Stepping off the Lizard

by Mark Webster

Photographers are fussy creatures. We want bright light, calm seas, good visibility, plenty of subjects and endless time in the water. These needs are rarely all fulfilled at the same time but we can improve the odds sometimes by being selective with the type of diving we plan.

For many divers, diving from the beach is something you have to do whilst training and is often not considered once you have those first few qualifying dives under your belt. However, for photographers, beach diving is often an ideal choice as the schedule is not dictated by a boat and possibly by divers and a guide who have no interest in the perfect image. It is not always necessary to venture far offshore for good subjects and the beach diving option often offers a much more relaxed approach to diving without the need to consider the needs others and if you are happy to dive on your own then you won't even need to be concerned about a buddy!

On my home patch in Cornwall, perhaps the best beach dive is found at a cove called Porthkerris, which is situated on the eastern tip of the Lizard peninsula close to the villages of St. Keverne and Porthallow. In addition to outstanding beach diving it also provides excellent launch facilities and access to the infamous Manacles reef and numerous other reef and wreck sites offshore. The cove itself used to be leased by the BSAC (British Sub Aqua Club) from the Ministry of Defence as their "national" diving beach. During that period it was also used extensively by the RN Fleet Air Arm for training and monitoring weapons testing offshore.

The undercut wall on the east seaward side of Drawna Rock reef is covered in jewel anemones which extend to feed in the current. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/25.

Spider crabs are common here throughout the year and can be found on the seabed or on the reef wall and even climbing to the top of kelp fronds. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

When there is a little current on the back of the main reef you will find the dead men's fingers (Alcyonium digitatum) extended to feed. The colour of the background water will vary from blue to green dependant on plankton levels. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

Drawna Rocks dive route seen from above. Choose your own route once you are familiar with the dive site.

Whilst the Navy still retain a building on the beach, the remainder is now under private ownership and is operated as the Porthkerris Diving and Watersports Centre which provides for all the needs of the visiting diver. Access to the water and car parking are excellent and the shore is only a few metres away from your car, so there are no long hikes with all your kit.

The beach at Porthkerris drops away quickly and there are several fringing reefs just offshore. The best dive is a reef at the northern end of the cove, known locally as Drawna Rocks, which breaks surface no more than 100m offshore even at high water. Behind these visible rocks a submerged reef arcs out still further offshore for a further 200m or so accessing depths of 20-25m dependant on the state of the tide. So you can explore everything from shallow inshore reef to deeper water topography all within a 300m swim from the shore. The dive is good at any state of the tide (distance to swim

Thornback rays used to be very common in Porthkerris cove. They are still here but you have to look carefully for them and I have found I see them more often at high water. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

and depth reduces at low water of course) but you must be cautious of stronger north east/south west currents on the seaward side of the reef during periods of spring tides - either stay inshore or time your dive for slack water unless you know the site well.

There is ample car parking at the northern end adjacent to the MOD building and a path down the rocks with a rope "banister rail" to help you up and down the steepest part. These rocks can be slippery when wet so exercise caution when your hands are full of expensive camera equipment. Enter the water on your left adjacent to a group of rocks close to the water's edge (these dry at low water) and opposite the largest of the surface breaking rocks, perhaps 100m offshore, and then surface swim to its

The shallow waters around the reef and close to shore have an abundance of seaweeds in the spring and summer. When the waters are calm you will often find that anemones like this snakelock have secured themselves at the top to improve their feeding prospects. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f22 1/250.

north western edge. During the summer this short swim takes you over beds of boot lace seaweed in the shallows and over other small patches of reef. I usually explore this area on my return swim, but

keep looking down as you swim as this is a favourite hunting ground for small shoals of large grey mullet which you can see darting through the weed forest below you. On reaching the large rock, dive and begin to swim east and seaward with the reef on your right shoulder. The seabed here is made up of heavy granite pebbles and shingle and so the visibility is often very good when there is no plankton. As you follow the reef the depth increases quite quickly from 6m or so at the start of the dive to 12-15m dependant on the state of the tide. This means that you get below the kelp line quite quickly which reveals the rock face on your right and its garlands of jewel anemones, tunicates, sea cucumbers and sponges. Don't ignore the seabed to your left as this is home to all sorts of bottom dwelling fish, crustaceans, tube worms, anemones and in the late summer months hordes of juvenile cuttlefish. Last summer I encountered a squadron of 16 shoaling together and the seabed was peppered with them showing off their camouflage skills.

The reef is dissected by a number of cuts and gullies all crying out to be explored, but your first dive here is best spent generally familiarising yourself with the topography and routing for your return. So, continue seaward until the reef wall terminates on your right and you encounter some large individual rocks which mark the beginning of the reef running further out into deeper water. Here, dependant on tide conditions, you can either continue seaward on the low reef to deeper water and return along the same route, or turn south along the "back" of the eastern face of the main reef. Along this back side of the reef there is a section of wall, slightly undercut in places, which reaches 4-5m in height before the reef forms a series of steps and ledges towards the surface. Because this face is exposed to tidal current it is covered with filter feeding dead men's fingers (soft corals), jewel anemones, hydroids, sponges and some small gorgonian sea fans which makes it quite colourful especially in the beam of a torch. The maximum depth here approaches 18-19m at high water and this area is home to several varieties of fish from marauding pollack and the occasional bass, ballan, goldsinney and corkwing wrasse, cheeky cuckoo wrasse who peer right into your mask and more unusual species such as red gurnard and John Dory's.

If you continue to follow this wall south you will come to the end of the first main "block" of reef and the reef becomes more dissected and broken, though no less massive. This area offers all sorts of gullies and undercuts to be explored and you can happily work your way along this area until the reef begins to rise on your right towards the end of this section, which is also seen as a surface breaking rock from the beach. Either follow the reef to the end and continue around towards the shore or take one of the gullies on your right to cross over it. If you have enough air then continue to explore the area on the shore side of the main reef which has numerous rock outcrops and weed beds that attract cuttlefish, dog fish and ballan wrasse with a harem of goldsinney wrasse feeding with them. From here you can either follow the patches of rock and reef on the

On the reef to the north east of Drawna Rocks you will find both dead men's fingers (Alcyonium digitatum) and outcrops of orange Ross Coral (Pentapora foliacea) which is in fact a colonial bryozoan. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/60.

There are dozens of tompot blennies to be found on the reefs at Porthkerris. Almost any crack or crevice can be home and they are normally very curious and bold. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.

Using a compact camera or DSLR system here will yield good results in both macro and wide angle. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

John Dory's are one of the most striking looking fish in UK waters and are more common than you might think. They are very difficult to spot in the weed and then require a great deal of patience from the photographer to get close. This one eventually accepted me as he cruised through the shallows looking for two spot gobies to consume. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/125.

seabed on a compass bearing towards the shore (easiest if there is any tide running) or surface and swim back.

Once you have explored this largest section of reef you can try the alternative of swimming north east at the beginning when you reach the main reef block towards a series of smaller submerged reefs. These rocks are also swept by the current and so have their own cloak of soft corals, including red dead men's fingers, anemones and hydroids. In the summer months you will find this a good spot to watch corkwing wrasse nest building and you will often find thornback rays and cuttlefish buried in the sand on the east side. On the furthest and seaward side of these rocks are dense beds of hydroids which are an excellent spot to hunt for nudibranchs in the spring time.

If you choose to follow the reef seaward from the main reef then it is best to choose a slack water period and ensure you have a good compass bearing for your return and enough air for the swim. The reef gently peters out in 25m or so on a dark sandy seabed where there is a healthy scallop bed. Even on a neap tide the current out here can be quite strong as you are beyond the shelter of the headland, so be cautious and turn back with plenty of air as a surface swim can be extremely hard work!

If you make the swim offshore do be cautious of departing and returning boats either from the dive centre or visiting groups and clubs. The Manacles are a mere fifteen minutes away and the wreck of the Volnay only ten minutes ride, so when it is busy these boats run a shuttle service to and from the dive sites. Also, don't be too surprised if you meet something bigger than yourself out in the bay during the summer months. Last year several basking sharks cruised in within 100m of the

Drawna Rock reef seen from the beach at low water. To follow the route described enter the water between the rocks on the left hand side. Canon G11, ISO 200, Auto.

Divers boarding the dive centre catamaran Celtic Cat via the walkway that ensure you don't get your feet wet before the dive! Canon G11, ISO 200, Auto.

beach and a pod of dolphins made regular visits, so you never can tell what might turn up.

I normally dive on the main reef area and on the smaller reef to the north, particularly when looking for macro subjects. However do not ignore the bootlace weed beds and smaller reef blocks in very shallow water at the entry point. I quite often spend an entire dive here in the summer months looking for John Dory's and cuttlefish. One of the guides at the centre told me many years ago he had seen sea horses here, which of course I still dream of finding myself. But the John Dory's are more reliable, although they are very difficult to spot initially amongst the bootlace weed and once seen you need to be very patient to gain their confidence.

If you want to try something different then sample a dive at the south end of the cove. Here the reef is much shallower and has heavy kelp growth, but there are some deep gullies to be explored which are good for lobsters and more unusual species like the tiny but cute Cornish sucker fish found in reef crevices with squat lobsters, leopard spotted gobies and tompot blennies.

The cove nestles under high cliffs and is protected from the prevailing winds which are occasionally very strong from the south west. So you may have rough conditions offshore but Porthkerris cove is generally flat calm. The facilities here are very good and there is now a shop, compressor station and café on the beach together with toilets and showers. You can also camp here adjacent to the beach dive entry point for the complete outdoor experience. The owners are currently developing some new accommodation units and training facility complete with 3m pool above the beach, which should open in 2012.

Diving from Porthkerris is popular although the beach is rarely crowded except on bank holiday weekends. It is an ideal base for a group or club holiday with the tremendous variety of diving on hand for novice and experienced divers alike and offers boat launching via a Lamborghini tractor. If you want to mix your beach diving with some offshore sites then you can book a boat dive with one of the three boats operated by the dive centre (two catamarans and one RHIB).

Taking the plunge from the beach may seem like hard work but it need not be and sometimes it is much more productive than a boat dive that fails to fulfil the needs of fussy underwater photographers.

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www.photec.co.uk
www.porthkerris.com

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.

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