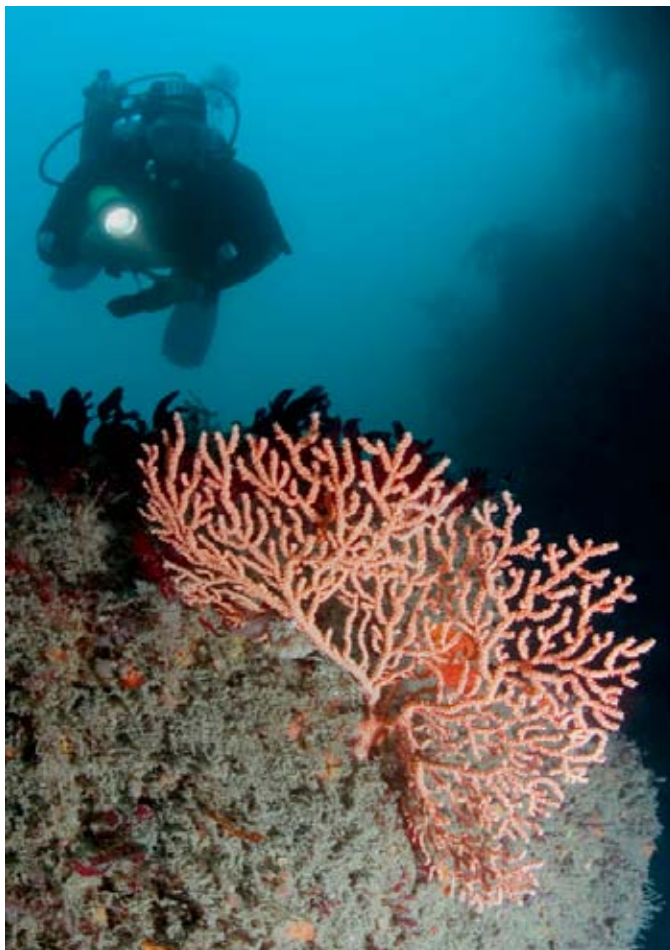


Diving in Sark

with Sue Daly

There can be few environments as challenging for a photographer than being underwater. Lighting and simply staying still are difficult, let alone the time constraints imposed by air supply and nitrogen levels. Add to that the complications of keeping electronics dry in a thoroughly wet atmosphere and every successful underwater image becomes a small miracle. When it comes to diving in the British Isles the challenge is greater with cold seas, turbid waters and often less than benign weather. With the right British location though I think the rewards are worthy of the challenge. Good images from our home waters have the added element of surprise, revealing the colour, beauty and diversity of British marine life.

The tiny Channel Island of Sark is one of those locations and lying some eighty miles south of the mainland offers a few 'exotic' southern species to a long list of marine life which make excellent subjects. Add good visibility, interesting topography and an excellent, underwater-photographer-friendly dive boat and you have the perfect ingredients for a great British dive destination. Diving here is mainly a mixture of submerged reefs and granite islets. The largest of the latter is L'Étac, an islet to the south of Sark. The triangular pinnacle continues underwater to over fifty metres in a series of walls, gullies and boulder slopes. Below the kelp forest Fan Corals and Red Fingers Soft Coral grace the walls providing the perfect focal points for wide angle shots while a multitude of sponges and anemones add yet more colour. This is also one of the areas where you'll find the stunning yellow



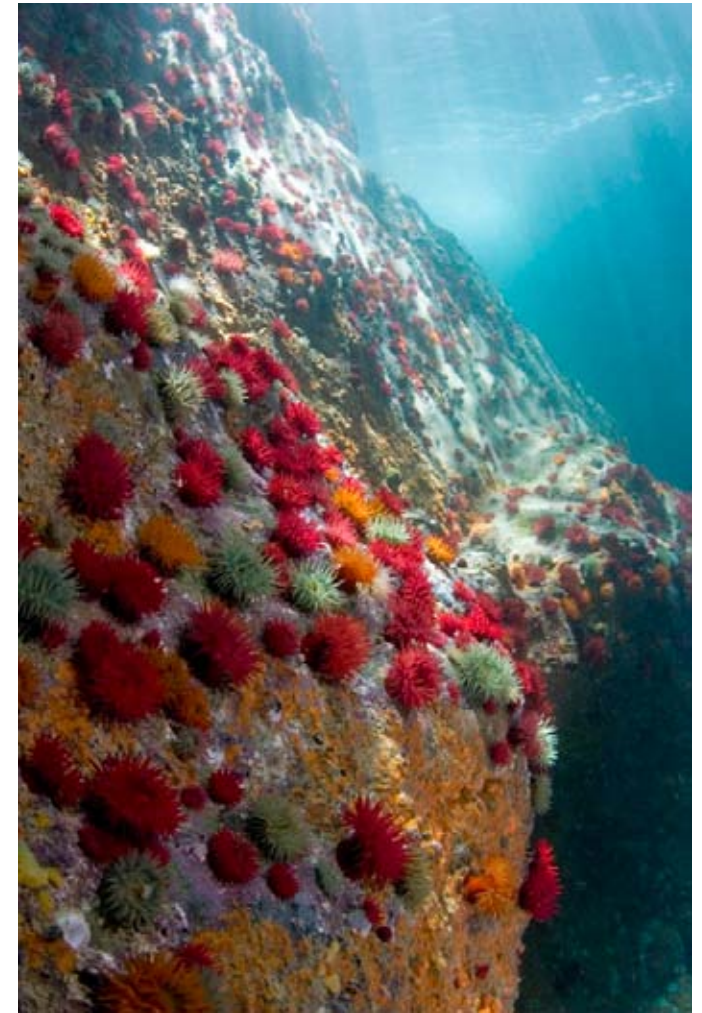
*(Above) Red Fingers Soft Coral
Canon EOS 40D in Sea & Sea housing with two Sea
& Sea strobes, YS90 & YS110
Sigma 10-20mm lens at 16mm, f11, 1/80, ISO200*

*(Left) Diver & Fan Coral
Canon EOS 10D in Sea & Sea housing with Sea
& Sea strobe YS90, Sigma 15mm lens, f5.6, 1/60,
ISO100*



Sunset Cup Coral, a southern species recorded at just a handful of sites on the mainland and a superb close up subject. To the north-east lies the Vingt Clos, a submerged reef with walls so sheer that you feel as if you're swimming along side a huge wreck. The corals and superabundance of Jewel Anemones make it another great spot for wide angle work with Conger Eels, Lobsters and Cuttlefish for closer shots.

Working anti-clockwise around the island you'll encounter the reefs of Ecrillais, Grune du Nord, Pavlaison, Guillaumesse and Boue Tirlipois, a variety of pinnacles, walls and gullies smothered in marine life and topped with a mop of kelp. It's in the deeper reaches of the kelp that the Cuckoo Wrasse live, the stars of many underwater pictures from Sark. Territorial and inquisitive, both the iridescent blue and orange males and the



*(Above) Beadlet Anemones in the Gouliot Caves
Canon EOS 10D in Sea & Sea housing with Sea & Sea strobe YS90 ,Sigma 15mm lens,f9, 1/60, ISO100*

*(Left) Lobster
Canon EOS 10D in Sea & Sea housing with Sea & Sea strobe YS90 ,Canon 28-80mm lens at 30mm, f5.6, 1/60, ISO100*



*(Far left) Anemone Prawn Periclimenes sagittifer in Snakelocks Anemone
Canon EOS 40D in Sea & Sea housing with two Sea & Sea strobes, YS90 & YS110, Canon EF 100mm lens, f20, 1/80, ISO200*

*(Left) Jewel Anemones
Canon EOS 40D in Sea & Sea housing with two Sea & Sea strobes, YS90 & YS110, Canon EF 100mm lens, f13, 1/80, ISO200*

*(Above) Cuckoo Wrasse, male
Canon EOS 10D in Sea & Sea housing with Sea & Sea strobe YS90, Canon 28-80mm lens at 38mm, f4, 1/30, ISO400*

peach-coloured females have a charming habit of swimming towards divers as if inspecting our equipment. (They seem particularly interested in strobes.) They make a colourful addition to a wide angle shot and often put themselves in the frame, whether you wanted one there or not. When it comes to taking their portrait, Cuckoo Wrasse have an infuriating tendency to swim right up to the lens forcing the photographer backwards to focus. Either

the Wrasse are reacting to their reflection in the lens or they're fish with a sense of humour! They appear to enjoy being centre of attention and, should your concentration shift to another subject, they will often deliver a sharp nip to remind you who's most beautiful.

As elsewhere in the British Isles, Tompot Blennies in Sark seem un-afraid of divers and keen to model for close up and even macro shots. For

something a little more unusual keep a sharp eye open for Black-faced Blennies which are found at most sites, particularly on vertical walls. The female of this southern, thumb-sized species is dappled brown and easy to overlook but the male is a different matter. Orangey-brown with dark bars, in the presence of a female he changes colour in seconds to bright yellow with a dark face and bright blue fin edges. In spring and early summer



*(Far left) Tompot Blenny
Canon EOS 40D in Sea & Sea housing
with two Sea & Sea strobes, YS90 &
YS110, Canon EF 100mm lens, f18,
1/80, ISO200*



*(Left) Black-face Blenny, male
Canon EOS 10D in Sea & Sea housing
with Sea & Sea strobe YS90 Canon EF
100mm lens, f6.3, 1/60, ISO100*

he dances around his mate in a figure of eight flaunting his splendid colours while the female wriggles before him. When she's ready to mate the male trembles by her side, fertilising an egg as she lays it before returning to his flamboyant display. It's a charming courtship display during which both sexes are easy to approach and photograph, even quite closely.

Blennies aren't the only good macro subjects around Sark. Studies of soft and fan coral polyps create stunning images as do Jewel and Yellow Cluster Anemones and Devonshire Cup Corals. In spring

and early summer there's no shortage of nudibranchs including the well camouflaged Sea Fan Nudibranch. The flamboyant Candy-striped Flatworm is a favourite of mine, as are the Lightbulb Sea Squirts it feeds on. Top of the macro list here though must be *Periclimenes sagittifer*, the beautiful, purple-striped prawn which lives amongst the tentacles of the Snakelocks anemone.

While the reef diving around Sark is the main attraction, for me the most spectacular site is also the shallowest; the Gouliot Caves. Weaving through the western most

headland of the island, they form a complex of tunnels from narrow slits and gullies to wider, boulder-strewn caverns. Most importantly, the caves are open to the sea on both sides of the headland so water sweeps through with the ebb and flow of the tide allowing a wealth of marine life to thrive on the rocky walls.

The dive begins on the north side of the headland a couple of hours after high water. There's nothing to see of the entrance above water but underwater a triangular opening begins a couple of metres below the surface. Ten metres or so in the ceiling

lowers and the pebbly seabed rises slightly to give the impression that the way forward could be too narrow but there's plenty of room without scraping your equipment from above or below. It's here that I've often encountered a shoal of Grey Mullet startled by my sudden appearance. (It's hard to say who jumps the most!)

This is the Sponge Cave, the darkest part of the dive and where you'll most need your torch. The walls are carpeted in Oaten Pipe Hydroids giving them a fluffy appearance but, as its name suggests, the most dominant creatures here are the sponges. Further on there's a patch of peach-coloured Plumose Anemones, a common species around much of Britain but something of a rarity this far south. The cave widens now with plenty of room for two or more divers side by side and the walls are dominated by red, orange and green Beadlet Anemones in their thousands. Look closely and you'll see the string



Sunset Cup Coral
Canon EOS 40D in Sea & Sea housing with two Sea & Sea strobes, YS90 & YS110, Canon 18-55mm lens at 55mm, f13, 1/80, ISO200

hue of the rainbow. Everywhere else there are yet more Beadlet Anemones and it's worth going up to the surface to see them all stuck to the walls out of water like thousands of giant fruit gums. Back underwater the tide gradually begins taking you through the Jewel Cave. Jewel Anemones take over in force now, the only place I know where you'll see them this shallow. In between are grey lobes of Elephant Hide Sponge, bright yellow masses of Boring Sponge and green sheets of Breadcrumb Sponge. By now the light and tide are getting stronger. Fluffy fingers of Soft Coral emerge from the walls which widen towards the exit and all too soon you're swept through an archway of kelp into Havre Gosselin, the bay on the south side of the headland where your boat will be waiting. If you've timed it right you'll have enjoyed at least forty minutes in the caves and your depth gauge will barely have touched five metres.

The greatest difficulty with the Gouliot Caves is deciding which lens to take. The shafts of sun highlighting the gem-like colours

of the Jewel Cave makes a stunning wide angle subject, especially with a well-briefed diver adding scale. For close up and macro work the anemones and hydroids provide endless opportunities and both attract nudibranchs which feed on them. Either way, it's a challenging location with surge even on a calm day (some extra weight on your belt helps) and a short tidal window but a real Sark diving highlight.

A visit to Sark though isn't just about great diving but a chance to experience the tranquility of an un-spoilt, car-free island. Walking or cycling are the only ways to get around unless you indulge yourself and hire a horse-drawn carriage and driver. There are miles of picturesque footpath to discover along with endless wildflowers and butterflies. From the water you'll see Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Fulmars and, if you're really lucky, a breathtaking display of aerobatics from the resident Peregrine Falcons. Add to this a choice of eating places offering cream teas and fresh local seafood and you can see why so many visitors return to Sark year after year. For more information visit www.sark.info

Sark Diving Services www.sarkci.com offer week long deals which include six days diving from the hard boat Starfish and accommodation in a shared, self-

catering cottage. The package includes foot passenger travel from either Poole or Weymouth on the Condor high speed ferry which means no worries about trying to cram your dive gear and camera kit into a mean airline baggage allowance. Tanks, weights and air are included and nitrox is available as an add on. I run underwater photography and marine identification workshops in association with Sark Diving Services.

Sue Daly

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of iridescent blue 'beads' just beneath their tentacles which give them their name.

Ahead there's light glowing greeny-blue around either side of a rock column reaching up to the surface. It doesn't matter which side of it you go, both ways take you into the beautifully named Jewel Cave, the highlight of the dive. The walls here are plastered in anemones in every shade possible, spot lit by sunlight shafting down from above. Pink, white and orange Elegant Anemones crowd the base of the rock along with patches of Jewel Anemones in every

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