

Ascension Island

By Paul Colley OBE MA FRAeS LRPS

It is possible that few (if any) people reading this article will have been diving in the seas around Ascension Island. The small, remote and rugged volcanic island is 9_ flying hours from the UK and over 500 miles south of the Equator in the South Atlantic Ocean. With only a small local population and limited logistic support, the Island is still used as a staging post for the Falkland Islands, and it can be a difficult place to get to and to operate from. Although the water is generally warm and clear, with less than a 1m tidal range and modest currents, diving conditions can be challenging. Some parts of the coastline are buffeted by huge swells and strong surge, with over 4000 miles of uninterrupted deep seas subject to almost permanent strong winds. Swells during the expedition that this article chronicles were routinely 1 to 2m high and the surge sufficient to move divers a few metres laterally and vertically. Even loading and unloading diving equipment from Guano Jetty, the natural volcanic harbour near to the expedition base at the north-west of the Island, was testing. We had a tough start when two large waves swept much dive gear (and almost some of the team) off the

natural rock jetty and into the sea, during one of our first attempts to load the dive boats. But for those who can get to the Island and adapt to these conditions, it allows the rare privilege of diving where the marine life is both prolific and unspoiled.

The team of twelve divers comprised a Royal Air Force adventurous training expedition. We used two tiller-steered RIBs to access the dive sites and Nitrox for nearly all of the dives to help manage the risks of decompression illness, because the Island has no recompression facilities. We also restricted diving to a maximum depth of 30 metres and stayed well clear of any mandatory decompression stops, even though most divers were qualified to operate well beyond those limits. The RIBs were permanently moored at sea to avoid them being damaged by the rugged volcanic rocks that form the natural harbours; there are no moorings alongside any harbours on the Island, because of the heavy Atlantic swells.

The diving was as spectacular and varied as it was challenging. In November, the water temperature was 24-25 Celsius, but 5mm wetsuits guarded against chilling topside winds



(Above) The team of twelve divers comprised a Royal Air Force adventurous training expedition.

(Right) Safety stop at China wreck. Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/250sec, f13, ISO 800, 10-17mm @ 10mm

and a strong equatorial Sun. Wetsuits also guarded against abrasion from the pumice-like rocks, which were hard to avoid in the shallow surge and whilst loading and unloading the boats. Despite the heavy swells and fierce surge, which sometimes reduced inshore visibility, the water further





*Jacks at White Rock
Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240
strobes and a Subal ND30 housing,
1/100sec, f8, ISO 200, 10-17mm @
10mm*



*Grouper and Blue Tang on the China
wreck anchor. Nikon D300, with twin
Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30
housing, 1/250sec, f7.1, ISO 200, 10-
17mm @ 10mm*



*Black Durgon detail.
Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240
strobes and a Subal ND30 housing,
1/125sec, f7.1, ISO 200, 60mm with +3
dioptr*



*Diver at Red Rock swim-through.
Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240
strobes and a Subal ND30 housing,
1/125sec, f7.1, ISO 200, 10-17mm @
10mm*

out was often crystal-clear. The underwater topography of the volcanic reefs produced a huge variety of dive sites from sheer walls and drop-offs to caves, swim-throughs and blow-holes, which were home to Green and Hawksbill turtles, Jacks, Ocean and Queen Trigger fish, Squirrelfish, and different species of Moray eels. Other species (including sharks) can abound, but our pelagic sightings on this

expedition were limited to a solitary Manta and 2 species of turtle.

For me, the signature fish of the Island became the Black Durgon; a small Triggerfish that schooled in hundreds and occasionally thousands around the divers. At distance, the Durgon looks jet black with white lines neatly edging the base of its dorsal and anal fins. But they often sleep or seek sanctuary in small rock

crevices, where you can photograph them close up and it is worth it, because at close range the black changes to brown and then a riot of electric blue, bright yellow and deep orange. As with many fish that are so abundant, but so beautiful, they become a photographer's favoured target.

So too did the many species of Moray Eels. My favourite was the

Fangtooth, with its distinctive fleshy horns atop a toothy maw. Some were covered in tiny parasites, which we occasionally saw on the eyes of the Morays, despite the clear presence of cleaner shrimps on all of the dive sites. Ascension is the only place that I have seen the Broadband Moray, which must be one of the ugliest creatures around the seas off the Island. Fondly referred to by



Golden Moray
*Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240
 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing,
 1/125sec, f13, ISO 200, 60mm with +3
 dioptre*

the team as Nora Batty, due to large folds of skin that looked like ill-fitting stockings, popular rumour had it that these large eels had no teeth. A first glance appeared to confirm it, but some macro shots soon exploded the myth; the images revealed large arrays of tiny, needle-like teeth.

The wrecks around the Island became a favourite haunt for us. Although the shallower ones were awash with macro critters, the surge was so strong that it became a very hit-and-miss affair trying to get images. I tried for 2 weeks to get a decent image of a very common fish, the Red-Lipped Blenny. Like the Durgons, they looked black from a distance. But close up they were comical-looking characters with a reddish-brown skin, bright red eyes



Divers over China wreck
*Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240
 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing,
 1/125 sec, f8, ISO 200, 10-17mm @
 10mm*

and 2 small red horns that topped a playful, cheeky-devil face. Absent my favoured 105mm lens (weight was a big factor for the logistic plot), which could have worked well on these skittish creatures despite the surge, I settled for a 60mm lens and a +3 dioptre. It captured the spirit of this character-full little fish, if not the very fine detail of its wonderful face.

Arguably, the best scenic dives in Ascension are around the exposed south-east corner of the Island at



Black Durgon school
*Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/100sec,
 f9, ISO 200, 10-17mm @ 10mm*

sites known as Boatswain Bird Island and Boatswain Bird Rock, some 50 minutes to one-hour transit from our expedition centre. But the winter weather was steadily closing in and we had to restrict our journeys to more local sites; the seas were pretty rough for handling such small boats. One of my favourite dive sites was known as China wreck, so-dubbed because the divers who first found this wreck spotted some Chinese porcelain in the cargo. But the

wreck's real origins were unknown to us. Sitting at approximately 18m, at one end there was a beautiful natural amphitheatre, which dropped off to 30m and which held a big school of Squirrelfish, several big Groupers and dozens of Morays. At the other end was a huge anchor encrusted with bright red sponges. The ribs of the ship's hull were sprawled out across the reef and home to countless Morays. I've never seen more of them anywhere in the World. This



Squirrelfish

Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/125sec, f8, ISO 200, 60mm

dive screamed out for wide angle work and most of my decent images of the anchor and amphitheatre were taken with the ubiquitous Tokina 10-17mm, most often opened out to 10mm. But getting light onto the full spread of the beautiful anchor, without producing excess backscatter or uneven lighting, was a real challenge. I was never really satisfied with my many attempts, but I did catch a Blue Tang crossing a Grouper resident at the base of the anchor and it captured

the feel for part of this beautiful dive.

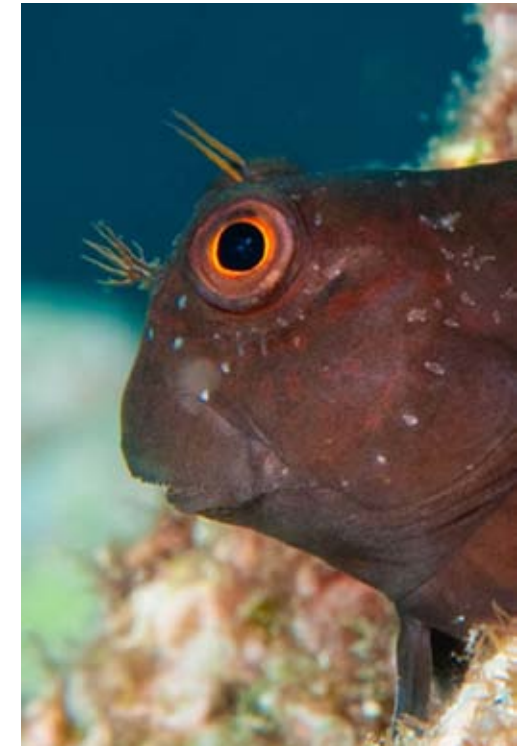
To help with the Ascension Island Government conservation programme, we conducted some marine life surveys and the diversity was staggering. In a small transept set out in a bay near our loading jetty, we counted: 100+ Apollo Damselfish; 1 Ascension Goby; 8 Ascension Wrasse; 1 Mottled Blenny; 20 Yellowtail Damselfish; 100+ Black Durgon; 8 Spotted Moray; 10 Sergeant Major; 75+ Squirrelfish; 10+ Island Hogfish;



Loading at Guano Jetty

Nikon D300, 1/125sec, f6.3, ISO 200, 10-17mm @ 13mm

15 Ocean Surgeonfish; 15+ Blackbar Soldier; 3 St Helena Butterflyfish; 1 Spotted Scorpionfish; 1 Fangtooth Moray; 3 Blue Tang; 15+ Creolefish; 1 Dragonet; 5 Sea Chub; 3 Tilefish; 2 Scarlet Striped Cleaner Shrimp; 1 Scrawled Filefish; 4 Soapfish; 2 Broadbanded Moray; 4 Grouper; 100+ Yellowtail Goatfish; 1 Island Boxfish; 3 Porcupinefish; 1 Hermit Crab; 1 Crayfish; 1 Trumpetfish; 4

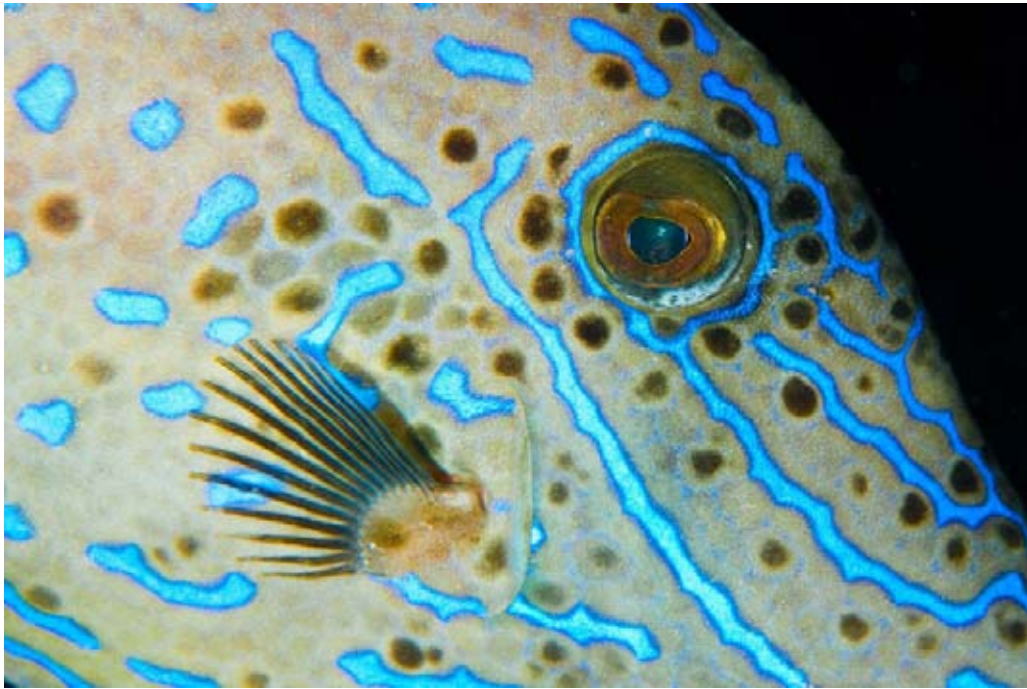


Red Lipped Blenny

Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/125sec, f13, ISO 200, 60mm with +3 dioptre

Needlefish; 1 Hawksbill Turtle; 4 French Angelfish; 1 Octopus; and 15+ Redlip Blenny! Enough to keep both wide angle and macro enthusiasts occupied for months.

I took only 2 lenses on this 2-week trip; the wonderful Tokina 10-17mm which, even with my Nikon D300 DX format, is an amazingly versatile wide angle companion. I agonised before the trip about which



Scrawled Filefish detail. Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/125sec, f8, ISO 200, 60mm with +3 dioptre

macro rig to take, but thought that the NIKOR 60mm AFS proved a good choice with the DX format, particularly as I could embellish it with a +3 dioptre. And there is something good about being forced to squeeze the most out of a limited lens choice; I found myself thinking much harder about my photography and would even consider taking only 1 lens next time to really force me to explore the edges of its envelope.

The biggest difficulty by far was trying macro photography in strong surge. It was so tempting because of

the prolific marine life, but I fear that I wasted some time. Although it was worth a go, the strike rate of decent images was low. Perhaps in future I should stick with wide angle in those conditions and keep the macro for deeper dives, where there is a fighting chance of achieving both decent composition and good focus.

But what a trip. As a relatively inexperienced photographer, I was delighted with many of the images. I am hugely indebted to Pete, who took the lead for organising and supervising the expedition, and to



Grouper. Nikon D300, with twin Inon Z240 strobes and a Subal ND30 housing, 1/125sec, f8, ISO 200, 60mm with +3 dioptre

Brabs for his sage advice and help with diving supervision. But every member of the team got stuck in to make this venture a success. It was teamwork at its very best and as a result, I and those colleagues who took their cameras underwater too, were tremendously pleased with the results.

Paul Colley
www.mpcolley.com



Paul Colley is an amateur photographer, a member of the Royal Photographic Society and of the British Society of Underwater Photographers.

As President of the Royal Air Force Sub Aqua Association, he takes every opportunity to pursue his passions for diving and underwater photography.

Although relatively new to both disciplines (he used his first underwater compact camera in 2006 and DSLR in 2008), he has been instructed by top UK photographers Martin Edge and Alex Mustard, to whom he is eternally grateful for passing on some essential skills).

Small ads



SOLD! – Ikelite housing for a Canon 5D MKII

Ikelite housing for a Canon 5D MKII, Ikelite 8" dome port (no scratches) for a Canon fish eye lens, Ikelite ports Canon 17-40mm and a macro 100mm IS lens. I am based in Scarborough, U.K. £1100 ovnoroaminrobin@hotmail.com

Your advert could be [here](#) instead for just £5.00



For sale – extrem'vision(up to 100 m!!) and video camera sony vx 2000

I'm selling a fantastic underwater housing extrem'vision(up to 100 m!!) and video camera sony vx 2000 in really good condition!!!coming with a pelican case!!!!The underwater housing is coming with :- 2 lenses (1 macro and 1 wide angle) - 1 red filter. - 2 set of o'rings - Sillicon for the o'rings. - Digital screen.The sony camera vx 2000 is coming with :- A set of batteries (2 large, 1 medium, 1 small) - 5 new dv tapes. - 2 cleaning tapes.Extrem'vision is a French Brand known worldwide.it's strong,reliable and easyto repair if any problems.....REALLY GOOD CONDITION!!!!2000 euros!!!!!!fabien mouret

Email: maddox666@gmail.com [Ref:c147]



SOLD! – Subtronic Nova analog version no ttl converter

Subtronic Nova analog version no ttl converter

The strobe is 3-years-old in good condition

All sockets in S6

800-€

Rudolf Solbäck

Ref C146

Your advert could be [here](#) instead for just £5.00



For sale – Aquatica housing 5D, 8 inch dome, dome shade and canon 5D body

Aquatica housing 5D, 8 inch dome, dome shade and canon 5D body including 2 spare batteries and spare charger for sale £1600 + p&p.Housing:Aquatica 5D housing - good to 90m, 8" optical acrylic dome port - some minor scratches but not visible in photos, 8" dome shade / guard, for wide angle lenses, Spare O ringCameraCanon 5D, 3 Batteries, 2 Chargers, StrapAll for £1600+ p&p, will accept paypal, or cashPlease feel free to ask any questionThe equipment has not been used for a while but I have just upgraded to a canon 5D mark II package so have this for sale.I am based in London and if you wish to come round and have a look/examine the equipment prior to parting with your money we can arrange that.

Email: martin.abela@hotmail.co.uk [Ref:c145]

Sell your stuff

You'll be amazed at just how quickly your unwanted underwater photography kit could be converted into hard cash with a UwP small ad.

You can have your own UwP small ad for just £5.00 and it can have one photo as well as up to 100 words.

Check out small ads
here

Buy your small ad
here