

Dr. Alex del Olmo

with Colin Marshall

You started diving at 18, living in Spain. I've dived in Spain, and the waters there are not exactly teeming with life...! What inspired you to start diving at such a young age?

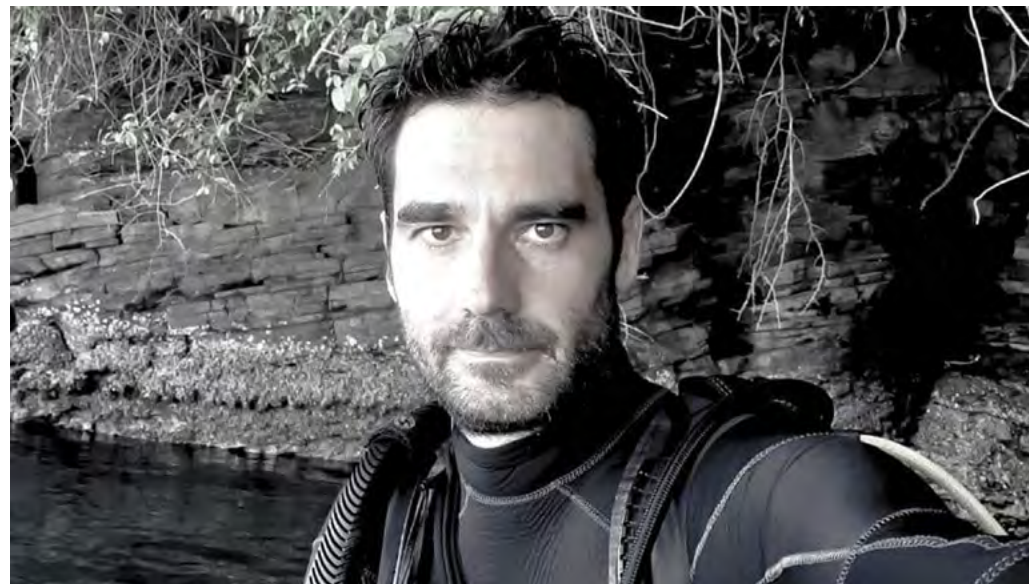
Indeed, the waters of the Mediterranean cannot be compared to those of the Indo-Pacific, but in the Costa Brava, the area where I learned to dive, there are still some particularly beautiful places, which cannot be found, for example, in Indonesia. Where you can enjoy profuse forests of red and bicolor big gorgonian sea fans, or dive with large groupers, even find some hidden places with red coral branches. The reason I started diving was because of my father and my experiences through my childhood.

Every year we would go to our summer house in Palamós on the Costa Brava in Catalunya (Spain), where every day I was in the sea with my mask and fins. That's where I learned to swim and then later to dive. I also went fishing in my father's boat. Many afternoons, I would review fishing books, with exquisitely drawn animals, and I would imagine what it would be like to see them. That's how it all started...

Your focus is obviously on video for film-making, but do you still take many still images?

No, I don't. I always say I'm not a good photographer. I have tried it on several occasions, but it has never caught my attention. Firstly, I have never had the patience or the desire to understand how flashes work, and secondly I find underwater video much more complete and complex than photography.

I understand that this statement may sound a bit vehement in the eyes of still photographers, but for me filming underwater is much more complicated than still photography, for many reasons. The need for exquisite buoyancy for long periods while you are shooting a long sequence instead of needing to be immobile for a fraction of a second, having the subject always in focus throughout the action and not just for a few seconds, working the focus in manual and not in automatic, or having a much more lower output power in video lights than in underwater flashes, which sometimes makes it almost impossible to get certain types of shots against the light, or at least make them much more complicated. That's just talking about the underwater filming



technique, then comes all the editing, music, color retouching, effects, etc...

As outlined in your website <https://naucratesuw.com>, your team seems to provide a wide range of services, including providing an underwater cameraman, Director of Photography, filmmaker, or an industry-level color grading expert to enhance film colours, or selling stock footage for others to use and you even teach people underwater film making. Which aspects of your work is most enjoyable and which is most commercially lucrative?

I am really lucky to do the work that I am passionate about in life, which means that I love whatever work I do. Whether it's an animal life documentary, working on a

commercial, or teaching underwater video. Now, if I had to pick just one, it would be shooting marine life documentaries. Being able to spend time underwater filming the animals, coral or fish, is a passion of mine. With the added bonus that I don't have to direct people, which means it's entirely up to me to do the underwater work and I'm completely focused on it.

The most lucrative projects are usually either TV commercials or documentaries, especially for big brands or streaming services. The downside is that there is always pressure and little time. Quite the opposite of when I'm on my own filming underwater when I always try to stay as long as possible and as long as it takes - as long as I have air - to get the shot I'm looking for.

What is your “mindset” prior to diving? Recognizing you take story-telling very seriously, I assume you have a story planned before getting wet? Do you have a pre-planned vision, or do you adjust your filming “on the hoof”?

It really depends on the job, if I’m hired as an underwater camera operator, I only have to worry about the technical aspects and getting the image that the director has in his or her head. On the other hand, when I’m making marine life documentaries or my own projects, I always, always have an idea in my head, I know what I want and how to get it. Therefore, beforehand I research the area, the species, the best equipment to get the best results. Once I have the images, I take care either to look for suitable music or to hire a composer who is in charge of carrying out musically the idea I have in my head. Therefore, in my case, I leave few things to chance, because when we jump into the water there are already multiple possibilities that things often do not go as we expect. After all, we work with wild animals and in an environment subject to the weather and with limited diving time.

What techniques do you use for film-making underwater, eg what default camera setup do you use at the start of the dive, and how to you

maintain stability, both when keeping the camera still (eg when videoing an animal on coral) or panning the camera smoothly?

That’s a tricky question, In my case, I change the camera setup according to the type of dive and to my shooting objective. I always say that you should use the right tool for the specific job you are doing. As a general rule, shutter speed at 180 degrees, 4K DCI, Log or RAW, variable frame rate at 30/60 or if the scene or subject requires it at 120 fps. Color temperature I leave at the same temperature as my Keldan (without filters). The rest is in post-production.

Regarding stability it depends on whether it is macro or wide angle. In the case of macro it’s easy, the shots are stable because I work with a tripod; it’s the only way to make professional shots when shooting small creatures. No one wants to see shaky footage. Regarding wide angle, the camera moves (or shakes) very little for three main reasons: firstly because the bigger the housing the more stability it has, secondly because when shooting in slow motion you can always improve the stability in the editing and thirdly because I have had more than 8,000 dives controlling perfectly my stability and buoyancy. Finally, the bonus is that I repeat the shot (if possible), until it comes out “perfect”.

What is your biggest “lesson learnt” about diving or photography that you would pass on to others?

Never leave anything to chance. Always check your equipment as many times as necessary before jumping into the water, never take anything for granted. Experiment whenever you can. But if I had to make a list, it would be the following: Film underwater as much as you can. The only way to improve your underwater filming techniques is to dive and make mistakes.

Learn from your mistakes. Every mistake you make is a lesson that will help you solve the same mistake in the future.

The camera is not important. Stop self deception telling yourself that you will start when you have the equipment you want to do big projects. You can start with a GoPro or an Olympus or your phone and upgrade it from there.

Study the audiovisual language, camera techniques, lighting, narrative and film editing. Without these basics, everything will be much more complicated.

Be inspired by the work of those underwater content creators you like. Analyze their work, learn from their techniques, understand their resources and why they use them and try to implement them. There is nothing wrong with “copying” and in

the process you will surely learn new uses of camera and editing that will lead you to create new techniques or improve them.

Have an interest in painting and filmmaking that is not just underwater. It will help you better understand lighting, composition and narrative.

Be consistent. Work hard, and keep your goal in mind. This is a complicated job in many ways, but tremendously rewarding.

Network with other creators, contact them, don’t be shy, but be polite, you get further with a please and a thank you than with your pretty face. You will realize that there are people willing to share their knowledge altruistically, others will do it for a fee and a third group will not even answer you. When it’s your turn, remember the first ones and help those who are starting out as they helped you.

Work on your buoyancy, it has to be excellent. There is nothing worse than a shot that shakes too much.

Don’t disturb the underwater fauna and flora in search of an image. Be polite and lead by example. You are the guest underwater. Learn the life and habits of the fish you want to film. It will be easier for you to understand them and create a good composition.

Be brave but humble. If you get an opportunity, take it even if it is 10,000 km away. Even if you are afraid

and think you might not be ready, you probably know more than you think. You always have to start somewhere and any opportunity is a good one. You might not be good at first, but if you have passion for your work, you will learn and improve.

What are your “top three” favorite dive sites or general locations, and why?

So many places and so little time... it is impossible to me to do a list... so take it with a grain of salt, because it can change by the day...

For landscape I love “Batu Bolong” alongside “Tatawa Kecil” in Komodo, especially when you have no other divers around. I was lucky enough to dive those places - and many others - again during lockdown. It was an incredible and yet odd experience to dive alone there... Why these two places? The colors of the table corals, the plethora of orange anthias swirling around in shallow water, the chances to see turtles feeding and giant trevallies hunting - especially in brisk current-. If you have clear water and sunlight the place is just from another world.

For macro “Twilight Zone” in Ambon. I dove two weeks 4 dives a day in the same dive spot, never got old. High chances to see two kinds of rhinopias scorpionfish: paddle flap and frondose (when in season) and if

you are extremely lucky you might see psychedelic frogfish, and of course stargazers, frogfishes, ghostpipefishes, octopus, hobbit worms, etc. Sadly, there is plenty of trash everywhere.

And for soft corals I am in awe of Triton Bay, especially with the Pinto Arus and Dramai dive sites. Those are the kind of places that you wish it never ends. The profusion of different soft corals, the color explosion and the marine life; I can do those dives for the rest of my life and I will be happy forever. Actually there is a hidden dive site, that I was really lucky to dive thanks to Triton Bay Divers who took me there, that probably was in the TOP 3 best dives of my life, especially as we hit it just at the right time and current. I dove with Dr. Jos Pet who has decades of marine biodiversity conservation experience and both of us had our minds blown with what we witnessed on that dive.

You were a PhD Professor at the Barcelona cinema faculty, teaching how to set up cameras, camera techniques, story-telling, how to shoot. Presumably this was primarily for students of land film-making – or did you find your underwater film-making experience provided insights applicable to land?

Yes, indeed. I always explained to my students at the university about underwater filmmaking, as it is also

a potential job in the audiovisual industry. Breathing is really important not only below water but also above. For example, how to breathe with a camera on land while you are doing a certain shot, especially if you are moving yourself with a big rig. When I was a university student we had a master class with a well known South American documentary director, who asked if any of us were divers, and he told us that divers became good land filmmakers thanks to his breathing technique. That was an eye-opening moment for me, as a young diver and not yet an UW filmmaker, I understood that filming above and under water has similarities.

What image of yours are you most proud of and why?

Believe or not, I do not have any preferences. I see my images as a whole. But I guess if I had to mention one that gave me a lot of satisfaction it would be the one of a small and elusive leopard anemone shrimp. I can't say for sure that this is the only time someone filmed one these in the wild, since you never know, but I can say that my film is the only one I have found on the internet, so there is a chance that might be the only one. It gives me special satisfaction because it took me four years to film one, and besides I was the one who found it (I am not great at finding

weird critters). Also, of the shot was technically very difficult, since it was in an area of difficult access and the tiny subject was filmed in macro and super macro with manual focus, with only two points of support less than 0.5 cm each to minimize contact with the rock.

When liveboards started producing videos for guests, we all experienced some “enthusiastic but not so professional” videos from the boat videographer – shaky, panning too much, zooming erratically etc. Your videos are next level, and reminds me of an underwater Emmanuel Lubezki, the Cinematographer for the space film “Gravity”. Your slow shots, where the environment languidly unveils to reveal astonishing sights is mesmerising, matched to perfect music. Do you consider this method as your “signature”?

Many thanks for your kind words. Actually it is a very interesting question, and I love it because it allows me to talk a bit about cinema and it is something I put a lot of thought into it as well.

What makes an author, an author?

Auteur cinema is known as that which is fully faithful to the director's will rather than to external interests. Numerous works by Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini or Lars von Trier

are significant examples of this concept.

When you watch a Pedro Almodovar film, even if you do not know is one of his films, but you saw some of them before, you will recognise his style, the “common places” he uses, the camera shots, the stories, the colors, etc.

But to understand more easily what auteur cinema is, we should refer back to 1948. In that year, the magazine L'Écran Français published a manifesto by French director Alexandre Astruc. There, Astruc introduced the term caméra-stylo to expose an avant-garde way of making cinema. In doing so, Astruc twinned cinema with literature. If the writer uses words to externalize his message, why can't the filmmaker use cinematographic resources for his purposes? If a pen (stylo) is enough to write, a camera (camera) is enough to make films. If the writer expresses his convictions in an essay, the filmmaker can do the same in his films.

So, I always used the camera as my personal pen, to create my stories in my very own personal point of view. To me, what makes an author an author, is that his or her work, his or her mannerisms, are recognizable - even if you do not know who is the director of that particular film. A recognizable style regardless of where you see it but when you see it you

know who it is. But not only that, an author should also be someone who creates a particular style, who has enough visual strength so that others decide to follow his style. That's what we call in Spanish, “crear escuela”.

I am certainly not crazy enough to designate myself as an author. That is not for me to say, and the time to do so it would probably be at the end of my career.

I believe you choose the music before you start editing. Is that to help specifically to work out when to break scenes, or to choose the order for showing various animals appropriate to the music or some other factors?

Let's say I decided the mood of the music before even filming. I already have an idea about what I want to do regarding music and the editing before even start. But once I am done filming, then it comes a long way listening a lot of music until I decide what it works the best with the images and the mood I want to create in my films. Lastly it was so energy and time draining I decided to hire a compositor to create the music for my short movies. Indeed, I use the music changes to break scenes (a very common technique in editing as it helps to “hide” the cuts), and as I said depending on the subjects or the main idea I want to share with the audience the music goes along with

the images.

Many divers start focusing more on behaviour as they become more familiar with the underwater world. What is the most memorable behaviour that you have witnessed?

Towards new moon, there is a specific place in Palau where the bumphead parrotfish gather together in large numbers for spawning. During the new moon phases, thousands of bumphead parrotfish gather to spawn, which is considered the largest bumphead parrotfish aggregation in the world. It is like fireworks under water to witness how the males swim towards the surface surrounding the females to release their sperm.

In September 2018, you became the Cruise Director (CD) for the excellent Seven Seas liveaboard. How many years did you manage to keep the dream job of being able to continuously film in the world's best dive sites whilst pretending to work as a CD (just joking)?! I believe Seven Seas owner Mark Heighes allowed you, and even pushed you, to go take images underwater every time you were not required to lead any dive group. What were the most memorable moments or sightings from your Seven Seas experience?

To be honest when I signed my contract with the company, I was convinced that I would retire in it. That

was my idea, and that's what I told Mark when we met to talk about me being the new CD of the Seven Seas.

I was leaving behind my life in Barcelona, my family, my work at the university, absolutely everything. And I wanted stability and security in my new job. And so I let Mark know, I told him I hoped to retire myself working for The Seven Seas, to which he replied “Mate, I am about to cry!”. I finally worked five seasons on the Seven Seas, a ship like no other, with an excellent crew and an incredible history behind it. Just the fact that I was able to dive and get to know Lawrence Blair or Valerie Taylor, learn from Mark, who is a diving institution in Indonesia, along with Dr. Jos Pet, or have some of the most famous coral experts in the world, make exploratory trips, filming for documentaries... etc. makes my whole experience on board just awesome. I felt so so lucky and I learned a LOT.

We were one of the few boats out there during the pandemic were sailing and also creating new Marine Protected Areas in Indonesia during the lock down.

I have plenty, plenty of memorable times on board... I could write a book about them... but just to say one that stills “haunts” me is being able to dive in Komodo, or Raja Ampat or Banda Sea absolutely ALONE, with no other boat in sight or divers. I

imagined for a moment what it must be like to dive in these places as the first explorers did, with no other boats around.

The reason I left the job was for family. Without a doubt I can say that the best years of my life have been aboard Seven Seas, the crew is my second family and Mark was never my boss, he was always a very good friend whom I respect and admire. He is a great person. If I had not had to return to Spain I would undoubtedly still be working on the Seven Seas.

I find most videographers irritating, hogging sightings until the animal disappears away from their “interrogation” lights. Am sure videographers also don’t like flashes in their films from still photographers who take too many images (like me). When I dived with you in March 2018, both of us as guests on a liveaboard, I noticed you would often dive and video on your own. As a Cruise Director did you separate videographers and still photographers or did you have a better way to keep the two species from irritating each other?! Or perhaps your guests were more tolerant than me...

Haha! Actually what it happens with the flash of the photographers is you can see them on video, and it is quite annoying, and also depending

how you set up your White Balance, and if you are using filters, those flashes can appear as well red-ish lights on you frame. Not good. To avoid that I just go by myself if I already know the area, or if I do not, I go with a private guide. Local knowledge is invaluable, especially when you need to get the most out of every dive. I cannot spend time looking myself for critters.

I was very flexible with photographers and videographers -actually I am a very flexible person- during my time working as a CD on the Seven Seas. I always play it by ear, depending on a lot of factors, i.e. if it is a charter or not, or if they come with a dive buddy or not, etc. Charters are easy, as everyone knows each other and we had mostly charters. When it was not, I used to group together UW photographers, then divers without cameras, and finally videographers, but I have to say we generally had very few videographers. I was fine as well letting photographers and videographers doing their own thing as long as they follow the guide.

You have won many awards at many prestigious international underwater film festivals, and your films have been broadcast on a variety of national & international television networks. What are your proudest achievements at festivals?

To be honest... I do not care much about awards. Of course it is nice to be rewarded and recognized for your work, and I am honored and extremely grateful for all the prizes I won, but truth to be told was never my main goal. You know, doesn't matter how many awards you won or might win, at the end of the day, you return home, the world is still spinning around and you make yourself a hot chocolate alone in the kitchen before to go to bed. Nothing really changes. You have to stay focus and remember that you are doing this because is your passion in life and not for any award. I've seen it in other (not many, thank God) UW filmmakers, obsessed in only winning film festivals. There are incredible UW filmmakers out there that they are not even sending their work to international film festivals.

BUT, because you asked me, I have to name 2 awards that made me extremely proud. The first one is when I won the first prize at the CIMASUB, as is the best UW film festival in Spain -and I am from there-. So, it is very special when your work is recognized in your own country. The CIMASUB is not only the oldest International Underwater Film Festival in the world, is as well the best UW Film Festival in Spain and one of the best in Europe.

The second one was the Wetpixel Masters Underwater Imaging

Competition, I won the first prize twice in a row. And it was a special moment because some of the UW filmmakers that inspired me won the award before me, like Lee Burghard or Evan Sherman. Thanks to them I found myself doing what I loved the most, filming underwater.

You have made a series (how many - 20?) of videos titled “Out of the Black & Into the Blue” for many different dive areas, eg Lembeh, Alor. I believe your Banda Sea episode won Gold, and Triton Bay won Bronze in the Wetpixel Masters Underwater Imaging Competition 2022. What do you do with these, ie are they commercial films, or are they simply for film festivals, vehicles for advertising Naucrates?

Hahaha! Between you and I, I don't even remember how many chapters I've done, but there is a lot!

Indeed, they served as advertisements for my work. It is an excellent platform to be recognized and to get to more people to know your work, especially those who work already in the field, which means they are the right target to maybe get hired. Thanks to those prizes, besides being able to travel even more to film to other locations, I got some jobs as well, like the two documentary series about the Coral Triangle I was able to shoot, sold internationally to several

main TV channels and also online platforms.

I love the fact that you downplay the importance of having the fanciest and latest equipment and instead focus on story-telling, narrative and accompanying music. Do you see evidence of this in festivals and competitions, eg someone winning a prize from taking a film with a simple iPhone in a housing?

I always told to my students when I was teaching at the university that they had already the tools to create a short movie inside the pocket of their pants. Cameras are just tools. Of course depending on the camera, the lights, lenses, etc... the result can be more or less “cinematic”, but the most important part is the person behind the lens. I didn’t see yet someone winning prize with a phone, although I’ve seen some works filmed with GoPros for example, winning awards, and briefly from time to time I saw a few clips filmed with iPhones (to name a brand), that seems quite promising.

I do believe that sooner than later we will see more short movies filmed with UW housings for phones, but professionally speaking, we still have a long way before that happens in a gig for an underwater professional work.

Do you see any future where your videos are taken with underwater drones, going to deeper-than-normal depths and minimizing disturbing the wildlife with bubbles? Or are we already in that future?

I think we are missing here a bigger picture here, probably the next step will be videos generated with AI, gradually being more and more difficult for the normal viewer to determine if the images are real or just fake. It worries me a bit, to be honest, but let’s see what the future brings regarding UW imaging, especially in my area of expertise.

You have worked with Dr Lawrence Blair, who wrote & co-produced “The Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey”, which won two Emmy awards. I believe they then asked you to be the Underwater Director of Photography and underwater cameraman to shoot the documentary “Behind the Seen”, which won the best short documentary in the Bali International film Festival 2023, the most prestigious international film festival in Indonesia. Any (repeatable) anecdotes from working with Lawrence?

Yes! I was so happy for him and his team when we won the award, and of course I was over the moon when Lawrence wanted me as the main UW camera and UW DoP.

I met Lawrence the first time a few years ago on The Seven Seas, and immediately we got along very well, not only due to his charming personality and the GREAT stories he has. I felt honored to meet him and had the chance to know him better, he really is a living legend. but also because he speaks Spanish (among other languages), and it was very nice to speak for a few days in my own language with him.

For the documentary one of the goals was be able to film salt water crocodiles. There were stories about a place in Indonesia with a pristine lake with clear water where you can find big crocodiles and giant sea snakes as well. We went to Wetar with the Seven Seas to find it and film it.

The lake was not close to the shore where we anchored. After a two hour 4x4 drive I had to carry my rig (camera, monitor, housing, etc) through the jungle with all the crew with 30 extra kilos to arrive to a huge lake where it was murky water and no signs of giant sea snakes.

I decided to NOT enter into the murky waters because I wasn’t comfortable at all, but Lawrence was teasing me (in a funny way) to get into the water while he was well secured on land not too far from the shore of the lake while he was doing his stand up to the camera. We finally were able to find one crocodile using our drone.

It was massive but as soon as the drone came close, he jumped into the murky waters and disappeared.

So I dragged my ass out and carried all my camera gear – again - by foot through the jungle once more without having shot a single image of the “pristine lake with giant sea snakes and crocodiles”.

I believe you were doing something with Netflix – what is that?

Can’t say much yet, but my next project will be filming for a long documentary exploring an underwater lost city that was submerged and forgotten for centuries and it seems it is still in good shape. It is a place not very well known and there is not a lot of info about it. As we speak there is still a lot of ground to explore as they have not yet mapped the whole city.

It will be a quite challenging project, as it is in cold water and limited visibility and the dives will not be shallow. My goal is really to capture the mood of an underwater ghost city lost in time.

Thanks you for such enlightening answers.

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