Editorial

Liveaboard safety

For decades, liveaboard dive boats have provided the perfect solution for diving remote locations in comfort and with easy access to the water. Add good food and convivial guests and you can have a productive, cost effective per dive, holiday.

They are especially suited to keen underwater photographers who can return from a one week trip with over 20 dives of, let's say, an hour each so that's a lot of underwater photography time. In addition, not being land based gets you away from the dreaded 'sand on the O ring' syndrome.

Of all the seas in the ocean, the Red Sea must have the highest concentration of liveaboards and recently, unfortunately, it has become the highest concentration of accidents either from fire and/or water ingress. The past five years have seen 16 incidents involving dive liveaboards in the Red Sea.

Three liveaboards have been lost within the last 21 months alone, resulting in numerous deaths.

The situation has resulted in a report/statement here in the UK from the British SubAqua Club (BSAC) and the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB). MAIB was prompted to act following the latest incident last November, which saw the capsizing of the liveaboard Sea Story near the port of Marsa Alam with the loss of four people, while seven people are still missing, including two UK divers.

I'm not going to go into all the details - you can read them here:

www.tinyurl.com/hrymacd6

and

www.bsac.com

but a precis of their conclusion is "Book liveaboard dive holidays through recognised vendors who can provide assurance about safety standards applicable to the dive boat and request a detailed safety briefing before departure. This should cover warning signals, emergency exits, the location and use of safety equipment and abandon ship procedures".

So, if you are planning a liveaboard trip, and not just to the Red Sea but to anywhere in the world, you would be strongly advised to seek reassurance from the agent or operator. Any company worth their salt will already have responded responsibly and made physical or procedural alterations and they will welcome your concerns because they are 'on it'. If you get the slightest feeling that you are being made to feel pedantic in anyway I would take that as a big warning sign. That's what the guests on the Titan sub should have done.

Finally I am not a fan of Associations but an international one for Diving Liveaboards would seem to be a good idea to standardise standards with regular inspections; but such costs inevitably end up coming out of our wallets so, in the end, you get what you pay for.

Enjoy, carefully.

To extremes and back

The arrival of Nauticam's MFO-3 brings us full circle when it comes to close up/macro photography underwater.

Why? Well, in the early days, dioptre (positive/magnifying) lenses were added to the standard lens to reduce the camera to subject distance and, underwater, this is good, especially in turbid waters. The stronger the diopter, the closer the focus but the greatly increased magnification brought with it strong optical limitations. Early, small scale manufacturers solved this with an air/water interface usually in the form of a sealed flat port in front of the positive dioptre. Better, but far from perfect.

Enter Nauticam and the very clever Edward Lai and they produced the Compact Macro Converters (CMC), with CMC-1 and CMC-2 providing up to 4.5x magnification. For full-frame cameras, the Super Macro Converters (SMC) offer even higher power, with SMC-1, SMC-2 and the newer SMC-3 offering 2.4x.

In real life, magnifications numbers communicate very little; what is important is lens to subject distances and, depending on the prime lens combination, it is between 51-103mm (2" to 4") and, however you look at it, that is physically very close. Difficult to light, difficult to keep steady and difficult to stop bumping into things but the results are stunning with hitherto unseen detail of nature's extraordinary designs - but it is incredibly hard work.

Enter the MFO-3 (the clue is in the name - Mid-range Focus Optimizer) and you have a much weaker lens with an optical design aimed at helping focus response and accuracy. Optimized for use with longer focal length full-frame macro lenses, the MFO-3 transforms these lenses into an approximate 60mm equivalent but with a much more versatile lens to subject distance of up to 1-1500mm.

The result is a much more relaxed scenario with the photographer being able to enjoy the environment whilst looking for subjects rather than hunched over a viewfinder for long periods.

I know which I prefer and I suspect the marine life does too.

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