

# Diving in Italy

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Sunset view of village on the Italian coast (above); Spiny seahorse (center inset)

**Italy is truly a beautiful country to explore. It is a place where one can not only savor the regional specialties and cuisine in between dives, but also experience the country's cultural diversity, lifestyle and heritage.**

Many years have passed since I was a child, but I still have fond memories of when I went to the beach with my parents to look for crabs and shrimps among the rocks of Liguria. It was decades ago, and a lot has changed, unfortunately, not all for the better. The sea is now nearly depleted of the bountiful marine life it once held. Even so, it still carries a great charm, perhaps more so now and with more poignancy than it did for me before, with the realization that the crabs and shrimps might have been better off left alone on the beach.

Over the years I have had the good

fortune to be able to dive and experience the sea more closely. From Tavolara to Ventimiglia, from Levanto to Castellammare, from Noli to Giglio, from Portofino to Sicily—every dive gave me something special. Every time I plan a trip, I remember and relive it all with joy. Indeed, I have travelled to many tropical seas in other parts of the world—all warmer and, in some respects, more colourful than the Mediterranean. Yet, diving in Italy continues to be interesting, and every dive is still a discovery, a search, an adventure.

The landscape and nature found in Italy offers diversity like few others. Only a handful of miles separate the very blue seas along the coast from the snow-capped mountains of the Alps. In between we have the green plains, the parks, the rivers, the lakes and a number of large and small cities.

The boot-shaped peninsula that makes up Italy is over 1,000km long and has a coastline of 7,600km. Along

the coast, the various sea regions that border the Mediterranean Sea include the Ligurian, Tyrrhenian, Ionian and Adriatic seas. They strongly influence the climate of Italy and are valuable resources, determining the temperate zone of the Mediterranean.

Thousands of years of history have shaped the culture of Italy; each of the country's various regions have different traditions and have managed to keep their cultural diversity over the ages. Indeed, a visitor will notice differences between regions on several fronts—from the kitchen to the language, even in the pace of work and life. Mix and blend those differences—the variety of styles, colors, scents and flavors, and there you have it—'Made in Italy'. And among the inventions made

Wall of pink gorgonian sea fans (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Portofino, Italy







COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Duomo di Milano, the Cathedral of Milan; Typical Italian street market; A Ferrari, the Italian luxury sports car; Fresh baked focaccia, Italian flat bread



making it almost impossible to describe a typical dive in Italy, because it can be completely different depending on where in the country it takes place. So how does one describe diving in Italy? Any generalization would be out of place. The seas lapping the Italian coast offer diving for every taste. In addition, for fans of freshwater diving, there are inland lakes,

of choosing to pursue the kind of diving for which he or she has a passion or a curiosity—whether it be marine life, marine archaeology, wrecks, walls, or caves. If you want to explore the underwater world in and around Italy, I recommend you refer to the database that we Italian divers have compiled, covering 500 dive sites distributed between the Peninsula and the surrounding islands. (See ScubaPortal.it)

If a friend from another country—say, somewhere far to the north—called and asked me for information on where to go diving in Italy, I would first investigate my friend's interests and make some recommendations based on his or her preferences, in order to provide some alternatives from which my friend could choose. I would then explain an important fact about diving in Italy: that the Italians

love the good life, and between dives, we love to eat well in each other's company.

It would then be my duty to show my friend from the north, in addition to the selected dive sites, the right Italian dishes to match. And in each corner of Italy we visited, I would make sure my friend from the north had at least

tried the specialty of the house. This way, the diving would have more 'flavor'. Then, I would throw onto the table some little cards marked with the possibilities, brief descriptions of dive sites on the main



Typical fishing boats found in picturesque harbor towns along the Italian coast



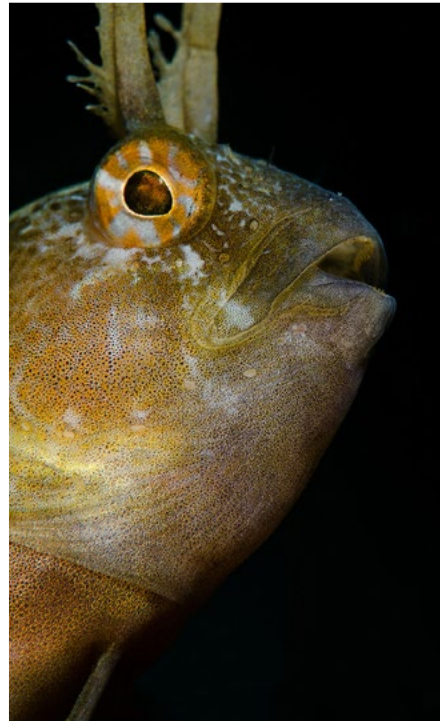
in Italy, there are also those created for the underwater realm. In fact, it is in Italy where several of the major dive manufacturers were established and are still innovating.

The diversity and variety mentioned above are also reflected in the sea,





Diver at ruins of old mill (left) in Lake Capodacqua near town of Aquila, Abruzzo in central Italy; Combtooth blenny (below); Mediterranean red seastar on reef (right); Grouper (lower right); Swimming octopus (lower left inset)



coasts of Italy, including Lampedusa, Ustica, Ponza, Elba, Ventotene, Aeolian Islands, Pantelleria, Volcano and Favignana. These small island paradises offer a myriad of great dive sites, some nearly tropical in flavor. The islands farthest south are real jewels, far away from

mass tourism, but they require quite a bit of transit to reach.

Take Lampedusa, for example. It's a picture postcard of beaches and exceptional diving in clear waters with a variety of fish that can compete with many tropical destinations. Ustica, known as the "Black Pearl of the Mediterranean" because of its lava rocks, is truly an open-air aquarium. The island of Elba in the region of Tuscany is closely connected to the mainland and well-known for its diving, with many dive centers ready to welcome guests who make it there by their own means.



Divers at a dive site in the Ligurian Sea

all tastes. From Cinque Terre and Portofino in the east to Riviera dei Fiori in the west, Liguria is a region that attracts tourists both for its natural beauty and for its man-made features. I recommend Portofino National Marine Park, not far from Genoa. In this natural protected marine reserve, which was established in 1999, one can find corals, barracuda, dusky grouper, common dentex or sea bream and other fishes that are more plentiful now than they were several years ago. At both ends of the Liguria region, there are

peninsula and the surrounding islands, as well as a few grains of insight gathered from my own and my Italian colleagues' best diving experiences.

**The islands**  
Aside from the two big beautiful islands of Sardinia and Sicily, there are many smaller islands scattered around the





Divers on descent line (above); Brilliant yellow and pink sea fans (top right)

two very interesting areas for diving: the area of Latte–Ventimiglia with the area of shoals at Balzi Rossi, and on the other side, the area of Levante and the Cinque Terre National Park, with numerous wrecks.

Liguria offers a wide choice of dive sites for wreck divers, including ships, aircraft and other historic vessels including the famous tanker, *Haven*, which sank in 1991 at the mouth of the port of Genoa. At 80m maximum depth, it's a destination of interest for advanced divers with some experience.

### Tuscany

From Liguria divers can head down to Tuscany, a region whose name is derived from the ancient name *dall'etnonimo* used by the Greeks to define the land inhabited by the Etruscans. "Etruria" later turned into "Tuscia" and finally became "Tuscany".

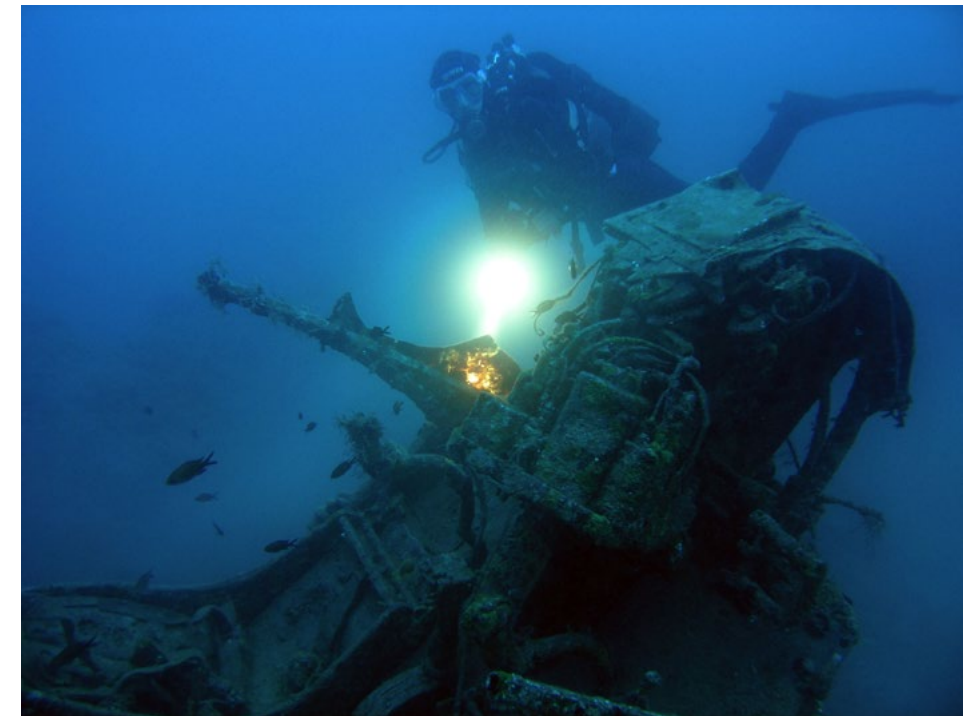
Aside from the island of Elba, which is well-known as a popular dive destination, other islands in the area deserve a men-

tion including Argentario, Capraia, Giglio and Giannutri islands. These islands offer excellent diving between rocks and shoals. Not far from Elba is Pianosa Island, which has been open for diving, albeit on a quota system, since 2013. It is part of the Tuscan Archipelago National Park and is famous for the high security prison, which was closed in 2011.

### Ionian Sea

When I think of the warm and wild seas of the south, my immediately association is with underwater photographer Francesco Turano's poetic description of this region:

"In Calabria, where it is still wild and desolate, where the beaches are incredi-

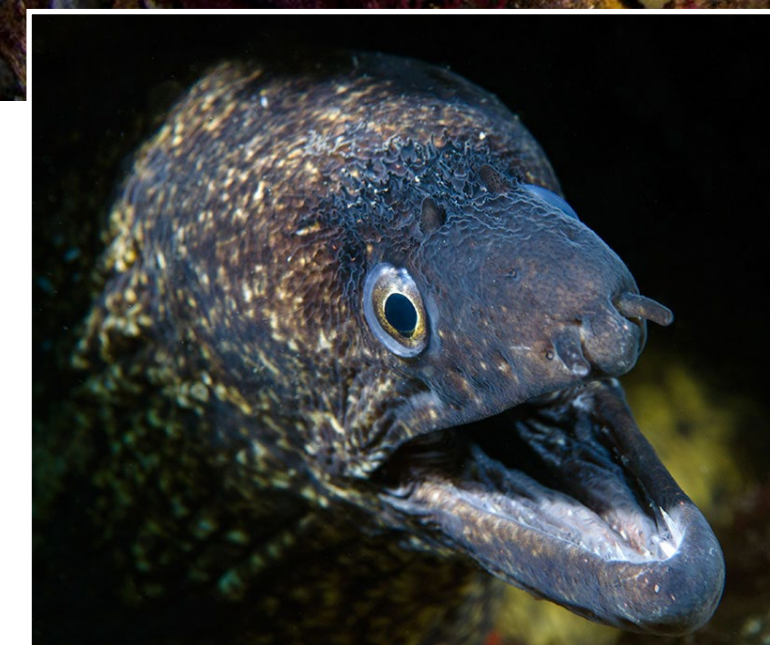


bly vast and where the largest rivers of the Aspromonte (Apennine Mountains) pour into the sea, dive immediately into the deep, following the incredible rocky staircases that lead to the abyss of the cold

Historic wrecks include ships, tankers and aircraft, such as a helicopter (right)







Pink and yellow gorgonian sea fans on rocky reef; Moray eel (left); Blenny (below)

Characterized by deep trenches and extended abyssal plains, the Ionian Sea is one of the most geologically active areas of our country.

"The portion of the Ionian Sea that borders southern Calabria is extremely intriguing from an

underwater point of view, as the submerged earth presents a landscape that does nothing to stop one from thinking of cathedrals of rock not far from shore.

"The charm and unbridled aggression of the deep blue sea, where peace and desolation does not fade away, in no small part, even in summer, are the power of these places for the 'lone wolves', those divers seeking the sea and nothing else, who want to experience their dives with a few close friends, experts and lovers of an apparently wild, untamed Mediterranean.

"In these places where mass tourism has not yet taken hold for lack of receptivity, where the only form of tourism is sustainable, environmentally responsible and therefore attentive to the landscape, motivated divers can choose to discover the secrets of the Ionian Calabria, the Ionian Strait, only if they

waters of the Ionian and Tyrrhenian seas, and you will find perhaps a less colourful sea, but a sea no less full of surprises for the diver who loves the Mediterranean.

"The Ionian Sea occupies the central part of the southern Mediterranean: this is where it reaches its maximum depth of 5,093m in the Hellenic Trench.

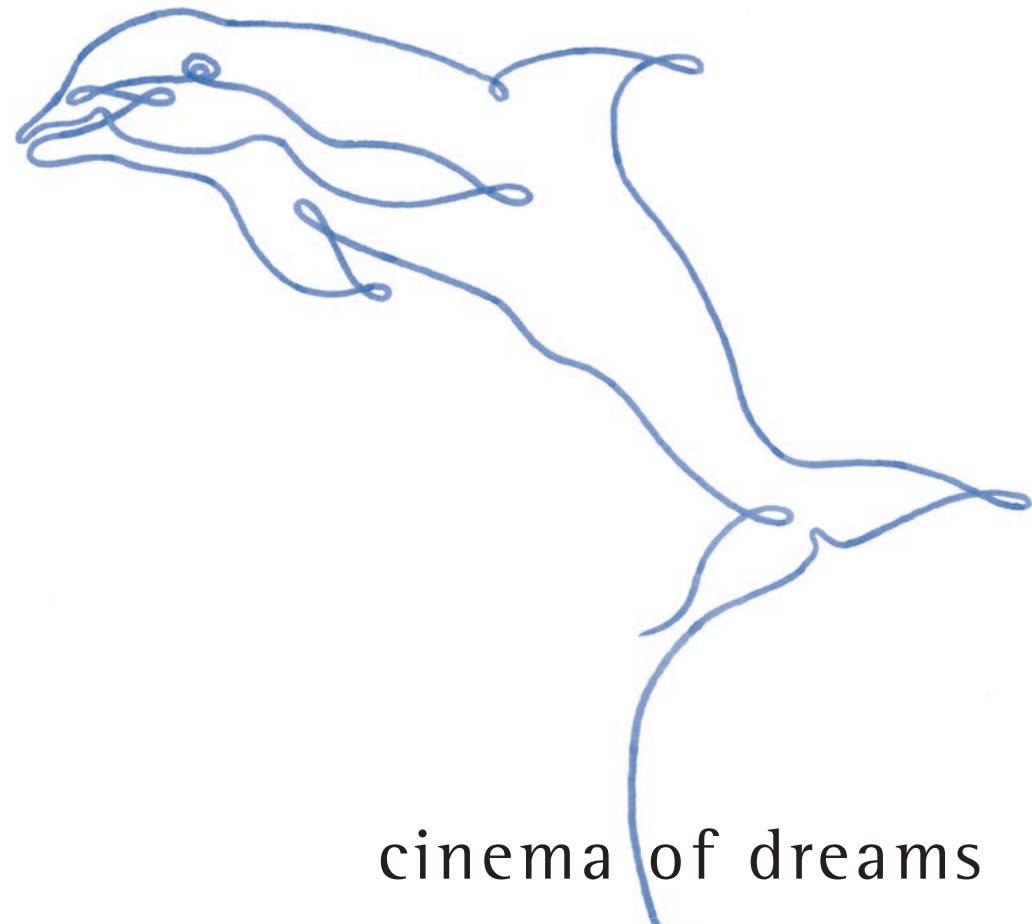


Beautiful Italian beach at dusk (top right); A variety of nudibranchs (above and left) can be found in waters off the Italian coast





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Italy

have good experience and many dives under their belt."

### Sardinia

Sardinia is a little story in itself with a landscape that has nothing to envy in more tropical seas. The clear, turquoise waters and white, sandy beaches create a unique landscape that continues below the surface of the sea. The natural beauty of Sardinia goes well with a vision of a holiday that is also suitable for families who do not want to limit their stay to exclusively underwater activities. For divers, the depths around Sardinia offer diving for all tastes including walls, shoals, caves and wrecks.

Sardinia is also surrounded by smaller islands, among them, Caprera Island, in the Maddalena Archipelago is recommended. The water is so transparent that its depths can be seen from above.



Brilliant yellow cup coral, Levanto, Liguria; Cardinalfish holding eggs in mouth (left); Cuttlefish (below)

more experienced wreck divers in depths down to and beyond 100m.

A very interesting destination at the northern tip of the island is Santa Teresa di Gallura, where one can view the unique and evocative scenery of Sardinia.

Going down the east coast of Sardinia are very interesting areas around the islands of Tavolara and Molara where a series of rocky shallows hosts dusky grouper, sea bream, large moray eels and spiny lobster. To the south is a very interesting area from the Gulf of Cagliari to Cape Teulada where deep dives require







Lake Garda (above), Italy's largest lake, near Verona, and Lake Orta (below), a sub-Alpine lake, near Novara, northern Italy

## Sicily

The most interesting diving in this region is found around the islands surrounding Sicily. The islands of Lampedusa, Ustica and Pantelleria, not to mention the Aeolian Volcano are definitely at the top of the list of dive locations in Italy. A friend of mine—Roberta—the owner of a dive center in Lampedusa, describes this island perfectly:

"Lampedusa is known for having one of the most beautiful beaches in the world and is just waiting to be discovered, also for its great diving. Like a dream scenario, set in an enchanted atmosphere, incredible marine life and clear waters in shades of blue attract visitors from all over the world almost all year round. There are not many other places in the world where you can find such a wealth and variety of fish, admire beautiful colors of walls covered in sea fans and spong-

es, where you can explore underwater caves, groupers, snappers, lobsters, amberjack, giant stingrays, dolphins and, with a little luck, sometimes gray sharks."

You may be lucky to meet the grays, but the rest of the menu is guaranteed.

## Adriatic Sea

The Adriatic coast is probably the least interesting for diving. The shallow, mostly sandy bottom makes for monotonous and uninteresting diving along almost the whole stretch of the eastern coast of Italy. Of course there are some exceptions and

among these some deserve to be mentioned, at least the Tremiti Islands and the coastal town of Numana. The Tremiti Archipelago, a natural offshoot of Gargano, is a detour route and a great location for fish fauna.

Numana and the Conero Riviera in the Marche region offer several



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pearly razorfish; Common octopus; Spiny seahorse; Greater weever; Streaked gurnard

dives, which are mostly on shoals, for divers of all levels. Although the visibility is often not the best around Numana, le Tenue and the wreck of the *Paguro*, it is still worthwhile for underwater photographers.

In the lower Adriatic, the southern point of the region of Puglia plunges into the Ionian Sea. Puglia has around 800km of coastline from Gargano to Salento. A group of islands off the coast comprise the archipelago of the Tremiti Island Natural Marine Reserve established in 1989 where divers can explore 50 dive sites.

### Cold waters

The lakes are visited by thousands of fans of freshwater diving and a frequent destination for foreign tourists. Underwater the lakes are all very similar with visibility more or less limited depending on the time of year and a winter temperature close to zero and summer above 20°C. The lakes are probably one

of the last areas people think of for diving but are of interest to people who are accustomed to or interesting in diving in colder temperatures. With that in mind at least three lakes deserve mention, the Garda, Maggiore and Como, which are spectacular, although perhaps actually more so out of the water than below. Some other goodies deserve to be considered, at least as a unique experience. Among these are Lake Capodacqua in Abruzzo with its submerged mills and Lake Tovel in Trentino. But both have restrictions for diving.

### Marine life

The marine life of Italy is a perfect testimony to the typical biodiversity found in the Mediterranean, with several hundred species that live on and give color to the reefs. Depending on the area and the type of diving, you will find different species—trivial but true.

In recent decades the sea has

been depleted a lot, and only recently have we witnessed a reaction, with measures to protect this resource through the establishment of parks and more stringent regulations. It is thanks to these interventions that protected areas are the most interesting to dive, at least in regards to the amount of fish one can see. However, it is also true that many areas outside of these protected areas are also now able to naturally support fish fauna.

The Portofino National Marine Reserve is an exceptional example of the operation of this type of regulation in this area, and the diving is definitely richer in comparison to similar areas only a few kilometers away, but outside of the park. After

many years, coral species, groupers, barracuda, amberjack, snapper, octopus, lobsters and many other fish have returned in abundance. Outside of the protected areas, meeting a grouper is very dif-





Mediterranean damselfish juvenile (left); Red scorpionfish (above); Spiny seahorse and *Pleurobranchus nudibranch* (center insets); *Bolzaneto* wreck, Levanto, Liguria (above); Deck gun on wreck (top right)

bottoms of the coast, which at first glance seem boring and lifeless, but stay calm and attentive and the underwater environment reveals a rich diversity of small creatures, ideal for macro photographers. Aside from the spiny seahorses, which are increasingly rare and precious, we also have stargazers, weevers, gurnards and angler monkfish. Smaller creatures are found almost everywhere; just look around a bit in the rocks and you will find colonies of hydroids grazed upon by colourful flabellina, dorida and other species of nudibranchs.

### Underwater photography

I may not be the most qualified person to talk about the technical aspects of underwater photography. But I do have some practical experience, so I can share some useful information with you about what to shoot in Italy's underwater realm that may perhaps lead to some satisfaction in your underwater photography.

Underwater photography in Italy, as in the Mediterranean in general, requires

a lot more concentration and knowledge of the underwater world than is required in areas such as the Red Sea, the Maldives or Southeast Asia. Of great interest here is nature photography, which requires a good knowledge of marine biology and in particular of the behaviour and habits of fish. A nature photographer in the Mediterranean, as indeed elsewhere, must have a great feel for the sea and its players to find the rarities and exploit its beauty. The first dive into unknown waters is always the most difficult for photographers, and if time is limited, it is recommended they rely on expert guides or, better yet, on other underwater photographers.

In Italy there are no large fish like sharks or manta rays, or at least,

none found during 'normal' dives. Even encounters with the sunfish (*Mola mola*) or other medium size creatures are pretty rare, so it is good to focus on



Submerged truck



small fish or even macro photography for many dives. For fans of macro photography, subjects are almost never

lacking. Even in sandy bottoms you can spend hours taking photographs in only a few meters of water.

For wide-angle the situation is different, yet almost everywhere you can still find corners more or less interesting to photograph, among the shoals, walls, or in sub-





Grouper (above); *Flabellina* sp nudibranchs (top right); Angler monkfish (right); Threefin blenny or *Tripterygion melanurus* (left)

photographer.

The art of underwater photography in Italy is tough and very challenging but it can be rewarding, you just have to arm yourself with patience, do a lot of diving and make the right choices in terms of dive guides for places that you do not know.

### General information

**Diving equipment.** A neoprene wetsuit is fine in the warm months while for the winter months it is good to use a semi-dry or drysuit

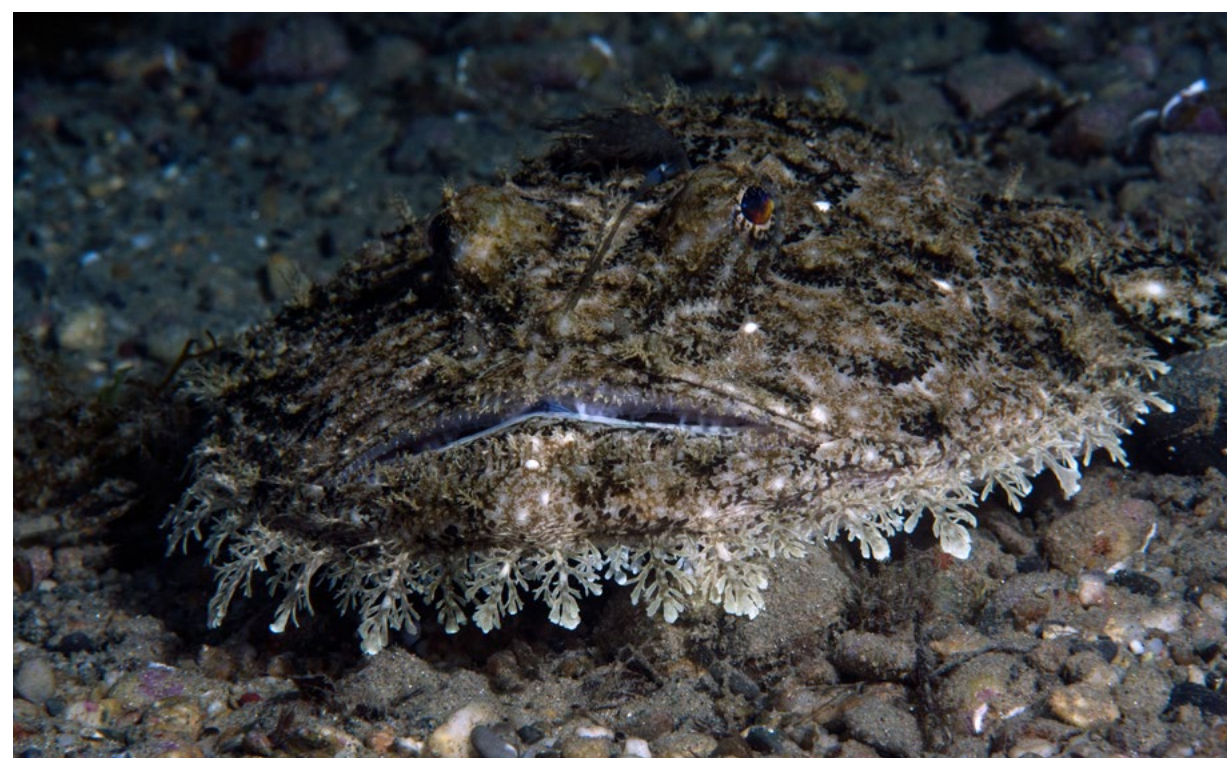
as well as a hood and gloves. For your safety, I recommended you carry a good dive knife or shears, as there can be nets and lines stuck in rocks and wrecks. Using a flashlight during the day can make it

more interesting to explore nooks and crevices.

### Regulations, laws and certifications.

There is an absence of specific legislation in diving at the national level. This "legal vacuum", with the increase of the people getting into diving—both professionally (as instructors, dive guides, dive operators) and purely for leisure—has become increasingly apparent and there have recently been a number of proposed laws to regulate the field. Local ordinances governing diving vary, so it is always good to find out about the rules at your destination.

**Dive centers.** Dive centers are located throughout the country and are easily searchable on the web. But don't judge



a book by its cover; keep in mind that in some cases dive activities are coordinated by 'recreational clubs', which often have beautiful and well-organized websites that can rival those of professional

dive centers. You are advised to always consult only with professional centers that make dive activities their work.

It's also good to verify some important aspects such as the languages spoken





Typical boats in harbor (left); At 1178m, Lake Tovel is a beautiful mountain lake to dive, located in Trentino, northern Italy (below)

advised to check ahead of time on the availability of staff with foreign language skills.

**Hyperbaric chambers.** The Italian national health system provides several hundred hospitals, many of which have a hyperbaric chamber. Check ahead of time with the dive center about the closest facility.

**Accommodation.** There are a wide variety of hotels in Italy, and everyone can easily find a suitable choice that is within their budget. When you choose a hotel, always consider the availability of parking, which

is often limited and expensive. Check also on the distance to the dive center. An excellent alternative to hotels are bed and breakfasts and apartments, which are in some cases included with the dive package. It is recommended that you ask the dive center for advice on lodging.

### Italian divers

Italian divers have never been counted since there is no register or a database for them, only for dive professionals such as instructors. Sample surveys have repeatedly been carried out, thanks to which, it has been discovered that fans of diving in Italy are sev-

eral hundred thousand strong, a number which is growing every year. In fact, many Italians live close to a dive center, take dive courses and plunge into this new world—beginning an adventure that changes their lives for the better, of course!

The underwater community in Italy now has about 300,000 divers with different levels of preparation and passion. At sea divers are usually seen in mixed groups transporting from the shore on boats and rafts, wearing dark suits, tanks and masks, to return after a few hours with smiles on their faces. Those who approach these groups cannot help but

by staff; diving equipment available if required; the availability of oxygen, water and boat first aid kits for emergencies; the availability of parking if necessary; as well as the number of vessels used. The latter are normally comfortable, fast rafts, with all the necessary safety equipment, that quickly reach the most interesting dive sites.

**Dive prices.** The price of a dive has, on average, settled around 30-35 Euros each and includes about 60 minutes with a dive guide and boat transport, tank and weights and use of the local dive center. The most exclusive prices can get up to 45-50 Euros per dive. The equipment rental is not included but available on request from the majority of dive centers. In some centers it is possible to do full-day dive trips and,

sea conditions permitting, even mini-dive cruises.

**Climate.** In the temperate climate of Italy, it is typical for people to enjoy the four seasons that are more clearly differentiated in the north, where the hot season is concentrated between the months of June and August. The air temperature in winter here oscillates between 0°C and 10°C, and in summer, between 25°C and 35°C, with 10 degrees difference between northern and southern Italy.

The water temperature varies greatly in different dive locations, and it is advisable to use a wetsuit during the summer season and a drysuit during the winter, especially in the north-central part of the country. In northern Italy, the surface water reaches a temperature

of over 26°C during the warm months but the thermocline is felt already at 10 meters depth where the water temperature drops down to below 14°C. In the hottest places, the water is warm enough so that a wetsuit may be sufficient. In winter the temperature drops dramatically, and it is recommended that one use a semi-dry or drysuit. The latter in particular will make for less traumatic journeys by boat.

**Language.** Despite Italy being one of the world's leading tourist destinations, English and other languages are not widely spoken. Although the language skills of Italians are among the lowest in Europe, the art of understanding and of being understood is very developed. Not all dive centers have adequate personnel to handle foreign tourism, so you are







Google map of dive centers in Italy (left); Divers at Lake Orta (far left)

certification. The majority further their training to become guides and instructors. Immediately after their initiation to the underwater realm, many choose to continue their education, encouraged by possibilities to expand their knowledge base in various branches of diving such as specializations in deep diving, night diving, wreck diving, etc. ■

Marco Daturi, who emerged from the warm waters of a nursery in 1972—a restriction prescribed by an inclement, authoritarian doctor—was always very close to the sea and the underwater

world, which he continues to explore with a passion whenever he can. Having survived the attack of a Ligurian porter crab, the false attentions of Indonesian nudibranchs, an underwater wedding, and insistent invitations to get into technical diving, Daturi continues to enjoy the passion that is diving, which culminated in 2003 with the creation of ScubaPortal.it. A certified divemaster, Daturi also holds a doctorate in economics, and two masters in marketing and sports management.

For more information, visit [www.scubaportal.it](http://www.scubaportal.it) or email: [info@scubaportal.it](mailto:info@scubaportal.it).

notice that these folks will go on for hours talking about those 60 minutes spent underwater. Overhearing these tales often triggers curiosity: Who are these masked people dressed in neoprene? What do they do in life? And more importantly, “Why am I not with them?”

In a recent market research study conducted on ScubaPortal.it, we traced the identity of the diver.

The average age is 25 to 45 years. Diving in Italy is an activity for all ages; one can start young, at 14 years, but one can also begin in old age. In fact, A woman of 80 years has been certified. Even if this is an isolated incident, there are certainly more certifications being issued to elderly participants.

Italian divers are 30 percent female and 70 percent male. There is one woman for every two men—a low average, but

fortunately growing. If it were true that women were less attracted to this hobby, then we wouldn't find that when women do participate, they're even more crazy about it than men are.

Around 45 percent of divers in Italy are college graduates. The level of education has increased in general in recent years and even more so in diving, where nearly 10 percent also have a master's degree. Not that it takes an advanced degree to go into the water, but it is indicative of a hobby that attracts mostly people with a high level of education.

Distinguishing characteris-



tics: Italian divers are sporty, open, dynamic and full of interest. Divers here do not just explore the depths, many divers are also keen skiers and play sports, read a lot and have many interests.

In terms of diving experi-

ence, most Italian divers have less than 200 dives, but, of course, there are those who, plunging in several times a day, can make up to 100 working dives in a month!

In general, those who start diving do not stop at the first



Divers preparing for a dive (above) and enjoying a delicious afterdive dinner (center)







# Grotta Giusti

— *Diving & Dining in style*

Diver underwater in the thermal cave, Grotta Giusti, located in Tuscany, Italy



Text by Peter Symes  
Photos by Peter Symes and  
courtesy of Grotta Giusti Resort

**I felt thrust back a century or two, perhaps into the setting of the Count of Monte Cristo. Lounging in the majestic sitting room, in the stately old mansion that now houses Grotta Giusti Spa but was once the seat and residence of a family from the Italian gentry, I cannot help but ponder the history these walls must have seen. Outside I can see the Tuscan countryside, with its rolling hills and slender stone pines. We are nowhere near the ocean. Yet I am just about to go diving—inside the mountain. In fact, I am about to go to Hell.**

The spa gets its mineral waters from some hot volcanic springs that come out of the mountain right under the complex. From the ground floor, we go down a ramp that leads into a cavern draped in stalagmites and stalactites. After we pass through a curtain, it is already significantly warmer and quite humid.

I am being told that starting from the entrance through to the deepest part of the Grotta, three different zones are crossed, each one increasing in heat, which some humorous tradition has been named Paradise, Purgatory and Hell. These zones are like saunas with different temperatures, and other guests draped in robes heading in or out, as we are being briefed for the upcoming dive, give us the usual puzzled stares.

But yes, we are going for a dive in the pools and crevices beneath the chambers where the guests sit and sweat in natural steam baths. The thermal mineral waters flow at a temperature of around 34°C (93°F). The



THIS PAGE: Exterior and interior views of spa

COURTESY OF GROTTA GIUSTI RESORT







COURTESY OF GROTTA GIUSTI RESORT

The age-old cave is divided into three sections: Heaven, Purgatory – with its Lake of Limbo, and an average temperature – and Hell, where humidity reaches 98%. Each area has a different temperature, and allows you to enjoy the benefits of the thermal vapours to the full, providing a fifty-minute path to well-being.

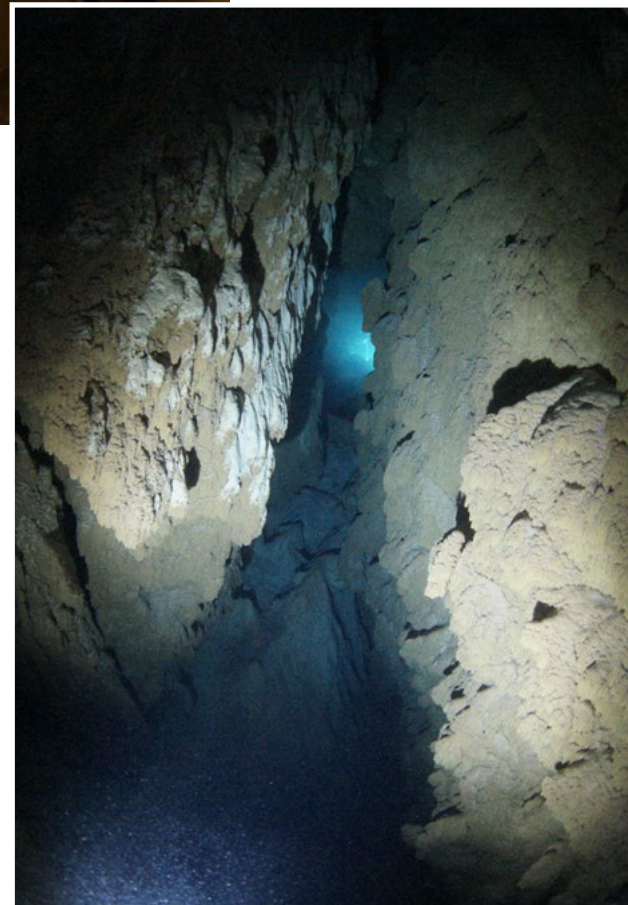
For nearly an hour and a half I walk and crawl along dramatic formations, sliding through crevices as if I could levitate. It was easier and far more

resulting vapours create a steam bath, which is said to be effective against respiratory, circulatory, gynaecological, osteo-muscular, nerve and skin complaints. Other techniques are also used, such as mud baths, inhalation, vaporisation and aerosol therapy.

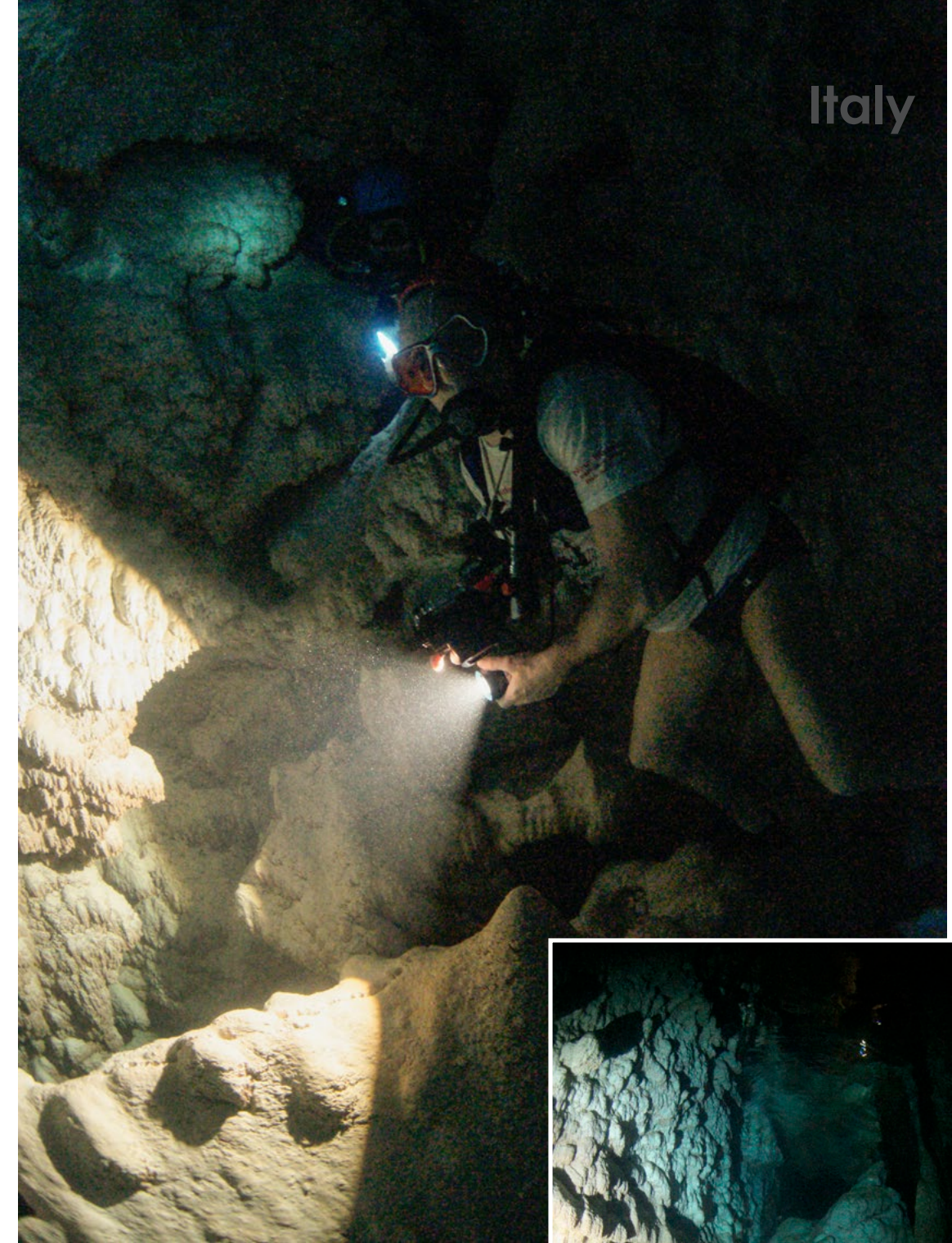
**T-shirt & no fins**

Several factors make this an unusual dive. First of all the water is too warm to wear any kind of suit so we are all just wearing t-shirts. Secondly, we won't be wearing any fins as we essentially will have to walk and climb underwater.

I am still not quite sure how cool I feel about the upcoming adventure, as I do have a bit of an issue with cramped spaces in overhead compartments as a result of once almost getting stuck in a wreck. But as it turns out it is not really an overhead environment, as there will be air above us at almost any given moment, and soon I surrender myself to what is turning into a surreal and certainly unique experience.



pleasant that I thought it would be. In fact, my biggest concern was not bumping my dome port into some protruding rock when going through some of the narrower passages.



**Massage**

We decided to give in to total indulgence and went for a massage afterwards. The therapists were very professional starting off with a short talk about my main issues, sore points and old injuries. As if any of all that talk was necessary, she found them all right soon enough—ouch, eek, aah! It was complete bliss afterwards. The long dive in warm water having already thoroughly warmed up my muscles and joints seemed to make the massage even more efficient



Spa entrance to the cave in the mountain

THIS PAGE: Underwater views in cave





The thermal outdoor pool where guests can enjoy relaxing underwater hydromassage, a waterfall and fresh fruit drinks, lunch and snacks from the poolside Bioaquam Café



as she could dig right straight in where it mattered.

After the session I wobbled—my gait hardly qualifying as walking—out of the massage room and went for a shower. Getting dressed I noticed that I had worked up quite an appetite, and having a quality restaurant just upstairs, I knew where I was heading next.

**Dinner**

The classy surroundings makes you want to dress up nicely and promenade down for dinner in style, although, as it turned out, it also acceptable to dine in your robes. As strange as it may sound it did not seem out of place, perhaps because even the robes were classy, and after all, it was a spa.

Italian cuisine shouldn't need any further introduction, and here we are, in the middle of Tuscany where they produce some of the best wine in the world. Needless to say, I was in for another treat and I had burned off the calories to make room.

As in any upscale restaurant, the menu was short and dominated by local specialties as it should be, and I found myself spoilt for choice. Under such circumstances, I usually ask the waiter for his recommendations, because even



Opulent entrance (above) to Grotta Giusti luxury resort and spa, where lavish floral arrangements adorn every space; In the hotel's restaurant, guests can enjoy a delicious menu of exquisite Tuscan dishes and original recipes by Chef Giuseppe Argentino, accompanied by an impressive selection of wine and aperitifs

though I am quite fond of Italian food and am familiar with many dishes, there always seem to be some new dishes to explore—often something that is just in season for a limited time.

We are clearly in good hands. Chef Giuseppe Argentino knows the secrets of

the Tuscan kitchen and how to combine fresh local produce to make light gourmet meals.

What I in particular favour about dining in the countries around the Mediterranean is that time seems to cease to exist once you are seated in a good restaurant. Dishes are never rushed but come in timely intervals, allowing one to more fully enjoy each one, and enabling the diner to have proper con-





THIS PAGE: Interior and exterior views of the resort, flora and fauna on the nature walks

experience in the cave for the non-divers of the family. There are many other activities to enjoy on the resort's nature walks, tennis courts, swimming pools and several nearby golf greens.

The resort makes a great base from which this historic county of Tuscany can be leisurely explored. Sitting inside the triangle between Bologna, Florence and Pisa, there are plenty of great excursions to



historic places within a relatively short distance, not to mention a range of good dive spots. While the place may come across as being a bit on the posh side, you also get what you

pay for, and I find all the indulgences that come along with a little splurging will make for a most pleasurable and memorable stay. I am quite inclined to pay another visit next time I am in Italy. ■

For more information, or to book a stay, visit: [www.grottagiustispa.com](http://www.grottagiustispa.com)

versations with significant others or friends, enjoying the evening in a relaxed manner without checking a time piece ever so often.

**Health and well-being**

The Spa also has a fitness centre, offering Pilates and Qi-gong, and outside there is a golf course and an exercise track in the nearby landscape so you can both please your inner health nut and enjoy being a foodie. Grotta Giusti is surrounded by 45 hectares of parkland, a natural environment of incomparable beauty characterised by age-old trees, fertile hills and fragrant flowers.

One can reach the spa building directly from the hotel, and thus access the extensive facilities providing traditional treatments such as mud baths, respiratory therapies and massages, and a

modern health farm featuring an oriental area, a well-equipped gym, numerous recreation areas and a centre for aesthetic medicine.

The complex is completed by the cave and the outdoor thermal pool with a surface area of 750 m<sup>2</sup> – complemented by underwater massages – and a spectacular waterfall. The water supplying it, containing minerals such as bicarbonates, sulphates, calcium and magnesium, maintains a temperature of 35°C.

It is possible to receive traditional treatments such as mud baths, ozonised baths in thermal water, thermal showers and respiratory therapies carried out under the constant supervision of specialist medical staff. These services are carefully targeted towards physical and psychological well-being

and the improvement of one's physical appearance.

**Escape**

It is a great escape for some days either as a conclusion of a business trip or en route to or from some of the many great dive sites along the Italian coast. A combination with diving the nearby island of Elba springs to mind, or as a pleasant stop-over on the way further south. The resort offers one- to three-night or weekend packages of diving and spa services, appealing to both divers and non-divers alike, as there is the option for a 'floating'





# The Underwater Project goes global with X-RAY MAG

Our new concept, the world's first perpetual underwater shootout competition, started half way through 2014 as an evolution of the popular Underwater Festival established eight years ago. Now the Underwater Project is announcing a partnership with X-RAY MAG.

And with the international scope of X-RAY MAG in mind, we decided to expand the horizons of the Underwater Project to a global one. From

the 1st of January 2015, you can shoot globally to become part of the growing Underwater Project, says Tim Hochgrebe, organiser of the Underwater Project

The Underwater Project is much more than a competition. As the name suggest we have taken the best of the Underwater Festival and have evolved it into a continuous event. A project that continues to share the beauty and the issues of the underwater world and shows the world what we have to lose.

The Underwater Project will create

and support unique local events across the globe throughout the year. Any dive centre, resort, liveaboard or dive club can become an Underwater Project Fringe Event host.

## New features

- A great new fully featured Underwater Project Snapshot Map with entries from past years included (2013 and 2014 now)
- Every member has their own stunning portfolio site with personal snapshot map and personal gallery. If you have been participating in the Underwater Festival in previous years, your past entries are part of your portfolio.



JAN ANTHONY ACOSTA

*We aim to again offer up to \$100,000 in prizes!*

per month. Premium memberships are available.

Submitted entries will be screened by the Underwater Project team. Entries that pass this first



- Collect and display awards and achievements (coming soon).
- Your Underwater Festival login and password will work on the project website.

## No more entry fees —just a simple annual membership

There is no charge for individual image or video uploads, instead a simple annual membership fee of U\$50 to join the Underwater Project. Standard membership entitles to 5 photo or 2 video uploads

round of judging will appear on the official Underwater Project Snapshot Map and in your portfolio.

Screened images will be judged annually by the established Underwater Project judging panel including Mathieu Meur, Gary Bell, Stephen Wong, Takako Uno, Kevin Deacon and David Warth, and we aim to again offer up to \$100,000 in prizes.

**Two step judging —Participation is what matters**  
All year round you can upload

your images and clip links to the Underwater Project website. Photos and videos have to be uploaded in the month AFTER the month they were taken—you no longer need to change the camera date to participate. Please help us to create all the amazing features we have planned for the Underwater Project and JOIN NOW!

## Spread the word

Please help us spread the word about the Underwater Project with our fantastic new banners and logos and link them back to the Underwater Project site. We are looking for social media marketing volunteers to help spread this project across the planet. If you know your way around social media and have some time to give, please get in touch.

See you underwater!

— Tim Hochgrebe, Peter Symes and the Underwater Project Team

*Get Involved!*

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JOIN now at:  
**underwaterproject.org**

Stay informed by registering now or just join our Facebook page or follow us on Twitter:

**Facebook.com/UWproject**  
**Twitter.com/UWfestival**

*Share the Passion!  
Join the Underwater Project!*

All images on this page are from 2014's contest



VANESSA MIGNON

