

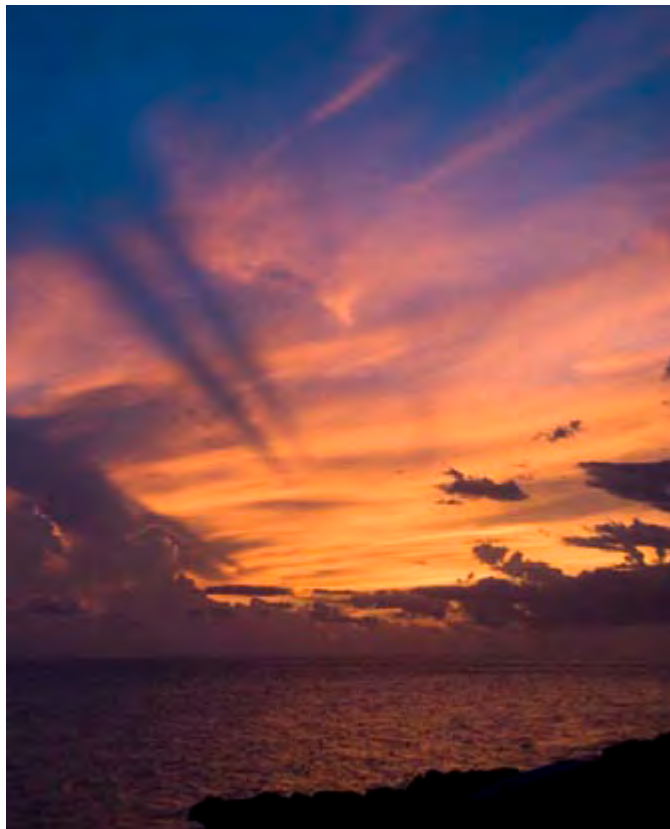
The Road Less Traveled in Cayman

By Jonathan Dietz

When you hear of diving in the Cayman Islands, what often comes to mind are the amazing wall dives, the great visibility and Stingray City. If you google 'Cayman Islands diving' for images you'll find that most of the resulting photos will be of Stingray City and reef scenes.

I've been living and diving in the Cayman Islands for about eight years now and dabbling in underwater photography for six of them. After about 250 dives here, I was getting pretty bored with the normal sights - barracuda, turtles, eels, stingrays, etc. Looking to jumpstart the excitement that I had felt in my early jaunts of diving, I started planning trips to other Caribbean islands that were known for different or more unusual creatures like seahorses, frogfish, nudibranchs, etc. Until relatively recently, I would have sworn that seahorses were extremely rare in the Cayman Islands, nudibranchs were almost non-existent, and frogfish hadn't been here in years.

Here in the Cayman Islands, every now and then I run into someone who says they have a friend of a friend or an uncle or brother who has seen things that are considered by most divers to be quite rare here. It's never been first hand information though and I could never get specific locations or details so I've always been a tad skeptical of the information. But one thing that most of these stories had in common was that they were in canals,



The northwest point of the island not only has amazing sunsets but it is also has great shore diving and nudibranchs, juvenile frogfish, seahorses, pipehorses and pipefish have all been recently spotted. Nikon D80, 18-200 zoom, f4.5, 1/40, ISO100

mangroves, or other places that most divers would rarely venture.

About a year ago, in urgent need of something to renew my passion for diving and underwater photography, I decided I would start on a quest to investigate some of the stories I had heard and search for some of these elusive creatures that seemed to be almost mythological in the Cayman



Sargassum Frogfish; Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 60mm macro, dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes, manual exposure, f10, 1/200, ISO100

Islands.

Just after having made this determination, coincidentally, or perhaps it was divine intervention, I got a call from a divemaster friend while I was sitting at my desk at work. He told me that while returning in his boat from a dive with a group of tourists he had come across a patch of sargassum. He slowed down to check it out and one of the

tourists said, ‘Hey, what’s that weird yellow thing? Well, lo and behold, it was a sargassum frogfish! So, he and I went and spent over an hour taking pictures of the beautiful fish that neither of us had ever seen before. It was the biggest rush I had experienced in quite some time. Finding the sargassum frogfish may have been mostly luck, but it certainly inspired me to continue on my quest.

The first site I chose to scour was beneath the docks at the local yacht club. I had heard a story or two of seahorses being seen on boat lines so I thought this was a good place to start. The water is relatively clear and only about ten feet deep. It’s slightly brownish green and the bottom is covered in jellyfish, so it’s not very appealing at first sight. Nevertheless, I jumped in and for the first thirty minutes or so, I saw only discarded bottles, tires, some underwear, and lots of jellyfish, which are actually quite good subjects! Finally, I started to relax a bit and went into search mode (you macro hunters know exactly what I mean!). Almost immediately I saw a lined flatworm which I had only seen in ‘The Book’ before. Very cool. Within ten minutes, I had found a total of four flatworms and I couldn’t believe it. After eight years of never seeing one, I had just found four! I could now consider my first mission a success, but just as I was congratulating myself, I almost had an accident in my wetsuit, and I don’t mean bumping into something! Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a large ominous monster rushing right over my head from behind me! A great white shark was the first thing that came to mind. After I pulled my head out of the muck, I slowly peeked out to see a giant spotted eagle ray peacefully gliding away in the murky distance. I was relieved that it was just a friendly eagle ray checking me out but I was still a



Yellow Seahorse next to dock at the Yacht Club; Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 10.5mm fisheye in 60mm port, dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes, manual exposure, f16, 1/60, ISO100

bit shaken and I started to wonder about the sanity of my commitment to my version of muck diving in the Cayman Islands.

The next day, I was still on the high from finding the flatworms so I headed back to the Yacht Club but this time I decided to try another more secluded area. I jumped in and amazingly within minutes I had found a gorgeous yellow seahorse on the edge of a dock just below the surface. I kept exploring and soon thereafter found a second yellow seahorse. I was ecstatic! Once again, I couldn’t believe that after eight years of diving in Cayman and only having seen one seahorse, I had just found two all by myself!

The following weekend, I decided to check an undeveloped area with canals that I had heard had some weird type of ‘slug things’. The muck diving gods were smiling upon me once again (or laughing at me and the muck I would have to dive into) and



Nudibranch in algae beneath a dock at the Yacht Club; Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 60mm macro, dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes, manual exposure, f18, 1/125, ISO100

I found that for a stretch of perhaps 100 feet there were ubiquitous hairy sea hares (*Bursatella leachii*). For the next two hours I snorkeled in the warm brown (but clear-ish!) canal water, with maybe three feet of visibility, and snapped away, starting with my 60mm lens, moving on to my 105mm lens and ending with my 10.5mm fisheye for some close-focus wide angle shots. For the third time in two weeks, I had found something I had never seen before and I now had a bug that I knew I wouldn’t be able to kick for quite a while.

This was all the start of my quest to explore the underwater road less traveled in the Cayman Islands. As a result, the past year for me has been filled with shallow muck dives and snorkels in excess of two hours searching for my next find, with canals, mangroves and seemingly barren hardpan areas having been my playground. I have seen all kinds of nudibranchs, flatworms, seahorses,



Pipehorse on hardpan in 15 feet of water off the Northwest coast; Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 105mm macro + 3x diopter, dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes, manual exposure, f14, 1/80, ISO100



Sea Hare and photographer in the sea grass only a few feet from shore; Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 10.5mm fisheye, dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes, manual exposure, f14, 1/125, ISO100

juvenile frogfish, juvenile scorpionfish the size of my pinky fingernail, and bumble bee shrimp just to name a few. My most fulfilling find has been the pipehorse since I was fruitlessly searching for one of these little guys for years and even named my website after this obscure creature. There are still places on my list that I have yet to explore and I am sure many more surprises await me.

My challenge to other underwater photographers is to try something new when it comes to diving and photography. Try looking for subjects somewhere you wouldn't normally go. Try something that is out of your comfort zone. Talk to people from all walks of life, not just divers, see what stories they have for you and then go explore a little. You might be very pleasantly surprised

what you find!

On a side note, there was recently a photography competition where the winners would be published in the 2010 calendar produced by a local publishing company. The only real guidance was that the photos were to show the beauty of the Cayman Islands. I figure the judges will be looking for somewhat typical Cayman Islands photos, as I described

earlier ñ turtles, stingrays, nice reef and diver with a light shot, etc. These subjects are indeed great subjects and provide opportunities for beautiful photos. And, to be honest, the general public will most likely relate to those pictures better than a close-up photo of a hairy sea hare in the mangroves! Unfortunately for me, I've spent most of my dives over the past year taking pictures in places that your average diver would never think of diving. Needless to say, I don't have any recent mainstream shots that I think could win first place. However, I still have a number of shots I think are good and show a different but still beautiful side of the Cayman Islands. My choice to submit was a split level shot of a sea hare in the mucky sea grass with a photographer, boat and dock in the background - wish me luck!

Jonathan Dietz



Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

www.magic-filters.com