manage a deco dive, including stop depth, ascent time and remaining air;

Light provides only 'must know' info for carrying out a no-stop dive. Enter decompression and the screen automatically switches to Classic.

might help those with colour blindness (me) or dyslexia.

You can turn the display through 180° to match your preferred orientation. You can either set the brightness of the backlight or leave it to self-adjust according to ambient light, and choose how long it stays on.

A full built-in decompression dive-planner allows you to see the effects of extending surface intervals, choosing different depths and changing mixes on first and repetitive dives. It's very straightforward.

Gas Integration

As a hoses computer, the G2C can monitor only one cylinder. If you use stages, you'll need to calculate their gas times yourself. Besides showing current tank pressure, the G2C offers all the usual benefits of gas-integrated machines.

You can quickly set alerts to warn you when you reach either of two pressure levels. The first might be set to your preferred turnaround pressure, or the 100 bar when you need to keep your divemaster posted. The second is the reserve with which to surface.

By measuring breathing rate, the G2C can predict, within reason, how long your gas will last and compare this to your depth, whether you

need only make a short safety stop or have a long deco hang ahead of you, and ensure that you have enough in the tank to surface safely.

It will also account for your selected breathing-rate caution zone, or data supplied by the heart monitor according to your chosen settings.

If extended stops are called for, you're covered by estimates based on current breathing rates. Working hard at the start of your dive to push through current to reach the lee of a wall in the Maldives might show a relatively short remaining-air time, for example, but as you relax and your demand for air decreases, so the air time remaining will increase.

Conversely, if you've had an easy-going drift at 30m but are suddenly confronted by an overweight and panicky out-of-air diver hitting on your octopus, remaining-air time will quickly be recalculated.

Setting Up

The USB charger doesn't lock onto the G2C (it uses magnets) but it does feel very secure. It's unlikely to come adrift if you're using your laptop on a

Right: One of the surface modes showing settings you've selected, such as water type and safety factor.

moving boat while charging.

The G2C has a phenomenal set of menus. Page after page of instructions does my head in, especially if I need to make selections against the clock, but the G2C has the best menu layout of any computer I've used.

This was especially welcome because my test model came set to German, one of more than 20 language options, so I first had to change it to English.

What makes the menus so easy to navigate, select and set is not the simple three-button control (one selects and sets, the other two scroll up and down, all common enough). It's that the G2C clearly confirms that you've made your selection by stating changes saved. If I got it wrong, it told me so.

No more going back and forth to see if you've actually saved your nitrox mix, for example.

When I pressed the enter button for too long, while upping the O₂ to 32%, the G2C flashed up "changes not saved".

Also laudable is that it would be difficult for a recreational diver to stray into the trimix menus.

Before first use, you need to select features you want and deactivate the rest. These include many you'll probably leave well alone most of the time, such as maximum oxygen partial pressure and depth and duration of your safety stop.

Others might need to be changed from dive to dive, such as nitrox mix and depth and elapsed time or reserve tank pressure alarms. Alarms can be set to be either visual, audible, both or off.

The main menus are logically presented and lead seamlessly into sub-menus. The G2C prompts you as to which of the three buttons you need to press to make your choices. These icons appear on the screen above the button.

If you have Scubapro's LogTRAK you can also enter emergency information such as contacts, blood type and allergies.

The G2C attaches to its high-pressure hose with a bayonet fitting that works very well.

Under Water

The menus that I needed my reading glasses to set topside (I am quite old) were replaced under water by bright, high-contrast displays. The large digits were easy to read and the information was presented very clearly, despite including deco, gas and compass information simultaneously.

Once into decompression – a few minutes at 6m – the read-outs were easily understood. They showed total ascent time, deepest stop and how long I would need to spend there.



Switch to a stage for accelerated deco, and the G2C shows the pressure (just a reminder, it can't measure it) and mix and adds your maximum operating depth.

A successful gas-switch is confirmed with a noticeable message rather than an icon. Having a computer-generated estimate of how long your gas will last in minutes is reassuring, especially at very low tank pressures.

You can choose a two-minute warning before crossing into full deco, while another alarm compares your gas requirements to your ascent time and lets you know when you're within three minutes of that limit.

A button-press summons the compass easily and it stays on for a pre-selected time. I preferred to set it to turn off on command. It can remember one bearing and doesn't accept waypoints, so you can't program in changes of course ahead of time, but must rely on memory or a slate.

You press a button to capture a bearing and an arrow shows the direction in which you have to turn, and disappears once you're lined up.

To make space for navigation read-outs while



the compass is on, only key dive information is displayed, such as dive-time remaining, air-time remaining, tank pressure and depth.

I was diving in green, often dark water and would have liked to scroll through the colour screen choices under water, but because the choices must be made at the surface I opted for the blue digits on a black background preferred by the previous user. I found it an easy read.

I don't much bother with logging dives other than professional ones in the UK, but I was impressed with the simple list of information kept by the G2C. I noted an admonition to that previous user for crashing his deep stop and a strike against me for running my air a bit low.

The G2C can memorise 1000 hours of diving.

Of course, it's Bluetooth-enabled.

You can also store photos and maps to call up under water. A photo of an underwater landmark would often have helped me navigate in the past on those "turn left at the big coral with the red anthias – no, the other red anthias" types of dive.

Conclusion

What won me over is not the spec, because it far exceeds my needs as an air/nitrox diver, but how stunningly simple it is to use. Menus are so straightforward to set and read-outs so easily read and understood that it's hard to fault.

The big, user-friendly displays are blended consummately with a very compact handset – no mean feat. Highly recommended. ■

SPECS

TESTER ► Steve Warren

PRICE ► £1160

ALGORITHM ► ZH-L16-ADT MB PMG

WEIGHT ► 196g plus hose

CONTACT ► scubapro.com

BC OCEANIC BIOLITE

FIRST IMPRESSIONS – OR PREJUDICES – can be so wrong. As I looked over the Oceanic Biolite's marketing, my immediate thoughts were: "Nice warmwater BC. Good luck in Gib!"

Warmwater BCs can get away with lower lift than temperate-water models, because they aren't expected to cope with the huge loss of buoyancy and ensuing severe negative buoyancy that occurs at depth when using thick wetsuits. It's also common for tropical resorts and liveboards to use relatively small cylinders, often aluminium, that are also less negatively buoyant than high-capacity steel tanks.

So as I waded into the cold winter Atlantic wearing a 7mm full wetsuit and steel 15-litre tank, I wasn't expecting very much of the Oceanic Biolite.

I inflated the BC, took my feet off the seabed and drew out my ruler. I wanted to check the distance from water level to my mouth.

"Seventeen centimetres," I announced to the other divers, all male, who responded with guffaws and predictable double entendres. It's a guy thing.

So this is a good time to point out that the Biolite also comes in a women's version. It's the same BC but in feminine colours, whatever that means in 2020.

In fact, schoolboy humour aside, 17cm is very impressive – and useable. We rely on a BC to keep our head high above the water while we talk to a buddy or students, take compass-bearings to

shore or watch the approach of the boat, but there will also be times when it's a safety factor, such as if out of air at the surface in a chop. It's all too easy to take in water, not air, if the BC can't float us high.

The height test was done at the start of the dive, when I was at my heaviest,

weighed down by nearly 4kg of air I wouldn't have at dive's end, and it was also perfectly stable, holding me upright.

A BC that relentlessly pitches you forward can quickly become exhausting, and a face-plant into the water from a badly trimmed BC has helped drown divers in the past.

Would this impressive surface performance be repeated under water? We'll first take a close look at the Oceanic Biolite's design and key features.



Spoiler alert: It turns out that it only looks like a tropical travel BC.

The Design

The 2.5kg Biolite trades on its low weight for travelling. It's a back-inflation BC, or wing, designed for single-cylinder use. The bladder is highly elastic, made from Oceanic's patented Bioflex. Its doughnut style means that the air circulates unimpeded all around the bladder.

Puncture- and abrasion-resistant 1000-denier weave Cordura protects high-wear areas such as the harness. This is a BC that should last.

Bungees help to keep the wing tight and streamlined when only partially inflated, and are mounted on the inside of the aircell to avoid creating a snagging hazard.

Lift is around 15kg for the XS, S and the medium size I used (17kg for larger sizes), a fact I hadn't checked before diving. I had assumed that the marketing push towards travel lightness would equate to low lift, but the Biolite's is on a par with other wings and jacket-style BCs for single-cylinder coldwater diving, explaining the excellent surface performance.

The Biolite is weight-integrated, with quick-release pouches at the waist and two trim-weight pockets mounted on the camband. There's a half backpack (only the upper half is rigid) to save weight and allow the top and bottom of the Biolite to be folded over one another when packing.

To improve tank stability, a lower retaining strap is fitted. The simple harness comprises two well-padded shoulder-straps and a waist-belt, plus a fixed-height chest-strap with built-in signal whistle, each with a squeeze-release buckle.

There's an optional cummerbund – it was neither supplied nor missed – and a generously cushioned spine-pad. A rapid-exhaust valve mounted on the left shoulder is activated by pulling down on the oral-inflation hose, while a pull-cord-operated bum-dump sits lower left inside the wing. There are no pockets.

Two plastic D-rings are attached at the bottom of the BC, one with a hose-clip. If you need more you can always use those on the shoulder-strap adjusters. Oceanic provides a locking karabiner on the right shoulder, and its height can be adjusted by threading it through various loops fitted to the webbing. This could hold a gauge or octopus.

In Use

This is an easy BC to put on. I like not having a cummerbund to get caught behind my back. The weight-pouches won't take hip weights, so I had to slot in two large H weights on top of each other to get my weight sorted.

They first go into zipped pockets with loop handles for carrying or handing up to the boat. You load these into the pouches from the top and zip them up. This is simple enough to do after you've put your set on, if you don't want to lift your rig onto your back fully loaded.

Speaking of fully loaded, I was packing about 35kg when I walked 500m to the water's edge in the Biolite. I was wearing a 7mm jacket and longjohn,



The locking karabiner has multiple positioning points. It's useful for clipping off SPGs and safe-seconds.



Biolite weight-release shown activated. It's also easy to insert weights after you've donned the BC.

so with a fair bit of padding it was no surprise that the rig felt so comfortable.

Later, to simulate warmwater diving, I walked it for five minutes on my treadmill in a T-shirt with a 10-litre cylinder and 4kg of lead and it remained very easy on my back and shoulders.

So what is this star performer at the surface like to dive? As a photo/videographer, I place a high value on stability. The Biolite held me very precisely, with no pitch or roll.

Want to shoot pictures under a low ledge? The Biolite lets you assume a head-down, vertical stance with minimal finning to hold position.

The use of a half-pack can make it harder to stop your cylinder oscillating as you swim.

A steel 15-litre cylinder tends to roll me anyway (it's a fat, heavy piece of kit, although so am I now), but it was very well controlled with the Biolite, thanks to the stabilising strap below the main camband and the lumbar support tucked firmly into the small of my back.

Swimming into current at depth with a fair amount of air in the air-cell to keep me neutral, there was negligible drag.

I have a thing about weight-ditching. I'm alive today because I ditched my weights as a 10-year-old, and I was only snorkelling then. Most recreational divers die from drowning and too often don't seem to think to drop their weights to save their lives. If they do think, it's vital that those weights can be dropped easily and quickly.

The Biolite uses Oceanic's Quick Drop system: pinch the clip on the pouch and the weights fall out of that pocket. This is a fairly common approach, and it's virtually impossible to release a weight accidentally, because snagging the release on wreckage or line can't open the

mechanism. You can also release half your weight at a time if wary of a fast ascent.

The pinch-clips are easy to operate with or without gloves, though I'd prefer them to be hi-vis to make them easier for a rescuer to identify.

The inflator fills the BC in about six seconds. The direct-feed control and dump-valve are clearly distinguishable by shape, though not colour. There's no shoulder-dump, so you must rely on using

the rapid exhaust for routine venting when on a head-up incline, unless you dump through the oral inflator mouthpiece.

Should the direct feed stick open, the remote exhaust can vent the Biolite faster than the direct feed can supply it, helping you keep control of your buoyancy. If the ascent did get away from you, even when fully inflated, the Biolite can be stopped dead in a distance of about 1.5m using the remote exhaust, as on most BCs I've tested.

The Biolite does roll up tight for packing. It wouldn't quite fit in my dive-bag's fin-pocket, but it came close.

Conclusion

This is a very nice BC. Its simplicity appealed to me. It performs admirably at the surface and under water and packs up small for travelling, so ticks all boxes for both the cold and warmwater diving that I do. It's highly recommended. ■



Left: The inflator has finger-holds that keep your hands clear of the button when dumping through the RE valve.



SPECS

- TESTER ▶ Steve Warren
- PRICES ▶ £340. Cummerbund £45
- SIZES ▶ XS, S, M, L, XL, XXL
- BUOYANCY ▶ 14.5kg (17kg L, XL, XXL)
- WEIGHT ▶ 2.5kg
- DUMP VALVES ▶ 2
- COLOURS ▶ Black (pink trim for women's version)
- CONTACT ▶ oceanicworldwide.com

BOLT-SNAP XDEEP NX DOUBLE ENDED

IT WAS LOSING THE BATTERIES that actually rankled more than losing the torch. I had just bought eight nickel-cadmium rechargeable D-cells, and this was my first dive with them. They had cost more than the light did. And now the whole thing was adrift on the currents and would probably wash up on a Spanish beach.

At least the lucky finder would have to buy a charger (I'm a sore loser).

I lost my light because its bolt-snap had failed. Presumably the closing spring lost tension, allowing the gate to open and the lamp's splitting ring to slip through the gap.

I learnt an expensive lesson that day. When I got into underwater photography a little later, I always used two bolt-snaps per camera to ensure their safety.

Nautilus is an equipment distributor set up by Brett Thorpe, a veteran of decades of previous dive-retail experience. His product lines include Fantasea underwater camera equipment but mostly favour technical divers, with brands such as Analox gas analysers and Suex scooters alongside own-label Nautilus accessories.

XDeep is one of his highest-profile ranges, well-respected for its BCs.



The Design

I had never given bolt-snaps a lot of thought. The ones I own

look much the same. I guess they've been made for boaters and, the odd spring failure aside, seem to work well enough for divers too.

But tekies aren't much into gear that works "well enough". The XDeep NX bolt-snap is reckoned to be user-friendlier for divers.

The Double Ended unit is 120mm long. It's made from type 316 marine-grade stainless-steel to prevent corrosion. The trigger stands proud, so it's easy to slide open with thick gloves on.

Usually this is just a low-profile nub, and at first sight the slider on the XDeep looks like a snag hazard. But its rounded edges encourage the likes of fishing-line to skip over it.

The shaft provides somewhere to wrap your fist around, as with its competitors, but the squared-off shaping under the eyelets gives a better grip for your fingers, so even a heavily gloved hand is less likely to slide off.

This thoughtful design makes it easier to open the slider and provides the firm grip for steering

the clip into place on a D-ring. It helps that the gate opens a little wider than my own bolt-snaps do.

In Use

I like double-ended bolt-snaps. I use them to secure camera housings, pressure gauges and octopus-retainers to BC D-rings and to rig finger-pools. The NX is easy to snap on and off a D-ring one-handed, even if it's out of sight.

For example, I keep my DSMB stored in the small of my back, the reel clipped to a hard-to-see D-ring by my kidney, so dexterity matters to me.

Conclusion

This bolt-snap unobtrusively does its job very well. When it comes to hanging a 5k camera off one, I'll take two please. Highly recommended. ■

SPECS

TESTER ► Steve Warren

PRICE ► £12

CONTACT ► nautilusdiving.co.uk



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The Social Distance

FINALLY IT SEEMS THAT THE WORLD has woken up to an issue that divers have long identified as critically important: What distance should you maintain between yourself and others as you go about your activities?

With the pandemic still upon us, governments have applied considerable scientific brain-power to help resolve this question. The answer? Two metres is regarded as a comfortably safe distance.

My personal belief is that the answer to all of life's dilemmas can be found within diving. And of course the 2m (or 7ft) rule has been standard knowledge to technical divers for decades.

It's a distance that's been tried and tested through many an emergency scenario.

Technical divers breathe from a demand valve that's on a 2m-long hose. It's the air source that we donate to anyone having an "out of gas" emergency.

Firstly, that's because we know that the regulator from which we've just been breathing is working. Just imagine the life-threatening kerfuffle that could ensue otherwise.

Secondly, the 2m distance gives out-of-gas divers enough space to panic, thrash, breathe and then compose themselves – without suffering the mortal indignity of having to eyeball us while they do so.

However, most divers are not technical. So does the 2m measure still hold up as a universal safe distance for recreational scuba-divers?

When we first learn to dive, we're encouraged to stick with our buddy. The emphasis is on how close we stay, not how far. In theory, this is just in case some mishap occurs that they could help to resolve.

Nobody mentions that it's your less-than-experienced buddy who is likely to kick the mask off your face with a sudden, clumsy bicycle-kick of their fin. Or knock the regulator out of your mouth while performing the classic "underwater breast stroke" arm movement that often typifies a newbie diver. Thereby creating the very scenario against which their presence is supposed to protect you.

When this happens, your buddy will undoubtedly be looking and heading away from you; far more focused on their own dive, cheerfully oblivious to the mayhem left in their wake.

AS TRAINEES, BOTH YOU and your buddy are unlikely to have much underwater spatial awareness, so you won't be keeping that vital 2m between you. Let's consider what that actually looks like under water.

If both divers face each other, draw their dive-knives and wave them at each other, there should be a healthy gap between the blades. If you're concerned about safety, you can see that this makes sense.

Bizarrely, this simple safe-distancing technique hasn't been included on any diver-training programmes.

The reality is that many people dive in groups behind a guide. So it's not just your buddy that needs to keep to the right distance.

Each individual diver needs to understand and maintain a polite and protective minimum space in all three dimensions around themselves – simply to avoid clattering into someone else. You know it makes sense.

To achieve the 2m or 7ft minimum distance, each diver needs to protect the three-and-a-half-foot personal space around them.

Should you need further convincing, that's 42in. And as ever, the answer to everything, always, is 42.

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NEW BUT UNTESTED

The latest kit to hit the dive shops



BARE Elate & Revel Wetsuits

With its new women's Elate and men's Revel lines of wetsuits, BARE promises superb comfort and fit through the use of superstretch neoprene and anatomical shaping, with the emphasis said to be on increased freedom of movement. The back-entry suits are available in 7, 5, 3/2mm one-piece and 2mm shorty models, with prices ranging from £110 to £255.

► baresports.com



Scubapro D Mask

At £155, the D Mask might be considered designer eyewear. This system mask features coated lenses said to block damaging high energy visible (HEV) light, with an optional selection of positive, minus and bi-focal eyesight correction lenses. Clear or black skirts are interchangeable and come in small, medium and wide fittings. An adapter for a head-up display computer is included.

► scubapro.com

Oris Carysfort Reef Limited Edition Watch

With a price-tag of £14,500, you might expect this timepiece to be a bit special – and it is.

The casing is made from 18-carat yellow gold. Only 50 have been released, including three that have been donated to raise funds for Florida's Coral Restoration Foundation. The watch is 300m-rated, displays two time zones, has a date function and is self-winding.

► oris.ch



Keldan 8M CRI Video Light

Keldan's professional 8M CRI video light has adjustable output from 8000 to 2700 lumens and running times from 45 to 170 minutes. The standard reflector provides 90° of soft light. A choice of accessories is said to enable this LED, aluminium-bodied, lithium-ion battery-powered light to be adaptable for any filming requirements. It costs £1520.

► keldanlights.com



Mares Ranger BC

►►►

For younger divers, Mares offers this jacket-style buoyancy compensator made from hard-wearing 420 denier Cordura. It weighs only 1.8kg, and features include three dumps, two pockets, two D-rings and a cam-band that adjusts for slimmer cylinders. One size is said to fit ages 8 through 12, and the price is £204.

► mares.com





Mares Rover 2S Regulator ▲▲▲▲

This inexpensive regulator – it costs £142 – is based around a traditional piston first stage with one high-pressure and four medium-pressure ports. Designed for ease of breathing, the first stage uses Mares’ Dynamic Flow Control (DFC) system, while the lightweight technopolymer second stage is vortex-assisted.

►► mares.com



Sealife Micro 3.0 SL550 Underwater Camera ▲▲▲▲

Sealife claims that this new camera will deliver high-quality underwater photos and video with the minimum of fuss. Incorporating a large Sony sensor, the 60m diveable rated camera delivers 16MP still pictures and 4K video with 120 frames per second slow motion. Five selectable electronic filters and manual white balance take care of the colour, it says, with a range of lighting and other accessories available to expand its capabilities. The price is £570.

►► sealife-cameras.com

Goodtodive Disinfectant ►►►►

The Covid-19 virus has tied hygiene to safety, but for individual divers, dive-centre staff and liveboard crew, keeping equipment infection-free has always been important. Fourth Element has teamed up with The Diver Medic to produce Goodtodive disinfectant, in the form of a powder that can be mixed with fresh or salt water, and it is said to be safe for marine life, making disposal easier. Dissolvable paper stickers are included to identify cleaned equipment. A starter pack with 1kg tub costs £14.

►► goodtodive.com



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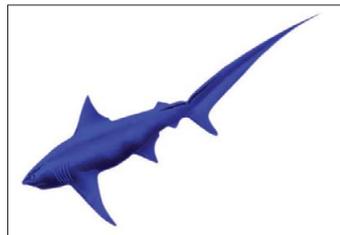
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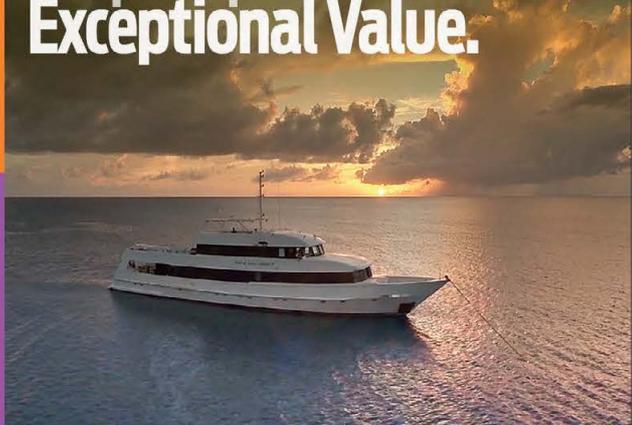
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HSE MEDICALS and phone advice - Poole

Dr Gerry Roberts and Dr Mark Bettley-Smith.
Tel: (01202) 741370

Diving Medicals - Midlands (Rugby) - HSE, Sports Medicals and advice at Midlands Diving Chamber. Tel: 01788 579555 www.midlanddivingchamber.co.uk (72756)

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Arnewood Divers, Christchurch - where diving is safe and fun from our own hard boat. Training from beginner to Instructor. Find us on Facebook or <https://sites.google.com/view/adsac/home>

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Alfreton (Derbys) BSAC 302. Welcomes new members and qualified divers. A small but active club with own RIB, wreck diving a speciality. Contact Angela on 07866 799364. (68370)

Appledore Sub-Aqua Club (SAA 35) Friendly club welcomes experienced divers from all agencies. Regularly dives Lundy island, own hard boat / compressor. Contact Damian 07831 152021.

Banbury SAC. Friendly, active club with weekly meetings and training sessions, own boat, compressor and equipment. Welcome divers/non-divers. www.bansac.org or call 07787 097 289. (69308)

Birmingham Underwater Exploration Club. Friendly, active dive club. Weekly pool sessions. Regular trips. Own RIB based in south Devon. Training and equipment loan available to members. Tim 07775 580033. (65792)

Bracknell Sub Aqua Club welcomes new and experienced divers from all agencies. Meets poolside at Bracknell Sports Centre, Thursdays from 8.30pm. Diving, training and social calendar: www.bracknellscuba.org.uk or tel: 07951 855 725. (65792)

Braintree Riverside Sub Aqua Club based in Braintree, Essex. A friendly club, we welcome divers of all abilities and have an active diving and social programme. Come and join us! email: denise.f.wright2@btinternet.com www.braintreeriversidesac.co.uk (69397)

Bromley/Lewisham Active divers required. Full programme of hardboat diving throughout the year. Check out Nekton SAC www.nekton.org.uk or contact Jackie (01689) 850130. (68537)

Buckingham Dive Centre. A small friendly club welcoming all divers and those wanting to learn. We dive throughout the year and run trips in the UK and abroad. www.stowe-subaqua.co.uk Tel: Roger 07802 765366. (69433)

Chelmsford and District SAC meet at 8pm every Friday at Riverside Pool. New and qualified divers are welcome. See our website for details: www.chelmsforddiveclub.co.uk (68620)

Cockleshell Divers, Portsmouth, Hants. Small, friendly club welcomes new and experienced divers from all agencies. Meets at Cockleshell Community Centre, Fridays at 8pm. Email: cockleshell.divers@aol.co.uk (64762)

Colchester Sub-Aqua Club welcomes experienced divers and beginners. Sub-Aqua Association training. Diving at home and abroad. Meets at Leisure World Friday evenings. Contact Tony (01787) 475803. (68263)

Chingford, London BSAC 365. Friendly and active club welcomes divers from all agencies and trainees. Meet Wednesday 8pm, Larkwood Leisure Centre E4 9EY. Information: www.dive365.co.uk Email: loughtondivers365@gmail.com (69208)

Cotswold BSAC, a friendly club based at Brockworth

Pool, Nr Cheltenham, Fridays 8pm. Regular inland diving and coast trips. Tel: 07711 312078. www.cotswoldbsac332.co.uk (68577)

Darlington Dolphins Sub Aqua Club, small friendly BSAC/PADI, open to new and experienced divers. Meet Friday night in Dolphin Centre at 8.30. Tel: 07773 075631 or email robkilday@hotmail.co.uk (72665)

Darwen SAC, in Lancashire, with an active diving programme. Own RIB. New members welcome regardless of agency/training. We provide BSAC training. Weekly pool sessions. www.darwensac.org.uk (69161)

Dream Divers. Very friendly dive club in Rotherham welcomes divers of any level/club. Meet at the Ring O Bells, Swinton, last Thursday of the month at 19.30. Email: info@dreamdiversltd.co.uk (69699)

Ealing SAC. BSAC 514. Friendly, active club, own RIBs; welcomes new and experienced divers. Meets Highgrove Pool, Eastcote, Tuesday nights 8.30pm. www.esac.org.uk (68413)

East Cheshire Sub Aqua. Macclesfield based BSAC club. Purpose-built clubhouse, bar, two RIBs, minibus, nitrox, compressor. Lower Bank Street, Macclesfield, SK11 7HL. Tel: 01625 502367. www.scubadivingmacclesfield.com (65609)

East Durham Divers SAA welcome new/experienced divers of any agency. Comprehensive facilities with own premises half a mile from the sea. Contact: John: 07857 174125. (68663)

East Lancs Diving Club based in Blackburn. Friendly, active club welcomes new members at all levels of diving from all organisations. Tel: 07784 828961 or email: ELDC@hotmail.co.uk www.eastlancsdivers.co.uk (69411)

Eastbourne BSAC. RIB, Banked air (free) to 300bar, Nitrox, Trimix. Enjoy some of the best diving on the South Coast, all qualifications welcome. www.sovereigndivers.co.uk (65695)

Eastern Sub Aqua Club SAA 1073. We are a small friendly dive club and welcome new and experienced divers alike. We are situated north of Norwich for training. For more information please see our website: www.esacdivers.co.uk (65879)

Elton Sub Aqua Club, Aberdeenshire, welcomes newcomers and experienced divers. We dive year round and meet on Thursday evenings. Contact www.eltonsubaquaclub.co.uk (65523)

Fife Scuba Divers Tel: 07575 372575 www.fifescubadivers.com SAA Club No203. Meetings: Thu 19.30, 81 East Way, Hillend, KY11 9JF. Training Club, Crossovers welcome. (72380)

Flintshire Sub Aqua Club based in Holywell, Flintshire, welcomes new and experienced divers from all agencies. Full dive programme. Meet Wednesdays. See us at www.flintscac.co.uk or call 01352 731425. (64293)

Guildford BSAC 53. Welcomes new and qualified divers. Friendly, active club with 2 RIBs, compressor, Nitrox, meets Tuesday at clubhouse with bar. www.guildfordbsac.com or call 07787 141857.

Hartford Scuba BSAC 0522, based in Northwich, Cheshire. A friendly, active diving club. Compressor for air and Nitrox fills. RIB stored in Anglesey. www.hartfordscuba.co.uk (67287)

Hereford Sub Aqua Club, is looking for new members. Regular diving off the Pembrokeshire coast on own RIBs. Training and social nights. Contact: rusaqua@googlemail.com (69146)

HGSAC, South Manchester based friendly, non-political club welcomes newcomers and qualified divers. Lots of diving and social events. Family. Three RIBs and compressor. www.hgsac.com (68501)

High Wycombe SAC. Come and dive with us - all welcome. Active club with RIB on South coast. Contact Len: 07867 544 738. www.wycombesubaqua.com (69131)

HUGSAC - BSAC 380. Experienced club, based around Hertfordshire, with RIB on the South coast. Members dive with passion for all underwater exploration. All agencies welcome. www.hugsac.co.uk (63275)

Ifield Divers. Crawley-based club. Twin engine dive boat with stern lift in Brighton Marina. Training for novices, diving for the experienced - all qualifications welcome. www.ifield-divers.org.uk Email: info@ifield-divers.org.uk or tel: 01883 731532. (64514)

Ilkeston & Kimberley SAA 945, between Nottingham and Derby, welcomes beginners and experienced divers. We meet every Friday night at Kimberley Leisure Centre at 8.30pm. Contact through www.iksac.co.uk (68559)

K2 Divers, covering West Sussex/Surrey. A friendly BSAC club, but all qualifications welcome. Training in Crawley, boat at Littlehampton. Email: k2divers@yahoo.co.uk or tel: (01293) 612989. (68335)

Kingston BSAC, Surrey. Two RIBs, clubhouse and bar, active dive programme, two compressors, Nitrox, Trimix, full training offered at all levels. All very welcome. www.kingstonsac.org or tel: 07842 622193. (69176)

Lincoln - Imp Divers. Small, friendly, non-political diving club with our own RIB are looking to welcome new and experienced divers. Contact Richard: 07931 170205. (69383)

Lincoln and District BSAC. Active club with own RIB, compressor and other facilities. Regular trips and training. www.lincolndivingclub.co.uk (69336)

Lincs Divers BSAC 1940. Friendly, active dive club offering dive trips and training for new/experienced divers. Lincoln based. www.lincsdivers.co.uk

Llantrisant SAC, two RIBs, towing vehicle, welcomes new and experienced divers. Meet at Llantrisant Leisure Centre 8pm Mondays. Contact Phil: (01443) 227667. www.llantrisantdivers.com (68519)

Lutterworth Dive Club, active, social, friendly. Own RIB, regular trips. Welcomes qualified divers, any agency. Training at all levels. Most Tuesdays, Lutterworth Sports Centre, www.lsaac.co.uk (70043)

Leeds based Rothwell & Stanley SAC welcomes new and experienced divers, full SAA training given. Purpose built clubhouse with bar, RIB, compressor. Meet Tuesday evenings: 07738 060567 kevin.odd@talktalk.net

Mansfield and District Scuba Diving Club. www.scubamad.co.uk Sub Aqua Association - club 942. 8 Beech Avenue, Mansfield, Notts. NG18 1EY. (71643)

Manta Divers, Norfolk wreck & reef diving. Small, friendly, experienced club. All agencies welcome. SAA training. www.mantadivers.org (64088)

Mercian Divers (BSAC 2463) Active & Friendly club. New, experienced & junior divers welcome. Own RIB. Based in Bromsgrove, West Midlands. Tel: 01905 773406 www.mercian-divers.org.uk (65391)

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STEVE WARREN isn't talking about the original DIR philosophy: his problem is with the self-appointed arbiters of diving dogma and the closed-mindedness encouraged in some new divers. Stand by for strong views!

DIR – a new religion or misplaced faith?

“A FOOLISH CONSISTENCY is the hobgoblin of little minds”, they say. Throughout my diving career, the spectre of Doing it Right has haunted me.

Now I'm not talking about DIR, the formal diving philosophy used by the elite WKKP cave-diving team. Their record stands for itself and validates their diving systems.

I'm more focused on the combination of closed thinking, complacency and arrogance that sometimes plagues our sport and discourages debate. The “You're Doing It Wrong” conceit.

The subject came up when a friend learnt that a technical-diving instructor had photographed his twin-set to use as a teaching aid – as an example of how not to rig your cylinders.

Dennis felt insulted. And, because he is one of my mentors, and I choose my mentors carefully, I felt aggrieved on his behalf.

After all, he has been diving for half a century, and his experience encompasses not just recreational scuba, but light salvage and Navy diving as well.

Now, let's first put the miscreant twin-set into context. It's a pair of independent singles on a wing. I've dived it myself when working with Dennis on regulator-sharing tests for **DIVER**.

It fulfils perfectly the needs of the kind of decompression diving he does.

WHEN I FIRST TAUGHT professionally for a PADI dive-centre, I suppose I taught a form of DIR. All the students read identical manuals, took the same theory classes and passed standardised exams.

In the pool, they wore matching kit and mastered the same skills. In open water, each completed the same dives.

But, once they left my course and began doing their own thing, experience would, I hoped, cause them to rethink and challenge much of what I'd taught them.

How they dived would change, as they were exposed to and influenced by other divers' techniques and philosophies and discovered what worked best for them.

What that should mean is that they became much better divers. My own exposure to many training programmes, observing other instructors and meeting other divers has, I feel, helped me hugely.

It's human nature to want to think well of ourselves. In diving, that can mean overhyping the agency to which we belong or lionising the instructor who taught us,

because then we look good by association.

The problem is that such narcissism can blind us to other, possibly better, ways of doing things.

A trend I think I'm seeing among some divers is that they progress quickly through a succession of courses but do them through one agency and a single dive-centre.

This creates an echo-chamber in which an almost sanctimonious mindset of DIR exists. It seems to make some feel entitled to criticise other people's diver training, abilities and choice of equipment – including their twin-sets.

I haven't been diving as long as Dennis, nor am I as accomplished, but I have 40-some years under my belt. What's been useful in that time has been learning from everyone else. I've been able to steal from them the ideas that work for me and at least consider others I've come to reject.

Generally I dive with people who might have different training, experience and kit, yet we have no conflicts under water.

Discussion about our personal preferences is just that: discussion – not dissent to be shouted down. No one is trying to score points or force anyone else to dive their way. It's all positive.

I started diving in 1978 but got trained only in '84. This was a period of transition. BSAC was radically changing its training in a bid to stall an annual one-third drop-out rate and see off the perceived threat from a PADI just starting to market in the UK.

Since the sport began, training programmes have been tweaked, often against entrenched resistance, and modernised. You need to be involved only for a few decades to see the changes.

When you're new, it's easy to be fooled into thinking this is how it's always been, will be and should be. Yet DIR is valid only for a brief moment in time.

Even at tech level, many instructors are relatively new, inexperienced and lack a broad overview of how others think. Without that overview, telling others how they should dive is plain arrogance.

IF I'VE LEARNED anything in my decades of diving, it's to constantly doubt myself and not believe I'm one of the chosen,



OMNI MATRIX / PIXABAN

because I keep seeing things that change my mind about how I should dive.

But I've been as guilty as anyone of letting hobgoblins cloud my judgment. It's easy to do. Training agencies, unsurprisingly, don't encourage their fee-paying divers and instructors to look beyond their own county lines.

However, especially when it comes to hardnosed safety issues, things divers should be educating themselves about, agencies can be quite coy.

Important safety publications, such as Stress and Performance in Diving, and Divers Alert Network or American Academy of Underwater Sciences studies, are not on their required reading list.

They make you think and question your faith in yourself, your training and your agency. And that's a good thing.

OVER THE YEARS I've known Dennis he has constantly changed his attitudes, broadened his skillset and built his experience. The kit he uses and how it's rigged has also changed.

And that twin-set? It's set up exactly the way it suits him. And that's Doing It Right.

When I was trying to break into diving, when it was more usual to train through amateur clubs, it wasn't easy. Today I'd just have gone to my local pro scuba instructor to get qualified in a couple of days,

Dumb misfortune meant that the few local clubs were either seasonal (not really geared to training), useless (year-round, but with a year-long basic training schedule that ran with all the efficiency of British Rail) or really good (but I couldn't join them because I wasn't in the Forces).

What frustrated me then turned out to be a blessing. Being closed off from the usual routes to training thankfully opened my mind a bit.

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