

Britain 20-12

by Jason Gregory

So, the UK has had a great year. Royal occasions and plenty of sport have kept our great nation amused for almost the entire year. But it's not all pomp, medals and amazing achievements by the Paralympians. British men and women (and many very welcome visitors) all wearing rubber suits have also had a good time.

UK diving can be challenging, but when everything works out right I believe it's world class. But there does however seem to be a little polarisation when it comes to UK divers. Those that do, and those that don't – enjoy British diving. That's certainly not a criticism. I can quite understand divers wanting clear and warm water for their hard earned leisure time. Maybe I'm just jealous, my family obligations and general thriftiness keep me on home soil/water.

As a bit of a theme I'm showing here photos taken during our 'Golden' year 2012. A glimpse of our sea life within just that time frame. Images are straight from the camera, no cropping and no heavy-duty post processing. This is what a diver will see. If you dive the UK I'm sure you could confirm this. If you don't, well I hope you see something here you would like to see for yourself!

I'll concentrate on the photographs, the subjects and methods of capturing the image rather than words about the diving itself. I assume most people reading this fine magazine will be familiar with diving for photography.

My 'photographic style' if I have such a thing, is for simple, clear images of marine life in



The beautiful rocky gullies of St Abbs, Scotland. A simple, shallow shore-dive from the harbour. 4m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens at 10mm, manual exposure at 1/3 second at f9, ISO 200. Two strobes to light the coralline encrusted rocks. A sandy seabed allows a safe place to settle and steady oneself for what is a relatively long shutter speed.



(Top) Plumose Anemones. 16m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens at 13mm, manual exposure, 60th second, f13, ISO 200, 2 strobes.



(Bottom) Sunstar. 24m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 at 17mm, manual, exposure, 80th second, f20, ISO 200, two strobes.



A carpet of marine life. Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens at 17mm, manual exposure at 60th second, f8, ISO 200

temperate UK waters. Green water, or in case of Scottish sea lochs ‘golden’ water provides a definable backdrop from the much more familiar tropical blue. I would urge any divers that haven’t experience sea loch diving (where the golden water is) to try it. There is one particular feature of these endless ‘salt water lakes’ that makes them appealing. They are weather-proof. That is to say, almost never ‘blown-out’, the weather blight that puts paid to so many UK dive expeditions.

Yes, sea lochs are tidal, and

yes visibility varies but it’s got to be blowing one hell of a hoolie to prevent safe diving. And even better, most dives can be carried out from the shore. The geography of many of the Scottish sea lochs (Scotland has some of the most complex geology in the world) provides good and varying depth just beyond the shoreline in many of the lochs.

Generally in the UK, we don’t have the consistent multi-metre visibility of warmer waters but with techniques, equipment and appropriate diving experience, underwater image



The iconic lobster. 18m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 at 17mm, manual exposure, 80th second, f10, ISO 200, 2 strobes

making can be just as enjoyable and rewarding, in my view better.

Many fish, certainly those fish that don’t hang about in mid-water (gobies, blennies, scorpion fish etc) rely on camouflage and on speedy reactions to avoid predation. The seabed itself provides cover and protection. UK divers know this and are rewarded by glimpses in torchlight of the shy creatures hidden in holes and crevices. Most have wonderful colouration that the camera can capture.

On board that luxury Red Sea

live-aboard one can always spot a diver that dives in British seas. BIG torch.

Some marine animals have become UK diving icons. The mighty Common Lobster has to be a favourite and provides good wild-life-watching for divers. They are not just impressive well armed beasts, they have character and often boldness! Occasionally one sees a lobster ramble confidently about the seabed unperturbed by the presence of a diver.

UK seas are home to some

invertebrates that are just plain big. Children know star-fish from rock-pooling, divers know an altogether bigger star-shaped echinoderm! With twelve or more arms and often dinner-plate sized, the Common Sun Star is an extraordinary sight, and a simple photo subject. They are serious predators too.

The UK also does pretty things. Anemones are well represented in our seas but none more outrageously coloured than the pretty little ‘Jewel’ Anemone. Found all over the UK in high energy locations, they form great congregations that are a splendid sight. They are both a popular macro and wide angle subject. One can isolate a dense group, get in close and the reward can be an explosion of colour and texture. Purple, reds and even ‘acid’ green examples sometimes together in the same area are a dazzling sight!

From pretty, to pretty spooky! Long Legged Spider Crabs and several other related crustaceans have a certain creepy presence, definitely so for the arachnophobic diver! They have a habit of sticking weedy material to their bodies which make them tricky to spot. And their ‘3D’ body shape makes choosing a focusing point awkward. These creatures may lack colour but certainly make up for in shape and weirdness.

Usually a shy critter, the Spiny Squat Lobster normally anchors itself well into under-hanging ledges and rock crevices. A supremely well adapted animal with odd blue stripes and patterns against an orangey-red carapace makes for a striking image, if your strobe light reaches it. As with many shy creatures, the diver’s patience is usually rewarded by the subject not being able to resist a look, or a stroke with its ‘antenna’ towards the diver – a click of the shutter and you have it.



Jewell anemones on the wreck of the Hispania, Sound of Mull, Scotland, 18m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Nikon 60mm micro, manual, exposure, 50th second, f14, ISO 200, two strobes

No better macro subject than the sea slug. Nudibranchs are rightfully sought after close-up targets and reward with both colour and textural interest. Again, the seas of the UK are also home to many species of the fancy shell-less molluscs. Knowing what they prey on can be key information when slug hunting. Find the right slug food, for example a bryzoan (‘sea mat’) and slugs may be home. They are not rapid movers and so time is usually available to set up the shot.

All that ‘greenness’ in temperate waters isn’t just a great backdrop colour for our images. Its waterborne food, and filter feeders do very well indeed. Where else can you find anemones almost half a metre tall? These colossal anemones, that occur in three pastel shades, orange, creamy white and khaki green are a ubiquitous feature of many locations with enough water flow. Upper areas



A small group of Crimora papillata nudibranches feeding on the bryzoan Flustra foliacea. 18m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Nikon 60mm micro, manual, exposure, 60th second, f18, ISO 200, two strobes positioned tight to the lens port.



Dahlia Anemone. 16m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens at 17mm, manual exposure, 50th second, f20, ISO 200, 2 strobes.



The complex and magnificent underwater topography from St Abbs Head, Scotland. Vast areas covered in these soft corals. 20m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens at 17mm, manual exposure at 60th second, f8, ISO 200. Two strobes

of wrecks and promontories of rock are usually festooned with the frilly-topped stalks of the Plumose Anemone.

I'm conscious that anemones are maybe getting a bit too much press in this article. But, UK diving has another super-critter that just has to be admired, and photographed! Indeed, one of our pioneering marine reserves, the St. Abbs & Eyemouth Voluntary Marine Reserve has the Dahlia Anemone as its emblem. Their huge size and rich and varied colouration cannot fail to impress even the most hardened wreck diver. In some areas these 'best in show underwater flowers' form congregations. Several dive sites make genuine claim to have an 'anemone gully'. If visibility permits and strobes are powerful enough and aimed



Spiny Squat lobster. Nestend's Gully, Eyemouth, Scotland, shore dive, 12m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Nikon 60mm micro, manual exposure, 80th second, f11, ISO 200, 2 strobes

accordingly, these lavishly carpeted seabeds can be recorded with the camera. Even if you have a hard-drive full of images of this flamboyant creature, they are photographically impossible to resist again and again.

So the bunting is packed away and the Olympic Park is to be transformed into a thriving new community facility. The underwater show though, continues as it has for countless years. With good management our 'local' diving areas will always reward those that make the effort to take the green water plunge. We have an established diving industry and community and we have a good old British 'let's get stuck in' attitude. Long may it continue.



A Butterfish squeezed into a crevice, 4m depth, Nikon D300 in Subal Housing, Nikon 105mm micro lens (old type, 22 years old in fact!), manual exposure, 80th second, f13, ISO 200. Two strobes to light the subject and torch light to give the old lens a chance at focusing!



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