

Dreamland or homeland?

by Lorenzo Buccio

Every time we surf the net or read a scuba magazine we see many corners of paradise: far away islands in the middle of the ocean, mysterious reefs or muddy bottoms with plenty of macro treasures. We plan a long trip, take our precious camera, strobes and housing and begin the search for the perfect shot. That's fair enough, it's the dream of every diver, but what about the ordinary homeland dives? Today I want to describe one of those. Rather, I want to describe one of the less significant seabeds you can find in the sea.

Why? Because we mustn't forget that every dive is, or can be, a beautiful dive. Beautiful because if we pay attention we can find interesting animals everywhere or curious behaviours to observe. Beautiful because the experience from everyday dives can help the way we will dive and take pictures when we visit a dreamland.

Follonica beach, Tyrrhenian Sea, Italy

One of the pearls of Mediterranean sea is the Tuscan archipelago National Park. In the park there are beautiful dive spots quite literally everywhere, from Montecristo, the island of Dumas's Count that is completely protected from tourism, to Giannutri, Gorgona, Pianosa, Giglio and finally Elba, with more than 40 dive centers and where this year the Italian National Trophy of Underwater Photography was held.

From Elba, the biggest island, move your eyes to the continent, and you will find the gulf of Follonica. Follonica is a little touristic city that in a year can host about half a million tourists. Originally this big gulf had plenty of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows. This plant has an important nursery effect and is a good habitat for a lot of fish and invertebrates.

As a result of economic and urban development in the sixties, the meadows slowly slowly began to disappear. Coastal erosion become more and more important and for that reason in front of the sandy beach has been built a submerged artificial reef



The typical fishermen's houses just on the beach have been transformed into concrete buildings during the Italian economic and industrial boom of the sixties and seventies. Originally, behind the seashore there was a dune environment, ecologically important for maintaining biodiversity.

Nikon D200 – Vivitar Series I 19-35mm f/3.5-4.5 – 35mm – f/13-1/250-ISO 250

in order to block waves. I will talk now about photographic dives on this artificial reef.

Shallow is worst

When we dive we know that mastery of buoyancy skills is crucial for taking good pictures. Not just to protect delicate corals but also to preserve the reefs naturalness, but also not to stir up the silty and muddy seabed. Diving in a shallow dive spot,





Diplodus sp. (vulgaris?) juvenile form

During the year you can observe, in the same place, all the vital cycle of some organism. Observe, in this picture, all the skeletal structure, with all the hard rays of fins structure clearly visible. Note also as are evident all the cells that have a role in coloration: from the dark melanophores to the clear iridophores that have inside a crystal of guanine that reflect the light depending by his position inside the cell.
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20 – AF Micro Nikkor 105mm F/2.8 D – 105mm – f/10-1/200-ISO 100 – 1 strobe SB900 in Subal SN900 – Subsee 5 diopters wet lens

like this which is only 1.5 metres deep, it is double important.

We know that pressure increases with depth, but we also know that this increasing is not linear. In the first meter pressure changes are much faster than if we were at 20 or 30 metres down.

Diving in shallow water is therefore the perfect training for improving your lung use and breathing rhythm. Manage breathing,

without holding it, helps us to manage our excitement and keep calm when, during a trip, a strange silhouette or a big shadow appear over our heads. Being confident with ourselves underwater means being ready to shot, lucidly and safely, when we have a once in a lifetime opportunity in front of us.



Leptomysis sp.

These crustaceans usually swim in the shadowed corner between rocks, maybe near to some anemones. If you are careful, you will discover that one of them is a different kind of animal, swimming right in the middle of the group. The microscopic world is far more differentiated and complex than the macroscopic one.

Nikon D200 in Subal ND20 – AF-P DX Nikkor 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 G VR DX – 55mm – f/16-1/320-ISO 100 – 1 strobe SB900 in Subal SN900 – Subsee 5 diopters wet lens

Shooting in the fog

Sometimes conditions are not as we expect. Currents, winds and rain can radically influence the visibility and the choice of our shooting set up. This dive spot is situated at the end of a river in a sandy gulf with plenty of

tiny sediment brought down by rivers through a really extensive marsh system.

This means that we need to find some tricks to take photos. First of all, leaving the wide-angle lens at home helps us to take pictures in which the muddy and brown water is not the



Gobius buchicchi

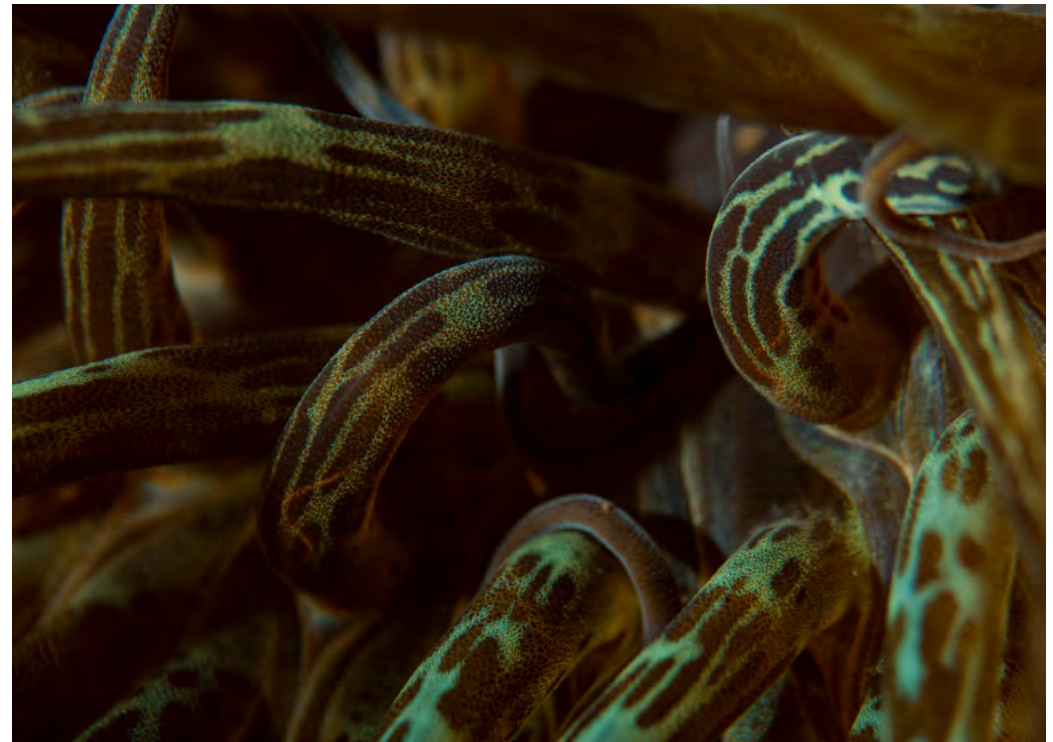
Every day there is a fight: eat or be eaten. This gobidae has just caught something in the sand. With the mouth he has blocked the prey hidden in the bottom, and now he will eat her. Every day there are wonderful moments of normal life.

Nikon D200 in Subal ND20 –AF-P DX Nikkor 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 G VR DX – 55mm – f/7.1-1/250-ISO 100 – 1 strobe SB900 in Subal SN900 – Subsee 5 diopters wet lens

main subject. Then, the closer we get to the subject the clearer our pictures will be. To do that, we need to use wet diopter lenses that reduce the minimum focus working distance. In addition, we have to manage the flash position properly to avoid highlighting exactly what we don't want to show in the picture: backscatter.

Another trick that I have learnt

is not to trust the camera's autofocus capabilities. In these conditions it is better use manual focus because otherwise you will sometimes focus on the silt and not on the big fish just behind. For that reason being able to manually focus fast is another important skill to develop and master.



Aipstasia mutabilis

This anemone, at night, shows a strange light-green fluorescence. All the arms come out from the central body, with the mouth (that is also the anus) in the middle of them. During the day the green zones are quite transparent. There are a lot of phenomena related to fluorescence, but very little is known and the specific use of this really particular kind of light emission is quite uncertain.

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Night and day, Seasonality and reproduction

Local dive spots give us the possibilities that no travel dreamland can easily give us. We can experience how the same place changes during the day and the night, summer and

winter. We can observe as planktonic life forms come out during the night from their refuges to swim in the black water. We can meet the same fish of the day sleeping and dreaming in their nests and wake up in the morning with the first sun.

During several dives we can also

experience the seasons changing, the algal composition that changes depending on the light availability and water temperature, the little fishes just born appear and slowly slowly grow until they disappear into the open water searching for a deeper place to live.

Shallower water is ideal for photosynthetic organisms and juvenile forms, both depending on light availability and temperature fluctuations. Monitoring this kind of environment can so give us a lot of subject variability through seasons and various times of the day.

Magic book in my hand, who is the the most hidden in the land?

Another aspect that familiarity with an environment can give us is the opportunity to fully understand ecological and biological facts about a lot of species and relationships between species. Improving our skill in searching and identify organisms, just as important in a temperate rocky coast as in a tropical reef, can contribute to the knowledge base. Then, when we find what we were searching for, because we knew where and what we were searching, makes these things easier to find. Our eye needs to identify shapes and textures; starting from easy things (which we

know are supposed to be there) to arrive at hard things (which we never imagined being there). This can lead us to a mastering of fine observation capabilities useful for both a tropical macro muck dive or in a photographic contest with others divers challenging in the same space and time.

Time to try

Training, as we have said, is important in underwater photography. Knowing your camera means being choose the camera settings quickly together with strobe position and power. To do that, we need to be really confident with our equipment. Practice makes perfect. But this is normal in underwater photography.

In fact, we also need time to develop skills that can distinguish us from other photographers, to create our own style. Photography needs creative capabilities and creative effects, both of which take time to develop.

Taking shoots of planktonic animals, that need micro focus skills, also needs time to wait and try, shot after shot. Enhancing natural fluorescence with not only the knowledge of the species that show this particular character, but also the time to find the right light balance to not cover the green glimmer with the impressive white strobe's light.



Parablennius pilicornis

Blennidae can be easily recognized because they have only one, unique, dorsal fin. They also have a lot of little teeth, because, despite looking cute, they are also predators. Between the eyes they also have some typical ramification, that can be also used to distinguish the different species. Don't be fooled by skin colouration, because it can be really variable! Depending on flashlights position and power, eyes of blennies can take wonderful shines and shades.

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Snoots, repetitive strobe lighting effects, diopter wet lenses, detached and - why not? -coloured lighting, coloured backgrounds, focus and bokeh effects. These require a quiet place to find the right subject and master the technique. When we become confident, we can try to add additional effects especially we will not have a second opportunity.

Curious blenny

Follonica's artificial shallow reef is also one of the favourite habitats of several species of blenny. This curious animal is a false friend of photographers. They wait, watching you, and as soon as you get them in the viewfinder, focus and choose the right composition... then they jump onto the nearest rock, not so far as to



Sepia officinalis

Cuttlefishes are famous for their skin, capable to change colour and texture depending by their mood and their behaviour. Colour, as the arms position, is also used in communication skills, both intraspecific that extraspecific. Some people say that they know how to talk with cuttlefishes, earning their trust and arriving to caress them. Also eyes, as all others Cephalopoda, are really developed. With their fins they can move back and forth, ready to disappear expelling water from their pallear cavity in a black cloud of ink.

Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ1 – 5,2mm – f/2.8-1/30-ISO 80 – 1 strobe Ikelite AF-35

disappear but neither so near either. So you have to watch out, move, set everything and then try another time to take a good shoot.

Being able to understand the

signals of the animals, like fin position such as the dorsal fin, can give you a way to understand your limits: how near you can go? Are you are stressing the animal with the light of the



Sparus aurata. The gilthead seabream is a hunter. He looks for his prey in the sandy bottom and on the rocks. With his teeth he can break mussel shells and crustacean bodies. Sometimes water turbidity can create difficulties in seeing and taking pictures of these animals which appear and disappear very quickly in the fog. The lateral line, one of the most important sensitive organs of fishes, is the only way with whom they can have a perception of the environment: in the picture you can clearly see that, the golden line on the gilthead seabream's side.

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strobes? Does the animal feel scared?

Trying to understand body communication can give you not only an instrument to conserve a friendly approach to the subject, but can also help you to understand how close you can go without scaring the subject and losing the occasion.

Strange meetings

The saying 'the more you dive the more you see' is true. In today's age, there are a lot of environmental changes. Consequently, we might see strange things. Not only big cuttlefish in the mating season or smaller ones trying to camouflage themselves with the dead algae but big fish hunting



Dictyota dichotoma with zooplankton. This algae can show fluorescence at the end of his leaves. Observe how on the leaves there is also a lot of epibiosis (the white concretions). The pink-white dot in the water are little organism that come out from the algae and swim during the night. During the day they can not be observed: they are hunted by labridae and sparidae, so they wait until the fall of darkness.

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in the evening, octopus out of their holes. Occasionally also tropical nudibranch that come from Red Sea can be observed. Obviously this only happens when you don't have the camera with you because, when you have the same place every time, why I should bring it with me?

The sea is not something that can be predicted. We have to be curious

and open to new encounters, every time.

Conclusion

The dive spot which I described is not a beautiful place. If someone brought you here you would probably ask for your money back.



Sunset during summer season. In the background you can see the two chimneys of Piombino's electrical plant. All the coastal region has been a really important iron and steel district for a long time.

Nevertheless it is underwater and it is a wonderful place to take pictures, observe animals and algae, and keep in training. This is what I have tried to focus on in this article: never be unsatisfied about the dives you do, because if you don't take good pictures or you don't see anything probably it is probably because you should pay more attention to the world around you and continue to improve your photographic skills. Love the sea everywhere, on a dreamland and in your homeland. And try to preserve it, because little niches of beauty are everywhere.

Sadly this place does not exist

any more, because a new pile of rocks has been dropped to prevent more coastal erosion and it has buried the older reef. It was my place, where I trained myself and where, as soon I could, I used to discover new things about the sea. But I will found another place, underwater, where I can observe and fall in love every time with new things, as you can also do near your home.

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Guidelines for contributors

The response to UwP has been nothing short of fantastic. We are looking for interesting, well illustrated articles about underwater photography. We are looking for work from existing names but would also like to discover some of the new talent out there and that could be you! UwP is the perfect publication for you to increase your profile in the underwater photography community.

The type of articles we're looking for fall into five main categories:

Uw photo techniques - Balanced light, composition, etc

Locations - Photo friendly dive sites, countries or liveaboards,

Subjects -, Anything from whale sharks to nudibranchs in full detail

Equipment reviews - Detailed appraisals of the latest equipment

Personalities - Interviews/features about leading underwater photographers

**If you have an idea for an article,
contact me first before putting pen to paper.
E mail peter@uwpmag.com**

How to submit articles

To keep UwP simple and financially viable, we can only accept submissions by e mail and they need to be done in the following way:

1. The text should be saved as a TEXT file and attached to the e mail

2. Images must be attached to the e mail and they need to be 150dpi

Size - Maximum length 20cm i.e. horizontal pictures would be 20 cm wide and verticals would be 20cm high.

File type - Save your image as a JPG file and set the compression to "Medium" quality. This should result in images no larger than about 120k which can be transmitted quickly. If we want larger sizes we will contact you.

3. Captions - **Each and every image MUST have full photographic details** including camera, housing, lens, lighting, film, aperture, shutter speed and exposure mode. These must also be copied and pasted into the body of the e mail.