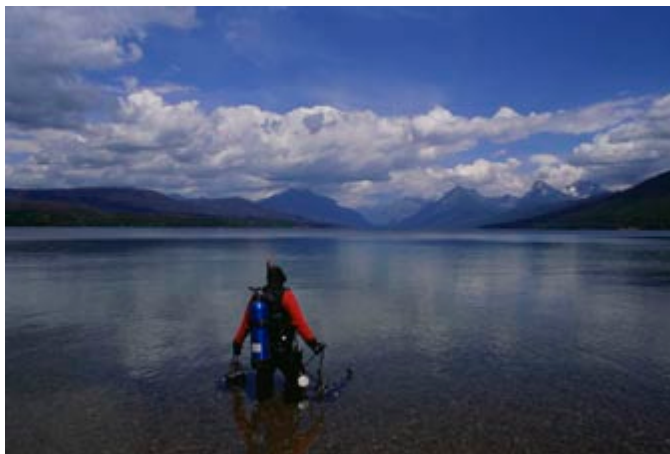


American Waters

By Alex Kirkbride

In July 1997 Aqua magazine commissioned a Diving Across America story. My assistant Sebastian, the writer Jim, and I travelled 4000 miles in nine days in a motor home from Long Island, New York to Los Angeles, California. It was a gloriously mad, intense shoot and I've never been more exhausted after a job. For example, in one day I photographed the Sheriff of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, went diving in the nearby Blue Hole and adjacent creek, and then drove 900 miles to Las Vegas, Nevada. We arrived in Vegas at 1am and were up and moving by 6am. Then we drove to the Colorado River, went diving in an 8-10 knot current, and afterward flogged on all the way to Santa Barbara, California. I feel tired just thinking about it. The results demonstrated how extraordinarily diverse underwater images could be. There was an impressionistic image of a cottonwood tree from New Mexico, an antique dentist's chair from Indiana, and an ore cart from a flooded mine in Missouri. I began to think about what else I might find on a lengthy trip around the country and how it might make a unique collection of images - a portrait of America from a fish's point of view, or a crocodile's, or a turtle's eye in a desert spring. It would be an enormous challenge to capture images expressive of American waters from coast to coast - a feat no one had ever attempted before.

Ideally, there would have been a crew of three: Hazel, my producer and girlfriend (now my wife); myself, and a full-time assistant. However, with inadequate sponsorship funds, I had to give up on



*(Above) Diving at Lake McDonald, Montana
(Top left) Workmen's tools, Lake McDonald, Glacier National Park, Montana
(Right) Blue Hole Creek, Blue Hole Cienega, Santa Rosa, New Mexico*

the idea of that handy third person, who was also going to be the main driver. I honestly did not know if Hazel and I would be able to keep up with the daunting schedule, but we had no choice, and so went for it. Hazel took on the job of my assistant, among many other duties, and I picked up the slack in the driving department. The combination of constantly moving, driving an average of 3,300 miles a month, diving, and only having one day off a month took its toll. Exhausting? Absolutely! But I was living my dream three ways at once-as a photographer, as a diver, and as a traveler-with my loved one at my side. Despite lapses into insanity, one of us could always be counted on to remind the other how extremely fortunate we were to be enjoying the freedom of the road and the surprises of each new day.

Adapting to living in an Airstream motor





(Above) Chatting with Jesse at Sunset Lake, Indiana

(Top right) Snorkelling a cranberry bog, Massachusetts

(Right) Cranberries, Edaville Bogs, Carver, Massachusetts



home, with its fully equipped kitchen, shower, air-conditioning and propane heating system, was relatively easy once the art of hooking and unhooking the SUV had been mastered. Learning to drive the monster rig took a little longer. Initially, the most demanding part of manipulating the 55-foot-long machine was backing up into a campground site. At first we were all over the place, especially after a six-hour journey. Without a doubt, the worst arguments between couples on the road stem from trying to park their

homes successfully. We realized it was a classic marital flashpoint when a campground manager in Maine helped us back in to a very tight spot with the words, “I’ve saved a lot of marriages helping couples back in”!

Since I gave myself a time frame of 36 months, from September 2002 to September 2005, to cover all 50 states and complete the project, I had to be very precise with the planning of when and where to go. Even though I would have liked to have gone to every state twice at different times





of the year, I was only going to be able to visit most states once, and for no more than two and a half weeks. This was really pushing the laws of Nature, because many of the days were consumed by traveling, but my gut feeling was that it could be done – just. However, every time I examined a large map of America, I felt completely overwhelmed.

It was a planner's dream, or nightmare, depending on how you feel about planning a thousand details. We would have to be in each state when a variety of underwater sites were at their clearest, and when the weather was right, and when certain indigenous creatures were active. Not only that: dive boats in certain parts of the country were only operational at particular times of the year. Also, the tight schedule meant I couldn't afford to get caught or stranded in an early snowstorm, or be delayed too long by bad weather or any mechanical failures.

In 2001, while I began pre-production and tried to figure out how to make the project happen, I made a jump-start on the photography. Previous magazine shoots had yielded a few images, and by grabbing a few more in the northeast before

(Top left) Undisturbed algae, Blueheart Springs, Snake River, Idaho

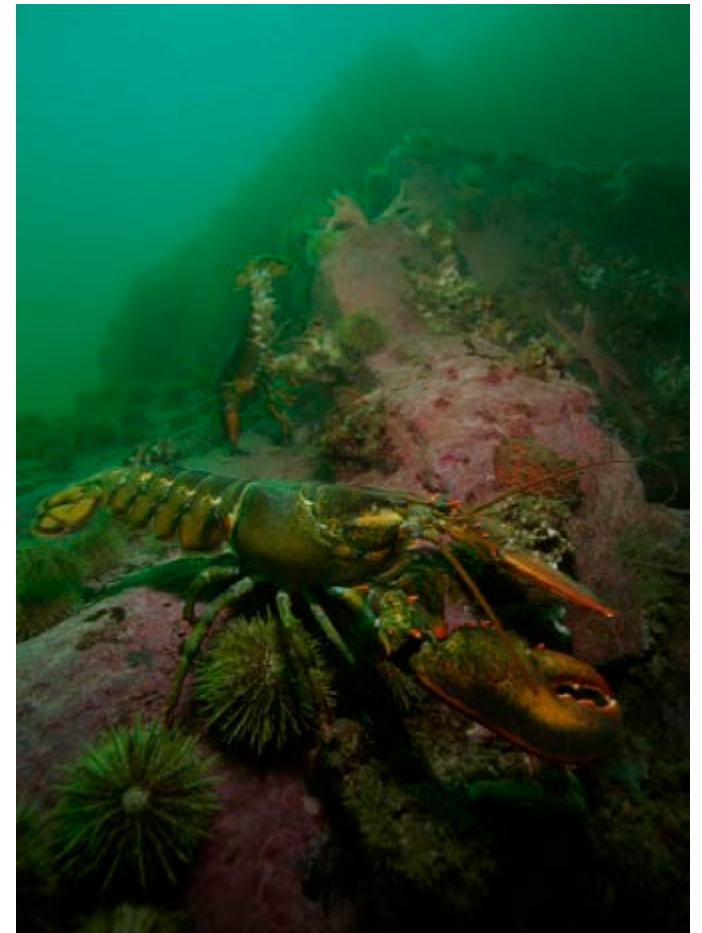
(Centre) Maple Leaf, Little Wappinger Creek, Salt Point, New York

(Top right) The Lily Pad Room, Onondaga Cave State Park, Leasburg, Missouri

(Right) American Lobsters, Iron Bound Island, Frenchmen's Bay, Maine

the main part of the journey, I was able to make inroads on the task that lay ahead of me. I hired a researcher, Madeline, for two months; her tasks included picking as many as six dive shops from different areas of each state, and finding an experienced diver who had been exploring their local water areas for years and was willing to chat. Divers around the country were incredibly helpful, and Madeline's detailed notes, along with my initial ideas, provided a first-draft road map.

Once I knew where we needed to be at certain times of the year - and which images simply had to be in this collection, such as the humpback whale – I plotted these destinations on the map and filled in the gaps. And by leaving a few days' leeway at





Black Angus, Circle S Ranch, Kansas

each location for weather and other opportunities that unexpectedly arose, I was able to fit in most of my image ideas into the schedule.

Research, of course, remained an ongoing, evolving process. As we traveled and talked to other campers, divers, and fishermen – and looked through local tourist brochures – we discovered many potential images along the way. Other ideas simply presented themselves. For example, I met Barbara one night at dinner in New York City. We began to talk about my upcoming project, and she mentioned that she could find ancient

shark's teeth in the Potomac River near her house in Virginia. We stopped by to investigate the teeth, which we found with the help of Barbara and Charles, but the water was too murky for photography. However, just down the road from our new friend's house lived a man who fished for blue crabs, which, serendipitously, led to the blue crab molting image I was eager to find.

Even with all the research, there were still times when we felt stumped in particular states. When this happened, we literally drove around a potentially promising water area



Bubba, Greg and Julie's pool, Crystal River, Florida

to see what we could find. But this was what this project was all about: stretching myself creatively to see if I could make something happen.

Any body of water was fair game, so the quest for images led to diving and snorkeling in the most bizarre places, especially when it came to fresh water. Rivers, creeks, streams, lakes, springs, marshlands, caves, swamps, and wetlands were all explored.

The expedition went to the source of the Mississippi River in Minnesota, and I even lay in a puddle in New York City. In Massachusetts at

harvest time, I jumped into a flooded cranberry bog - cranberries being one of the few truly native fruits in the USA - to the great bewilderment of the farmers. For Kansas, when the time came to photograph cattle in some aquatic situation, I spoke to my friend Rob, the only person I knew from the Heartland State, the geographical centre of the contiguous United States. Rob's father put me in contact with a rancher, whose foreman didn't think my notion too far-fetched - until I asked to jump into the cows' water tank.

In the vast swamplands of the



1940's Georgia Firetruck, Blue Springs, Pelham, Alabama

south, I slipped into murky waters knowing there were alligators around and imagining them whenever my leg brushed up against a submerged tree trunk. But you force yourself to control those thoughts; you have to, in order to concentrate on the task at hand. Somewhere in the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, I broke this mental barrier, and sharing the water with lurking near-relatives of the dinosaurs became less of an anxious experience and more of an exhilarating one.

From the beginning of the journey, one of the greatest challenges

was what could be created in Nevada, the driest state in the union. Research had turned up Stillwater Marsh, where you can see the occasional sand dune from the water's edge. However, a five-year drought had all but dried out the shallow marshland. Instead, we found copious amounts of buffalo carp bones lying where those fish had gasped their last breaths. We spent the entire morning driving around in search of an acceptable body of water and almost ran out of gas - a near-disaster that made us think again about those fish bones. By that point, Pyramid Lake in the Paiute Tribe

Reservation seemed my best chance, and the most I expected was a split-level image of Pyramid Rock. Instead, a fortuitous meeting with a fisherman led us to some dramatic underwater tufa formations, and four days later we left the desert with Nevada in the bag, much to my surprise and delight.

In Florida, there are many cave systems, but they have been well-documented. So I chose to look elsewhere, beginning in Arkansas, where we visited a couple of huge caverns. Spectacular, indeed, but not quite right for my purpose. As we left Arkansas's Hurricane River Cave, where Jesse James supposedly hid from the law, I came across a pamphlet for the National Cave Association showing the Lily Pad Room in the Onondaga Cave, Missouri. The Lily Pad Room turned out to be simply remarkable for photography.

After all that time underground, our thoughts turned to those peculiar waters that fly into the sky - the geysers of Yellowstone, and the superheated pools that launch them. Perhaps some of the most unique water in America can be found in Yellowstone National Park, the world's first national park, founded in 1872. Yellowstone is home to some 10,000 hot springs and geysers, including Old Faithful, possibly the most famous fountain in the world.

Now you can't just jump into these areas-you aren't allowed-and even if you were, you'd find yourself being boiled by the world's biggest Bunsen burner, the Yellowstone Caldera, the giant volcano that lurks beneath the parkland. There was another option, however, and one that was both very cold and very hot: Yellowstone Lake. Protected from the snow-melt chill by a drysuit, you can dive down to bubbling geothermal vents where there are also clusters of spires, and some very odd growths of green algae the size of 1960s beanbags.

My dives in the high-altitude lake, where I felt the Earth shake with subterranean thunder, were unforgettable, and humbling. To dive in such unusual places, where few if any had been before, was one of the greatest joys of the journey.

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