

Nudibranch Safari

By Lars Stenholt Kirkegaard

Every year a Nudibranch Safari is held at the popular diving site Gulen in Norway.

The event is known to everyone with an interest in nudibranchs, but also by many underwater photographers, because even though Gulen is a cold-water diving destination, it is also a hot spot when it comes to underwater photography.

In addition to being an ordinary diving resort, due to its good logistics, it has been used over the years for workshops, TV recordings, training and other events by underwater photographers from all over the world. I started doing workshops here myself almost 15 years ago, where I had Alex Mustard as a co-teacher.

Gulen is a really nice diving site, which has some of Norway's best wreck dives in the immediate area, and at the same time it has a very easily accessible and usable house reef right in front of the center, which is known to house an extraordinary number of nudibranchs.

Because the house reef offers exciting diving from a few meters deep to a good 40 meters without having to move much and because the fjord is

over 100 meters deep just around the corner, the variety of wildlife is high.

Nudi for nerds

The nudibranch event at Gulen has existed since 2008 and was started by the well-known macro photographer Christian Skauge because there was a dive trip with bad weather, where you couldn't sail out to the wrecks. It quickly became a success and after a few years they invited 2 associate professors from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Torkild Bakken

Over the years people from countless countries have joined the safari. This year more than 10 nations were represented.

Photo: Jochen Frenzer / explore-the-ocean.com

Nudibranch photographed with TG-7 camera and ring light. The contrast is then increased. Note the very even lighting from the ring light which gives lots of color and detail.

Photo: Lars Kirkegaard

Specs: ISO 200, f:3.5, 1/250 sec





The field lab had a range of microscopes and a photo setup for deep studies.

and Jussi Evertsen. Both worked with nudibranch taxonomy and distribution for Norwegian waters since 1997, which brought the event to a completely different professional level.

The week is usually built around scientific collection, documentation and education about nudibranchs, giving participants the opportunity to learn where the animals are found, what they eat, the variation in the species and how to handle them when they are subsequently studied under a microscope.

Every day there are lectures by some really talented guest lecturers on topics related to the biology of nudibranchs and between dives there is study in the field lab, where everything is recorded and documented.

Gulen is the place in Norway where the most different nudibranchs have been spotted and over the years 3 completely new species have also been found, all of which have been officially registered and named: *Gulenia orjani*, *Gulenia monicae* and *Fjordia chriskaugei*.



Collecting nudibranchs for further study. By picking them in a bottle using a vacuum, they will be unharmed. During study they will be in water at all times. After study, most will be released and some put in alcohol for further study at the university.

The couple had been aware of this for a long time and had decided to do something about it. They therefore contacted me and asked me to handle that part.

Not nudi-nerd

I have to be honest, I have had a very strained relationship with nudibranchs. Whether it is because in my younger days I was a wreck enthusiast and tech diver and therefore did not have an eye for these small biological wonders, I cannot quite agree with myself.

I have always seen a lot of pictures of beautiful nudibranchs and that is precisely what I mean, beautiful nudibranchs. Because nudibranchs are incredibly beautiful in their nature, I have seen far too many bad pictures of beautiful nudibranchs, and since I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut when I see sloppy photography, it has resulted in many heated discussions. But that was back then. Now I love photographing nudibranchs. Maybe because I have

Photo and nudibranch?

This year, Ørjan Sandnes and Monica Bakkeli, who are the owners of the center, had the idea to shake things up and make the event a little different.

Since the event and the participants all spend a lot of time photographing the nudies, there is always a good amount of talk about photography, but because the event has always been of a scientific nature and not a photography course, the photography part has been left alone.



Nudibranch photography is usually done with macro lenses. However, in this case a wide angle is used to allow for background effect. Photo: Andreas

been to so many nudibranch events that I have now learned to find them, which is an important part of getting a good picture.

Admittedly, I still don't have much interest in the biology, but as a photographic object they are top.

Nudibranchs as a motif

I have a background as an advertising photographer, and for part of my apprenticeship I was at a studio that had a portrait department. It was during that time that we made black and white copies in the darkroom in

the basement and then pressed them and edited them with a razor blade before we framed them.

During that period I learned a lot about the composition of a face. For example, it means a lot to a good portrait image whether the eye is sharp, the corner of the mouth is relaxed in a smile, whether the lips are dry or shiny, whether the angle of the neck and head matches the turn of the face, as well as the focal length, shadows, exposure, backlight and background. Yes, photographing portraits is incredibly similar to doing macro photography underwater.



Not all pictures are of nudibranchs. Sometimes their eggs are also quite OK. Here I am testing the small Smart Torch snoot combined with a slight softening from the ring lamp. And no, the starfish is not positioned but wandered into the picture so it was a combination of luck and patience.

Photo: Lars Kirkegaard. Specs: ISO 400, 1/250 sek, f:4,9, 18mm

Phototechnical or scientific feedback

I had bought into Ørjan and Monica's idea that it was possible for me to direct the evening's photo review of the day's finds. I can usually do that as routine, because that's exactly what I do when I hold photo events and workshops. Whether it would work at an event whose primary function was to study nudibranchs, I had no idea.

Everything I know about photography falls to the ground if a photo has lost its scientific or documentary value. Was it a challenge that could be solved, so that the participants felt that my feedback was relevant or would I just be in the way?

The daily news

Each day, one or more photos were collected from the participants which I then reviewed in the evening.

There was a lot of natural talk about nudibranchs and their findings, but the new element was that we also looked at the photographic technical aspect of the images.

It basically worked well and it was clear that all the participants were equally interested in talking about the photographic technical aspect as the biological aspect. Since my biological knowledge of nudibranchs is not great and since many of the participants had a biology background or were just big nudibranch enthusiasts, there was quite a lot of feedback from the participants every evening.

Often there was scientific input on a picture that changed both my and the photographer's view on the choice of a photo angle or lighting. And sometimes there was a discussion about the technical value of the picture versus its scientific value, but it all happened on a both cheerful and scientifically high level.

Who is right?

One evening there was a picture that really divided the waters. There were people who thought it was one of the best pictures taken of a nudibranch all week, and others couldn't see the interesting thing in it. This is not an unfamiliar situation for me, because images depend on

the eyes that see, and we all put a combination of our diving, life and photography experience into the evaluation of an image.

My role was largely to illuminate the different ways in which one can see an image, as well as try to understand the photographer's thoughts when he/she pressed the button. When I understand this myself, I have to try to convey it to the other participants, which can be both a difficult but also a very fun process.

I always start a photo session by reminding the participants that if the photographer can find joy in a given image, then it has a justification regardless of what the majority of the participants may otherwise think. And that is a good rule of thumb to follow.

Big vs. small?

Another fun discussion arose from a question from a young participant, who exclusively photographed with an Olympus TG-7 compact camera without a tray, but with a small video light in her hand. Her question was for all of us "established underwater photographers". She asked: "Why do you choose to swim around and photograph with such a large camera equipment as you have, when the subject is so small... and why do you choose to limit your lighting to lights



The most popular camera in the world – and in Gulen – is the Olympus TG-6/7. Here in a Weefine housing with ring light and Smart Torch snoot.

that are attached to an arm system?"

I LOVED that question. And she was absolutely right in her assumption. It is sometimes incredibly stupid and impractical with the large equipment we have, because it goes without saying that small subjects

are easiest to photograph with a small camera setup, where it is easy to position yourself in relation to the composition and where it is easy to get a small lamp both close to the subject and placed at the right angle.

The fact that many people



If you are patient with the little animals, you can capture them with your camera in incredible positions. And if you backlight them, you can almost make them glow. But it requires patience and a steady hand.

Photo: Stephane Raynal. Specs: TG-6, 1/100, ISO 100, f:18

choose a large camera is mostly about the fact that you can use a camera with a large CMOS and thereby achieve a lot of detail in the final file, which in turn allows for a lot of post-processing options. And of course there is a big difference between photographing with two fast flashes or a small LED lamp - and she understood all of that very well.

However, she was still not entirely convinced that the result was

up to the equipment and I understand why. In reality, we all want the best possible quality and the best light, but in the smallest possible package. And it is often a combination that is full of compromises.

All that equipment

Since I make a living selling UW photo equipment, I have many different underwater housings myself.



If you look closely, you can find areas where the nudibranchs are very close together. So close that it is possible to get several in the same picture. Here they are photographed with a Magic Tube, which nicely frames the subject. It is not a complicated photo, but the effect is delicious.

Photo: Jochen Frenzer / explore-the-ocean.com Specs: 5D MKIII, 100mm, 1/125, f:8.0

Fortunately, during the week of the safari, I also had the opportunity to play with them. I am always behind in testing new equipment from suppliers, so it is good to be away for several days.

Changing equipment during a photo trip is not really something I recommend, because good photos are very much about being comfortable with your equipment and having all the buttons and functions

completely under your skin. If you change equipment, you often get set back and have to rethink logistics and buoyancy.

I am typically in Norway 2-3 times a year to dive and test, and one of these times is typically at Gulen, so this year I was able to combine business and pleasure.

As always when I am out giving lectures or teaching, I had brought a lot of photo equipment with me



The fine details in wildlife can be difficult to photograph. But with backlighting or, in this case, a snoot and a little softening, you can really bring out the structure. Here photographed with the TG-7.. Photo: Lars Stenholt Kirkegaard

for the participants to try, and it was popular. Many of the lamps and optics I had with me changed hands many times during the week.

Participant toys and testing

Most people know that creative macro photography is related to lighting, and many use a snoot to bring the subject into focus and exclude the background from the image. I love snoot photography and a nudibranch safari was the perfect place to play with snoots.

One of the most well-known snoots on the market is of course the Backscatters MF-2, which was developed for this purpose, but most flash manufacturers have made an optical or manual snoot unit for their flash. I myself use Marelux' SOFT which has a built-in focus light and a built-in iris, but on Gulen's house reef, I and the participants had plenty of time to play with one of my current favorite gadgets; Smart Torch from Weefine, which is an LED lamp with a small lens and a snoot. We put it together with an Olympus



During the week, the nudibranchs were studied and documented in a special photo stand in the laboratory. A black background was used and the snails were photographed while lying in water. Here is a photo collage of everything that was photographed during the week.

TG-7 camera and a small lamp. This allowed us to play with snooting, both with and without backlighting. The small compact cameras are very prone to overexposing, so sometimes it helps to soften the light a little and reduce the contrast in the image. Several of the participants made dives where they held the snoot lamp in their hands to be flexible.

Another light gadget that I brought was the new Ringlight from Weefine. The good thing about photographing nudibranchs with

a ring light is that you are typically very close to the subject. And this is precisely where ring lights have their strength. Unfortunately, they work just as badly when you are a little further away from the subject, because they give a lot of backscatter.

At Gulen we played around with the lamp for nudibranch photography a lot and it works well as a documentation light, which was the goal for many of the participants. Of course, you have to remember that you remove most shadows in the



image and thus reduce the contrast in the subject.

If you want a little highlight or shadow in the image, you can advantageously combine the ring light with another lamp. It can either function as a side light or an effect backlight, there are many fun options.

The participants who used it found that it provided good and even light, which was very useful for identifying nudibranchs, but that it was necessary to give the images some contrast later in the editing.

The process was successful

The week progressed and many

nudibranchs were documented. In fact, a record was set with no fewer than 61 different nudibranchs, which is a good thing since a total of 87 different species have been found on Gulen over the years. So there was great satisfaction among the research team with the effort.

On the photo front, things also went well, because there were a lot of good photos taken and nice photo talks. The participants seemed satisfied with the feedback they received in the evening. As they got used to us reviewing images, they also remembered to put them on the memory chip for me during the day and to be on time so that we could

start the presentation. The most important thing for me was that Ørjan and Monica were happy with their decision to invite me and asked if I would consider coming again next year.

The annual Nudibranch Safari takes place every year in March.

www.gulendiveresort.com

If you want to read more about workshops with Lars, you can do so at:

blog.fotografit.eu/workshops

Lars Stenholt Kirkegaard
www.fotografit.eu





IPHONE HOUSING KITS

OLYMPUS Tough Camera
Accessories

GOPRO

UNDERWATER HOUSINGS

TRAY AND ARM SYSTEMS

WET LENSES

DOME PORTS FOR HOUSING

DOME PORT ACCESSORIES

HOUSING ACCESSORIES

UNDERWATER VIDEO HOUSINGS

UNDERWATER MONITORS AND
VIEWFINDERS

LED Dive Lights

SNOOT LIGHTS (SNOOTING)

FLASH STROBE SYSTEMS

BATTERY AND CHARGERS

CAMERA GEAR BAGS

BOOKS

COLOR FILTERS

RENTAL EQUIPMENT

OUTLET

SERVICE

Choose brand



IPHONE HOUSING KITS



OLYMPUS Tough Camera
Accessories



GOPRO



UNDERWATER HOUSINGS



TRAY AND ARM SYSTEMS



WET LENSES



DOME PORTS FOR HOUSING



DOME PORT ACCESSORIES



HOUSING ACCESSORIES



UNDERWATER VIDEO
HOUSINGS



UNDERWATER MONITORS AND
VIEWFINDERS



LED Dive Lights