

# Cuttlery Draw

by Rob Spray

We British are often portrayed as prudes while our European neighbours are considered sophisticated love machines. This isn't entirely fair but it's one reason why so many of us holiday abroad... and in Europe the place to go for erotic thrills is Holland!

We first heard about cuttlefish breeding by the Zeelandbrug from Dutch divers at an Indonesian resort. Strangely we learnt about the gathering in Holland before discovering a similar event in England, now that we've heard how greedy fishing threatens that gathering it seems all the more appropriate to relay our Dutch experiences.

## Destination Duiveland!

The encouragingly named Island of Schouwen-Duiveland in the province of Zeeland is roughly 15 miles long and 7 high (smaller than Malta) so getting around is easy. Even more so because it's very, very flat and you can often see your destination in the distance! We chose to stay at De Kabbelaar in Scharendijk which is an integrated dive centre, shop

and hotel. The founding family have recently chosen to rent out the shop and concentrate on the hotel but it's seamless for customers. Separating the hotel from the shop has allowed Bastien and Caroline more resources to add some more spacious rooms. We got to spread out in one of the new ones which made a great base. The hotel has a dry front door into the bar and a wet back door which opens, via two secure, chip keyed, CCTV observed doors, into a huge washing and drying area. More secure doors get you to the rooms or straight into the bar...

Diving in the Netherlands is predominantly a weekend pursuit and our local informant's most valuable tip was to go during the week. That ensured relaxed, crowd and queue free diving. It helps that the May cuttlefish season is pre-high season for land lubbers. The cuttlefish are THE big diving event in Zeeland and the bridge car park is crowded whenever a good slack falls within normal daylight hours. Luckily there's plenty of daylight in mid-May and much before 9.30 is not considered normal so you can get a chance at some undisturbed



*All photos taken with Olympus E-330, macro with 50mm + 1.4x teleconverter and wideangle with 7-14mm lenses*

gloom.

Contributing to the post dive calm was a typically practical Dutch innovation - self service air fills. No more frantic runs to the dive shop before they close, and no queues because there's simply no hurry. The air is metered out at 400litres for 50 Euro cents so a 10litre tank costs 2.5Euros to top up from 50bar of leftovers. Whether the UK populace could be trusted with this breakthrough is open to question but the Dutch can clearly cope The only

real problem is amassing a good stack of half Euro coins.

The island has distinct bodies of water above and below it. Above, the tideless Gravelingenmeer allows diving at any time on a selection of sites, several with concrete reef balls to provide extra habitat for the local wildlife. They work very well and bring the focus up off the light silty sea bed which makes for better vis. There are many 10s of them which makes for a good area to search. Most of the sites are shallow, the dykes



generally slope gently to 2 or 3m and then more sharply down to a plateau at 7-10m. If you keep going there's another dropoff which can take you down beyond 30m but we didn't meet anyone who recommended it and can't say we were tempted.

To the South there is the Oosterschelde, which is tidal and the sites here should be dived at slack. The currents can be strong and the water is torn past some of the features which make up the sites on this side more diverse. There are tide tables on the web and there's a set for sale in the shop with the offsets for each of the popular sites. Far and away the most popular site, North or South, is the Zeelandbrug. Whether or not the cuttlefish are there someone will turn up for slack. When the cuttlefish are there any daytime slack will be well attended, even during the week. There's decent sized car park for 30-40 cars but anglers often claim the pole positions by the steps. There's a 'hardcore members' area under the bridge where you can get a bit of shade and some gravel free concrete to change on or catch some rays.

The Dutch weather can be blazing in early



summer, so we always come back with a fetching drysuit tan, and the water is warming quite fast. It's been 12oC early in May and up to 15oC by the end of the month for the 10-15m range which holds most interest. In the shallows it is often considerably warmer. Most local divers will be in semi-dries with the drysuit minority looking much more comfortable at the end of their dives. If you're aiming to spend 60-90minutes photographing wildlife then a drysuit is de rigueur. All the Dutch divers have been pretty friendly and most are very happy to explain the sites. Many of them go prepared for a good chat and carry albums of photos – even framed 12x16" prints in one case! We were warned that they could be pushy and did experience some light jostling when our strobes drew a crowd but I've suffered a lot worse in the UK from my own (ex) club members and many blue water herds. In vis which is 4-5m at best and much less than 1m in a crowd the key is to stay calm, hold your position whilst protecting yourself and above all to avoid entanglement. It's no big deal just be sensible and careful.

## Where to go

We were there for the cuttlefish so we concentrated on the bridge and supplemented it with a sprinkling of the others, all on the North coast as it happens where the lack of tide makes planning trivial. With the long daylight hours it's easy to fit in 3 dives a day.

## Scharendijk

An ideal starter for De Kabellaar residents, only 20m from the air station to the steps over the dyke. It's a very benign place to get used to the conditions and a great photo venue for some of the locals; barnacles, mussels, anemones, prawns and slugs. There will often be a group on the picnic bench at the top of the steps to cheer you on too.

Situated in a quiet corner of the Gravelingenmeer there's no current and it can get quite murky. That shouldn't upset you too much if you are into macro - we spent 30 minutes on buoy ropes marking the ends of the runs of reef balls snapping skeleton shrimps and nudibranchs.

## Den Osse

After a few days of diving the climb up the steps from the car park, the thrill of crossing a road in full kit followed by the final ascent of the dyke can be tough on the thighs. It's a good workout and you'll be able to enjoy the view down from the top!

The shallows here are particularly nice, very clear and bright on a sunny day. It's an excellent place to get good shots of black faced gobies guarding their eggs in oyster shells and Nudibranchs



laying eggs on sea lettuce. The top of the oyster-covered slope down to the 8-10m plateau, where the reef balls are, is fringed with a wall of wireweed acting as a low-rent kelp forest. The slope is alive with fish and crabs.

## Dreischor

The most remote of the reef ball sites. A risk made only too apparent by the odd cube of shattered car glass is that of theft. Off season it seems lonely and remote but the opportunistic thief is more likely to venture out when picking are better in high season. It's preferable to dive with others around, you can strike a deal with other divers to share minding duties – though there may not be anyone about at all. There's usually a herd of cows about and they may be there to greet you at the shore when entering or leaving the water but won't log your dive or watch your car.



## Zeelandbrug

The seabed around the bridge piers is very silty, so you probably won't get great vis. That said the major factor is divers, so it's well worth getting up early and risking a little tide. A neap tide gives nearly 2 hours of slack and few divers go in more than 30 minutes early so you can get some cuttle time to yourself. The water isn't truly slack until you see light debris stationary and the guide rope has no pull on it. A compass is vital as the bottom is uniform away from the piers so it's easy to lose your bearings. It's possible to dive between slacks but a number of people have been lost that way!

For years local divers have planted nesting material for the cuttlefish, rows of crossed sticks, grouped as villages of tents either side of the first bridge pier. There are 3 major 'villages' plus some further away to ensure peace for the cuttlefish and a better chance to study their success - TV crews were filming the planting and monitoring of sticks. Those planting the sticks attend daily and are fiercely interested in sightings, be ready



to describe what you've seen and hope for some advice in return. They are concerned that numbers are falling because fishermen are taking too many, but this is pressure from angling not commercial potting. If this is affecting numbers then it's obvious that the brutal harvest of the breeding cuttlefish in Babbacombe Bay will be devastating. If they don't get to breed the population will collapse.

These are not animals in prime condition, their entire effort and energy has been devoted to procreation – I wish I could claim that – and they are dying even as they court and lay their eggs. Their dilated pupils and single minded preoccupation with their task in the face of spectators make it only too clear that they are running on empty and shutting down their higher functions to dedicate their last hours to their final, most important task. It's a quietly tragic end to a very promising and intelligent life. Cuttlefish are fantastic animals to interact with and simply absorbing to watch at close quarters. That an animal with such potential should be designed for just one season of life, for the female, is very sad. Whilst



perhaps it's the right time to suggest that a sustainable tourist business would do more for local prosperity and the UK's environmental reputation than short sighted slaughter during this critical period. Here you have an animal which can truly inspire and captivate any wildlife aware surface dweller and if a the price of an exclusion of fishing around the area was an accompanying ban on diving that would be a fair trade to secure better rights for these amazing creatures.

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watching the courtship and egg laying is magical one is struck by the stoic stillness of the single animals waiting to die after completing their mission. There's no frantic business as usual, just an apparent understanding that their work is over and that they can rest. To be so sentient, showing such interest in abstract objects surrounding them is surely a sign that they are worthy of much greater respect and care than they receive.

### British Reserve:

Given that the UK conditions appear, from Alan James' excellent pictures, to be much more favourable

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