

Seychelles with the Club

by Joss Woolf

It's not often that I choose to go away with my dive club these days. Since my passion for underwater photography took a hold, ten years ago, the mere idea of being part of a mixed ability group of divers, let alone non-photographers, and being led at a pace impossible for taking anything other than snap shots, fills me with horror, choosing instead to join dedicated underwater photography trips. However, when, earlier this year, one of our club instructors decided to organise a trip to the Seychelles, where I had never been before and at an affordable price, the opportunity to "slip in" yet another trip was just too good to turn down. To manage my own expectations, I told myself that this would not be the photographic opportunity of a life-time and to just chill out with old friends – maybe even go diving without a camera occasionally, hmm...

We had a couple of trainees in our group who so far had only braved the icy waters of Stoney Cove and Wraysbury Lake and were keen to notch up their qualifying dives in the luxury of the Indian Ocean. I hope they will come to realise just how lucky they are.

The only thing I already knew about the Seychelles was that it was the setting for the 1979 rom-com "10" starring Bo Derek and Dudley Moore and "Castaway", that other film starring Tom Hanks and his football-friend, Wilson. It is also the home of that bizarre-looking coconut species, "coco



Nikon D300 in Sea & Sea housing with twin Inon Z240 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens at 10mm, F8 @ 1/90th. ISO 200.

de mer", endemic to the Seychelles, of which both males and females exist as separate plants, the latter of which looks spectacularly like a lady's bottom.

A couple of things had already warmed me to the place; they drive on the same side of the road and they use the same three-pin plugs.

We were staying at the Hotel Berjaya on Mahe; just fifteen minutes' drive from the airport and after spending what seemed like an eternity sorting out

the rooms (second floor with no lift) I toddled along to meet Glynis and David Rowat who run the PADI Dive Centre there, very conveniently situated in the grounds of the hotel. I later discovered that this iconic couple, there for the last thirty years, are pioneers in whaleshark research. Another day, skimming through a book on whalesharks at the dive centre, whilst waiting to go out for a dive, I was tickled to see images by both Pedro Vieyra



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and Tony Baskeyfield; both old BSoUP members. Unfortunately, we had just missed the whaleshark season.

As with all first days of any diving holiday, they like to try you out with something rather shallow and unchallenging; ours was no exception. What was unusual was that our dive guide Simon turned out to be no less than the Vice Consul.

Much of the underwater topography is of large granite boulders formed aeons ago by volcanic activity. There are swim-throughs and gulleys, many completely plastered with red, orange and purple; but without the benefit of a strobe, appear brown to the non-photographer. I'm a real sucker for over-hangs too as, likely as not, there will be one or more white tip or nurse sharks lurking underneath, either being cleaned, or resting from a hard night's work. In our very own Beau Vallon bay, a coral garden stretched as far as the eye could see, (viz permitting, of course) densely populated with pale green or blue damsel-fish and the very prettily

spotted long-nose filefish, wafting around in small gangs of five or six.

Having run for shelter one lunchtime from one of the many tropical rainstorms we hadn't anticipated at this time of year, we struck up a conversation with a French woman, forced outside by her need to smoke. On learning that we were divers she asked if we had heard the story about the shark? A young couple had been almost completely devoured while swimming off a neighbouring island by a 6m shark four years ago. To our enormous relief, she did conclude the tale by saying that it had since been killed, confirmed by matching the shark's teeth to those found in the remains of the poor couple.

After a second day of boulders and brown coral (the result of El Nino) suddenly, things seemed to get better, not least by the presence of our lovely dive-guide, Julianne; an escaped GP who had spent the last three years there in exile. In a conversation about the surprising lack of anthias in these parts,



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as compared to the Red Sea, I commented on the fact that usually there are about ten females to every male. Julianne told me that the situation was pretty much the same on Mahe too, and not with the fish!

It turned out that being the only photographer was actually a great advantage – it suddenly dawned on me that here was a rare opportunity to photograph divers, people. My buddy, Alan, after



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a few hints and tips, soon became a very willing model. Just about every time we came to a gulley or a shoal or a turtle, for example, there he was, always striving to get into the right position for that coveted “cover” shot. In fact he was so keen that he kept getting into shots where I didn’t want him! But the hard bit was explaining just how close they need to be to the lens; only by showing your model your images afterwards, can they begin to understand where they need to be.

After a fabulous morning dive at Concepcion, we prepared for our second dive back at “Grouper”, a boulder site we had already been to which some might describe as less than spectacular. However, whilst waiting for our rather crowded boatload of thirteen guests to kit up, (which is exactly the kind of thing I had wanted to avoid) buddy Alan and I decided to go down and wait at the bottom. Almost immediately, four large rays swam by really close and we felt privileged to have seen them alone. Then Alan started swimming off into the blue and I



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could vaguely make out the shape of a large turtle. I decided not to follow as it is usually a waste of time chasing stuff into the blue so hung back a while. When, after a couple of minutes, he didn’t come back to the reef I relented and went to join him. My reward was an unprecedented encounter with not one but two large hawksbill turtles, interacting with each other and with us. Evidently it was mating season and these two were clearly interested in each other’s nether regions although we later learned though that they were both males - I suppose there’s no accounting for taste. But what an opportunity for us – and one that we would have missed had we held back and waited for the group.

Several times I had to back away from a turtle determined to attack its own reflection in my dome port. It was a good ten minutes before the rest of the boat-load slowly trickled down to join in the spectacle. Even then, the turtles made no attempt to leave, until finally, they had to go up for air. I only hope our two novices won’t be too spoiled by the



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event; that sort of encounter is far from normal.

You knew it was going to be a heavy dive as soon as the boat departed, not least because of the presence of Tony, an expert shark spotter, who would lead the dive together with Finn, from Ireland and Michael, French Creole, tall and lean like a praying mantis. For sure, as we left the relative tranquillity of Beau Vallon Bay, the wind was up, a current was running and a bail-out plan had already been hatched for the faint of heart. After a vote, we stuck to the original plan and before we knew it, we were plunging in and climbing down an eternal shot line. It was heavy going and we were like wind socks, pulling hand over hand. It was especially difficult for me as I had to hold on to my



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cumbersome camera rig and could only manage with one hand. By the time I got to the bottom I was quite out of breath and a quarter of my air was gone. But at least on the sea bed it was relatively calm and I had time to adjust the settings on the camera. Dammit; the camera wouldn't work – after all that effort of getting it down there.

After chilling out with several thousand yellow snappers, we made our way, with stealth, between the now customary granite boulders, to a very special place where several rays of various species and sizes

were hanging out in the current; truly magical. Just when you need your camera the most it had decided to play up. It turned out that the ISO button was stuck down and although I could take pictures, I could not review them or change any settings and had no idea how the pictures would work out, if at all. Sadly, we were only allowed a few minutes there because the newbies in our group were already low on air and we had to start making our way back.

Thanks to Tony's amazing navigational skills, the shot line reappeared out of the gloom, as if



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by magic, and we wafted on to it to make our stops. Whilst hanging on, rather enjoying pretending to be a flag, a compact camera, clearly on an independent mission to the surface, (unknown to its white-suited, white gloved, blingy Russian owner further down the line), came floating by. 'I'll have that', I said to myself, and grabbed it. What should I do? Wait till we're back on the boat? I pondered teasing her for a while but no, her incredible surprise when I handed it back whilst still on the line, was reward enough.

Meanwhile, for others on the

dive, their return to the surface was much more exciting; Finn, having spotted what later turned out to be "the wrong shot line" led his disciples on to it. Whilst hanging on at 16m, the boat to which it was attached, started to pull it up and move off and our friends, who happily survived the event, later described the feeling as similar to underwater water-skiing. It didn't take rocket science for them to decide to jump off and ascend naturally to the surface.

A great site for both macro and wide-angle photography is that of the twin-barges. Deliberately sunk to



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create an artificial reef not far from shore, the passage of time has allowed a rich mixture of coral and marine life to develop. Here you will find peppered morays in threes, a ménage-a-trois of stone-fish on the deck at the lower end of the deeper barge along with a delightful collection of hingeback shrimps. After a relatively short visit here, as a result of the time we had clocked up on our earlier

dive, we wafted up to the shallows of a rather boring coral garden. I came across the carapace of a dead crayfish – and then its head and legs. To while away the remainder of the dive-time (there was little else to see or do) I carefully reassembled the still brightly-coloured components and lay the poor creature to rest on a small table coral. A gentle current even made it move slightly, adding to the



reality.....

Philip, whose name has been changed to save any further embarrassment, not usually the first to spot anything interesting underwater, was most grateful when I pointed it out to him and took several photographs with his strobeless compact from various angles. How my mask leaked with laughter! I know I should have left it at that but couldn't resist telling him on the surface. "But it was moving", he said in his defence. Doh – as if crayfish sit out in the open!

Joss Woolf



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