

Muck diving, French style

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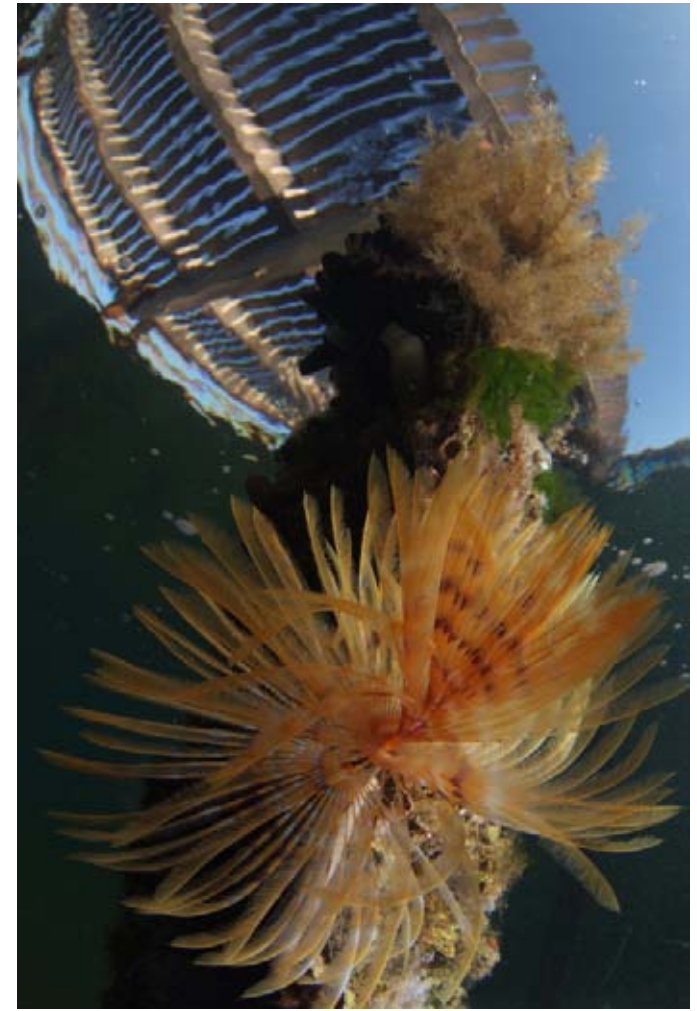
When you speak about muck diving with other uw photographers, the same locations always come up : Lembeh Strait, Malaysia etc. Of course, most muck diving is done in Southeast Asia where there are more marine species than anywhere else in the world. Places like Mabul and Kapalai in Sabah, Malaysia, Lembeh Straits in Manado, Indonesia and Bali are the most popular because of the amazing creatures found in the muck. However there also good muck dives here in Europe but they are not well known. Moreover, some of the most interesting ones are kept hidden so as not to allow a lot of diver's fins to affect the area. With beautiful fauna, diversity and various type of dives, we are going today to present two of them, located in the south of France with the aim of finding two things : incredible fauna and moreover some 'Hippo' families.

There are no pygmy seahorses in European waters just two different species - the long-snouted seahorse *Hippocampus guttulatus* and the short-snouted *Hippocampus hippocampus*. Seahorses are grouped with pipefishes, pipehorses and seadragons as members of the family Syngnathidae. If you look at the morphology of those fishes, they don't seem to share anything in common but pipefishes look like seahorses that have been



Seagrass area of Zostera in Thau, during a cold period but with very clear waters in January Fuji S2 Pro, Aquatica Tokina 10-17mm fisheye at 10mm, 2 Inon Z-220, F8, 1/200 ISO 100

straightened and stretched until they are long and narrow. What is very well known about them is their way of reproduction (laboratory and aquarium observations). The female seahorse produces the



Spiral tube-worm on a oyster farm in Thau. Fuji S2 Pro, Aquatica, Tokina 10-17mm fisheye at 10mm, 2 Inon Z-220, F13, 1/40, ISO 100

ovums and the male the sperm. Then, the male becomes pregnant as the female deposits ovums into the male's brood pouch. Then, the ovums are fertilized and become eggs. Pregnancy can last

30 days (depending on the species) and, during the breeding season, males can go through more than one pregnancy. 100 to 300 young are released per pregnancy. They look like miniature adult seahorses and are fully independent after birth, receiving no further parental care (more info at Seahorse Project : <http://seahorse.fisheries.ubc.ca>).

In the South of France, seahorses are found in a large number of different diving sites but only 2 or 3 locations host large and abundant populations. The long-snouted can be easily seen in the laguna of Thau and the short-snouted in the channel of Hossegor in the south of France.

The Laguna of Thau

A laguna ? Yes you can find a big laguna in the South of France bordered by the Mediterranean Sea. It is around 20 km long and 5 km wide ; not unlike the more famous Laguna Vaneta in Italy. Between Beziers and Montpellier, near the unfortunately famous 'blue tuna harbour' of Sete, the Laguna of Thau is a really special marine ecosystem. Dives are not deep, with practically no current at all. Visibility can be very good, but typically only a few meters depending on the location and surface wind.

Some families of seahorses live there and the most famous diving site is called 'Le ponton', surrounded by a decades old garbage area where it is easy to find old washing machines, TVs as well as mounds of plastic stuff. Some of this was dumped near the coast and, unfortunately for the environment, are now few feet underwater. As a result, during your dive, you'll be able to drive a 4x4, be the captain of some very old boats (now wrecks) and find some amazingly designed metal sculptures (could be good for uw modern art). But



Long-snouted seahorse with yellow colours and white spot. Fuji S2 Pro Aquatica Nikon 105mm AF-D macro, 2 Inon Z-220, F40, 1/125, ISO 100

the most amazing is that the ecosystem seems to have adapted well and has actually taken advantage of all this specific environment.

Previously, crossing the area and reaching the coast was sometimes completely impossible to do without a big 4x4 (thanks Mr Land Rover



Short-snouted seahorse with brown colours. Canon S1, Canon housing, Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries, Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000, F8, 1/80, ISO 50

!). Now it's much easier to get to and park on the 'ponton'. This is located near the big channel of Sete, which forms a bridge between the laguna and the Mediterranean. Firstly, the channel brings salt water and marine life. Fishes, worms, crustaceans and molluscs grow because they can find interesting



(Left) Classic peacock blenny, the ‘clown-fish’ of the laguna of Thau. Canon S1, Canon housing, Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries, Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000, F8, 1/60, ISO 100

(Above) Red-finger nudibranch. Fuji S2 Pro, Aquatica, Nikon 105mm AF-D macro, 2 Inon Z-220, F22, 1/125, ISO 100

(Top right) Common green pipefish, feeding near the mussel sand. Canon S1, Canon, Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries, Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000, F8, 1/30, ISO 50

(Right) Black Polycera with yellow spots feeding on a seagrass. Fuji S2 Pro, Aquatica, Nikon 105mm AF-D macro, 2 Inon Z-220, F22, 1/250, ISO 200

hiding places underwater (thanks Ariston, Philips and one more time Mr Land Rover. Also, clear water comes from some rivers situated in the northern part of the laguna and salt/clear mixing water here make an amazing ecosystem.

Diving the laguna is really well documented by sea slugs experts. As a lot of species are found only in this area in Europe, it's becoming a real big sea

slugs hotspot. Also, a lot of different types of fishes can be found (depending on the season). But here, after seahorses and sea-slugs, the third member of this famous laguna is the peacock blenny *Salaria pavo*. Underwater, it's like a clown, allowing very funny shots during the mating seasons.

But for French uw photographers, Thau means one thing - seahorses. Some people say, before

your first dive in this area « If you don't see any, it's because you dived with your eyes closed. Keep them open and you will see them». Well, of course, that's not totally true but it's also not 100% wrong and, sometimes, it's really like coming back to childhood times and having a ride on the merry-go-rounds. Each time you make a round, you find one of them. Most of the observed seahorses



Common prawn, feeding on red colonial seasquirt. Canon S1, Canon housing, Home-made +10 macro lens with +4 dioptries, Sea&Sea YS-90Auto and Inon D-2000, F8, 1/80, ISO 50

sand, maybe trying to find a warm place to hibernate during winter. Not much is known about them but scientists observed that, at least during the breeding season, most seahorse species studied exhibit high site-fidelity and small home ranges. It explains why they can be found in this laguna, very close to the sea.

Capbreton-Hossegor and Notre Dame bridge

The second 'Hippo' hotspot is located close to the Atlantic coast, between the Basque Country and the city of Bordeaux. Capbreton-Hossegor, well known for summer surfing festivals, is a small harbour with not a lot of dive sites. The coast is flat and sandy but some very deep dives can be had few miles off the coast. But here, as in the laguna of Thau, a peaceful and not very deep dive site is located in a small channel. This channel forms a link between the ocean and the lake of Hossegor and, as at Thau, it allows the life to grow with a permanent exchange of salt/

clear water and nutrients. Under the Notre Dame bridge, at around 7-8m deep, a very large family of seahorses and other pipefishes can be found. Less coloured than their cousins of Thau, seahorses are coloured darker (from brown to black). A few of them are yellow or orange, but only the short-snouted seahorses *Hippocampus hippocampus* are found in this dive site. Depending on the season, you can also find a lot of schools of various fish, like triggerfishes and seabreams.

Both of these dive sites are really full of life, and as an uw

photographer, we are sure you'll enjoy your muck dives in these seahorse paradises.

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in the laguna of Thau are from the specie *Hippocampus guttulatus*, also called 'long-snouted seahorse'. The most abundant color is yellow, with hundreds of little and tiny white spots. Some with big long spines and others with nothing on their head. There doesn't appear to be a difference between 2 different species just different 'decoration'.

During the coldest months, when the water temperature can drop to 3 or 4 °C (with ice on the coast some years ago), it's completely impossible to find any of them. A lot are maybe in the sea close by, waiting for a warmer season. At the end of autumn, some can be found in the

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