

The Art of Exploration

by Tony Myshlyaev

Having fallen in love with underwater photography, I am fortunate enough to be in the water almost every day. You hope that all your preparation will produce some results. With each success you begin to gain more confidence in your abilities and push yourself to produce even better images. As the stakes raise you hit plateaus on your progress. Favorable subjects become increasingly harder to find as your standards rise.

When I reached this point, I felt I was losing my inspiration. It may have been time to take out the credit card and book a trip to Indonesia. Instead I began to explore more of the island I already knew. I realized it is almost impossible to see the entire underwater landscape and always being limited to dive sites you are familiar with can take away from the inspiration you need to produce great images. What lurks beyond visible range? It is a fact that, if you look, sooner or later you are always going to find something. As long as you are smart about it.

Beginning at a dive site and working your way outwards in a direction you are unfamiliar with is the most basic way to begin. Staying within the bounds of safe waters should be the most important factor. Speaking to experienced divers can help you avoid something dangerous like a powerful current. Although current prone areas are often the most promising locations, proceed with caution. However if the conditions are favorable, it is always worth it



Pelagic Jellyfish - Thysanostoma Thysanuran

Despite being in a new environment floating in mid-water was a pelagic jellyfish that was the star of the dive.

Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 16mm f/2.8D, 2 x Inon Z40

to explore. Fish and critters flee from popular dive sites to avoid the harassment of countless divers and often lie beyond the reach of the common route. Whether it's all the noises of scuba diving or boat pollution, they have good reason to leave.

If you are passionate about being in the water as much as possible then it will also be worth adding a self-reliant diver certification to your

credentials. This way there is no compromise of your goals. It would be a pragmatic investment and you will find yourself benefiting greatly from the new skill. This will allow you to pause and look around at your own pace as well as avoid scaring away fish by approaching with an army of bubbles. The ideal pony tank is also a key factor to consider. To avoid exerting yourself, invest in



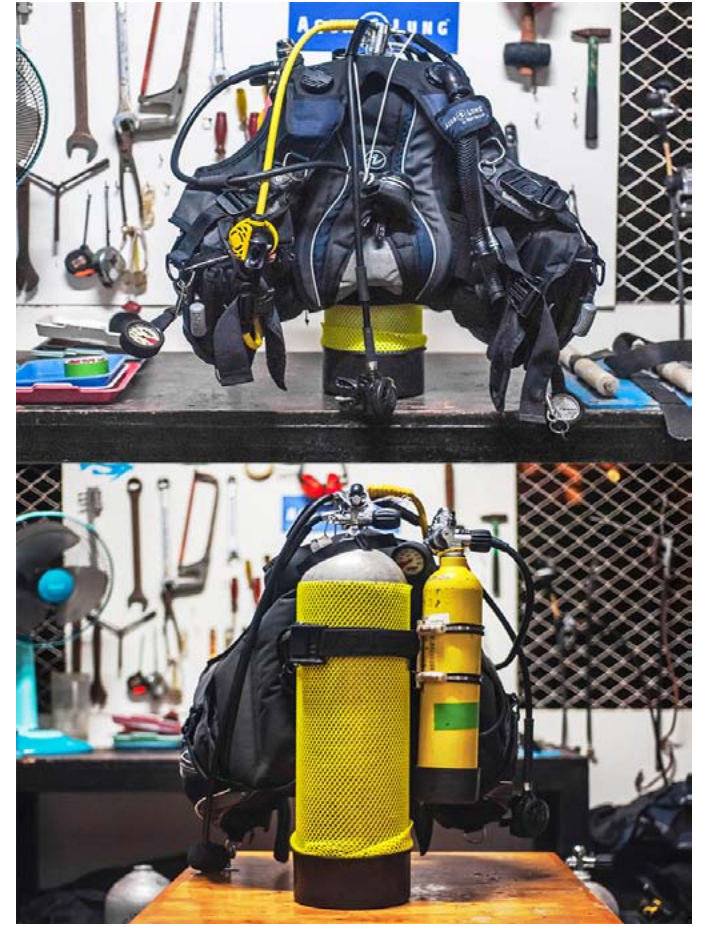
Cuttlefish

Having the spare tank on my back allowed for a head-on angle of this cuttlefish. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

a light aluminium tank. It is important to keep the counter weighting to a minimum. A lighter kit will allow for effortless swimming, keeping you relaxed and making efficient use of the air in your tank. Especially in the case of shooting macro, it is wise to have your pony tank mounted on your back by a tank bracket. When it is clipped onto the front you risk making contact with the reef or sea floor.

This not only damages the environment but also disturbs the creature during your cautious approach. By having the pony tank out of harms way you can also gain a unique perspective by getting closer to eye level with your subject. Have your back up second stage clipped on in the most accessible and streamline position and you are ready to go.

It is common to stare at an area of high



Kitting Up - Preparing for a solo dive. Making sure everything is clipped on and tucked away to avoid any distractions from exploration. I like to keep my back up regulator tied to a bungee around my neck. Nikon D700 50mm f/1.8D

potential and find nothing for a long period of time when, out of nowhere, you spot movement and zero in on a camouflaged subject. Train your eyes for the macro shots. With time your eyes become paranoid to the shapes of fish and critters. Try to question every shape. Here is where a torch and pointer can



Miracle Triplefin Blenny – enneapterygius mirabilis

This miracle triplefin blenny was motionless in front of my eyes for more than five minutes before I was able to spot it. Patience can pay off. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

help. Avoid harassing life or damaging any growth but if you are unsure about a shape you have found, you can bring your pointer near the subject in question and see if it has a reaction. If it does, it will reveal itself to you. The more you make of this habit, the more success you will have. This is the best way to find unique photographs. In most cases, the greatest challenge is locating the critter rather than taking its photograph. As I began to try this myself, I had varying levels of success. One day, after searching

on a number of walls for the course of 45 minutes, a little cavern held a Miracle Fin Blenny. I had never heard of anyone seeing in this area before. Taking that picture home with me was more rewarding than the past ten previous dives combined.

If you are able to gather a group of divers with the same mind set, you could take it to a more ambitious level. Pooling together money to rent a boat or sonar can allow you to explore entirely new areas. During preparation it is wise



Grouper

Whether it is the bubbles of the intimidation of a big group of divers, fish tend to move away from common areas. This grouper was on the outskirts of the dive site. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 16mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

to ask around for promising leads. Fishermen and sailors may know about a thriving fish locations or interesting rock formations (ones they probably avoid). These could prove to be photogenic areas: caverns with cathedral lighting or formations worthy of your shutter. If you are fortunate to have marine biologists nearby your location, they are an excellent source of information. With the help of a local expert such as this you can stumble on a gold mine. Often the exchange of information for

photographic proof of your findings will help them as much as they helped you. You never know when you might find an undocumented species in your area. Be wary of diving in extremely strong currents that might take you off course. All the same, avoid areas with fishing boats at all costs. There is no need for anyone to end up on a hook or in a net. Avoid risks at all costs. In my experience, dendronephthya is not a common coral in Koh Tao, however with some great advice and motivation, a group of us were led to a



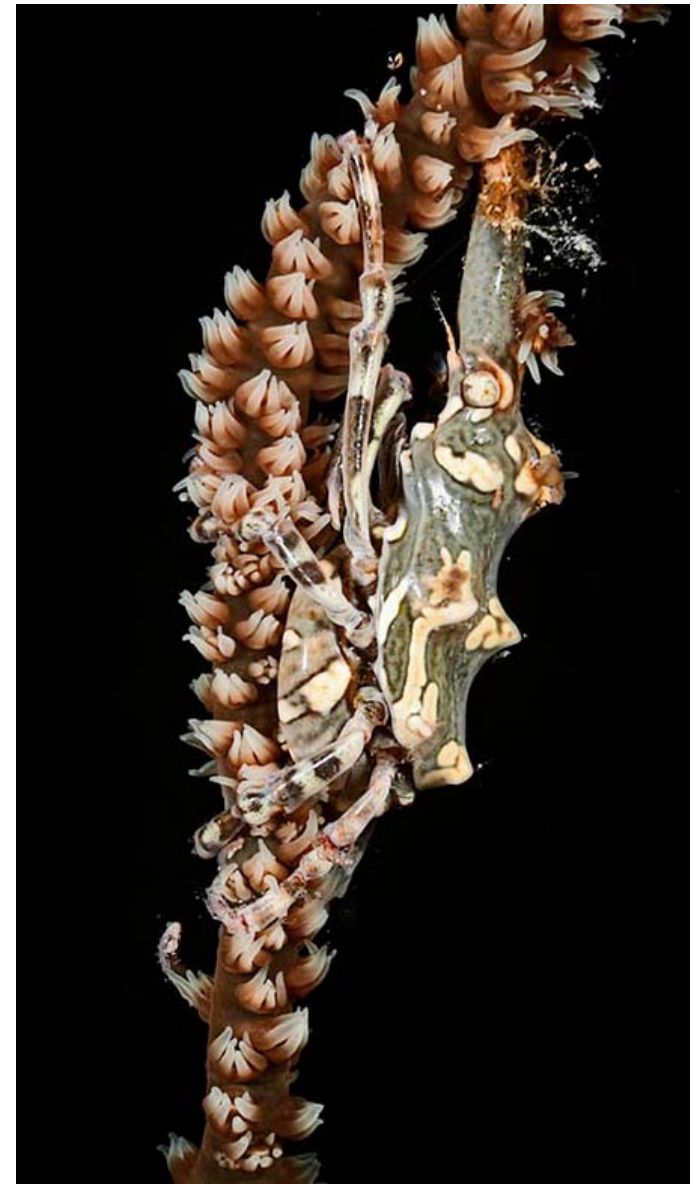
Strapweed Filefish – pseudomonacanthus elongates

Hiding in dendronephtya coral was a juvenile strapweed filefish. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

whole garden of it. It harboured countless symbiotic critters I was so unused to seeing. This was all within clear view of a common dive site.

Scouting with a snorkel is another indispensable way of finding your own promising leads. This way you can economically locate your next exploration dive. With it you can also be confronted by sea life that would usually flee

at the first hint of bubbles. It may seem like a chore. Especially in cold water environments but it can bring a refreshing perspective to your portfolio. Green turtles, like sharks, are never seen at my local dive sites however can often be sighted by snorkeling. Avoiding the noise of divers they relocate to quiet areas where they find themselves much more comfortable. This allows for unique



Xeno Crab

A friend tipped me off about the location of a xeno crab. Sometimes you can have your work cut out for you. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40



Pink Anemone Fish

Observing this pink anemonefish I spent a bit of time to get perfect the shot before moving on at my own pace. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

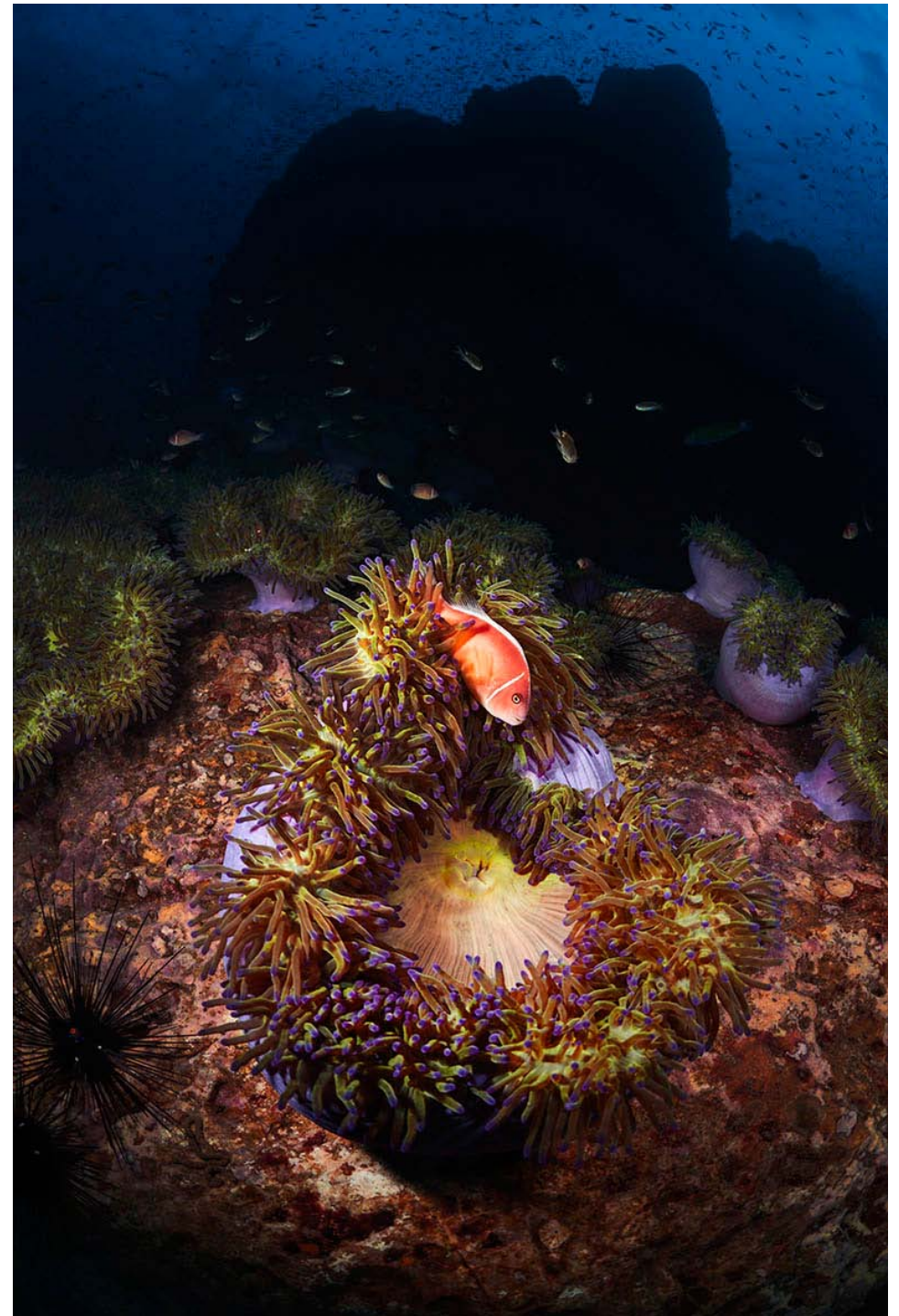
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photo opportunities that let you utilize the surface in ways your dive gear cannot. Rarely do you have the time to delay a dive while waiting for a turtle to surface for a breath!

Lastly, it is important to never give up. Every last bar counts and it could be at any point that you find just what you were looking for. Just because a day of exploring brought you minimal success does not mean it was all in vain. Perhaps

you were unaware of the type of creatures that could be found in the area. Brush up on your knowledge of the environment. Research bottom feeders, reef dwellers, pelagic life, and whatever types of environments you find yourself confronted by.





Caloria Indica

Meticulous searching is crucial. At the end of my dive I came upon two caloria indica mating. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 105mm f/2.8D. 2 x Inon Z40

This will narrow your search and allow you to become more efficient at locating subjects. After 65 minutes of searching I was ready to call it a dive. It was clear that every crevice brought me no success. I was running low on air but I was not deterred to keep scanning every rock during my swim. Right before launching my safety marker I spotted two Caloria Indicas in the final moments of mating.

Photography has never been as simple as clicking the shutter and

getting pretty pictures. It takes a lot more to find the right moments and angles to live up to professional standards. And diving does not need to be as simple as waking up, going to your dive centre and getting on a boat just to be led around for your dives. Taking the next step will help you gain confidence and vital skills as a scuba diver as well as a photographer and amateur biologist. All of it works hand in hand to improve your images and opens you to a perspective of



Green Turtle

Green turtles are certainly around the island but often shy away from dive sites. Nikon D700 w/ SUBAL ND700 housing 16mm f/2.8D. Magic Filter.

infinite possibilities where you thought they were already exhausted. With each mounting success your knowledge and awareness grows, facilitating the rate at which you add new locations and creatures to your knowledge.

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