

Parting Shot

Persevere, avoid the crowds... and cheat!

I've always wanted to shoot a good image of a jellyfish, having failed with British jellies when I started out in 1990 using a Sea & Sea Motormarine II, bought from a dubious back-alley shop near Hammersmith in west London (I think it was called Ocean Optics, and run by a couple of suspicious characters who seemed to build their own cameras in the back room).

Martin Edge has a wonderful jelly in his book, "The Underwater Photographer". I always wondered how he shot it in a tide pool, with a sunburst in the frame.

Being older, richer and less tolerant of cold water I set off a couple of months ago for Palau, an independent state in the western Pacific, that nevertheless feels like a small corner of the USA. One attraction was the famous Jellyfish Lake, now apparently recovered from the catastrophic death of its jellyfish several years ago.

The Rock Islands of Palau are fossil coral reefs supported by a slowly sinking volcano. Water percolates through the limestone to fill salty lakes that have no direct

connection to the sea. The rain forest gives way to mangroves, surrounding still waters that support a few fish, and millions of Mastigias jellies. The jellies float around the lakes where they live, following the sun. They have lost most of their sting, and live by the photosynthetic algae that stain their bodies brown. A severe El Niño caused them to expel their symbiotic algae and most died, like bleached coral.

There are a few barriers to meeting the jellies. Buy a permit, then a speedboat ride at hair-raising velocities through the narrow twisting channels between the Rock Islands. Clamber over a sharp limestone ridge, with camera and fins. Apparently the vegetation to either side is poisonous, but the snakes aren't. You are not allowed an aqualung.

A small jetty is crowded with tourists, all wearing life-jackets, and most don't seem to know how to swim. They have to be negotiated, as the jellies are about 200 yards away, across the lake. It's unseasonably windy, and the choppy water is hazy. I have two strobes and a 12-24mm zoom, but I can't get a decent shot



with the surface in it. After 45 minutes (the official ration of time for visitors to the lake) I give up.

Next week my companions want to sunbathe, but I give the lake another chance. It's calm now, and the visitors are inexplicably concentrated 100 yards away from the jellyfish. I dive down several times, and shoot upwards against the light. I'm using a 10.5mm fisheye lens, and the jellies look very small.

Then I have a sudden inspiration. I float at the surface, and hold my camera with its dome port just

underneath a jelly, with my strobes pulled back behind the camera. I guess where the jellyfish will appear, and shoot several frames.

Everything falls into place.

Tim Priest

**Do you have a nice shot with a short story behind it?
If so e mail me and yours could be the next "Parting shot".
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