

Tobias Bernhard

by Pete Atkinson

For nature photographers, one competition is regarded more highly than any other, the BG Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition. It attracts over 19000 entries from 60 countries. 19000 is a stack of slides 38m high, just to put it in perspective. Many of the world's top professionals enter and even a highly commended is cause for excitement.

Winners and runner-ups in each category are flown to London for the presentation from all over the world. The dinner is simply magnificent, held in the main atrium of the Natural History Museum, lit by candlelight with an 80' Diplodocus skeleton draped between the tables.

This year, for the first time, the overall winner was an underwater photographer, Tobias Bernhard. Almost amazing as the win itself, was the fact that he also won three highly commendeds (shown opposite). Four awards in one year is virtually unprecedented in the history of the competition.

Tobi was presented with his awards by Chris Packham and Andrew Bonfield.

Tobi Bernhard was born in Munich, a long way from the sea. His parents owned a house in the south of France which kindled his interest in the underwater world and where he learned to dive.

After completing his studies in graphic design he travelled all over the world for three years with his partner Nora Shayeb. Back in Munich he worked in a graphic design studio for a while before he and Nora emigrated to New Zealand in 1991. He also worked as a diving instructor in Thailand.

An interest in diving with a graphics arts background, inevitably led to underwater photography. In New Zealand he bought the 32' yacht Sedate, and sailed among the



South Pacific islands looking for adventure.

When we first met at Suva Yacht Club in Fiji he was struggling with a Nikonos V and wide-angle attachments. He soon realised that the gear was a restriction and bought a Sea&Sea housing for the Nikon F90X. Later he bought a Subal Nikon F4 housing and recently bought the last Subal housing for the F90x which Nikon in their infinite wisdom have discontinued.

In the early years I was able to help him with technical points, but he always had an almost obsessively clear view of what he wanted to achieve and would pursue it with relentless vigour until his pictures matched his vision. Now it's me who has to ask how he achieved certain effects.

At Beveridge Reef where he shot the winning picture I also took loads of slow shutter speed panning shots but mine were all utter rubbish. He seemed to master slow shutter speed techniques with ease and applied them with great skill to great whites, producing unique images from a subject which has received a lot of attention from the world's best photographers.

I have never met a

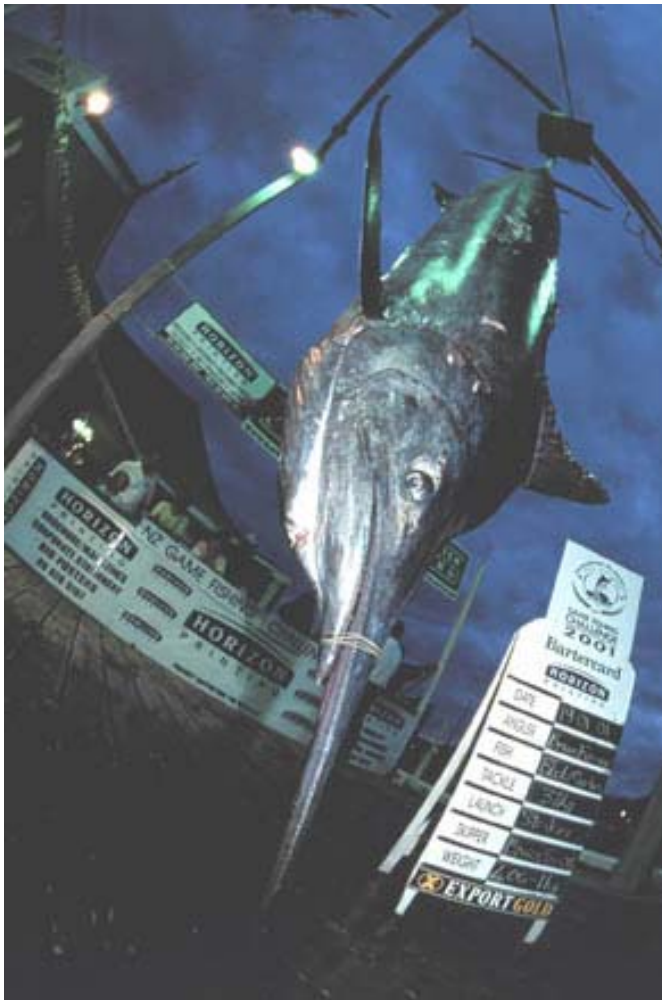


photographer quite as critical of his own work. He throws away pictures that I'm sure my agents would be able to sell. His own agents delight in his submissions since there is so little to weed out.

The Tutukaka Photo Festival in New Zealand is in its infancy, but Tobi's winning shot which the judges had no difficulty in awarding the top prize was fished out of the rubbish bin by his partner Nora Shayeb, who has unnerving talent for picking winning pictures, including some of mine.

Her artistic influence over many years can only have had a positive affect on Tobi's photography. She is a talented painter, sculptor, builder or pretty much anything she turns her attention to.

He believes that living and working on his new boat Nexus, a converted 47' aluminium fishing vessel, is often central to achieving the images he has in his head. It allows him to spend virtually unlimited time to get to know an animal subject, its habitat and behaviour. Nexus was a long-liner and the fishing gear came off in the



part exchange deal with Sedate. The 9 tonne ice-hold was converted into a pristine camera, computer and editing room. You wouldn't eat your dinner off the floor because it would leave crumbs: it's immaculate.

The aft working deck is protected from the sun by an upper deck which houses the shark cage, kayak and solar panels.

One of the amazing things about Tobi is that he has only been taking photos underwater seriously for five years. This year, apart from the BG win, he has won Best New Zealand Image at Oceanz 2001, and won the marine life category of the prestigious Nature's Best competition in the USA. This attracts 15000 entries from the world's top nature photographers. So I guess we'll be hearing more about Tobias Bernhard in the future.

The BG Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2001 Exhibition is now open at The Natural History Museum, London until 11th March 2002.

Tobi's website is <http://website.lineone.net/~tobias.bernhard/>

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