

El Hierro Open Fotosub 2013

by Peter Rowlands

I was delighted when I was invited to be a judge at the 17th Open Fotosub in El Hierro this October. A few days in a warm climate with the prospect of clear water diving at a time when the British summer was showing signs of moving into autumn with darker nights and uncertain weather, I jumped at the chance.

El Hierro is the smallest island in the Canarias chain just off the east coast of Africa; more famous for the tourist magnets of Tenerife and Lanzarote. As with all the islands in this chain it is of 'v' origin. I use the word 'v' because I don't want to spell it out in full and put you off going to this delightful island in case a 'v' goes off as it did a couple of years ago but it was underwater at a depth of around 300 metres. When it had spent its force a new seamount had been created which rises up to 90 metres; a shame it couldn't have gone a bit higher and created an amazing new dive site.

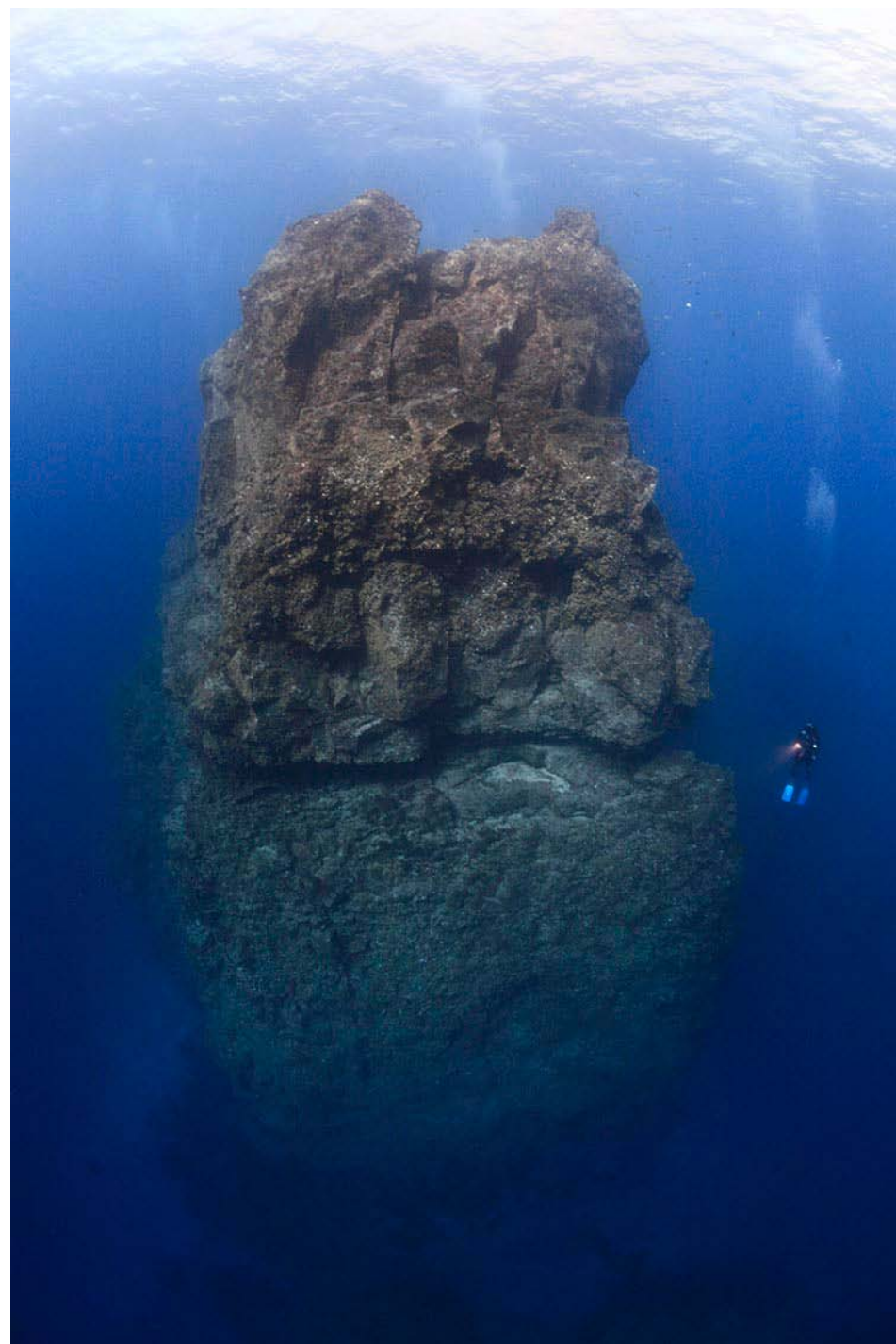
Unfortunately the 'v' started a week before the Open Fotosub in 2011 so it was cancelled and this diver dependant destination was left with the unenviable task of building up all of the previous excellent goodwill of the past 16 years. As with all downsides the secret is to 'pick yourself up and start all over again'

and that's exactly what Carlos Minguel and Iker Vildósola did this year. It was touch and go for a while but reduced funding was eventually secured with just two months to spare.

La Restinga is a small fishing village in the South of El Hierro about an hours drive from the airport which is a 30 minute flight from Tenerife where direct flights arrive from most large European destinations so you have a comparatively easy journey to what is a largely unaffected tourist destination. I say largely unaffected and that is exactly how it feels but beneath the whitewashed low rise buildings are no fewer than 7 dive centres and enough self catering apartments to cater for large numbers of divers.

The reason why there are so many dive centres in La Restinga is because the diving is excellent year round and it is right next to a marine conservation area. The water temperature was 24°C in October and the visibility I experienced was never below 20 metres. But what about the 'v'? I hear you ask. Well, as with all things natural,

This shot by Francisco Rerez won the Environment category





4 of the shots from the winning collection by Arturo Telle from Spain





The remaining 4 shots from the winning collection by Arturo Telle from Spain

nature has sprung back and, if anything, life is now more profuse than before the 'v' so that's the last time it will be mentioned. Life and the diving is back to better than normal.

The El Hierro Open Fotosub is just that. Open to anyone who wants to participate and this year the top prize was 5,000 Euro which is a major attraction; even a fifth place would net you a welcome 1,000 Euro. Unfortunately funding was

well down this year so contestants had to arrange and finance their own diving but with 7 dive centres all with big comfortable RIBs and package prices for the 6 diving days of this event, think of it as a holiday with excellent, varied diving with the possibility of coming home 5,000 Euros better off.

This year, in terms of contestants, it was an entirely Spanish affair but I urge you to look out for news of this event next year and consider

it seriously. The diving is excellent and the photographic potential is yet to be fully tapped.

The diving press and we 3 judges were kept away from the contestants in terms of diving. We had our own RIB generously provided by Jose Sacramento of Sibora-Mar Diving in Tenerife and he and his trusty RIB driver Alexis looked after us superbly. Jose has a big presence and a deep voice that makes Lee Marvin sound like Tiny Tim



Winner of the Best Macro/Close Up by Eduardo Acevedo from Spain

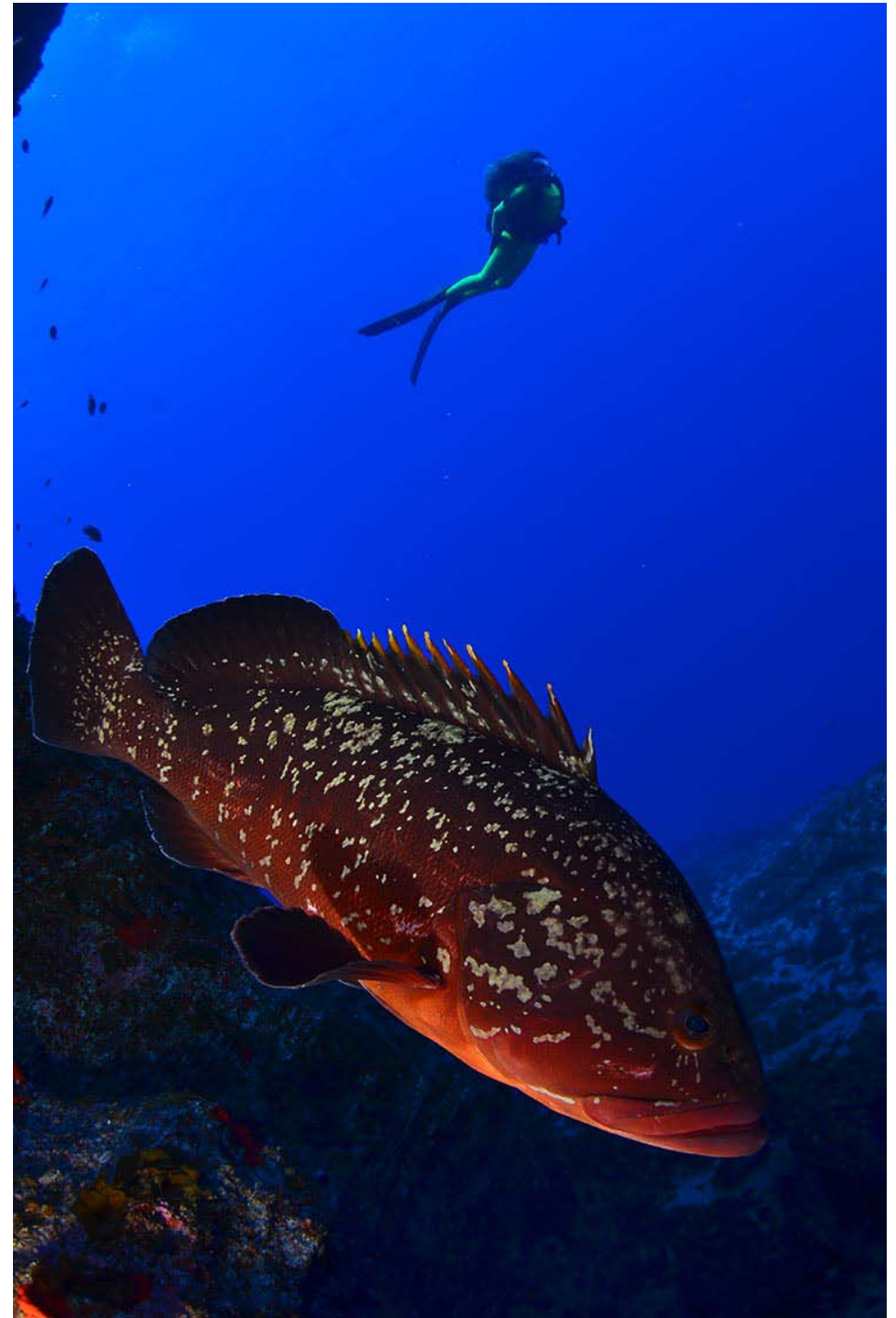
(look him up if you weren't around in the 1960's). We started at around 9am and did 2 dives a day (the contestants are allowed three) with a return to the harbour in between dives to take on new bottles and to be treated to Jose's "Sandwich Canarias" a delightful mix of freshly prepared Spanish crusty bread sticks lined with gloriously unpolitically correct tinned sardines in oil. They were absolutely delicious.

Most of the dives are a short RIB ride from La Restinga and literally just outside the harbour is probably

the biggest attraction known as El Bajón. This is two of huge, steep sided underwater mountains caused by 'v' activity several hundreds of thousands of years ago. The result is, without word of a lie, quite breath taking.

Fish life teems in the shallows and pelagics visit on a regular basis with mantas being not uncommon and even

Winner of the Best Model image by Javier Madinaveitia from Spain





the possibility of a whaleshark as an occasional treat. For wide angle shots you are spoilt for choice with such big landscapes. Get a diver in the distance to emphasise the scale and you will come back with stunning, easily taken images.

In terms of macro there is lots of colourful choice from shrimps to tube worms and eels to lobsters. The fish life is mostly fast moving grazing species but the highlight has to be the large charismatic groupers which are on the increase in terms of size and numbers.

For us dives were un-timed and I get the impression that this is the norm. Currents sometimes picked up so we just went into drift mode at the end of the dive and put up our

surface markers. All very easy and photographic liberating. Excellent night diving is available right off the harbour wall with octopus, squid and nocturnal feeders all quite common in just a few metres.

With 2 dives under our weight belts we were back in harbour about 2.30pm which was the perfect time for a "Spanish lunch" which never lasts less than two hours and is a most convivial affair. Fish is very much part of every restaurant's menu for the Spanish are traditional fishermen and fish eaters. Now I like the occasional cod and chips as much as the next man but it isn't rocket science to note that, if less fish was eaten every day, it would surely leave many more in the sea for us to photograph; or maybe it's

just me.

And so it was that after 6 days diving that the 16 contestants had to submit 8 images each as a Collection/Portfolio for David Barrio (current World Champion), Marc Gimenez Larrea (current Spanish champion) and myself (current nothing champion) to judge.

We started at around 930am and gave votes out of 10 for each shot. These were added up to give an initial running order. We then looked at each portfolio in its entirety to look for variety and photographic quality. We all agreed that to enter a similar shot (in this case surface reflections of a fish at night) in the same portfolio weakened its overall effect and one entrant actually had 3 similar shots

in his 8 shot portfolio which, for us, pushed it down the rankings significantly.

With a mid morning break for coffee and sunlight we were back at our calibrated monitors until about 1230 by which time we had discussed every aspect of every entry and had arrived at a running order with which we were very comfortable. In addition we had to choose best individual shots for landscape/scenery, macro/portrait and finally Best model.

On Saturday evening in a special marquee on the harbour side the results were announced to a packed audience in a stylish, well orchestrated presentation produced by a professional AV company with speeches by local dignitaries, a couple



of musical interludes from a local band followed by the revelation in reverse order. There was a lovely air of what seemed to me like friendly expectation followed by genuine congratulations for the winners from competitors and public alike. The banter and celebrations continued well into the night and crowned a most enjoyable week.

Not to put too fine a point on it, these events have an ulterior motive; they are there to promote the diving around La Restinga and I can think of no nicer place to spend a week diving and photographing under a sunny sky with the added bonus of coming home 5,000 Euros better off.

With that in mind I hope they don't invite me as a judge next year.

See you there?

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