

The 'golden islands' of the French Riviera

by Jean-Philippe Borges

From Marseille to Nice, the French Mediterranean coast is dotted with beautiful islands and islets. Who has never seen paradisiac pictures with beautiful white sand, big blue waves meeting red jagged coasts ? Here we are : some are very well known for tourism, others completely wild. Near Toulon, well known French navy harbour, we can meet one of those fantastic islands, in front of Hyeres peninsula : the island of Porquerolles. With the National Parc of Port-Cros, to the east, those two islands can be called the 'Golden islands of the French Riviera'.

The National Park of Port-Cros, created in 1963, is one of the oldest national park in France. It's also the first european marine park, with around 1300 hectares of marine protected surfaces. Around the islet of 'la Gabiniere', maybe the most known diving site near the park, any diver can meet big families of groupers, surrounded by walls of barracudas. The legend says 'behind every rock you can find a grouper or a moray-eel... and sometimes both of them'.

This is a legend, but during some dives in summer, this legend comes true. Also, a strong current is always present and a lot of fishes come around to feed. It's always a good diving site to prospect, following the current with open-eyes.

The island of Porquerolles, not included in the Marine Park, is less known for diving. Its orientation (East-West) allow divers to always find a good point to make incredible dives. Because of the ligurian current that pushes out the Rhone's cloudy waters, the visibility is incomparable and water is really clear almost all the year : here you can find all the best conditions to see fishes coming around to feed, hunt and make their reproduction.

There's no 'good season' to dive here : it's possible and very interesting all the year. The best is to find accomodation on the island and dive with the 'Ileo Porquerolles diving center' (www.ileo-porquerolles.fr). This is the best diving center in the zone, with very good divemasters who know all the good places.



The northern part of the island is not very deep, with a lot of diving sites surrounded by important surfaces of Ocean grass-wrack (less than 20 meters depth). A lot of small fishes find good places to feed and make nurseries. The very rare fan mussel (*Perna nobilis*) can be found in this healthy ecosystem. For divers who



Red gorgonias feeding in the current on a small wall Fuji S2 Aquatica Nikon 10,5mm fisheye Nikon SB-800 in Fantasea housing and Nikon SB-28 in Subal housing, F9,5 1/125 ISO160



The ecosystem of ocean grass in the Mediterranean Sea *Fuji S2Aquatica*
Tokina 10-17mm fisheye at 14mm *Nikon SB-800 in Fantasea housing and*
Nikon SB-28 in Subal housing F13 1/60 ISO160

want to find relatively rare things underwater, ocean grass-wracks are the good candidates. If you are lucky, you'll be able to find some little 'ocean grass-wrack anemones', with beautiful purple tentacles. A lot of species live around or between the roots of this marine plant, like very small green sea-slugs. Also, at the eastern part, some diving sites like 'the two brothers', 'the policeman' are full of fishes and hidden sea slugs. When the current is stronger, groups of barracudas come around to find

their prey. At the same moment, some giant but isolated balls of 10 meters of diameter, full of little fishes like sardines try to keep them safe from these incredible predators.

On the same diving site, the biggest can meet the littlest. Between some sunken peaks, around 25 meters deep, big gorgonias can be a perfect and safe place for small seaslugs and shrimps. Also, you can find on the yellow ones, some white simnia like *Neosimnia spelta*.

The western part of the island is



Family » of hervias (Cratena peregrina), during their period of reproduction in summer *Canon S1* *Canon Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries*
Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000, F8 1/40 ISO100

deeper, with some dives between 25 and 50 meters depth. There, between some very big red gorgonias, it's not rare to find the 'gorgon's head' (*Astrospartus mediterraneus*). This specie are very strange to look at, with so many little 'arms' and 'fingers'. When you go on the top of the rocks, at around 25 meters, some moray-eels and congers live in little rifts. Almost all of them must share those narrow habitats with shrimps and other crustaceans. This is the most incredible part of those dives : the

'dentist's show'. Red Mediterranean shrimps are often inside the mouths of both moray-eels and congers to feed and make like dentists are supposed to do with your teeth : to clean them. It's not very rare to see both congers and moray-eels in the same little tiny rift, with 2 to 8 red shrimps trying to feed at the same moment. Of course, the sound made by your bubbles can spook them, but most of the time, they continue work regardless. If you are lucky, you'll also be able to find some incredible yellow white-spotted sea-



(Top left) Common mediterranean moray-eel with a red shrimp trying to clean his host. Canon S1, Canon Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000 F8 1/40 ISO 100

(Left) Small purple-pointed anemona on a leaf of the green ocean grass. Fuji S2, Aquatica, Nikon 60mm AF-D macro Nikon SB-800 in Fantasea housing and Nikon SB-28 in Subal housing F16 1/15 ISO 200

(Above) Head of a mediterranean grouper (Epinephelus marginatus). Canon S1 Canon Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000 F8 1/30 ISO 100

(Top right) The rare « Phyllidia flava » sea-slug, feeding on a wall of gorgonias and hydrozoarians. Canon S1 Canon Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries, Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000 F8 1/40 ISO100

slugs, like the 'phyllidias' (Phyllidia flava). This little sea-slug feeds on some particular red and orange sponges. So, first thing is to find the correct sponge... and second to find the yellow phyllidia.

Some other diving sites are less deep, like the little wreck in the center of the northern part. The 'Cimentier' is well known for hervias (Cratena peregrina). This diving site, used all summer for 'discover scuba diving'



and 'bubble-maker' initial diving courses, is no more than 8-12 meters deep. Between little rocks and ball-algas, some green anemones can be encountered. This is the perfect habitat for a beautiful tiny shrimp : the amethyst partner shrimp (Periclimenes amethysteus). With long and purple/transparent arms, this shrimp is very difficult to find because of its size : maximum 3 centimeters in 15-20 centimeters green tentacles of the anemone. It's always a great moment to see this animal, like a dancer in the anemone, going slowly from a tentacle to another. Some bigger fishes, like groupers are quite common but as we aren't in a marine park, they are pretty wild. It's very difficult to get closer than few meters.

Inside the ocean grass-wrack

areas, some normal and other painted combers can be found ; most of them protecting their eggs. Also, a lot of tiny red blackfaced or standard blennies are always around the divers, trying to look better at what is going one. Some of them can be found with a small crustacean behind their face : some anilocras, or 'fish-fleas'. Some can be taken off when fishes try to scrub, but most of them will remain attached and will continue to act as a leech until the death of their host.

Nevertheless, the diving sites are really full of life and, if you can spend a little extra time trying to find it, you'll really enjoy your dives. The diving centers in this area have a lot of dive sites so it'll be very unlucky if you have go diving with a lot of people at the same time. Other diving

sites, in the eastern part of the island, are deeper and can be part of another article of this incredible diving area : the wrecks of the 'Donator' and the 'Greek'. Two, at least, very fantastic dives around 45-55 meters depth. If you like trimix and CCR, you'll enjoy for sure.

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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.

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Size - Maximum length 15cm i.e. horizontal pictures would be 15 cm wide and verticals would be 15cm.

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