

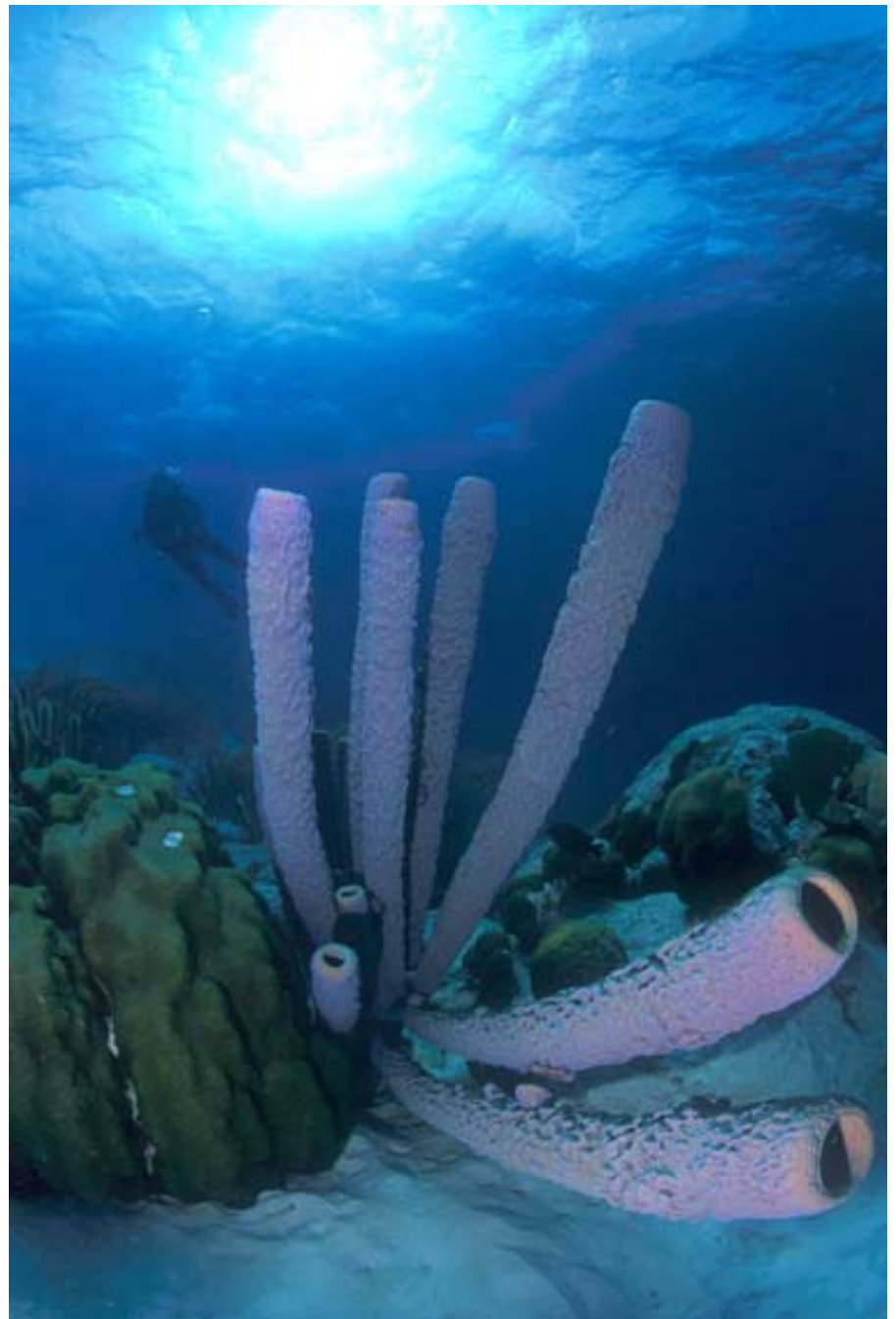
Bonaire - a unique underwater studio

By Linda Dunk

Whether you are already an accomplished underwater photographer seeking to perfect a particular technique or explore new ways of approaching your subject, or someone keen to master the basic building blocks of underwater photography, there are some essentials that are needed to make the creative process easier and more productive, and in my experience, one of these is continuity of location, conditions and subject material.

I have struggled with picture taking in wet places for rather longer than I would care to admit, and have had plenty of time over the years to consider, when in far flung places the shots are simply not coming up to scratch, what uncontrollable circumstances I can blame for my lack of success. Excuses I have come up with have included jet lag following horrendous triple- and quadruple-flight journeys that leave someone in the prime of youth, let alone pushing on well through middle-age, feeling bereft of a brain, let alone inspiration visual ideas clamouring to be committed to film. Many is the time I can hardly remember when finally on location how to put the dive kit, let alone the camera gear together, after a long-haul trip to what I know, if I can only get my head around it, is sure to be an underwater photographer's paradise.

Another source of tremendous frustration can be that old coconut of being taken, either by RIB, dhoni, liveboard,



Nikon 801s in a Subal housing, 16 mm Nikkor full-frame fisheye, Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 1/60th F11. Fuji Velvia film

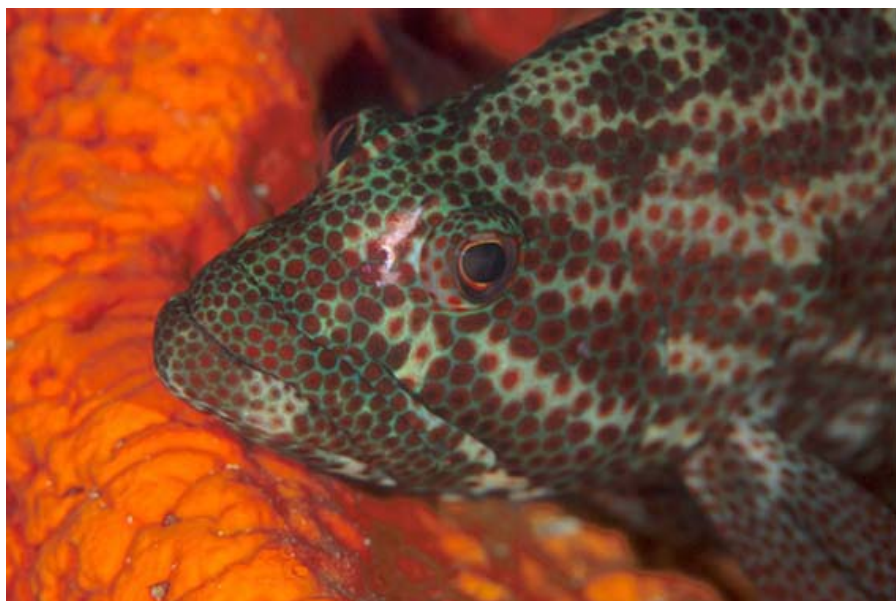
you name it, to a terrific site that you know instantly you could spend the rest of the trip, perhaps even the rest of your life on, only to be told that the RIB doesn't come back to that site until the day after you have left, or that the liveboard's schedule

involves a new dive site every two hours, and no, they won't change things just to suit you.

Other rich veins of excuses have included currents well-suited to a wet-and-wild extravaganza, whose only use to the photographer are to



demonstrate at high speed what a bountiful array of subjects he/she will not be able to photograph, and the certainty that the exciting light coupled with a calm surface that bends the wide-angle photographer's brain occurring at the beginning and end of the day will not coincide with the preset dive times. Often these preset dive times are those favoured by every other dive operator within 50 miles, so that divers can experience the communal pleasure that comes from shoaling in warm water. Then there is the possibility that those precious babies, your films, may come back, if there happens to be processing available, fried in the first developer. Finally, don't forget the ever-present risk of encountering an embryonic dictator or RSM masquerading as a dive guide, and you can be easily be excused from producing a half-decent underwater photograph for the



(Above) Nikon 801s in a Subal housing Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 105 mm Nikkor lens. 1/60th F11 Fuji Velvia film,

rest of your life.

However, it doesn't have to be like this - because Bonaire exists.

Americans have long been familiar with the delights of Bonaire, but when I first had the good luck to find myself on this

island fifty miles or so north of Venezuela fifteen or so years ago, it was not a location uppermost in the consciousness of the British market.

Bonaire is part of the Netherlands Antilles, with companion islands being Aruba



(Left) Nikon 801s in a Subal housing, 16 mm Nikkor full-frame fisheye, Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 1/60th F11. Fuji Velvia film

and Curacao, known in maritime parlance, according to a rather optimistic coastal skipper course I undertook way back, as ABC. As a self-governing part of the Netherlands, the Bonaire authorities had the great foresight to ban spearfishing on the extensive reef system that surrounds the island and its uninhabited sister islet, Klein Bonaire, in 1971, and then to designate a vast area of reef on the sheltered western side of Bonaire and all round Klein Bonaire as a Marine Park.

This action has resulted in the spectacular fringing reefs remaining largely pristine and teeming with marine life, including a variety of unusual, but not too difficult to find, marine creatures of interest to underwater photographers. These include seahorses, terrific cleaner shrimps in the anemones, snake eels, secretary blennies, approachable squid, frogfish, heaps of juvenile spotted drums, and many more. The usual varieties of grunts, schoolmasters, snappers, angelfish, moray eels and groupers are also available to have their pictures taken, and tend to be less fey than in other locations possibly due to their being used to divers and not being hunted.

Staying at a resort such as Captain Don's,

situated on the western side of Bonaire, and facing Klein Bonaire, you have the tremendous benefit of a house reef that can sustain you in terms of picture opportunities for whole period of your stay, if you so choose to work that way. Captain Don's prides itself as being "the home of diving freedom", and indeed, you can dive whenever you want, day or night, and it is not necessary to encumber oneself with a buddy - again, the choice is yours.

You can work the house reef entirely to your convenience, and although Bonaire is often said to be a macro heaven, for a wide-angle devotee like me, this has huge advantages.

After a shallow swim to the edge of the reef, the house reef off Captain Don's slopes away at about an angle of 45 degrees, and the sun rises in the early morning up over the top of reef, perfectly positioned for close-focus wide angle, using foreground subjects on the reef slope to make up the picture. Shoals of fish are often calm at this time in the morning, as is the surface, and small boats on fixed moorings can be brought into the composition. Alternatively, if a buddy can be persuaded to get out of bed, the diver, torch, video light scenario can be brought into play. The important thing is that the sun is in the right place for you, and that you can go back, each morning of your stay, and shoot, shoot and shoot again until the picture in your mind's eye finally and satisfyingly, makes it onto the film.

You don't have to dive deep to find your subjects, visibility is usually very good, currents amount to a gentle wafting at worst, the sun shines a lot, and the reef inhabitants appear to be as much creatures of habit as *Homo sapiens* can sometimes be, doing the same things in the same place at the

(Right) Nikon 801s in a Subal housing Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 60 mm Nikkor lens. 1/60th F11 Fuji Velvia film.

(Below) Nikon 801s in a Subal housing, 16 mm Nikkor full-frame fisheye, Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 1/60th F8. Fuji Velvia film



same time, so enabling you to find them without wasting valuable dive/shooting time. You are also able to plan ahead and fit just the right lens for your chosen subject, again maximising the possibility of successful picture taking. However, there must be waves occasionally, in order to justify an overheard remark when preparing for a night dive along the lines of "Honey, I don't do waves"....

Should you wish to be a little more adventurous and stray from the house reef, boats operating an intelligent rota that avoids overcrowding will take you to sites around Klein Bonaire, the Salt Pier, and an array of other locations; you just sign up for where you want to go in advance on a first-come-first-served basis. The Town Pier is known world-wide as a night dive to die for. Dive kit is kept close to the shore diving entry steps/jetty, so you don't have to clump about for miles in the heat all kitted-up, and can start your dive alert and full of enthusiasm rather than near collapse. Likewise, the rooms are not too far away either, so you won't come back with one arm larger than the other and in permanent spasm due to all that unwanted training carrying heavy camera gear back and forth n times daily.

At Captain Don's, the rooms are generous in terms of space and storage, giving the underwater photographer plenty of places to secrete the often extensive range of bits and pieces, gadgetry, film, batteries, ports, chargers etc etc. You can set yourself up comfortably for those long hours of camera fiddling, with the benefit of air-conditioning if you choose to cool you down when equipment malfunction rears its ugly head, and there is sufficient space for those with more than one rig to set it up ready to run without having to climb over it/stub your toe on it during the night when nature calls. Because you are not on a boat, using the night hours to go from A to B, engines throbbing away, anchor rattling up and down at 4 am, you can look forward to a decent night's sleep, that is if the excitement about today's pics in the development stage and tomorrow's opportunities can be quelled (a spot of alcohol in moderation

(Left) Nikon 801s in a Subal housing Nikon SB25 strobe in a Cullimore housing, Sea & Sea YS30 slave. 105 mm Nikkor lens. 1/60th F11 Fuji Velvia film.

can be handy here - another thing easily available in Bonaire).

Captain Don's has an excellent photo shop on site, enabling you to pop your film in hot from pressing the shutter, and get it back, reliably processed, next day. This has immeasurable benefits for all underwater photographers, and especially for those participating in a photo course, as you can not only see that the kit is working properly, but you can also look at your films, decide what you like and don't like about them, discuss successes and problems with the tutor, take the remedial steps, and best of all, go back and shoot the picture again and again, until it all comes right for you. You can improve your technique almost exponentially as a result, mastering concepts that can take years to get one's head round doing it on an ad hoc basis, in a very short time. This liberates you through improved understanding from the shackles of the nuts and bolts of kit, film speed, aperture, shutter speed, depth of field, lighting, and focusing, and frees up your mind to concentrate on the end goal, the actual picture. As a result, you can progress to develop your own style of underwater picture taking.

None of this benefits from isolation, and as part of a group working together on a common goal, nothing is better than discussing one's ideas with others intent on capturing those elusive shots that have the gasp factor that we all so keenly seek.



Such conversations can be accompanied by the odd chilled beer, rum punch or margherita as appropriate as the sun goes down.

No course would be complete, however, without some more formalised teaching, and this can comprise, in addition to individual chatting and tuition, maybe three or four evening lectures, before or after dinner, as the group chooses. The resort has excellent conference/projection facilities for this activity, with air-conditioning that can be turned up to arctic if needed to keep everyone attentive after an active day's shooting. Tuition is not a one-way process, and opportunities are always available for you to share your work with the group as part of the process.

Finally, if the photography/diving becomes a little too intensive, why not try something a little different for a day or two; hire a car and tour the island (can be combined with shore diving as well, if you simply can't leave it alone), visit the Washington-Slagbaai National Park, attempt flamingo photography instead (it'll help to

put the underwater thing in perspective), or just laze by the pool. After all, it is your holiday.....



Linda Dunk

Linda's next photography course is in Bonaire, at Captain Don's Habitat, from November 17th - 25th, 2002. Details can be obtained from Hilary Lee at Divequest, on (44)-01254-826322 (Tel), (44)-01254-826780 (fax), e-mail: divers@divequest.co.uk.

A range of Linda's work, including a series of fine art prints offered for sale, can be seen on her website at www.lindadunk.com.

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