

Nudibranchs of the Seychelles

by Chris Mason-Parker

When considering Seychelles as a dive destination, it is the underwater seascapes and charismatic megafauna that spring to mind. Enormous granite boulders lie on the seabed as if scattered by some giant invisible hand. Stacked loosely together, they provide numerous swim-throughs and overhangs, where whitetip reef sharks and huge marble rays make their homes, and hawksbill and green turtles swim lazily by.

With so much of the ‘big stuff’ to preoccupy even the most jaded of divers, it is easy to see why the smaller inhabitants of the reef are often overlooked. However, for those willing to take the time to search, the Seychelles archipelago provides a wealth of macro subjects, not least an impressive variety of nudibranch species.

To date, the nudibranchs of Seychelles have been understudied, with little information available regarding species diversity and distribution. What is without doubt is that the seagrass beds, coral reefs and sponge encrusted granite boulders

provide the perfect habitats to support a diversity of opisthobranch species.

Although nudibranchs are found within the granitic islands year round, certain species are seasonal and diversity definitely peaks at particular times of the year. The southeast monsoon from June to October brings cold plankton rich upwellings to coastal waters. It is at this time of year that the visibility and water temperature drops and it coincides with a proliferation in nudibranch species.

During this period a localised population explosion of the Dorid nudibranch, *Gymnodoris ceylonica* takes place within the Baie Ternay Marine National Park. *G.Ceylonica* is virtually absent for the rest of the year, both within Baie Ternay and elsewhere within the inner islands. However, as sea temperatures decrease in June and July, large numbers of the species appear within the seagrass beds of the bay. Clusters of nudibranchs group together among the blades of seagrass, with their bright orange egg strings. Both



Localised population explosions of Gymnodoris ceylonica occur at the same time each year. Canon 7D, Canon EF 100mm macro USM, Ikelite Housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 320, f/22, 1/250

Goniobranchu gleniei is frequently found on granitic sites. Canon S90, internal flash. ISO 200, f/2.8, 1/500

mating and feeding behaviour can be easily observed, with the seahare, *S.longicauda*, the preferred food choice.

The main island of Mahé has numerous productive dive sites for nudibranch hunting. The Twin Barges





Close up of the perfoliate rhinophores of Phyllidia ocellata. Canon 7D, Canon EF100mm macro USM, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 200, f/8, 1/200



Goniobranchus conchyliatus is often observed crawling along the substrate. Canon 7D, Canon EF100mm macro USM, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 125, f/10, 1/250

wreck is a pair of old barges deliberately sunk in 1989 to create a new dive site near the Corsaire Reef. Today the barges are encrusted in corals and sponges and are a great place to find nudibranch species. A variety of nudibranchs are often encountered on each dive, often crawling across the vessels surfaces or on the adjacent reef.

To the north of Beau Vallon bay, the tiny islet of Lilot is an excellent site for uncovering opisthobranchs. The reef is famous locally for its soft corals and throws up a variety of nudibranch species. Halgerda wasinensis and Nembrotha lineolata are particularly common here, the latter appears to be extremely localised and up to now, does not appear to have been observed outside of this dive site.

Another species of Opisthobranch prone to population explosions is Cyerce nigricans. At certain times of the year these sapsuckers are found

The psychedelic colours of Hypselodoris pulchella at Twin Barges. Canon 7D, Canon EF100mm macro USM, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 160, f/14, 1/250



The cryptic colouration of Phyllidiopsis cardinalis makes it difficult to distinguish when on the reef. Canon 7D, Canon EF100mm macro USM, Ikelite housing and single Ikelite DS160 strobe. ISO 200, f/16, 1/250





*The sapsucker **Cyerce nigricans** is capable of ejecting its cerata when threatened. Canon S90, internal flash. ISO 160, f/2.8, 1/500*

*Night dives provide the opportunity to find species such as **Platydoris formosa**. Canon S90, internal flash. ISO 80, f/9, 1/60*

in large numbers in the waters around Curieuse Island, where in less than one metre of water they can be observed feeding on the algae *Chlorodesmus* sp.

Granitic sites have a good diversity of nudibranch species too, with *Goniobranchus conchyliatus*, *Goniobranchus gleniei* and *Goniobranchus albobunctatus* all regularly encountered alongside multifarious species of *Phyllidia* sp.

Night dives in Seychelles provide fantastic opportunities to photograph nudibranchs. Spanish dancers are particularly common with bright red,



orange and mottled specimens observed crawling across the reef. Other large species such as *Platydoris formosa* and *Dendrodoris carbunculosa* have also been encountered.

While Seychelles may not have the abundance of nudibranch species that turn up in certain locations in southeast Asia, with a little local knowledge there should be plenty to keep most enthusiasts in the water. With over eighty species

already identified and no doubt numerous more waiting to be discovered the islands are only just beginning to give up their secrets.

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