

# The “Pearl of the Atlantic”

by Augusto Salgado

After more than 20 years diving and doing underwater photography, I decided that it was time to improve my photographic techniques, not as I had been doing just buy reading and practicing, but by direct exchange of experiences.

With this in mind, I decided to participate in one of Alex Mustard's workshop in the Red Sea, where I was able to achieve all my goals, including the workflow after we returned to the boat. All of this in a friendly and highly cooperative mood, between all of us.

Having gained a new approach to my underwater photography, I was ready to put in use all that I had learned in my next holiday in the Madeira Island, also known as “The pearl of the Atlantic”, where my family roots are.

The Madeira archipelago, as two main islands – Madeira itself, and Porto Santo –, plus the Desertas group and the Selvagens, both uninhabited. Madeira Island, is at a latitude 32° 40' N, so we can find some sub-tropical species not found on the Portuguese mainland, but it doesn't have all the big fauna that we can find in the Azores.

The water temperatures range from the 18 in the winter to the 22° C in the summer, with almost the same temperatures on the surface, although the highs can reach 28° C. Whilst the visibility can reach 20 meters, typically it is around plus 10 meters, although in winter, due to the rain that flows to the sea, it can drop significantly.

There are plenty of flights from Portuguese mainland or directly from Europe, mainly England and Germany, and there are plenty of hotels, many of them with direct access to the sea, but only some with diving centers. There is also a dive chamber in the island.

Diving occurs mostly on the South coast, as in the North, although

*(Top) The front of the Tubarão Diving Center in Funchal-Madeira, on the ground floor of the Pestana Palms Hotel*

*(Right) A friendly interaction with one of the small groupers in “Garajau” reserve. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Sigma 17-70 at 17 mm, 2 Z-240, f.8, 1/80*





*Morey eel being “cleaned” by shrimp in “Clube Naval”. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Nikon 105 mm, 2 Z-240, f.22, 1/125 and Sola 600P light*

there are some pristine spots, the big Atlantic waves seldom present good diving conditions.

The main diving spots are situated in “Garajau” nature reserve which, after a difficult start with local fishermen, is now fully established and preserved by all. Here a diver can always encounter lots of marine life. The resident groupers that are the reserve’s symbol, and they are very friendly, allowing the photographer to get real close. But other big species exist, as big stingrays, sometimes

mantas pass by, or you can be very lucky and encounter a sea lion.

A night dive can always be arranged, providing there are a minimum number of divers interested, providing very interesting photographic macro subjects. But, in all these dives, be aware when you touch the bottom, as there are plenty sea orchids, especially active at night.

Of the other diving spots, outside the reserve, the one I recommend most is the wreck of the dredger “Bowbelle”, called “Bom



*(Above) In the summer and in some places divers can spot seahorses, this one was in “Clube Naval”. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Nikon 60 mm, 2 Z-240, f.20, 1/160*

*(Right) Bow of the Bowbelle. The bottom lies at 30 meters deep, on a sandy bottom. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Tokina 10-17 at 10 mm, 2 Z-240, f.10, 1/40*





*Inside bridge of Bowbelle showing that some equipments have already been removed as souvenirs. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Tokina 10-17 at 12 mm, 2 Z-240, f.8, 1/50. One of the strobes was remotely triggered using Triggerfish slave sensor*

Rei” while under Portuguese flag. This ship might recall some bad memories from English divers, as she was responsible for a tragic incident in the Thames in 1989. On the 20 August 1989, a passenger boat with 130 partygoers on board was hit by the Bowbelle, several times her size, making the Marchioness capsize and killing fifty-one young people. The wreck lies at a depth of 30 meters, upright but it’s broken near the bow that for the last years has been listing

forward. As she lies on a sand bottom, the wreck provides safe refuge to several species, making it a very pleasant dive. The only drawback is that it will take almost one hour to get to the spot, but with good visibility and no current, it’s a great dive.

In the Funchal area, I also recommend another diving spot, usually known as the “Clube Naval”. Here you can either do a normal dive, or a drift dive, depending on the current, and on the bottom, in



*A “big” stingray on a sandy bottom. Nikon D300, Sealux housing, Sigma 17-70 at 17 mm, 2 Z-240, f.7, 1, 1/20*

the middle of the rocks, we can spot several species of moray eels, sharing the tight spaces with cleaning shrimps, giving the photographers great opportunities, provided you have a good aiming light.

But, if your travel partner is not a diver, don’t worry; there is plenty to do, especially if you enjoy walking near nature, along the “levadas”, a system that carries fresh water from the highs to the lower part of the island.

Talking with divers from Malta or Canary Islands, they say the fauna is similar, but mainly in the “Garajau” reserve, there is much more life than in either islands. So, come and dive in the “Pearl of the Atlantic”...

**Alves Salgado**