

Baiae Archeological Park

by Marcin Trzcinski

“Et tu Brute contra me?” (And you, Brutus, against me?). When dying Julius Ceasar said these words on 15 March 44 B.E., he could not have expected that already in a couple dozen years a great harbour would be erected barely two hundred kilometres south of the Eternal City and that the most affluent patrician families would build exquisite villas in Baia, overlooking the bay.

Rats! Our trip to Italy, prepared for two months, was supposed to be so great and such a huge screw-up took place already at the beginning! On our approach to Fiumicino, thick clouds hid the ground from us. Finally, when our Airbus A320 touched down, outside the tiny windows we could see a grey and gloomy face of the “sunny Italy”. Oh well, we still had over 200 km to go to Pozzuola near Naples. Might the weather improve?

We packed our bags into a Renault station wagon and hit the motorway to reach our destination as fast as possible. Unfortunately, as kilometres passed, our moods fell. Not only there were still thick and dark clouds in the sky, but, icing on cake, it started to rain. This was definitely NOT how we had envisaged our four

days in Italy. Could it be worse? Yes, at the reception desk of our motel there was a message from Kair at the diving centre: due to bad weather we could not dive. The situation could be better the following afternoon... Our despair was not alleviated even by the supper we had at the small Da Rita trattoria in via Miliscola. Yes, both the bruschetta and the steak I had were very tasty but that was not why I was here!

In 37 B.C., during the civil war between Octavian August and Sextus Pompey, the construction of a huge harbour for the Empire's war fleet was started in the Bay of Naples. The works, initiated by Octavian's follower Marcus Agrippa, consisted in connecting the lakes of Avernus and Lucrinus and the bay with a navigable channel between Baia and Puteoli.

The fleet's presence resulted

*Antonia the Younger - the statue is located in Nymphaeo di Claudio.
Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/160 sek., f/10, ISO 200*



in swift development of the whole region, including the erection of storehouses, cisterns, dockyards and workshops. However, pretty swiftly, in 12 B.C., the navy left the region and the infrastructure was adapted for civilian purposes. The proximity of the harbour and the picturesque location of neighbouring villages combined with warm thermal waters in the area were some of the factors which contributed to the creation of a “resort”-like region in the following years.

Exquisite, opulent villas, baths and temples were erected on the mountain slopes. Many families had a “second house” here, including the aforementioned Claudio and Piso family (although in the following years the latter’s property was confiscated for plotting against Nero) and the region was visited by Cicero, Seneca and Horatio. The latter is given credit for the quote perfectly picturing the Roman’s attitude to this place: “No other bay in the world shines stronger than the beautiful Baia.”

Baia became famous all over the Empire not only due to the properties of the thermal waters which abound in the region but above all on account of the night-long parties which did not lack the pleasures of the spirit and (or maybe above all) of the flesh. Poet Marcus Valerius Martialis who

lived in the 1st century A.D. recalled ironically that “women come to Baia as Penelopes but leave as Helens.”

It was even worse in the morning. Fleeting moments of better weather ended with violent downpours. According to the forecast, waves in the bay afforded visibility around 70 cm. Watching the situation from the end of the pier we were forced to believe it. It was not good. There was no way we were going diving so we started our second day with looking for fragments of history.

In the area, there were still many outstanding monuments proving the power of the Empire and the skills of its builders, such as the huge thermal complex or the temples of Venus, Diane and Mercury. We have not forgotten the Aragonese castle museum. Its collection could give a headache even to people experiencing history on the daily basis. For Adam, our on-duty historian, it was an amazing experience. He examined respective sculptures, statues, busts, fragments of frescoes and columns in a religious-like ecstasy. I did not

Villa di Protiro. Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/125 sek., f/9, ISO 200



could think what would happen when we went to the Pompeii or Herculaneum...

24 August 79 is the date of a huge eruption of Vesuvius, the volcano dominating the whole area of the Bay of Naples, erupted. Tonnes of lava and ash led to one of the greatest tragedies of the ancient world: the annihilation of the Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae. Thanks to its location more to the north, Baia was spared. It met its fate only in 15th century. First, a series of earthquakes led to considerable destruction in the town. The night from 29 to 30 September 1538 was the most memorable; an eruption of a small volcano levelled the village of Tripergole and a large part of the Lucrino lake became solid lake.

Tuesday witnessed the much-desired weather change. Forecasts for the next 36 hours mentioned sun and clear skies. Only on Wednesday night another cold front was to bring a new wave of rain. No time to lose, then; time to start underwater. The mood at Centro Sub Campi Flegrei was much better too. It was clear that we had all waited for that moment with longing.

I think that Kair knows all there is to know about underwater Baia. And no wonder. This petite blonde has been participating in archaeological works conducted in the ancient Portus Julius and the adjoining villas of Roman dignitaries for years. Every year, a new fragment of the huge, multi-acre terrain over which the ruins are scattered is being secured within the scope of the national heritage protection programme.

"Claudius' Nymphaeum is the most spectacular and this is what we will start with. But do not be deceived; there are many more magical places underwater, only they are less visible..." And she was right, because Nymphaeum di Claudio in



Floor made of tiny white stones. It's enough to remove the top layer of the bottom to find the miracles like this. Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/60 sek., f/8, ISO 200.

the villa owned by the family of as many as three Caesars (Claudius, Nero and Caligula) is stunning. And the fact that the first sculptures, discovered in late 1950s, were removed from the water is of no importance. The similar fate met also further findings, also those from 1980s. According to



Small octopus in the archeological park. Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/100 sek., f/8, ISO 200

the decision of monument conservation officer, they have been placed in the Aragonese castle overlooking the bay which hosts an archaeological museum (Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei Nel Castello Aragonese). It is really of no importance because what's left underwater is

incredible incrusted floors, fragments of villa walls and the copies of original sculptures, meticulously reconstructed by the local stonemasons. They look just the same and, located in the same places where they used to bring joy to the villa residents two thousand years ago, they still give you goose bumps caused by so close a proximity to history.

I slipped down the RIB's rubber-coated side and, after collecting my photo equipment, started downwards. The water was cool and not too transparent but it was OK, with visibility of several metres. The arrival of Kair, Wojtek and Adam ended my short stop at the bottom. We were all there and we could get on our way.

Three abreast, following one metre behind our guide, we started towards the still invisible ruins. Invisible? I took a closer look at the small mound to the left. Its shape was too regular for the Mother Nature to have created it. It had certainly been made by humans and ages ago used to be a wall base. Looking round, I noticed ever more fragments of ancient buildings. We were moving between two walls about 5 metres apart which, although they probably used to be high and ornamental, now raised barely 50cm above the bottom. But... The situation was different up ahead. Due to low visibility we came upon it suddenly: in a blink, the corridor turned into a wide hall, the nymphaeum. It was lined on both sides by statues of gods and members of the Claudio family.

I dropped to the bottom at the feet of Dionysius, god of wine and vine. I waved at Kair to circle the statue around the back and come up to it from the left. She looked really good in a full-face mask used on account of numerous underwater works. A couple of flashes and I gestured to her to repeat the manoeuvre. I wanted to make sure that at



Cuttlefish. Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/100 sek., f/8, ISO 200

least a couple of photos would be OK.

Moving from figure to figure, I kept shooting furiously. King Odyssey, statue of Antonia the Younger, mother of Emperor Claudius. The time was running out and our weather window gave us no chance for a longer exploration of the excavation site. Rushed on by our guide, I followed her towards further chambers of the villa. Stop! Kair turned cautiously over the sandy bottom, littered with small stones, and started to remove the top layer with her hand. She managed to raise so much sand that for a moment we could not see anything. After a moment, however, the delicate current moved the cloud of particles to the side and I got a glimpse of the floor, first unclear but better with every passing second. It was beautiful, made of tiny white stones. Attracted by movement, fish started to move above the bottom, looking for food.



Dionysius – this statue is located of the right side of the Nympho di Claudio area. Olympus OM-D EM5 with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital 14-42 f/3.5 - 5.6 II R lens in Nauticam housing. Wide angle Inon UWL-H100, Inon D2000 strobe. 1/200 sek., f/9, ISO 200

I wanted to wait a bit more but Kair moved on, leaving the floor uncovered. “We will come back here in a moment,” she gestured. And she was right, we could give the dust time to settle, especially that we did not go anywhere far, only to the next room which we entered not by the door but above the



wall. The floor of the chamber was covered with thick mats kept down by stones. We removed some of them and... I went speechless. A totally smooth surface of exquisite marble, slightly damaged here and there by the passage of time and water but still preserved in a surprisingly good condition. A couple of photos and we had to go back. But first we had to clean up after ourselves, covering both floors carefully.

The evening was perfect. Not only because our dives greatly improved our moods but also because the foot served at the “Da Bernardo” trattoria in via Montenuovo Licola Patria proved delicious. Already the beginning was great; the owner, a dark and gloomy Neapolitan mobster type, brought us a plate of bruschetta, followed by a wondrous smell of Garlic, olive oil and fresh tomatoes. A starter on the house. And it kept getting better! No wonder that when I finally went to bed it took me a long time to fall asleep. Despite my tiredness, my full stomach (at Wojtek’s encouragement we ended the feast at a nearby ice cream parlour, stuffing ourselves with huge portions of gelato) and the vision of next dives



prevented me from letting my eyes rest. But only for so long.

Off we went! A moment on the boat and we were at our location. I jumped first into the water to check the dome port I had mounted that morning on the wide-angle converter. After dropping to the bottom, I checked all my equipment and was ready to go. First, as we had arranged still at the surface, we returned to the magnificent floors to uncover them and use the times with the sculptures for the water to clear.

Before we started clearing the floor, Kair stopped, hovering above the bottom, and started to pick at it. I was in no hurry but it took awfully long. Moreover, Wojtek, who had so far stayed in the back, was lying on the bottom in front of her, taking one photo after another. What was up? I floated towards them and, surprised, noticed a small octopus hidden under a stone. Silly! Now I had to work real hard to manage a good shot since Wojtek had taken the best position. Almost touching his side, I tried to wedge into position. One close-up, then another. How about a wide angle? The octopus



and Kair hovering above it? One test photo to set the parameters. Checking; it was OK. One more try, changing the shot a bit. Yes, great! I was pressing the shutter when I noticed sudden movement. Irritated, the octopus had enough and made its exit in an instant, leaving me without my shot. Oh, well... It was time to move towards the sculptures waiting for us in the adjoining chamber.

Jumping into the water above Villa a Protiro I was already somewhat cold, but it was here that we were about to find the most beautiful floors in the whole excavation site! Using our tested method from the first dive, we uncovered them first. This time, however, the result was even more stunning. I could not turn from the wondrously ornamental floors with mosaics of white and black stone. Man, how awesome was that! Wherever you moved your hand, you uncovered some new wonder; a fragment of cobbled street between the villas, a floor or fragments of bath heating systems.

Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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