

My Florida, My Backyard

by Jack Israel

At times during my years of diving, I've lamented the lack of biological diversity in my home state of Florida compared to other places around the world. We also dodge hurricanes in the summer and strong winds in November. But this year, during COVID, I discovered the splendor of Florida diving for the second time. I looked at it through new lenses. And what I saw made me feel thankful and blessed.

When the quarantine hit in March, I was fortunate to have a friend who lived on the beach. Kevin, a stubborn old cuss, and I often snuck across the closed beach to go shore diving on the first reef. Florida has the third largest barrier reef system in the world with three parallel reefs, which run intermittently from the Florida Keys in the south to West Palm Beach/Jupiter 160 kilometers north, the home of black water diving and shark feeding. It wasn't long before Kevin and I were up close and personal with fish cleaning and a host of critters, which actually seemed happy after not seeing divers for a while.

We dove here without trepidation for about 6 weeks until we caught the attention of the county sheriff. One day, at the speed of sound, a sheriff's deputy bore down on us in a 4-wheel drive vehicle. I chickened out and ran back to the building, but Kevin swore at the cop and ran into the water. After all, Kevin had a 120-cubic-foot tank. He could dive for 3 hours on the shallow first reef. The sheriff was not going to wait that long...but he did. He grabbed Kevin and ripped him up one side and down the



other, and that was the end of our quarantine diving.

But not long afterwards, Florida slowly opened, and we were back in business. I went to my favorite wide-angle spot, a fishing pier where the entire food chain lives, from nudibranchs and tiny blennies to barracuda and nurse sharks. Huge schools of baitfish and lookdowns (selene vomer) live under the pier, and frisky tarpon, a fisherman's delight, come to mate every year. They beat their gill plates and chase each other around in excitement, ignoring me on the bottom.

Top right. Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 8-15mm F3.5/4.5 at 15mm, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/250th @ F10. ISO400.

Right. Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 105mm F2.8 and an AOI 12+ diopter, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/200th @ F32. ISO200.





Above. Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 60mm F2.8, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/200th @ F32. ISO200.

Both left. Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 105mm F2.8 and an AOI 12+ diopter, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/200th @ F32. ISO200. Z330s. 1/250th @ F32. ISO200.



During weekdays, when there are no crowds, I would drive an hour north to Blue Heron Bridge, one of the best macro sites on the East Coast. Diving is normally an hour before and after high tide. The conditions are calm and conducive to macro, and the place is loaded with small critters. Some experienced eyes have no problem finding several nudibranchs, seahorses, colorful gobies and blennies in a single dive.

But by far, what renewed my

love of Florida was diving at night, something I rarely did before. The Okinawa wreck is a large tugboat that is home to felimare pictas, a giant of nudibranchs, which graze on its hull at night. I'm curious by nature and thought to myself, how many pictas live here? Can we "fingerprint" them based on the patterns on their backs? And how long do they live?

My biologist friend and I are barely 4 months into this study, but we have found 22 unique pictas based



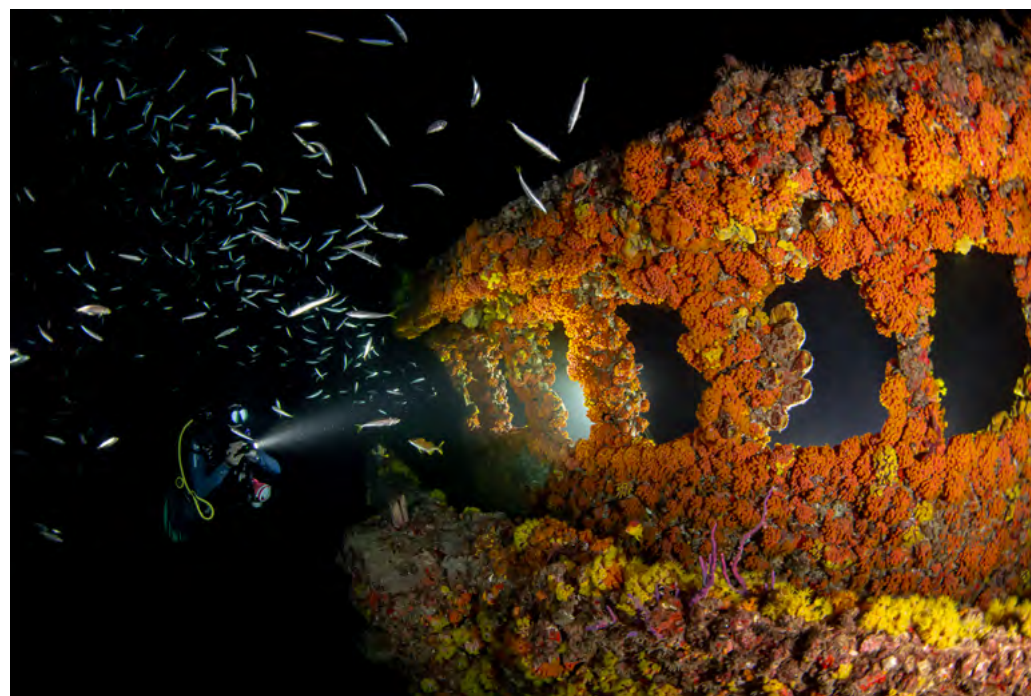
Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 60mm F2.8, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/125th @ F13. ISO400.

on their back patterns. We've named them and now recognize them when we dive the wreck. Freckles, for example, is extraordinarily beautiful. It disappeared for a while, but two months later, it came back. But this work is full of mysteries. We have never found egg ribbons, yet they mate on the ship. Could they be "hooking up" and then returning to the reef hundreds of meters away to lay their eggs? We still have much to learn.

Creatures come out at night that we rarely see during the day. My favorite is the large crabs that cut off soft corals with their claws and

carve them to fit on top of their shells. Their back legs hold this mobile camouflage on tight. Colorful cryptic teardrop crabs look like Christmas tree ornaments hanging from soft gorgonians. And sleeping fish provide a great opportunity to get up close and personal for a shot.

But without a doubt, my biggest adrenaline rush is to dive our deep wrecks at night, about 35 meters down. The captain would say to my dive buddy and me, "One, two, three, JUMP," and off we'd go into the ink. The wheelhouses are encrusted with soft cup corals, whose polyps protrude



Nikon D850 in an Ikelite housing, Nikon 8-15mm F3.5/4.5 at 15mm, 2 x Inon Z330s. 1/60th @ F5. ISO2000.

like flowers in a vase, creating a magical orange exterior on an old rusty boat. Taking pictures of the wheelhouses at night is a treat, and we got a bonus this summer when large schools of silversides were attracted to our lights. They thumped off our wetsuits and heads.

I invested in a few 15,000 lumen lights and lit up the Ancient Mariner from the inside out. It looks pretty spectacular, but what makes it more interesting is knowing that the wheelhouse is not on the shipwreck. In 2017, Hurricane Irma violently tore off the wheelhouse and tossed it in the

sand. I tried my best photographically to resurrect the Mariner to its former glory.

As vaccines become available, I'm sure everyone is planning their next dive trip. I've got so many places to go, and it always seems, not enough time. But as much as I miss exotic locations, I'm always happy to come back to Florida and would love to see more of you here, too.

Jack Israel

vseznyushe@gmail.com

Kit for sale

If you're looking for a specific piece of kit, enter a keyword (e.g. flash, housing, Ikelite, etc.) to show only the adverts you want.

Search UWP adverts



FOR SALE – SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO

SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO, incl.diffusers and TCL ball mounts, 2x batteries, 2x chargers (EU and UK). 5-pin Dual Sync cord-1pc, 5-pin Sync Cord N-2pc, 2sets - Double Ball Arm L and M, YS-TTL Converter, spare ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Sea Frogs Panasonic GH5 housing, flat and dome port

Brand new and never taken underwater, 40 metre Sea Frogs (formerly Meikon) housing for the Panasonic GH5. Flat port for macro lenses and dome port for wide angle. No zoom or manual focus controls. Prefer sale in the UK and ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Aquatica Macro Port & 2 x Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes

Aquatica Macro Port (Manual & Autofocus) for any DSLR Aquatica housing with the 4 lugs bayonet fitting. £180. Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes with instructions & one Diffuser they are in good used condition and in full working ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800

Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800 Excellent condition. Full overall by Nauticam in December 2017, not in the water since. Vacuum check; electronic monitoring circuit installed, no vacuum system. 2000 euros + shipping ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam flat ports and lenses Sony 28mm and 90mm

Nauticam flat port for Sony 28mm + sony lens 28mm +Nauticam flat port for Sony 90mm + sony lens 90mm+Nauticam trigger flash for sony. SOLD Can be sold separately. Total price 1260€ (does not include insurance and shipping) ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES

SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES: - Yellow SUB 50 TTL strobe / arm extension - SEA & SEA 16mm Wide angle lens MM-2 - SEA & SEA Macro lens ML-2/3T plus attachments - Removable view finder - ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nikon D500 + Hugaft D500 setup

This one year old set of equipment is in excellent working condition and will serve great to a new owner. The reason for sale is a switch to a new equipment. Nikon D500 (19k clicks). Sigma 10mm F2.8 Fish Eye. 128Gb XQD Lexar ... [More >](#)

Please support our advertisers and help keep UWP free.

Magic Filters

BACKSCATTER
UNDERWATER VIDEO & PHOTO

KELDAN
Advanced Lighting Technology

OCEAN LEISURE CAMERAS

Nauticam
臨天海

ULTRA LIGHT
CONTROL SYSTEMS

Ikelite

XLOK
DIVERS

REEF
PHOTO & VIDEO

WETPIXEL.COM
digital imaging for divers

SEA&SEA
THE UNDERWATER IMAGING COMPANY

DivePhotoGuide

wakatobi

ACQUAPAZZA

UW CAMERA STORE

Nauticam
innovation underwater

Magic Filters

Small Ads

Sell your stuff You'll be amazed at just how quickly your unwanted underwater photography kit could be converted into hard cash with a UWP small ad. You can have your own UWP small ad from just £7.50 and it can have one photo as well as up to 100 words.

Check out small ads here

Buy your small ad here