Muck diving in Florida

by Kristian Taylor

All too often we read articles about the amazing dive sites found offshore from secluded islands, far removed from the impacts of population centers. Locations such as the Fiji Islands, Roatan and the outer islands of the Bahamas come to mind. Very few of us ever look closer to home for potential dive sites that are only a car ride away. While I am not making the claim that local dive sites might match the water clarity and marine biodiversity found in the previously mentioned locations, all I am saying is that we should never overlook potential muck diving opportunities if they are available.

Let me begin by saying muck diving isn't always easy and glamorous. Muck diving can be difficult, dirty, tiresome and frustrating. It is adventurous. It can be extremely rewarding and can open up brand new diving opportunities. For those of you unfamiliar with the term, muck diving refers to diving nontraditional sites. These include marinas, canals and bridges. (Please note: it goes without saying that the necessary precautions should always be taken when diving areas such as these, and of course to make sure diving is permitted.) These locations tend to have an enormous human footprint. Whether it is trash thrown overboard from passing boats, or leftovers from fish cleaning stations, the seafloor tends to be covered with debris. Nonetheless, this anthropogenic bottom can produce a unique environment for benthic creatures. In no way am I encouraging trash to be thrown overboard to build a benthic habitat. Rather, in areas such as marinas, canals and bridges, where trash has already been dumped, I think you would be surprised to see what marine creatures have turned it into a home. I have seen eels treat empty bottles as a personal den, car tires filled with spiny lobster, stop signs become a home for stone crabs. Dives like these, while maybe not holding the same color palette as a traditional coral reef, can be done for a fraction of the cost.

Personally, I feel that these

Orange seahorse found in the open, ISO 400, Aperture - auto, shutter speed - auto. Stylus 1030sw, with the Olympus housing (PT-043) and Remora Pro Set strobe.

Banded Jawfish, ISO 300, Aperture - auto, shutter speed - auto, Stylus 1030sw, with the Olympus housing (PT-043) and Remora Pro Set strobe.

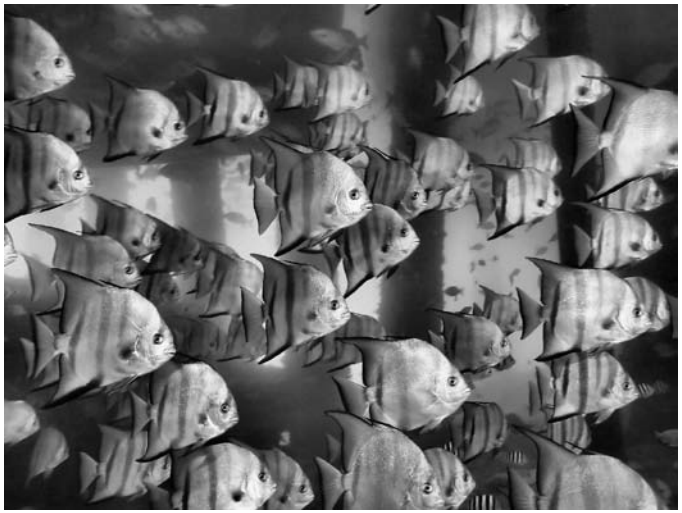
Molly Miller, ISO 400, Aperture - auto, shutter speed - auto, Stylus 1030sw, with the Olympus housing (PT-043) and Remora Pro Set strobe.

Stareyed Hermit Crab, ISO 300, Aperture - auto, shutter speed - auto. Stylus 1030sw, with the Olympus housing (PT-043) and Remora Pro Set strobe

unorthodox dive sites offer many scenarios for not only unique experiences but also distinctive photograph opportunities. It's a different brand of diving that I think few even consider, but those that give it a go tend to be pleasantly surprised - depending on where you go, some of the sights might surprise you.

For my most recent muck dive I decided to try something different and went inland towards the intercoastal waterway near West Palm Beach (Florida, USA). Just north of Peanut Island, the Blue Heron Bridge spans Lake Worth, less than one 2 km in from the Atlantic Ocean. This is a unique area in that while it is separated from the Atlantic by barrier islands, a large cut exists 2 km to the south that provides an exchange of water between the intercoastal waterway and open ocean waters. This exchange provides an ample supply of larvae, and in some cases large pelagics, to populate the bridge environment. The proximity of the bridge to the open water pass produces strong tidal currents in the area. Based on the conditions of this particular dive, it was important to get into the water about one hour before high tide. This allowed for a bottom time of approximately 1.5 hours before the outgoing tide picked up and visibility dropped as interior water was flushed out.

I heard that this bridge offers a unique muck diving opportunity in an area of Florida that otherwise offers fairly limited diving opportunities. I must confess that the topside surroundings of this potential dive site gave little reason to believe that it was worth my time. The bridge experiences heavy traffic, a local public park was quite crowded, small recreational boats were seen buzzing around slightly offshore and a marina situated along the southeast side of the bridge seemed quite popular. However, this sight only worked to make the diving all that impressive. Utilizing an available beach entry and approaching the first bridge columns revealed an environment teeming with marine life. Large schools of Atlantic Spadefish were hovering in the main channel along with Bermuda chub as well as the occasional bar jack. Visibility approached 15 m as the tide was still coming in and clear ocean water was pouring through the pass. Continuing eastward along the line



School of Atlantic Spadefish moving under a bridge, ISO 100, Aperture - auto, shutter speed - auto, Stylus 1030sw, with the Olympus housing (PT-043) and Remora Pro Set strobe.

of columns revealed two small wrecks. The two seemed to be small motor craft and must have been down for several years based on the encrustation covering all available surfaces. Hydroids and sponges seemed to add more color to the boat than any paint could provide.

The bottoms of the columns were covered in arrowhead crabs, banded cleaner shrimp and juvenile spiny lobsters. Further out among the muck, and with a careful eye might I add, scorpion fish, batfish and eyed-flounder peppered the bottom. With a rocky flooring covered by scattered debris such as car tires, trash and algae, this area demonstrated the amazing camouflage schemes evolved by the many benthic fishes that call it home.

From a photographer's viewpoint, this dive provided many unique opportunities. As mentioned before, small invertebrates covered the base of the bridge columns where they plunged into the seafloor. This provided a perfect scenario to use the macro lens. However, the backdrop of soft corals and colorful sponges on the column itself added some color, so too narrow of a field of view would take away from the distinctive backdrop. (I would like to point out though that you should never get too caught up in macro photography: as I was shooting several arrowhead crabs, two large manatees swam right above me on their way down the bridge.) Such challenges are common during a dive that doesn't follow the traditional scope and design of an ocean reef. Lighting issues were ever present as we moved in and out of the shadows cast by the bridge and columns. While this provided difficulties in adjusting for correct lighting, it produced a perfect scene for some great black and white images. Incorporating the bridge columns into wide angle shots only added to the great black and white contrast between the sunlit areas and those under the bridge. As a personal preference, I enjoy using black and white settings as well to capture the benthic creatures found in and around the trash that is scattered on the bottom. It's important to keep in mind that on muck dives such as this one, the color of the trash-strewn bottom away from the bridge columns isn't the best backdrop for colorful images. Therefore, by switching to black and white I was able to pull out some nice images that show how easily the subject matter blended into the background, without producing an image overly greenish brown.

Shooting underwater on a muck dive requires a little experimentation, and a change from normal procedures. Although color can be found, the hues tend to be more bland as a result of the muddy bottom. Nevertheless, situations like this are capable of producing interesting black and white images and are very enjoyable dives nonetheless.

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