

Cornish Jewels

by Mark Webster

Regular clients on my overseas workshops have become accustomed to my regular references to the joys of diving in British waters. My tack is normally the same - if you can perfect your techniques in the temperate waters of the UK then you should be able to shoot successfully anywhere around the globe. Perhaps a better reason is that there are some superb subjects and scenery which are enough to inspire even the most jaded globe trotter - if not then the colder water is sure to get your attention!

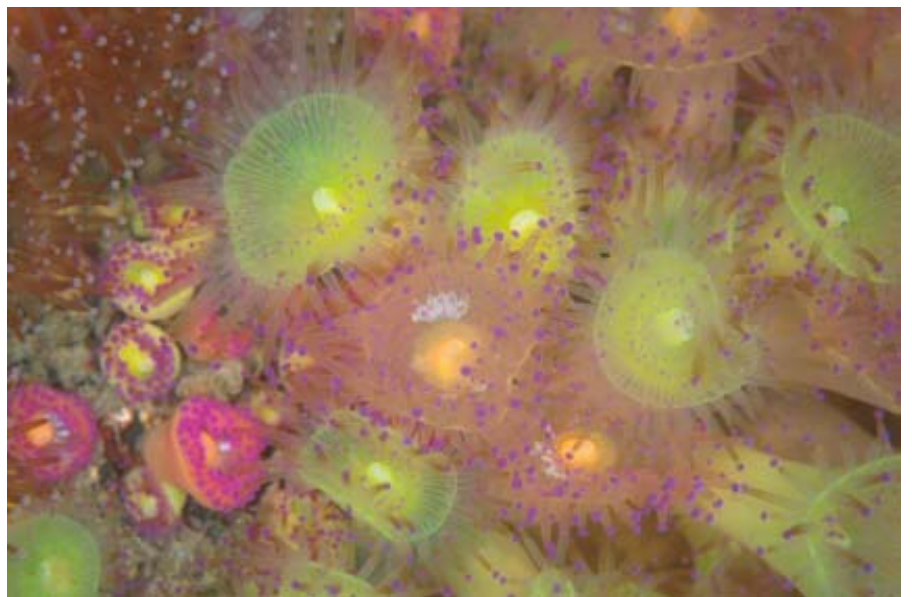
In my continued quest to sing the praises of our waters I thought I would highlight two of the most photographically productive diving sites I am lucky enough to have on my doorstep. Both are submerged reef systems located offshore in the path of strong tides, which in our waters equates to masses of colourful invertebrate life and healthy fish populations. The first is the Manacles reef off the Lizard and the second is the Runnel Stone close to Land's End.

The Manacles:

The land mass of the Lizard peninsula is the most southerly point of the United Kingdom. Its position reaching out into the English Channel has been a major navigational way point as well as a hazard since the earliest



Basking shark - The plankton blooms in late spring early summer reduces the visibility in the water column but is also a magnet to the plankton feeders like the basking shark. To get good pictures of these beasts needs a combination of timing, luck, patience and a good set of lungs to keep up on a snorkel! Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 20mm, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @60th.



Jewel anemones - These tiny anemones come in both subtle and vibrant colourways and make fantastic macro subjects. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 60mm macro, Fuji Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th, YS50 and YS30.

days of sail. The granite cliffs, sheltered bays and offshore reefs boast some of the best diving that this area has to offer. One of the most popular of these areas is the infamous Manacles reef which lies on the north eastern side of the peninsula at the edge

of Falmouth Bay. This reef comprises a series of granite peaks and ledges rising sharply from depths of 60-70m to break the surface or lurk just 2m or 3m below the water.

This reef area rates as the most spectacular in Falmouth



Lands End - The Cornish coast is extremely rugged with high granite cliffs tumbling into the sea. This topography continues in many areas underwater which creates spectacular plunging reefs with multitudes of gullies and swim throughs to be explored. Nikon F90X, 28-200mm zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f8 @ 1/60th.



Ballan wrasse - Ballan wrasse are the groupers or coral trouts of temperate reefs. They are very territorial and inquisitive and will make repeated approaches to you if you are patient and stay in one spot for a while. They seem to particularly like games of hide and seek within the kelp which can be a challenging place to remain even in a light surge. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @ 1/30th, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30.

Bay, but must only be dived when the conditions are right. Vicious tides of up to 5 knots are experienced here, and the current continues to run sometimes even during “slack” periods on a

spring tide, and sadly there have been several diving tragedies in the area. The best diving is found on the outer reefs of the Manacles where the rocks are most exposed to the tide and the

density of marine life is often quite staggering. Much of the reef system does not reach the surface, so it is important to go with a boatman who knows the area and tides and can identify the sites. The whole area offers potentially excellent diving and it is well worth trying more than one of the reefs as they all have a different feel and topography.

Perhaps the most spectacular site is Raglans Reef, which is the most seaward of the reefs and looks very impressive on the echo sounder rising sheer from a depth of 50-60m to within 3-4m of the surface. The reef can only be located with a combination of land marks and transits or a GPS fix and an echo sounder. You should plan your dive for slack water and preferably on a neap tide for a long dive. Arriving on location before the tide is slack will enable you to spot the surface disturbance caused by the tidal waters being thrown towards the surface by the obstruction of the reef. This will give a clue to the location of the reef top and you may begin you sweep with the echo sounder upstream of the disturbance. When you are waiting for the tide to stop running there will often be a ‘false slack’ period when the current appears to stop only to restart again with a final surge 10 or 15 minutes later. It is possible to dive at this moment when there is a neap tide, but on a spring it is best to wait for full slack water. If you are an experienced diver then it is possible to start or finish your dive when the tide is running, as the reef will offer shelter on one side. However, your boat man must be experienced and be alert to the possibility of divers being



Gulley with sponges - There are ledges and gullies to be explored throughout the depth range. Each provides an avenue of different sessile life, one might be full of anemones and the next full of sponges and dead men's fingers as in this case. The bright granite sand which collects in the bottom of these reflects both the natural light and your flash to help fill shadows. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @ 1/30th, YS120 and YS30.



Cuttle fish - Cuttle fish are most common in the mid summer months and you will find them up amongst the kelp canopy or on sandy patches on the reef slope. They have remarkable camouflage skills and can be difficult to spot initially but make willing photographic subjects once found. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 60mm macro, Fuji Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th, YS120 and YS30.

carried away by the tide particularly at the end of a dive. Always carry a surface marker sausage or flag so that your boat can spot you easily on the surface. The other cautionary note for this area is its popularity especially on holiday week ends when there will be a large number of diving boats operating in the area. So be aware of other boat traffic especially when surfacing at the end of a dive away from the reef.

To be certain of locating the

reef when you leave the surface it is best for the boat to anchor to the reef top or to deploy a marker buoy on a grapnel or shot weight. If you miss the narrow reef top then you run the risk of not finding the reef at all or hitting it at a depth far greater than planned. The top 5-8m has a heavy growth of kelp with widely spaced stipes which provides shelter for many marine organisms. This area is best left for exploration until the end of your dive when you are

decompressing or making a safety stop. Just below the kelp line around 8m the rocks are covered with hydroids, masses of brittle stars, endless arrays of jewel anemones and soft corals. The best route to follow is to start on the north east side of the pinnacle where you will find a series of vertical rock faces which are carpeted with sea fans and plumose anemones in a variety of colours. Follow these to your target depth and then begin to swim around the



Rhizostoma jelly fish - The spring plankton bloom attracts swarms of jelly fish, the largest being the Rhizostoma. This year (2002) they were particularly prolific and literally dozens would pass by every few minutes during a dive. Plenty of bracketing will ensure that you do not over expose the reflective white body of these animals. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @ 1/30th, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30.

pinnacle either west or east dependant on which way any current may be flowing. On the reef edge watch out for shoals of bass which like to congregate in eddies created by the current striking the rock faces and feed off the disturbed plankton. As you make your way around towards the south face gradually decreasing your depth you will find that the sheer rock faces change to a series of large ledges and boulders with small sandy patches collected in the hollows. Stop and inspect these as you will often find angler fish, topknot flat fish or dog fish and tope resting here. The decreasing depth will also reveal more reef fish activity with ballan wrasse, goldsinney wrasse and the very bold and inquisitive cuckoo wrasse approaching you to



Lomanotus nudibranch - We have a great variety of colourful nudibranchs in our waters, which are certainly the equal of their tropical cousins, but they tend to be quite small in size. The exception to this is the splendid Lomanotus which may be 4-5cm in length and is found in this iridescent yellow colour or a shade of red or pink. Nikon F90X, 105mm macro, Fuji Velvia, f16 @ 1/125th, Inon Quad flash.

investigate. In the spring there will be clouds of juvenile fish shoaling just below the kelp line often being herded and hunted by marauding groups of pollack some of which reach an impressive size and are very bold.

This is an excellent site for photography, not least due to the range of subjects, but also because of the depth ranges available in one dive - go deep first, then decompress in the shallows looking for macro subjects. The charted position of Raglans Reef is 50.02.63N, 05.02.45W. Slack water is generally found one hour before low water and one hour after high water at Falmouth.

The Runnel Stone

Further west and close to Lands End is the infamous Runnel Stone which is reputed to have wrecked more than 27 ships. The Runnel Stone is in fact an extensive area of reefs and pinnacles which lost its only surface breaking feature to the last vessel to be wrecked on the Stone, the City of Westminster in 1923. The reef is now marked by a buoy within sight of Lands End and the Longships reef lighthouse and is consequently open to Atlantic oceanic conditions. Tides and weather need to be right and even in good weather there is normally a healthy swell to contend with. Local knowledge is essential as the tides are vicious and sometimes unpredictable and the weather can change very quickly. But under the right conditions the Stone is simply stunning.

The topography is immensely rugged, the geology granite and serpentine, which produces a bright yellow heavy sand, and there are no river out falls to upset the visibility. These ingredients are perfect for a dense proliferation of encrusting marine organisms and attracts fish which enjoy the shelter a reef provides, dwell in the sand or prefer the flow of the tide to bring them food. This whole area provides a rich microcosm of reef life in temperate waters

Due to the strong currents at this location only the hardiest of sea weeds are able to take hold and thrive. However, the kelp canopy here extends down to between 5 and 8 metres, less where the reef walls are particularly sheer, and provides shelter for a wide variety of



Pouting - There are several wrecks mingled together on the Runnel Stone, but the most distinctive remains are those of the City of Westminster. Throughout the wreck you will encounter large schools of pouting who are very patient with persistent photographers. Dependant on the time of year you will also find shoaling bass, scad and mullet. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @ 1/30th, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30.

marine life both sedentary and mobile. Sponges abound and the first signs of jewel and daisy anemones can be found in as little as 3 metres of water. Looking up toward the kelp line graceful plumose anemones can be seen extended sifting the current. In amongst them are daisy and dahlia anemones. Where the kelp ends the fields of jewel anemones begin in almost every colour you can imagine from vivid yellows to deep purples. These are interspersed with the stems of hydroids reaching out to feed. Inspect these hydroids closely as more often than not you will find two or three species of nudibranch feeding on them, particularly in late spring when they are reproducing. Remaining space on the rock surface is occupied by masses of feather stars and brittle stars again seemingly coloured by every hue from a painters palette.

Along the wall you will find countless nooks, crannies and ledges which are home to crabs, squat lobsters, blennies, shannies and prawns most of which are both inquisitive and co-operative. The best photographic tool here is a housed SLR with a macro lens, the opportunities are endless. You should keep your eyes open for scorpion fish and the Corkwing wrasse which can be found busy building it's nest early in the summer. Cowries and topshells are common on the kelp holdfasts and there is normally an abundance of spider crabs picking there way amongst the kelp stipes. Look carefully at the stipes as you will often be lucky enough to see more than one pipefish taking advantage of their camouflage. As you go deeper the reef system offers walls, gullies and plateau's which support an astounding wealth of marine life, even playing host to the occasional



Dead men's fingers 1 - Below the kelp line you will find swathes of soft corals known locally as dead men's fingers. They vary in colour from white to yellow and this string orange colour, making an ideal wide angle subject. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @60th, YS120 flash.

sub-tropical visitor such as trigger fish and sun fish. It is common to encounter large shoals of mackerel, bass and pollack which show little fear of divers. In amongst the rocks are the remains of the numerous wrecks, which in some cases are so close or overlapping that it is difficult to tell when you swim from one to another.

One of the best known and the largest is the City of Westminster which now lies on the south side of the Stone. She was on a voyage in October 1923 from Belfast to Rotterdam with a cargo of 2400 tons of maize when she ran into dense banks of fog as she rounded Lands End. In those days the top of the Runnel broke the surface and was marked by a beacon, but this was entirely invisible to the skipper in these conditions. The ship was too close inshore and she hit the stone under full



Kelp stypes - The reefs top out between 4-8m where you will find dense canopies of kelp. Save some film for the end of the dive as the stypes are home to all sorts of macro critters and interesting wide angle compositions are also possible. When the sun is in the picture you will need to meter the scene carefully and allow a little extra exposure for the dark green kelp fronds. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f5.6 @ 1/30th, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30.

power, so hard that the bows broke off the top 3-5m of the stone complete with the beacon as the hull drove over the reef ripping out her keel. The ship quickly broke her back and disappeared beneath the waves, fortunately without any loss of life. Her remains include the bows and mid ships section in 20-25m whilst her stern lies a little off the main reef in 50-55m and is consequently rarely dived. The ship is well broken open by the pounding of the Atlantic swells here, but there are many recognisable features and if you search in the gulleys on the north face of the reef you will even find the remains of the Runnel Stone beacon knocked so carelessly from its perch all those years

ago.

Other wrecks in the immediate vicinity are the Royal Fleet Auxiliary 'Moorview' (1920), the Febrero (1863), the Lake Grafton (1920), and the Joshua Nicholson all in depths of 15-25m. It is possible to satisfy every diver's taste on the Runnel Stone with more wreckage than you could sensibly cope with and the option and contrast of the adjacent spectacular drop offs and gullies for photographers and marine life observers. The visibility here is generally very good, with 20m not uncommon, although the plankton bloom in late spring/early summer will reduce this but will bring the possibility of an encounter with a massive basking shark or squadrons of huge *Rhizostoma* jelly fish.

As mentioned previously this area is very exposed and should only be considered in ideal conditions. What appears to be a calm sea when launching from Penzance can become heavy going and dangerous by the time you round the headland at Lamorna Cove if winds are coming from the South or West. The best period of slack water is one and a half hours before low tide at Penzance, although it is possible to dive on a high water slack during neap tides. Nowhere along this stretch of coast should be dived without the benefit of local knowledge which is best sourced from the local diving clubs or charter boats. The nearest is the Penzance branch of the BSAC which has its clubhouse on the harbour side at Albert pier. At present there is only one daily dive charter boat operating from Penzance, the Son Calou skippered by Bill Bowen of Mounts Bay Diving,



Cuckoo wrasse - The male cuckoo wrasse is perhaps the most colourful fish in UK waters. They are very inquisitive and territorial and will make repeated approaches towards a photographer, particularly when they can see their reflection in a camera port! Nikon F801, Subal housing, 105mm macro, Fuji Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th, YS120 and YS30.

who also operates a compressor on Albert pier.

If you are diving from your own boat then the Runnel Stone is easy to find using land marks and an echo sounder. Position your boat close to the buoy and look towards the shore at Lands End. On the cliff top you will see two cones, the closest one red and one further in shore which is black and white. Line these two up as you steam slowly inshore from the buoy whilst looking north east towards the headland (Ped-men-an-mere) adjacent to the cliff top Minack theatre and the cove of Porth Curno. On the cliff top on the far side of Porth Curno is a white triangular land mark, as this begins to be covered by the headland you will be over the Runnel Stone. Watch your echo sounder as the depth jumps from 35-40m to 5-6m perhaps 150-200m from the buoy (see sketch). The charted position of the stone is 50.1.33N, 5.40.33W.

Runnel Stone Info:

Launching Points:

Penzance - slipway
Lamorna Cove - slipway
Porthgwarra - awkward beach launch for small boats only
Sennen Cove - beach launch

Day Boats:

Son Calou: 01736 - 752135
Cornish Diving: 01326-311265
Undersea Adventures: 01736 333040

Live Aboards:

Mentor Maritime: 01872-862080
MV Maureen: 01803-835449
MV Chalutier: 01392-431841
Dunedin: 01548-842057
McGregor: 01503-263584



Dahlia anemones - There are a wide variety of anemones on both the Manacles and the Runnel Stone which appear in colours to rival those of a tropical reef. Using a focussing torch to check the real colour will help you choose the most striking. . Nikon F801, Subal housing, 60mm macro, Fuji Velvia, f16 @ 1/60th, YS120 and YS30.

Air:

Mounts Bay : 01736-752135
Trevair: 01736: 740647
Undersea Adventures: 01736 333040

More information:

Penzance Tourist Board Tel. 01736 62207
Falmouth Coast Guard Tel. 01326 317575 Fax. 01326 318342
Penzance BSAC: Tel. 01736-69213
Penzance Harbour Master: Tel. 01736 66113
Lamorna Cove Tel. 01736 731734

Manacles Info:

Launching Points:

Falmouth Bay:
Falmouth Watersports Centre - slipway
Maenporth - beach launch
Lizard:
Porthkerris, Porhoustock - beach launch
Mullion - slipway
Poldhu Cove - beach launch

Day Boats:

Porthkerris Diving Centre : 01326-280620
Patrice: 01326-313265
Cornish Diving: 01326-311265
Seaquest: 01326-375544
Gangy Lady: 01326 375458
Dive Action 01326-280719

Live Aboards:

Mentor Maritime: 01872-862080
MV Maureen: 01803-835449
MV Chalutier: 01392-431841
Dunedin: 01548-842057
McGregor: 01503-263584

Air and Nitrox:

Cornish Diving: 01326-311265
Seaways: 01326-375544
Haven Underwater Centre: 01326-250852
Porthkerris Diving Centre : 01326-280620
Dive Action 01326-280719
Dive Kennack: 01326-290533
Franchis Holiday Park: 01326-240301
Cornish Diving Lodge: 01326 290633
Divers Den: 01326 280365

More information:

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Sony TRV900 housing system for sale



This housing is self designed and professionally machined from aluminium.

All of the controls are mechanical for reliability yet they are positioned ergonomically for ease of use.

There is an external 5" colour LCD viewfinder which allows you to compose your shots from almost any angle.

The battery pods in the base provide power for the monitor

and for an external light such as an HID.

There are two internal flip filters - colour correction and close up lenses and the camera is secured on a baseplate which holds it within the housing extremely accurately.

There are controls for stop start, zoom, manual focus,

autofocus, white balance, exposure, shutter speed and aperture.

The system comes in a fitted Sealtight case and includes housing, Sony TRV900 camera with two batteries, colour monitor (with spare LCD panel worth £250), 4 x battery packs for lighting and monitor power

The system is for sale complete and cannot be broken up for it is designed to provide the highest quality results from a small neat package.

The system is for sale at £2500 inc VAT and UK postage.

(An overseas buyer would not have to pay 17.5% VAT).



Light & Motion SunRay Pro HID lighting system for sale having seen little use. Includes 5 batteries and a 110/240v charger. All cables and arms included. Price new approx £2200. This

system is for sale at £1150 inc VAT with free shipping within the UK. (An overseas buyer would not have to pay 17.5% VAT)

For further details about these systems please contact Peter Rowlands. Tel 00 44 (0)20 8399 5709 or e mail peter@uwpmag.co.uk