

Scilly Seals

by Lucy Ray

Having just returned from The Galapagos Islands and photographing sea lions, I was eager to find similar subjects within easier reach so turned my attention to the grey seal.

After some research the Isles of Scilly quickly made it to the top of my list because of its crystal clear waters and pristine beaches, ideal for underwater photography. It might sound like the Maldives but you quickly get a reality check when you put a toe in the water. At between 10 and 18 degrees, the waters off the Isles of Scilly are less than tropical but the water clarity and abundance of grey seals make it worth braving the cold. It is one of the only places in the UK where you can easily snorkel with Atlantic grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) and as the trips by The Scilly Seal Snokelling company have been running for many years, the seals are used to snorkelers, are known to be quite friendly.

To get to The Isles of Scilly, take the ferry from Penzance Harbour, or fly from Exeter, Land's End or Newquay with Skybus. I opted for the ferry because although the flight only takes about 30 minutes, you are only allowed a small piece of hand luggage (a small bag of 30cm x 15cm x 15cm) so I preferred to transport my camera and diving equipment with me on the ferry. The ferry takes about two hours 40 minutes and can be quite rough, but you might get lucky as I did, and have calm seas.

The ferry docks on the island of St Mary's, which is the biggest of the five inhabited islands,



A seal glances over before disappearing into the deeper water.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes, Lens: 20mm 2.8, ISO: 1600, Aperture: 5.6, Shutter Speed 1/1000.

The Isles of Scilly may look like a tropical destination but located just 30 miles off the coast of Cornwall, they are in easy reach for a long weekend away.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII, Lens: 70-200mm 2.8 at 200mm, ISO: 320, Aperture: 7.1, Shutter Speed 1/1250.





A seal looks to be waving as it lies on a rock near the waters edge.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII, Lens: 70-200mm 2.8 at 200mm, ISO: 320, Aperture: 7.1, Shutter Speed 1/1400.

and has a range of hotels and B&Bs offering comfortable accommodation.

I stayed at The Sylina Guesthouse, which conveniently ran a taxi service (Toots taxis), making the trip to the quay painless, with my heavy underwater camera setup. I took my Canon 5D MarkIII camera in Ikelite housing, a 20mm 2.8 prime lens, 8" Ikelite dome port and twin Ikelite DS161 strobes. I also had a Canon 7D with 70-200mm 2.8 lens to capture shots of the seals on land from the boat.

The snorkeling trip runs from the neighboring island of St Martin's but Scilly Seal Snorkelling will collect you from St Mary's for £5.

Back on the island of St. Martin's is where you prepare for the seal adventure. You are kitted out from their extensive equipment room, with a semi-dry suit, gloves, boots, fins and a hood and mask and snorkel. They really make sure you are



A seal bobs up to the surface as the boat approaches.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII, Lens: 70-200mm 2.8 at 200mm, ISO: 320, Aperture: 7.1, Shutter Speed 1/1250

braced for the chilly water but as these trips are suitable for beginners and children, it's good they ensure everyone has the right gear. I had my own kit so sweated on the side in my suit, while everyone else got ready.

It feels like a lot of neoprene for snorkeling though, especially with no weights. We were informed that duck diving is not allowed as it scares off the seals. With the positive buoyancy I had with two suits on, you would have needed a motor to manage a duck dive so that really wasn't going to be an issue!

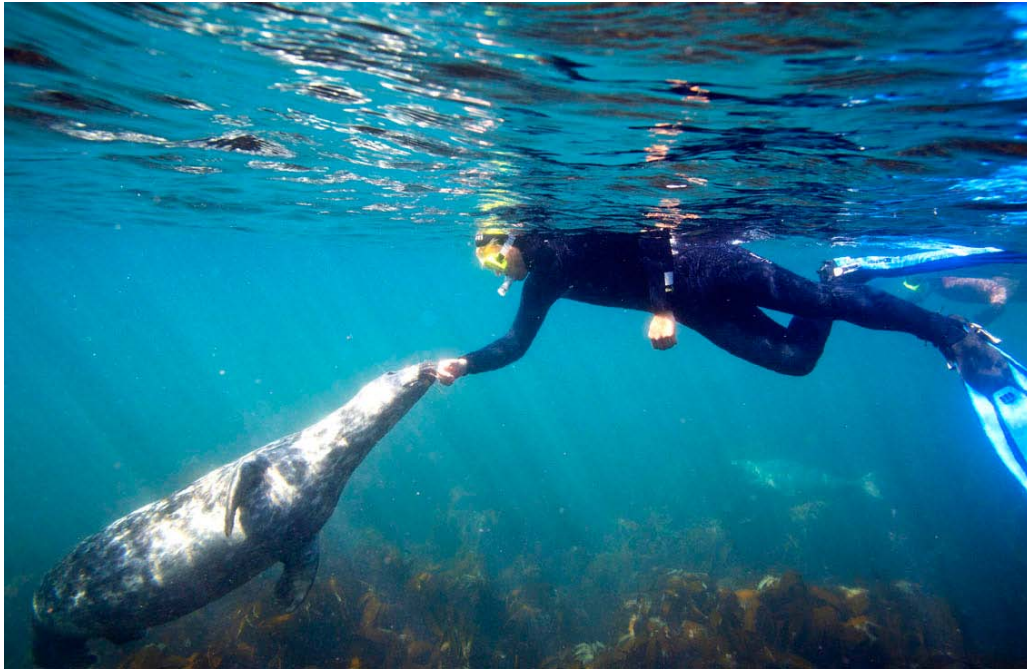
As we approached the seal area on the rib, heads bobbed up from the dark waters and then disappeared, as the seals peeked up to see what the commotion was about.

I was keen to get in and start photographing them so I jumped in first and waited for their advances.



An over under shot of a seal and the blue sky.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes, Lens: 20mm 2.8, ISO: 400, Aperture: 8, Shutter Speed 1/200.



Guide Jack Gillett, gets a close encounter with a friendly seal.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes, Lens: 20mm 2.8, ISO: 800, Aperture: 10, Shutter Speed 1/200.

I floated on the surface with my camera held in front of me, and tried to make only small movements. Sure enough within a few minutes I spotted something in my peripheral vision, but as I turned the seal quickly darted away. We were warned about their sneaky behavior and to always check behind you. So after a few minutes of barren waters, I turned around to see if the action was behind me but the splashing from the other snorkelers entering the water was all I could see. I tried venturing closer to the

rocks where some of the seals were lying in the hope one might jump in front of me. After another fruitless wait I swam over to the sea grass and hovered above it and again waited. Deep within the sea grass I spotted some eyes staring up at me. I fired off a few frames and the seal stayed put, curious of my dome port. It then rose out of the sea grass, and darted out towards the open water.

Having seen seals beached on the rocks nearby it was quite surprising how quickly they can move



The seal poses for the camera before diving off out of sight.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes (Switched off), Lens: 20mm 2.8, ISO: 1600, Aperture: 5.6, Shutter Speed 1/1000.

underwater.

After an hour in the sea I was a bit disappointed by the amount of seal time I'd had. The few encounters so far had been brief and I hadn't taken the pictures I had envisaged.

As with all wildlife photography, patience and luck play a big part in producing outstanding images, so I knew I needed as long as possible in the water. I felt the group of 10 snorkelers and two instructors may be making the seals nervous, so I was hopeful for more seal action

as the cold started to get to the other snorkelers.

The adrenaline was flowing with the anticipation of a great shot, so I barely felt the cold and was happy to float around while the others got back on the boat. I was now alone with instructor Anna Cawthray and just as I'd hoped, a curious seal swam directly towards us. She stopped just below us and stared up at us with her big eyes. I took lots of shots and she remained with us, completely unfazed by the flashes.

Participant Ben Cliffe, gets a close encounter with a friendly seal.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes, **Lens:** 20mm 2.8, **ISO:** 800, **Aperture:** 10, **Shutter Speed** 1/200.



She swam around our fins and then latched onto Anna's fin. She was very curious and friendly, and seemed content being near us. Sadly our time in the water was nearly up and a boat load of cold snorkelers were watching on, but I was reluctant to leave while the seal was being so playful. She swam around our fins again and hugged Anna's fins once more, and looked like she was smiling whilst clinging onto the fin. She then let go, took one last look at the strange neoprene creatures with a massive Ikelite eye between them, and glided off into the deeper water.

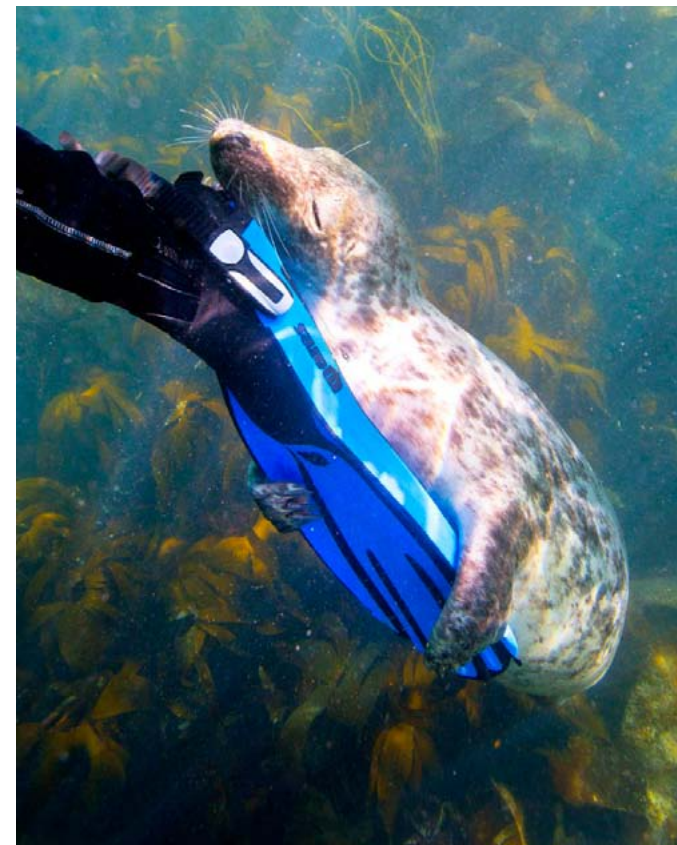
After this close encounter I was eager to spend more time with the seals so I booked to go out again the next morning, as the trips run daily. The weather had been glorious and I was hopeful it would remain so for the next day.

I was hoping to show how friendly the seals were in my photographs, and my final encounter

with the seals gave me hope that I might get the images I needed.

The second day we stopped the boat at a different spot and I jumped in quickly as before. Rather than venture away from the other snorkelers though, I stayed close and watched, hopeful for more human and seal interaction. The sky was clear and blue and the sun was shining, so conditions were perfect.

The seals were on fine form on this outing and there was none of the caution and hesitation I had seen the day before. There were also more seals in the water with us and they were swimming all around us. After capturing some images of interactions I was hoping for a lovely seal portrait so I broke away from the group and swam around the cove to an area where I was alone. Again, I waited and sure enough an inquisitive seal came up to me and I took a few shots. The ambient light was



Guide Anna Cawthray, gets a close encounter with a friendly seal who took a real liking to her fins.

Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII in Ikelite housing, Twin DS161 video strobes, **Lens:** 20mm 2.8, **ISO:** 400, **Aperture:** 8, **Shutter Speed** 1/200.

quite good so I turned off my strobes, boosted the ISO and used a faster shutter speed to really freeze the action of the darting seals. After half an hour of waiting, a seal swam towards me and stopped for a few seconds, long enough for me to take three frames, then she turned and swam into the deeper waters. We were being called back to the boat so my seal experience was over, but I felt I had captured

A seal hiding in the sea grass below.

*Camera: Canon 5D MarkIII
in Ikelite housing, Twin
DS161 video strobes, Lens:
20mm 2.8, ISO: 640, Aperture:
14, Shutter Speed 1/200.*



the friendliness of the Scilly Seals. I wished I could have gone back out everyday for a week, as each trip was unique and yielded different image possibilities. Two days was not long enough!

Diving trips are also available but you need a buddy, and the trips are unguided.

I hope to visit the seals again in late summer when pupping season begins, and capture some images of seal youngsters with their mums.

The snorkeling trips run from March through to September but are weather dependent. Minimum age is 8 years and costs £44.

Lucy Ray

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