The secrets of boring seagrass

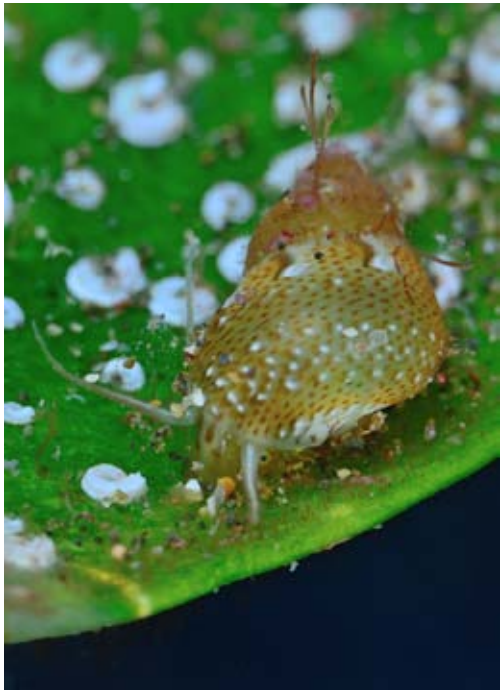
By David Barrio

Underwater photographers are creatures of habit, when we go to our local divesites we usually do the same routes, take the same kind of pictures of the same subjects and even use the same lenses, missing some areas full of wonders to observe and photograph. I realized all that when Enrique Souto, an UWP friend of mine, started to explore an otherwise ignored seagrass field area at El Cabrón, one of the most dived local sites in Gran Canaria. With shoals of fish, gorgonians and many caves and arcs we never found the time to go and spend a whole dive at the seagrass fields until Enrique talked me about it and Luisa and I started to go and look for the green prairie inhabitants...

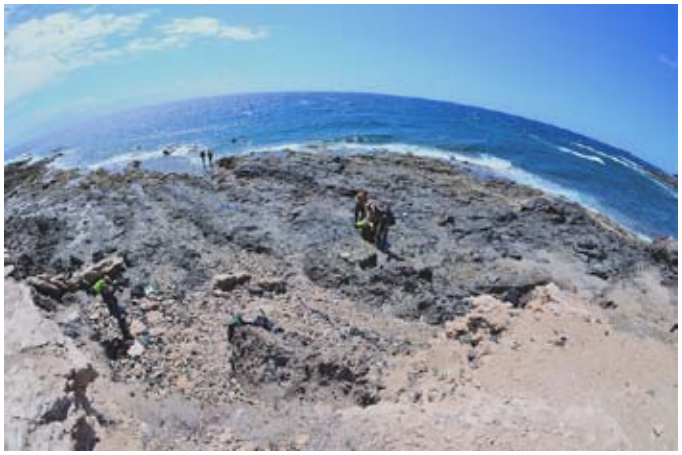
Seagrass fields are formed by two main species: Cymodocea Nodosa (which in fact is a plant) and Caulerpa Prolifera (a green algae). Some areas show only one of them and other areas are a mix of both. Ecologically speaking, these fields are very important in many ways, they serve as a craddle for many juvenile fish and organisms, fix the soil and, according to a new research released in the journal Nature Geoscience, seagrasses are a vital part of the solution to climate change and, per unit area, seagrass meadows can store up to twice as much carbon as the world's temperate and tropical forests. Unfortunately, the Canary Islands Government, in order to allow the construction of marine infraestructures, recently canceled Cymodocea´s (and many other species) protected status in a very controversial decision even though seagrasses are among the world's most threatened ecosystems. Some 29 percent of all historic seagrass meadows have been destroyed, mainly due to dredging and degradation of water quality. At least 1.5 percent of Earth's seagrass meadows are lost every year.

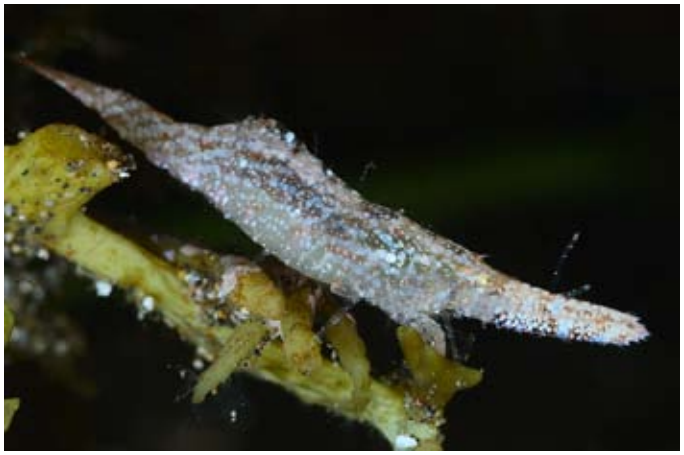
It did not take us long to start finding different and amazing critters although one has to be patient because searching leaf after leaf can be tedious, specially in Cymodocea areas, as its leaves are longer, thinner and the field thicker, although not as thick as the poseidonian fields of the Mediterranean sea. It is good to choose a day with not much swell, as the movement of the field makes finding subjects more difficult to even at 18 meters, the depth at which we will be diving (there are other areas at 12 meters nearby and even at tidal

General view of a Cymodocea Nodosa typical field. F11, 1/60 sec, ISO 200. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm, Hugyfot housing, 2xSubtronic Nova strobes.



An undetermined snail is another favoured critter specially when looking at the camera. F 38, 1/250 sec, ISO 200. Nikon D7000, Nikon 105mmVR with Kenko 1.4x TC, Hugyfot housing with Sagadive cone flat port. 2xSea&Sea YS250pro strobes.





areas in other islands) with a visibility that always exceed 10-15 meters and is usually 20 meters.

Most of the animals found are fairly small so macro is the most productive setup but the problem is that "small" is very different to "very small"! so we have to choose what kind of subjects we are going to look for as, for example, a skeleton shrimp is much smaller than a seahorse, being both regular seagrass inhabitants. We have tried different lens combinations ranging from a 60mm coupled with an Inon Micro Semi-Fisheye Relay Lens UFL-MR130 to 60mm with kenko 2x teleconverter and Subsee 10 diopter lens, always in nikon DX cameras, with many variations in between (I favour the 105VR with/without kenko 1.4x teleconverter and Subsee +10). Using longer lenses or their equivalents bring the first photography problem of this environment which is having a lot of leaves in between the port and the subject so, whenever possible, I try to reduce this distance by using the diopter lens that I flip on-flip off very fast with a 67mm mechanism made by Sagadive. Evidently, the shortest distance of work is acquired with the Inon microfisheye lens, it is also a lens that would be perfect for these

Razorfish (Xyrichtys Novacula) sometimes bury themselves when danger is around. At first I almost instantly deleted this picture because of the bothering leaves but, when I saw it at home, I liked the suspecting glance and how the picture shows the bushy environment. F 16, 1/180 secs, ISO 200. Nikon D7000, Nikon 105mmVR with Kenko 1.4x TC, Hugyfot housing with Sagadive cone flat port. 2xSea&Sea YS250pro strobes.

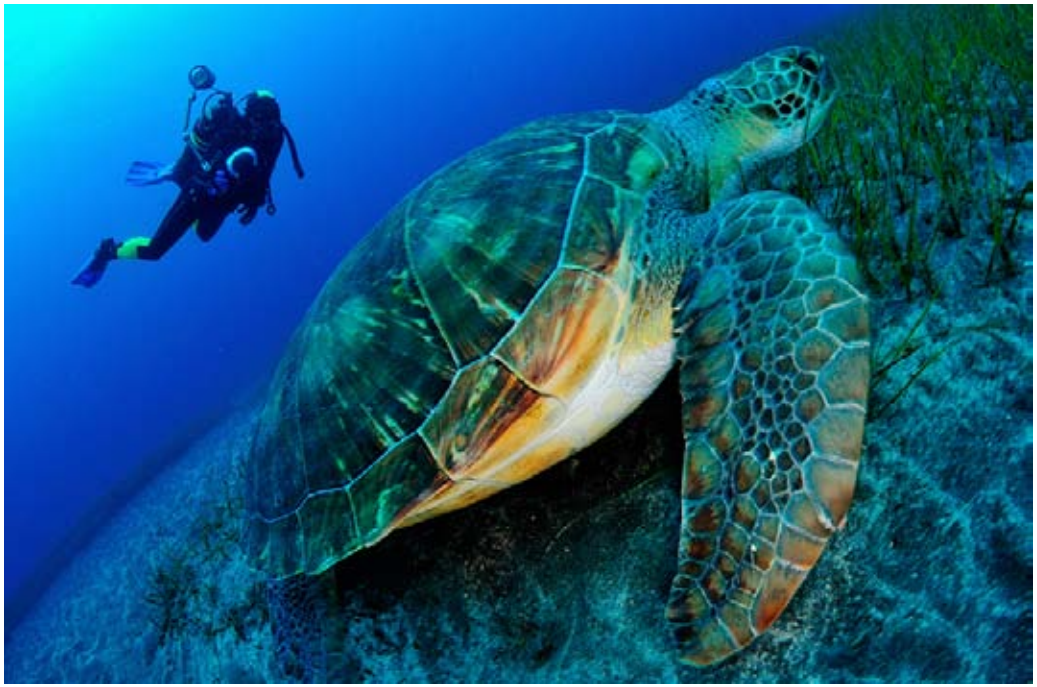
critters (small and with a tendency to stay immobile by trusting their camouflage), but it just does not deliver good quality, it is what I call a tease lens because its pictures look great in the camera´s screen but not on the computer (it is very good for video though); I wish Inon would come up with an improved version of this fun lens.

Being always close to the ground is when a 45 degree viewfinder really proves its value (even though they are expensive!) and framing and focusing are much more comfortable with this gadget. In the lighting department, I prefer to use two strobes because I noticed that the ever present leaves sometimes caused undesired shadows that

A rare white variant of the green shrimp (Hippolyte Inermis) lives within the brown leaves or small unattached branches of cystoseira sp algae that drift around the seagrass field. F 32, 1/250 sec, ISO 200. Nikon D7000, Nikon 105mmVR with Kenko 1.4x TC, Hugyfot housing with Sagadive cone flat port. 2xSea&Sea YS250pro strobes.

disappear with two sources of light, even though it can be bothersome with the couple of Sea&Sea YS250pros that I carry. Most of my friends just use one big Subtronic-type strobe, I guess it is a matter of personal preference. I also own two YS110alphas that I would recommend being lighter and smaller, and delivering enough light for this kind of pictures and with dSTTL available, but both 110s have fallen pray to Luisa and her canon S95 kit... When I dive with the Inon microfisheye lens I use it with a Glowdive optical fiber ringflash that I modified to make it reversible (so I get two different optical fiber placements). Snooting is also very convenient as it helps isolating the subject, in this case I use a

Tube worms and guinean pufferfish are easy to see and I used them to take my first pictures with Luisa´s Canon S95 and WA lens. F 8, 1/60 sec, ISO 100. Canon S95, Fix housing, UWL-04 wet lens, 2xSea&Sea YS110alpha strobes.



A green turtle (Chelonia Mydas) feeds on the seagrass unbothered by the underwater photographers. F13, 1/45 sec, ISO 200. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm, Hugyfot housing, 2xSubtronic Nova strobes.

couple of black painted orange Fanta 2l bottle plastic cones (sorry, I had to save for the viewfinder!), with different diameter home-made end attachments. There are also some wide angle opportunities, for which I have only used for a couple of shots Luisa´s Fix S95 and Fix UWL-04 wide angle wet lens (with the previously mentioned Sea &Sea YS110alpha strobes...) whenever she let me borrow it underwater (use of force and/or tank valve closing was necessary...), but I have to say it is a pleasure to dump my heavy macro rig and just shoot away with such a small and light setup. I have not had the opportunity to fully explore its potential yet, but I think it can deliver great quality images and it could surprise many diehard DSLR users; I really look forward to use it more and find its best menu settings etc...

Now that we have our UWP gear ready is time to head for the water. The El Cabrón divesite is located in east coast of the island in a deserted and protected piece of land at about the same distance (30-40 minutes driving) from Las Palmas, the capital city in the north, and the tourist oriented areas in the south (Playa del Inglés, Maspalomas...). It is a land accessed divesite (no one uses a boat to dive there) where every divecenter goes and, even though it has no staircase etc... it is usually very easy to walk in and out. Once we are in the water we would usually choose going to the left (north) to find the gorgonian fields and the gerardia macaronesica or going to the right (south) to the bastard grunt (Pomadasys Incisus) and axillary bream shoals (Pagellus Acarne), the caves and the arcs... Instead, we go straight out (east) cruising over rubble, then sand and, finally, the seagrass fields at 18-20 meters. It is good to go with as many friends as possible to increase the chances of seeing more things such as shrimps like the green shrimp (Hippolyte Inermis) and its rarer white variant, snails like the emerald neritid snail (Smaragdia viridis), nudibranchs like the Eubranchus Farrani, different kinds of polyps and anemones, various species of cephalopods of which the rarest is the elusive local bobtail squid (Sepiola Atlantica) or

some of the perfectly adapted fish like the broad-nosed pipefish (Syngathus Typhle) which mimics the Cymodocea leaves and their movement, the green clingfish (Opeatogenys Cadenati) that for the photographer is always "on the backside of the leaf...", or the short-snouted seahorse (Hippocampus Hippocampus)... Everyone who likes looking for critters will enjoy the search and know the feeling of finding one of these jewels after a long search...

David Barrio
www.davidbarrio.com