

Red Sea Merfolk

By Rob Aarsen, Lisa Elvee and Jamine De Wandel

Photography by Rob Aarsen and Daniel Scott

Dolphin!!! – Rob Aarsen

A loud cry can be heard across an otherwise empty Red Sea: ‘Dolphin!!!’ I quickly gather my gear and step overboard. This can’t be..., can it? I swim away from the MY Big Blue and wait to see if he shows up. Suddenly a beautiful gray animal overtakes me at top speed. He had sneaked up behind me and is now playfully circling around me. First I take a good look, then start taking pictures. He gives me a penetrating look back from up close. “Zapped” by a dolphin, that’s what it feels like.

In the meantime, a few others have joined so that the dolphin has more people to play with. Not everyday divers but snorkelers with a large fin on their feet. Dolphin seems intrigued by these creatures that look a bit like himself but then again not. First Lisa is inspected up close. A thrilling encounter between human and animal. After a few laps, Dolphin dives to the bottom where we see him wandering around for a little while. Maybe he’s calling his friends? After a few minutes he calmly rises back to the surface and turns his attention to Jamine, in a monofin and mermaid

top. The two seem to like each other. A graceful dance ensues between Jamine and Dolphin, who mirror each other’s movements, cross and swim in formation. And then suddenly Dolphin disappears. ‘Magic of the Red Sea,’ is how instructor Manu explains the phenomenon. ‘You never know what to expect here.’

On the dance floor – Lisa Elvee

Mermaiding is the term used for swimming with a special mermaid tail. This consists of a monofin with a fabric or silicone tail over it. These tails come in all kinds of colors, shapes and sizes. The special costume is also what makes mermaiding so much fun! Both men and women can become merman or mermaid. Gender-neutral terms used are “merpeople” or “merfolk”.

As a circus artist, I have always had a love for movement art, costumes and fantasy. That’s why mermaiding grabbed me when I first heard about it. After a lesson I was blown away by the wonderful feeling of gliding through the water like a dolphin. This way of swimming feels effortless and natural, and being underwater brings me peace and



Magic of the Red Sea. Jamine meets dolphin. Nikon D810, 1/80 Sec, 64 ISO, f7.1. Nikon 16-35 at 21mm. Two Sea&Sea YS-D3 strobes (Rob Aarsen).

Lisa Elvee. Nikon D810, 1/125 Sec, 64 ISO, f7.1. Nikon 16-35 at 19mm. Two Sea&Sea YS-D3 strobes (Rob Aarsen).

relaxation. I immediately bought my first tail and soon found four other mermaids in Amsterdam. The group grew quickly and we have great fun diving around each other, making underwater videos and exchanging our creative ideas about underwater tops and accessories.

The mermaid community spirit is a large part of what makes



mermaiding so popular. Sharing your passion with others is always fun and mermaiding together is more fun than alone. You sense each other in a unique way under water. We anticipate each other's movements and this connection makes swimming, turning and diving feel like dancing together on the dance floor. That is why you often find mermaids together in a colorful school or -- as we call it -- a "pod". This inclusive community is always happy to welcome new merpeople, so don't hesitate to dive in!. www.lisaelvee.com

Red Sea Mermaid Safari – Rob Aarsen

The Red Sea Mermaid Safari is a liveaboard trip in the Red Sea especially for "merfolk". Its purpose is to do photoshoots with experienced model photographers all day long. The strong wind keeps us near Hurghada where we take shelter behind Gubal Island, about two hours to the northeast. Here we have a spacious open water studio with shallow sandy bottoms and coral reefs where we look for protected spots for the photo sessions. We shoot on the beaches at sunrise.

The route takes us back to Hurghada via Shaab El Erg (Dolphin House), a large, crescent-shaped lagoon where, in addition to the dolphin, we also come face to face

with eagle rays. The coral here is in better condition than at Gubal, although we were not on the sea side of the reefs due to the wind. The last two days we are between the Giftun islands, close to Hurghada and very busy with day boats. The MY Big Blue that Dive and Travel booked for us, is a spacious, stable ship of 38 meters long and 7 meters wide with a total of 14 cabins. It served our purpose well, even though this mermaid safari was a first for the crew. Scuba instructor Emmanuelle (Manu) Hular and freediving instructor Yasmine Tarek assisted us during the photoshoots and kept everybody safe.

A happy reunion – Jamine De Wandel

In 2021 I came into contact with a family of wild dolphins for the first time. That was in a bay in Corsica. It was a unique experience and my first introduction to the underwater world. As a child I was afraid of water and dreamed that I was drowning. Nevertheless, like many children of my time, I became fascinated by the Little Mermaid. I also wanted to become a mermaid so I wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

Forty years later I overcame many of my fears and after a gender transition, I was finally able to be myself. Jamine the mermaid saw the light and dived into the wonderful



Merfolk conquers the Red Sea. Top row left to right: Mermaid Althaia, Mermaid Sherelle, Melody, Gianna, Mermaid Glacia, Marleen Schouten. Bottom row: Jamine, Lisa Elvee, Loraine, The Mermaid Aurelia, Chris Meerman. Nikon D600, 1/400 Sec, 100 ISO, f6.3. Sigma 15mm FE. Nikon Speedlight SB-5000 (Rob Aarsen).

world under water. This first contact with the family of dolphins in 2021 gave me the reassurance that I had taken the right course with my life. It even looked like I one of the dolphins gave me a wink. As if he was saying: 'You are welcome here.'

I decided to fulfill my childhood desire. I quickly completed the freediving and mermaid courses at SSI. Now I am an SSI Mer(maid) instructor. With my mermaid school at De Flippers in Leuven (Belgium), I want to help people who share my passion to make their dreams come true. The same way De Flippers helped me make my dream come true.

The Mermaid Safari in the Red Sea is one of the most wonderful moments



'A dance I can't refuse.' Jamine. Nikon D810, 1/80 Sec, 64 ISO, f7.1. Nikon 16-35 at 16mm. Two Sea&Sea YS-D3 strobes (Rob Aarsen).

I have experienced in my young female life. Two years after my first dolphin encounter, I once again have the opportunity to interact with a dolphin that appears out of nowhere. For a moment it seems as if the dolphin that winked at me in Corsica had followed me. Here is what happens:

On day four of the safari we had planned a photo shoot with a parachute. Just as we were about to start, a gray dolphin emerges from the blue. I jump into the water in monofin and top and leave the parachute for what it is. Without hesitation I dive down, where I don't have to wait long for a happy reunion. "Flipper" soon comes over and spins around me. Honored as I am, I cannot possibly refuse this dance. An endless moment in which I can feel one with this special being and the environment in which we find ourselves. We tumble and frolic around each other until I have to rise to the surface to catch my breath. But Flipper remains curious and so I can dive again and again and maintain contact. We swim under, over, in front of and behind each other. Until the moment when Flipper looks me in the eyes one last time and disappears into the deep



Early morning beach shoot, Mermaid Sherelle. Nikon D600, 1/1000 Sec, 100 ISO, f7.1. Nikon 24-70 at 32 mm. Nikon Speedlight SB-5000 (Rob Aarsen).

blue. Returning to the surface, I find myself in a state of eternal gratitude for this moment. This now legendary memory is forever in my heart...

No gravity – Rob Aarsen

To me, underwater model photography has proven to be completely different from 'regular' underwater photography with a model (diver). It is also different from model photography in a studio. It's somewhere in between. As an underwater photographer I had to learn new things and kick some old habits. For instance, front lighting with the strobes attached to the housing will not give you mindblowing model photos. Nor will shooting upward with a fisheye lens. The biggest difference is that the images we make are always a result of the collaboration between photographer and model. The model contributes ideas and creativity to the shoot and expects clear instructions about the poses and intent from the photographer in return. This requires different preparation. As a



Chris Meerman. Sony A6500 23mm, 1/60 Sec. 400 ISO, f8. Seafrogs Housing, Viltrox 23 mm (Daniel Scott).

photographer, you have to know about poses and directing models. I usually make a moodboard before every shoot. And then there is the production: finding a pool, models, coordinating agendas, and sometimes finding props or costumes.

In the pool, depending on what I want, I set up an underwater studio with background cloths, strobes on lamp stands and, if we are working in deep water, a bridge or crane for the model to hold on to. All my strobes are Sea&Sea: YS-D3, YS-D1, YS-250 Pro and YS-350 Pro still going strong. I find them very reliable. I put my strobes on light stands because I want to avoid front lighting. Using light stands allows me to position the strobes around the model and I can move back and forth without taking the light with me. The strobes are fired by a single Sea&Sea YS-D1 on the housing through optical triggers. Obviously, this doesn't work in open water. During the mermaid safari I had my strobes on long arms attached to the housing. The lenses I use are the Nikon 16-35 f4 zoom and the Nikon 24-70 f2.8 on



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Lisa Elvee. Sony A7RIV, 1/60 Sec. 200 ISO, f1.4. Sigma 105 mm (Daniel Scott).

a Nikon D810 full frame DSLR. I don't use fisheye lenses because I feel the distortion is too unflattering for the model.

I like to separate the model from the background by working with backlight, complementary colors or both. For backlighting, I usually place 1 or 2 powerful strobes on the edge of the pool, just above the water surface. With a long mermaid tail, in addition to the main light that comes from above, I use 1 or 2 strobes to illuminate the tail. Sometimes I turn



Mermaid Crystal, pool shot. Sony A7SIII 16mm 1/60 Sec. 200 ISO, f8. Sigma 16mm Nauticam Housing Sony A7SIII (Daniel Scott).

a photo upside down. Then I set up the light on the bottom of the pool and point it upwards. The model turns upside down under water, and after I turn the photo over, the image is correct again. In this way I create the illusion that the water surface is the floor of our 'studio'. That's the fun of model photography. Let your imagination run free and create images that are not possible under the influence of gravity.

Rob Aarsen (The Netherlands) has been an underwater photographer since 1991. He does editorial work for publications and books and in 2018 he turned to underwater model photography. Since then he has explored the creative possibilities of this form of photography, where the interaction with the models largely determines the result. Underwater model photography requires a completely different approach than 'normal' underwater photography. A reason for Rob to keep learning and developing – and to take more and more beautiful photos.



www.in2thedeep.com
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Daniel Scott (Germany) was captivated by the fascinating world of photography 15 years ago. His passion for art and aesthetics led Daniel to scuba diving, where he discovered the breathtaking beauty of the underwater world and was able to photographically capture the enchanting world of marine life, corals and macro creatures.



As a DUP instructor (PADI) and avid recreational diver, Daniel was also able to develop his skills, specializing in the unique combination of model photography and underwater photography. The fascinating mermaids and underwater models, wrapped in enchanting robes, dresses and fabrics, are always floating in front of his lens with new ideas.

www.instagram.com/_scotty_photography_