

Malta's Gentle Giants

(and some colourful jellies)

by Paul Colley

For the majority that will not know this author (I am a relative newcomer to the world of underwater photography), I first learned to use a compact digital camera underwater in 2005. After a few diving trips with it and (crucially) an inspiring lesson from Martin Edge, I converted to using a digital SLR in 2008. Opportunities for me to take photographs are limited given commitments to my full time job. However, in early October 2009, I had the great pleasure of joining a group of fellow servicemen from Royal Air Force sub-aqua clubs across the United Kingdom for a week-long expedition to the Maltese archipelago. Our objectives were centred on the many ship and aircraft wrecks around Malta, some of which have important historical connections with our Service. But we also took an opportunity to dive with some captive giant Bluefin Tuna, which are the main subject of this article. As President of the Royal Air Force Sub Aqua Association, I am also trying to encourage some of our many divers to develop their photography skills

(and to improve mine at the same time). The dive with the Tuna was judged by all of us to be quite unusual and something beyond our collective experience that far.

I had been inspired to complete this dive by reading a short article about Bluefin Tuna in a dive magazine, which I chanced upon just before I went to Malta. It fascinated me, especially because the author of that article had concluded that he should have taken his camera with him. I was determined to replicate that author's experience, but with

(Top) The fish that I photographed for this article had been caught by fisherman and placed in a huge circular pen, about 80 metres or so in diameter.

(Right) The D300 auto focus and tracking systems worked well with fast-moving fish. Selecting a subject at range and then holding half action until the composition was right seemed to work best.

Subal Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 at 13mm, 1/200th @ F9 ISO 100



a camera in hand and my expedition leader was kind enough to fold the request into his overall plan. A local dive company called Maltaqua were providing us with excellent logistic support in Malta and they put us in touch with the people who had access to the Tuna pens in St Paul's Bay, which is located to the North West of Malta.

The guides told me that there were about one thousand fish in the pen and that their market value was over 1 million Euros; sadly, they were nearly all destined for the Asian sushi market. Readers will probably be aware that the Bluefin is under severe stress from over-fishing, especially in the Mediterranean. Less than one month before we dived, the European commission had agreed to back a proposal to ban all trade in Bluefin Tuna. Despite optimism that this might lead to a fishing ban, the move was blocked in late September by the Mediterranean nations with a vested interest in the industry. The fish that I photographed for this article



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had been caught by fisherman and placed in a huge circular pen, about 80 metres or so in diameter. Although I had mixed feelings about diving with fish destined for the sushi market, there was a crumb of good news. The diving is helping the Tuna in a small way, because a proportion of the money generated from it is being used to buy some of the fish, which are then released back into the wild. But this was too good an opportunity to miss anyway, because

Bluefins are becoming rare and they are difficult to approach in the wild. From a photographer's perspective, despite the worrying plight of the fish, the environment inside the pens provides a wonderful opportunity to observe and photograph these gentle giants.

The experience was quite surreal. You jump from your dive boat to a position just outside the circular pen, which sits in about 50 metres of water. The depth to the bottom of the net that



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forms the pen is about 35 metres. You have to swim up to a floating circular boom, from which the huge net is suspended. From there you pull yourself rather inelegantly over the booms and into the pen, assisted by two guides. Once inside and as we prepared to dive, the Tuna were already rising up at speed to take some baitfish inside the pen. On pushing my face under the water to get a first glimpse of them,

it was a very impressive sight; several hundred big Tuna were circling about 5 metres below us in a massive shoal with shafts of sunlight playing on their backs. The shoal had considerable depth to it; it was not possible to see the bottom, but it looked as though it might extend to below 20 metres. Tuna are built for speed and shaped like bullets with smooth green-blue backs punctuated by bright yellow spines;

the latter were clearly visible while looking from above. Having picked up my camera from dive buddy Joanna and waited for her to join me inside the pen, we signalled ready to descend and dropped straight into the middle of the swirling mass below. We settled at about 18-20 metres, where most of the action seemed to be.

Although capable of 10 times the speed, the Tuna cruised around the pen at about 6 knots or so. Some weighed up to 450Kg; they were absolutely huge fish and they became accustomed enough with us to make an occasional close pass which, even at a modest 6 knots, was enough to buffet the camera with the wake. Sometimes, they even passed close enough to push the strobe arms backwards. Tuna normally have their pectoral and pelvic fins pushed close into the body for streamlining, but as they manoeuvre, the fins pop out like miniature air brakes on an aircraft, allowing them to turn quickly and in a small radius. It was a fascinating experience just to watch them swimming and occasionally to see their fins jutting out into the flow. I swam gently against the stream of the shoal or tried to hover in mid water looking for an elusive head-on shot. It felt at times as though I was standing on a motorway with juggernauts thundering towards me, only swerving at the last sensible moment to miss. The shoaling behaviour of the fish also generated a moderately strong vortex that slowly pulled us downward. It was like being inside a huge, but very slow and powerful washing machine. Accurate depth control was difficult and, because the Tuna sometimes tended to swim from high to low, looking at them through a viewfinder for extended periods – especially when detached from the visual references provided by the edges of the pen – was quite disorientating. Despite being

used to flying at very high altitudes and speeds in fighter aircraft, diving inside the pen gave me something that I had not experienced before; a hint of vertigo. The dive was thus a very unusual experience in its own right.

I am far from an expert photographer, but I did start with a plan and managed to take a few shots that still remind me of the incredible experience, although they tend to lack the rich colour that I have managed in some other photographs. My set up was a Nikon D300 in a Subal housing (I absolutely love this camera), with a Tokina 10-17mm lens and the associated dome port. On the end of some buoyancy arms, I had a combination of Inon and Sea & Sea strobes. Manual settings all round work well for me, but it always takes some trial and error to get the lighting right. Although I try to slightly under-expose my shots as a rule, the pass distances of the fish varied enough to make many of the pictures very under-exposed. Because the fish were moving quite fast (and because I have not yet developed enough confidence to use more creative techniques), I generally used shutter speeds of 1/100 or faster and then simply varied the F-Stop and power of the strobes. I found that the D300's auto tracking modes worked extremely well and I had learned enough about them to experiment effectively. The lens provided such a good depth of field that even manual focus worked, but I found that the Nikon's 3D and Auto tracking modes were very well suited to the conditions. Although it was difficult to predict which fish would make a close pass for a good full-frame shot, by selecting a fish that was initially distant, but pure head on, and then by focusing, holding half action on the shutter and tracking it until the composition looked good, I managed to catch a few half-decent fish portraits.



The Tuna create a downward vortex as they shoal. Subal Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, 1/250th @ F5.6 ISO 100

Unfortunately, because the action was continuous and shot opportunities constantly upon me, I tried to take so many that I failed to evaluate my performance properly whilst in the water. This meant that I did reasonably well with some of the compositions, but I failed to be consistent enough with the exposures – or to try out any new techniques.

What would I do next time? I would force

myself to stop every 5 shots or so, evaluate more closely how I was doing, and then adjust the parameters accordingly. I would also try rear curtain flash with some much slower shutter speeds and some without strobes, using manual white balance. I had worked out those particular opportunities before the dive, but failed to keep to that part of the plan once I became mesmerised by 1000 swirling Tuna. However, it was a memorable dive. I was pleased to learn more about the Bluefin Tuna, was very saddened by its plight, but overjoyed to see these magnificent fish in what at times felt like open water. I hope to repeat this experience, hopefully some time in 2010, but with a little more discipline and thought applied to my photography.

Finally, although slightly disappointed with the difficulty that I had experienced getting some colour into the Tuna photographs, I was very encouraged by one other unexpected opportunity in Malta. From our very first dives, we had been seeing dozens of bright yellow jellyfish. The locals told us that it was a seasonal effect in Malta. We eventually saw thousands of these creatures; there were even some inside the Tuna pen. They are known locally as fried egg jellyfish, but more correctly as *cotylorhiza tuberculata*. They were quite big (about 50cm in diameter) and, having



Hundreds of Jellyfish set against the Azure Window just off the Island of Gozo. Subal Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 at 10mm, 1/80th @ F9 ISO 200 Magic filter

only mild venom, provided great potential to get close for photography. We saw them in open water, in most of the entry and exit points (we did a good deal of shore-based diving), and in huge concentrations around some sites, where the currents had brought them together. We even found some inside small caves. I had never photographed a Jellyfish before, but recalled Martin Edge telling me about his iconic shot of one, which had set him on the path to seriously pursuing underwater photography. He had emphasised in his book (and in his

lesson to me a couple of years ago), to look for subjects with potential. These Jellyfish screamed exactly that at me, because I had a patient dive buddy and time to think through the shots. I had also just finished reading an article about composition using opposites on the colour wheel and was struck by the opportunity to set bright yellow against deep blue. With a 10-17mm lens, no strobes (but using a Magic filter), I was able to get very close to the jellyfish and pick out the colour; it did indeed contrast well. Whither Palau with these wonderful



subjects so easily accessible in the Mediterranean?!

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