

South West Ramblings 2

By Mark Webster

The summer weather in the south west of the UK during 2012 has left us wondering when global warming will really come. We have been promised a Mediterranean climate with high temperatures, thriving olive groves and warm calm, clear seas. Well global warming may be inevitable but it certainly hasn't arrived yet! Apart from a handful of good days the weather has been relentlessly unpredictable, windy and often very wet. But this has not stopped the intrepid divers and underwater photographers of the south west from pursuing their obsession, however we have had to pick and choose our days and locations to make the best of often poor conditions.

Double Trouble

Bad weather and lots of rain results in poor visibility and so many of my plans for wide angle photography this summer came to nothing. So I started to consider alternate imaging techniques to overcome this and keep me engaged. I decided to turn the clock back a little to a technique we used frequently in the now distant days of film, particularly when competing in photosub and splash in competitions. If you have been a regular reader of UWP and have a long memory you may recall I wrote a piece entitled "Is Digital the Death of the Double Exposure?" way back in 2003 when most of us were just making the change from celluloid to mega pixels. At the time I speculated that we might



all be making our double exposures or combining two or more images in Photoshop only, but of course then we were unaware that Nikon would come up with the image overlay function that has been available in some of the higher end and "pro" models for a while.

This function allows us to make a double exposure in camera in exactly the same way that we did with film although there are some distinct advances in this procedure which makes it a little



(Left) Jewel anemone double exposure – the classic double exposure composition comprises a macro subject such as this anemone with a sun burst or reef overhang as the wide angle background. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro and 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash, ISO 200 f22 1/250.

(Above) 4. Nudibranch double exposure – nudibranchs make ideal foreground subjects in a double exposure composition as they rarely move fast which gives you time to perfect the lighting. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro and 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash, ISO 200 f22 1/250.

easier than with film. Not only can we see that we have the exposure and positioning of each element correct as we make them, but you can also match up the best foreground and background composition before you commit to the final combined exposure. The image overlay feature is found in the menu system and is very straight forward to use, guiding you through the selection of both images, showing you a preview of your combined images and even offers you the chance to adjust the exposure of each

before you combine them. When you commit to your selection a new NEF raw file is created which you can then process as a single image. You could actually do all this underwater when you shoot the second part of the image, which might help initially in positioning the elements of the composition, but it is far easier to wait until you are warm and dry after the dive to choose the best combinations.

The results are very similar to those we produced on film and it was great fun to go back to this technique in camera, although many may still argue that it is easier to achieve the same sort of results in Photoshop. The challenge and pleasure for me is the planning and shooting both elements in the water and hopefully producing a successful result. To maximize the forced perspective appearance of these images it is best to work with macro sized subjects for the foreground like nudibranchs, although larger subjects can also produce good results. The foreground subject needs to be exposed with a black background in the bottom or side third of the frame using directional or snooted light. You can also seek out subjects with open water behind them and then select a small aperture and fast shutter speed to ensure a black background. For the wide angle element you can seek out overhanging reef or just expose a sunburst leaving the rest of the frame

dark for the image overlay. The order in which you shoot each part of the image is irrelevant as long as you remember the correct orientation for the overlay. In fact you may need to wait for several days to get good enough weather for a sunburst!

Snoots of course can range from home engineered to commercial units with multiple aperture sizes. In the days of film we used plumbing fittings, funnels and I even have one made from a watering can spout! Now there is also the option of fibre optic snoots which produce a very clean and directional beam of light but can also be a challenge to aim at the subject successfully. I attach small Mitylite torches to mine to help with the aiming and often take the flash head off the arm to hand hold the snoot which perhaps helps with the accuracy of aiming and also allows you to quickly adjust the direction and distance of the light beam.

Revisiting an Old Lady and a Close Neighbour

After one of the wettest and windiest summers on record in the south west we were blessed with a few days of high pressure, warm weather and calm seas at the beginning of September, a classic Indian summer in the UK. This presented me with an opportunity to visit a couple sites that are close neighbours which I had not



Wreck of SS Hera – there are a number of sections of the wreck at the bow and stern which stand 3-4m proud of the seabed into the prevailing current. These provide a solid base for colourful sessile marine life. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/60.

dived for ten years or more. The first was the wreck of the SS Hera, once a noble tall ship that I had first dived in the mid 1970's not long after it had been discovered by the sub aqua club from RAF St. Mawgan near Newquay.

The Hera was a four masted steel barque built in Tecklenberg in Germany and was originally named the "Richard Wagner" after the popular composer of the time.

When I first dived her there were still numerous large sections of the wreck standing several metres

proud of the seabed, but inevitably over the years she has collapsed in places due to corrosion and the winter gales. The wreck also became very popular with both local and visiting divers who have collected souvenirs over the years and so I was expecting to see some changes in the wreck today. However, I was in for a pleasant surprise as there are still some large sections particularly in the bow area which reach 4m or more in height and these are decorated with colourful plumose anemones and



There are parts of the collapsed centre section of the hull which can be explored and attract the usual wreck fish like this school of pouting. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

soft corals (dead men's fingers). The wreck attracts a variety of fish species including pouting, wrasse, pollack and during our visit one large cod that was trying hard to look like a pollack by schooling with the other fish.

The central section of the hull is collapsed but is still elevated from the seabed and there are still sections that can be explored internally if you are cautious and brave. Under the edge of the plates are large lobster and even larger conger eels that should be treated with some respect.

The seabed around the wreck is heavy gravel with areas of healthy Maerl, a red/purple coralline algae (*Lithothamnion corallioides*) which is attractive and a safe haven for a number of species which are preyed on by crabs, star fish and cuttlefish in the summer months. So it is worth swimming off the wreck with a wide angle lens or a macro lens and perhaps even dedicating a dive to exploring the maerl beds.

As mentioned above the Hera came to grief on a reef named the



*Maerl beds (*Lithothamnion corallioides*) surround the Hera and are a great place to explore for macro subjects and larger predators like these thorny starfish. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.*

Whelps just to the south of Gull Rock. This is an extensive reef system with several surface breaking features which drops rapidly to a depth of 30m in a series of steps, walls and deep gullies. This area is swept by the tide and so has thriving colonies of soft corals in various hues, anemones, sponges and hydroids. It also has some less common species including the Yellow Cluster Anemone (*Parazoanthus axinellae*) which is a zoanthid coral. Zoanthids have a different internal anatomy

compared to true sea anemones and form colonies in which the individual animals (polyps) are connected by a common base tissue, called the coenenchyme. These pretty colonies of anemones vary in colour from a bright canary yellow to a deeper orange, but all have an orange centre and will be found in groups of a handful to many hundreds mostly on vertical rock faces.

Another species found here which was common throughout Falmouth bay is Ross coral (*Pentapora*



Ross coral (Pentapora foliacea) is not actually a coral but a colonial bryozoan which grows in coral like structures. These delicate colonies were once common in Falmouth Bay, but now only thrive on rocky reefs that cannot be trawled. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/20.

foliacea) which is not actually a coral but a colonial bryozoan which grows in coral like structures. It is extremely fragile and has suffered in more exposed areas of the bay due to trawling by scallop dredgers. Rocky reefs with deep gullies like the Whelps provide protection from these indiscriminant fishing methods and it is a real pleasure to see many healthy colonies here.

Other colourful species here include colonies of large yellow

boring sponges (*Cliona celata*), the seven arm starfish (*Luidia ciliaris*) and numerous species of inquisitive wrasse, so it is well worth exploring this area with either a wide angle or macro lens.

Cuttlefish Connection

2012 seems to have been a poor year for cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) in the south west. There are locations where we would expect to see numerous cuttlefish during the



After several visits to our local cuttlefish (Sepia officinalis) they began to recognise us instantly and would rarely move from their preferred resting place which allowed us to take some set piece compositions like this one. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

breeding season and at the end of the year when the juveniles are out in force, but this year they have only been found in ones and twos.

When the weather settled in September my wife and I made a number of dives at our local beach dive and discovered a pair of resident cuttlefish at the end of one gully. A pile of old monofilament net and rope had been washed into the end of the gully and sat upon a heavy gravel seabed, which was providing excellent

cover for these cuttlefish. During our initial visits both cuttlefish were wary of us and would shed their gravel cover and move off holding station perhaps 3m or 4m away, too far away for good images. But with each subsequent visit they began to accept that we posed no threat and became much bolder.

So with each dive we were able to get closer and closer and during the final couple of dives they all but ignored us and allowed very close



The weed season came late to our corner of the south west this year but did offer the opportunity to take some weedy seascapes that are normally only possible in the springtime. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/20.

approaches with some gentle display of pattern, colour and texture. I was able to rest my camera housing dome within an inch or so of the cuttlefish and then have Susanna approach from the other side with her G11 rig and set up some posed shots. I don't know if these cuttlefish were behaving in the same way with other divers or perhaps they had learned to recognise the camera housings, but it was a

real pleasure and we made sure visit them on each dive just to keep the relationship strong! Sadly we have now had the first of the winter storms and they have departed, but hopefully next year will also bring some cooperative cephalopods.

Final Weedy Thought

During a normal spring time we see an accelerated growth of seaweeds

in shallow coastal waters as the water temperature begins to rise. This leads to what I call the weed season when the shallow gullies are filled with carpets of green lettuce and red weeds and the forests of japweed and bootlace weed are reaching for the surface. This is normally at its best after the last of the winter storms and before the first plankton blooms spoil the visibility.

This year the weather gods had conspired to spoil this event in the spring, but with the resulting cooler water temperatures throughout the summer we seem to have been blessed with a second short weed season in

September. So the final images and thoughts go to the fragile weed beds and forests and the hope that we will enjoy a more normal seasonal progression next year.

Hopefully you have found something useful or engaging in this second instalment. The next edition will most likely include some warmer water ramblings as we depart to host workshops in the Egyptian Red Sea and Indonesia.

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