

My back yard: South Devon

by Dan Bolt

In these challenging times of lock-downs and social distancing, it's interesting to see what little things we all start to miss from our ordinary, pre-Covid19, lives. For many, I'm sure the mind jets off to exotic climes with coral reefs, warm waters and easy access to bountiful marine life.

But I have found myself missing nothing more than diving in my own back yard. Not literally my back garden (although my small pond has been looking very tempting recently!), but my personal longing is for the easy-access diving that I have available along my local stretch of coastline.

I'm very lucky to have a group of friends who are all impassioned underwater photographers, and the four of us have been exploring the waters of south Devon (in the south-western end of the UK) for more years than I know we'd care to own up to.

With the UK being one of the windiest countries on the planet, it's no surprise that our diving activities are ruled by the weather. But we're lucky that our local patch has one coastline that faces east, and one to the west. This means that if one coast is 'blown out' then the other normally still gives us options to get wet. Our group has members who live near both coasts, so it just takes a quick call between us to see where the best conditions will be for a days diving.

We have a few favoured shore-dive sites on both coasts – favoured not only for their ease of access with heavy camera kit, but also the



Cuttlefish fighting at Babbacombe

Olympus E-PL5, Olympus housing, f/6.3, 1/80th, iso400

Babbacombe bay

DJI Spark, f/2.6, 1/320th, iso100

abundance of life and myriad species that follow the sun as the year progresses.

On the east facing coast, Babbacombe and Beacon Cove are possibly our most popular and photographically productive sites. Both are shallow, sheltered bays, but





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Beacon cove .DJI PV2,f/2.8, 1/1600, iso100

*Juvenile snakelocks anemone on seagrass, Beacon Cove
Olympus E-M1, Aquatica housing, f/13, 1/320th, iso200*

they couldn't be more different in character: Babbacombe has a mostly silty bottom, and is famed locally for its annual spring-time influx of cuttlefish (though because of commercial fishing their numbers are declining), but here we also see the occasional octopus and every few years we witness over 10,000 spiny spider crabs aggregate to mate and moult.

Beacon Cove, on the other hand, is home to a protected meadow of

seagrass. It is a photographic delight in the right conditions as the shallow water and white sandy bottom means that light is in bountiful abundance here... but only when the weather is right!

So when we have an easterly wind (which happens all too often) the west-facing coast mainly comes into play. This stretch, with its high cliffs and beaches with no vehicular access, is wild and mostly inaccessible for shore dives. But again there are two



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spots that stand out as photographically productive all-year round: Just off the beach of Thurlestone lies the wreck of the liberty ship the *Louis Sheid*. With a maximum depth of 10m this is a shallow and weedy wreck, but a wreck non-the less and the lack of depth means dive-times often exceed 90 minutes. All year round she provides us with photographic opportunities.

A more challenging dive can be found in the heart of the nautically-famous city of Plymouth. Indeed; here you have to be given permission to dive by the 'Longroom' who control the deep and narrow stretch of water that leads naval vessels into Devonport dockyard, a major harbour for the British Navy.

Once you have permission, and have timed slack-water to the minute, you'll get the opportunity



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*Diver on the Louis Sheid
Nikon D90, Aquatica housing,
f/6.3, 1/100th, iso320*

*Sea scorpion on the Louis
Sheid . Nikon D7200,
Nauticam housing, f/13,
1/125th, iso125*

*Juvenile Bib on the Louis
Sheid. Nikon D7200, Nauticam
housing, f/9, 1/80th, iso400*



© Malcolm Nimmo



© Malcolm Nimmo



Drakes Island in Plymouth, with Eastern Kings in the background
DJI Spark, f/2.6, 1/800, iso100

to dive on a vertical reef that goes from 10m all the way down to 40m... and more according to the more adventurous locals.

Because of the huge tidal flows here, the reef is home to countless sponges, anemones and ascidians of all colours shapes and sizes. But those same currents also mean that this isn't a great site for wide angle because the sediment picked-up in the currents tends to reduce the visibility. So the main draw for us photographers is the explosion in nudibranch species that

starts in early spring and continues through to mid-summer: we don't need superb visibility to shoot these inch-long enigmatic creatures.

Each these sites has its own personality and subtleties that means they are never the same on any two dives. They change dramatically with the passing seasons and more subtly with localised weather patterns, when taken all-together makes the diving conditions very hard to predict. And it's this that I'm missing above all else... the anticipation, the planning,



Nudibranch Doto cuspidata at Eastern Kings
Nikon D7200, Nauticam housing, f/32, 1/125th, iso100



Candy-striped flatworm at Eastern Kings
Nikon D7200, Nauticam housing, f/9, 1/160th, iso100

Nudibranch Edmunsealla pedata at Eastern Kings
Nikon D7200, Nauticam housing, f/11, 1/100th, iso100



© Terry Griffiths

*Common octopus at Babbacombe
Nikon D500, Nauticam housing, f/11,
1/250th, iso400*



© Malcolm Nimmo

*Jewel anemone at Eastern Kings
Nikon D7200, Nauticam housing,
f/18, 1/200th, iso100*

*Tompot blenny at Eastern Kings
Nikon D90, Aquatica housing, f/22,
1/250th, iso200*



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Diver swims over spider-grab aggregation in Babbacombe
Olympus E-M1, Aquatica housing, f/7.1, 1/80th, iso6400



Montagu's blenny at Babbacombe
Olympus E-M1, Aquatica housing, f/8, 1/160th, iso400

the guesswork, the banter(!), the dive and finally the post-dive bacon butty and stop-off in a pub on the way home for more banter.

In a way, conscious or not, our underwater photography is really just the excuse, not the purpose.

When travel restrictions are finally lifted, I won't be booking any high-carbon flights to anywhere fancy to spend a week with a bunch of people I don't know, as lovely as I know you will all be! Instead; I'll be heading down to one of our beautiful local beaches. And I'll be there with

my friends who will, no-doubt, take the piss out of my blue, purple and white Raynaud's suffering fingers and toes. And the sea will give me a big, big, BIG, soggy (oh so soggy) hug..... and it will be amazing.

I sincerely wish you all a similarly amazing experience in your own 'back yard' when you are able to be there. Stay safe.

Dan Bolt

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