

Open Fotosub El Hierro 2007

Linda Pitkin went as an invitee on the jury to an annual underwater photography competition in the Canary Islands. The 11th Open International Fotosub Isla de El Hierro was held from 22-28 October, 2007. Here Linda recounts her impressions of an eventful and very enjoyable week.

The horn sounds at 9 a.m. and the race is on. A fleet of RIBs speeds out of La Restinga harbour, jostling for position as they carry the competitors to their allotted dive sites, each team keyed up for the stressful task of making the best possible photos in 60 minutes underwater. The three days of competition of the 11th Open International Fotosub Isla de El Hierro have started now in earnest.

This Fotosub is a prestigious annual event with big money prizes, and this October it attracted 22 underwater photographers with their models or assistants, mainly from Spain and the Canary Islands and a few from Germany and France. As fate will have it, something is bound to go wrong for somebody when it really counts, and German photographer Andreas Koffka had a disastrous first dive when his memory card persisted in giving an error message despite him surfacing twice, getting back on the RIB, and opening the camera housing to try and fix the problem.

It is incidents like this that made me glad I was on the jury, and our boat left half an hour later for us to enjoy a relaxed dive with no pressure on us other than the watery kind. Fine weather meant that we did not have to contend with the rough seas



1st Prize went to Arturo Telle and Teresa Rodriguez

that made the competition more challenging the previous year.

It was my first visit to the Canary Islands and, after 28 years of diving, my first experience of something in between Britain and the tropics, and I was pleasantly surprised. Firstly, as I hit the water, it was a relief to find I could manage OK in the still warm season with my one piece 5 mm wetsuit, plus hood, and I didn't regret that I'd been unable to squeeze the second piece, my top jacket, into my bulging luggage. Then, the water clarity was

impressive, 20 metres or more visibility, and the marine life was fascinating as it was all new to me. I could see plenty of scope for the photographers in the competition, with striking volcanic scenery all around and a good diversity of fish and other animals including an abundance of some of a tropical nature, such as parrotfish, trumpetfish and filefish. El Hierro has a richer fauna because it is the most southerly of the Canary Islands with slightly warmer waters than the others. Helping to preserve the coastal area around La Restinga, at the southern



*Best macro (close-up):
Jesus Villalba*



*Best wide angle: Carlos Villoch &
Maite Uribarri*

end of the island, is a marine reserve where there are restrictions on fishing and diving is mainly limited to sites marked by buoys.

Not much English is spoken on the island and, struggling to recall any of my rusty Spanish picked up during fieldwork in Costa Rica 11 years ago, I was glad that the dive briefings just before we dropped in off the boat were brief. For Brian and I it was a case of suck it and see. On one dive I followed Brian to a small pinnacle at about ten metres, but I knew we must be in the wrong place. Straining

my eyes far out into the hazy blue, I caught a glimpse of bubbles, and heading across a stretch of open water we eventually found our group diving around a massively tall pinnacle that dropped to the sand at 40 metres. I enjoyed all the dives we did, especially El Bajon and El Desierto. Pelagic fishes swirl around the sheer current-scoured faces of El Bajon, and several large groupers too, but my favourite grouper had to be docile and photographer-friendly Pancho, the resort's 40 kg mascot that lives at El Desierto among the rocks 30 metres

or so down. There is currently a move to save him from the threat of being fished, so that he can enjoy the full 50 years such a grouper might live to.

The competitors dived twice a day and submitted two photographs to be judged each of the first two days, plus two extra on the third day, that they had taken on any of the three days. The standard was very impressive and a pleasure for us in the jury to see, but quite hard work to make the all-important decisions in the scoring, especially on the last day when we had to go through all the 176 pictures to make the final selection of the top ten teams, best wide angle and macro, best model, photo most representative of El Hierro, and our favourite photo of a Canary Islands parrotfish. This fish is the emblem of the event and something of a local speciality not just in the water but rather disconcertingly on the restaurant menus too. It does seem just a little a bit unfair to spend the dive establishing a rapport with a fish and then go and eat it for dinner!

The jury was made up of three from Spain and the Canary Islands, plus the Hungarian underwater photographer Tibor Dombavani, and myself, making for an international mix. After much deliberation we were happy to pick as the overall winner Arturo Telle from Gran Canaria with his model Teresa Rodriguez.

Arturo's collection of eight images was spectacular. Second place went to David Barrio and Luisa Quintanilla, and third to Julio Díaz and Esther Torrent.

The organization of the Fotosub was excellent and a credit to the tireless efforts and attention to every detail of Carlos Minguell (three times world champion of underwater photography) and his team of helpers. The scale of the event was amazing in the small, quiet, fishing village of La Restinga. El Hierro is the smallest and least touristy of the Canary Islands, and the Fotosub is the event of the year for local people too, young and old. The enormous marquee erected on the harbourside to stage the shows was full to overflowing on the night of the awards, when we were entertained by an amusing and cleverly put together film of the competition, and a terrific instrumental band including a brilliant timple player (a characteristic Canary Islands instrument). In the main street of La Restinga a fiesta continued through the night, and as we prepared to leave for our early morning flight home, the young locals were still dancing to the throb of the disco.

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