

D'Artagnan

KURT AMSLER

Text by Gunild Symes

Photos by Kurt Amsler and Peter Symes



Kurt Amsler, winner of over 100 awards at international photo competitions and a world champion title, turns 60 this year, but you would never know it watching him mountain bike up a steep pass with his black Labrador running at his heels in the hills behind his house, a lovely home that sits overlooking the beautiful Mediterranean and a small picturesque village in the south of France. Kurt says he still goes on dive expeditions around the world, but now he is usually the most senior underwater photographer on the boat. It doesn't bother him. He has two young kids ("I started late," he winks), a lovely wife who is a doctor and plenty of spunk left for adventure.

Kurt Amsler



KURT AMSLER

Diver explores the glorious pink fan corals of the Mediterranean reefs; PREVIOUS PAGE: Large Gargonian fan coral

Kurt explains the humble beginnings of his love for the sea and underwater photography, which began in, of all places, land-locked Switzerland, where he was born and raised near Lake Zurich. At the time, no one dived in Switzerland. There were no dive shops or divers. So, Kurt, the adventurous and resourceful ten-year-old boy that he was, inspired by the books of underwater legend Hans Hass, devised his own underwater breathing apparatus with the help of some friends and the local bike shop, the owner of which loaned the use of the shop's bicycle pump to Kurt on Saturdays. Needless to say, no busted bicycle tires in town could be filled on those days when Kurt was using the pump for his underwater expeditions into the local lake... It was a small sacrifice to make for science.



ABOVE: Lotte and Hans Hass
LEFT: Master underwater photographer, Kurt Amsler, was inspired to pursue the underwater world by his childhood hero, Hans Hass, a book of whose he is showing. Photo by Peter Symes

The apparatus was made of a breathing tube and a lung that allowed the diver to stay underwater for twenty minutes. Kurt could take a gander around the bottom of the lake until the his CO₂ replaced the air in the lung and forced an accent up to the surface. Young Kurt and his boyhood friends would drag the apparatus to the lake in a wheel barrel, much to the chagrin of the local preach-

er who thought there was something wrong with the boy. The priest actually asked Kurt's father to stop the boy from continuing his excursions under the lake, asking why, after all, God made all the world and its beautiful lands for humans to walk upon and enjoy, why does this boy insist on going underwater in the lake? Kurt's father, who was himself an accomplished photographer and mountaineer, smiled and said, "Why not? The boy is not hurting anyone, and he may just find out something interesting."

Indeed, the boy Kurt who wanted to emulate his father's adventurous life, continued to aim for terrain not high in the mountains, but in the opposite direction -- below the water's surface for the rest of his career, to explore the

mysterious and captivating scenery and life under the sea.

The Business of Diving

Young Kurt and his boyhood friends would drag the apparatus to the lake in a wheel barrel, much to the chagrin of the local preacher who thought there was something wrong with the boy

Eventually, Kurt became properly certified as a diver and instructor after completing a four-year degree in professional photography. After diving in the Red Sea and living in Kenya and the Bahamas, he returned to Switzerland to open a small dive school with his

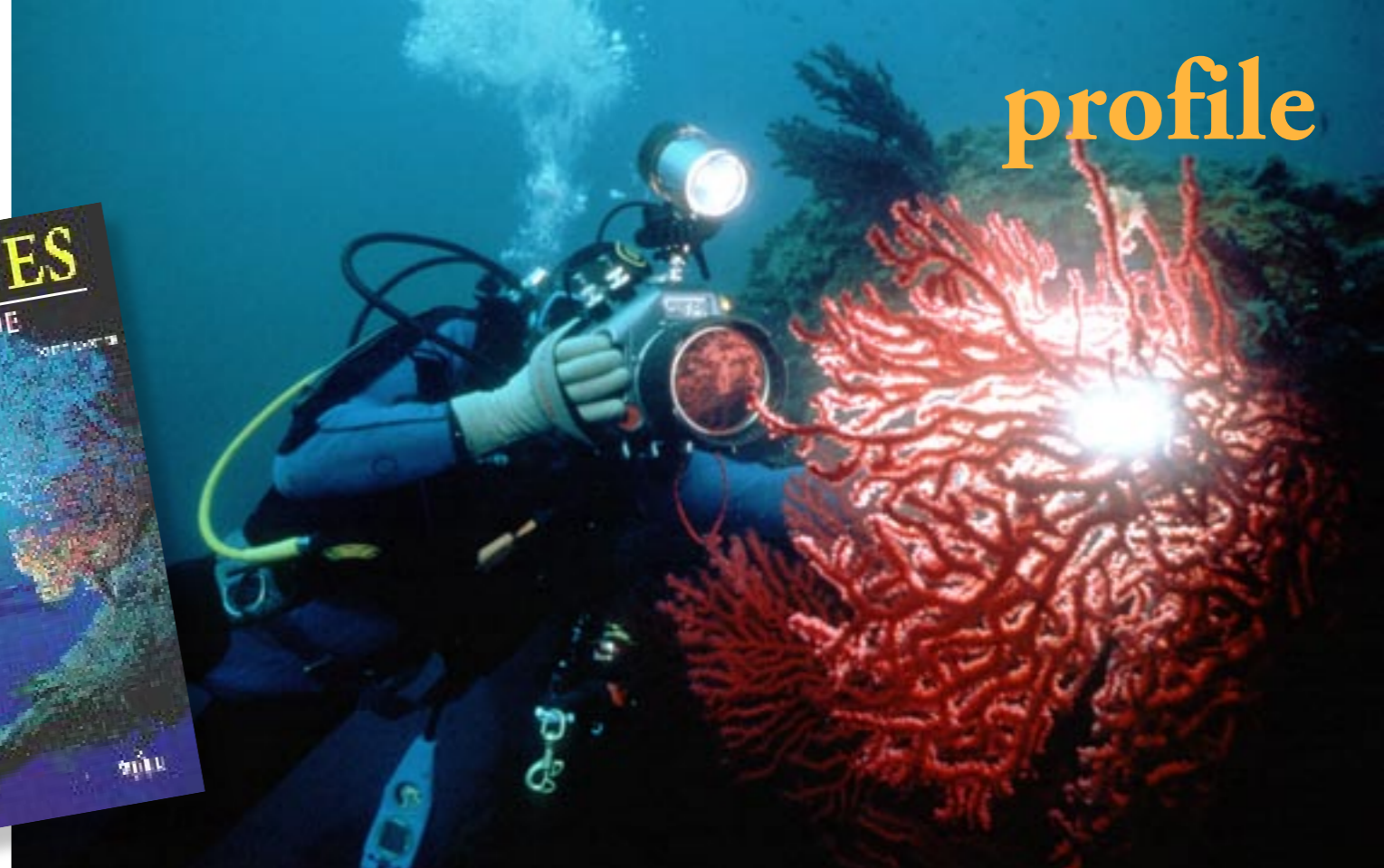
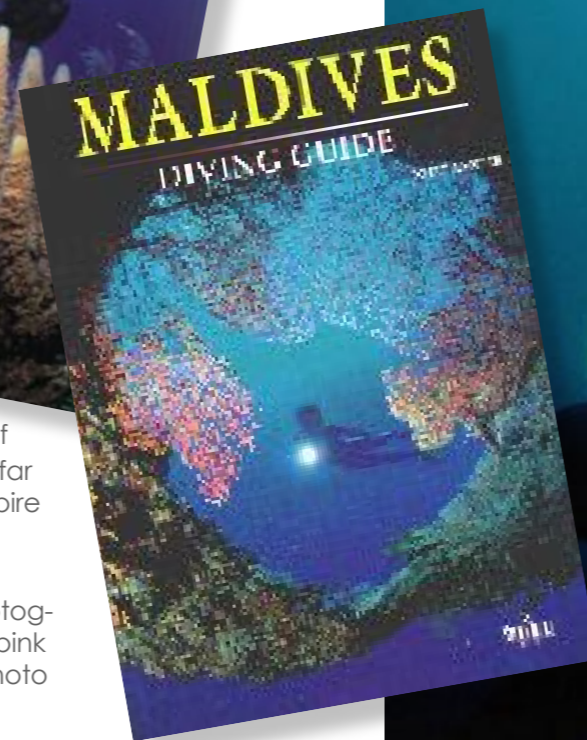


PETER SYMES

Kurt Amsler



PETER SYMES



Amsler still enjoys the wonder of Hans Hass' books that were so far ahead of their time and still inspire the pro to do more

FAR RIGHT: An underwater photographer sets up a shot of bright pink corals in the Mediterranean. Photo courtesy of Kurt Amsler

buddies. Since diving at the time meant joining a dive club, the dive school was a novel idea. It had never been done there before and people were curious. Kurt said that they had a compressor and everything for a dive shop and went about the business of introducing diving to the local community by offering weekend and evening dive courses, "so people could learn to dive just like learning to drive a car". Kurt set the level of the dive school very high, so the quality of the education was very good.

While living in the Bahamas for three

years where he became certified by NAUI as a dive instructor, Kurt learned how to run a dive business and was successful with the operation in Switzerland. "At the time, we made one million Swiss francs with the dive school and the dive shop," said Kurt, "If you tell this to dive shop owners these days, they change colours like an octopus," he chuckles.

The difference then, Kurt says, was that people bought everything: double tanks, regulator, BCD, personal gear. They needed everything with them if they wanted to go diving, since there were no

dive centres renting equipment on location. Back then, people had more time and used it to dive.

Compared to the prices one paid for dive equipment back then in 1973, these days "what you pay for a tank is peanuts," said Kurt. The same deflation has taken place with certification courses, said Kurt. Nowadays, he says, you pay half as much for open water certification as one did back then. "So, no one makes any money any more," he said. It's an issue that Kurt says plagues the dive industry as a whole today.

D'Artangan

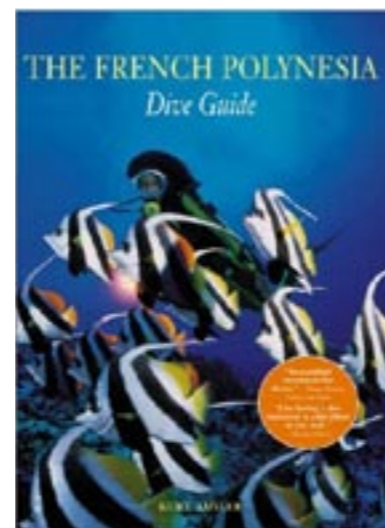
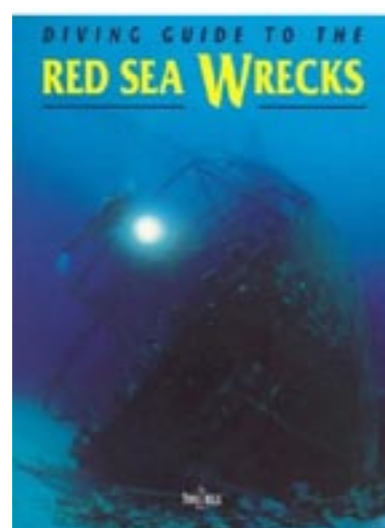
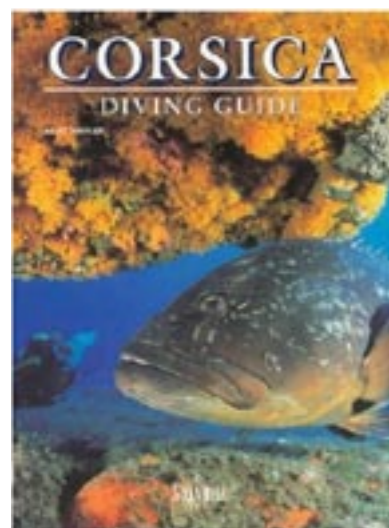
Amsler has never been timid about his opinions on issues that affect the dive industry and conservation today. He sees himself as a proverbial *D'Artangan* of the dive world crusading to awaken the industry and the general public to improvements that could be made to make things work better.

"You know why we have this *miserere* in the diving industry today? Because the diving industry never learned to become pro-

fessional," said Kurt, "Not like skiing, not like tennis, not like horseback riding, not like golf or mountain biking... they are very professional, and of course, they make money."

Kurt added, "The industry could make a fortune there are not that many sports equipment that are so intensive as diving and a person needs all this expen-

because many sports equipment

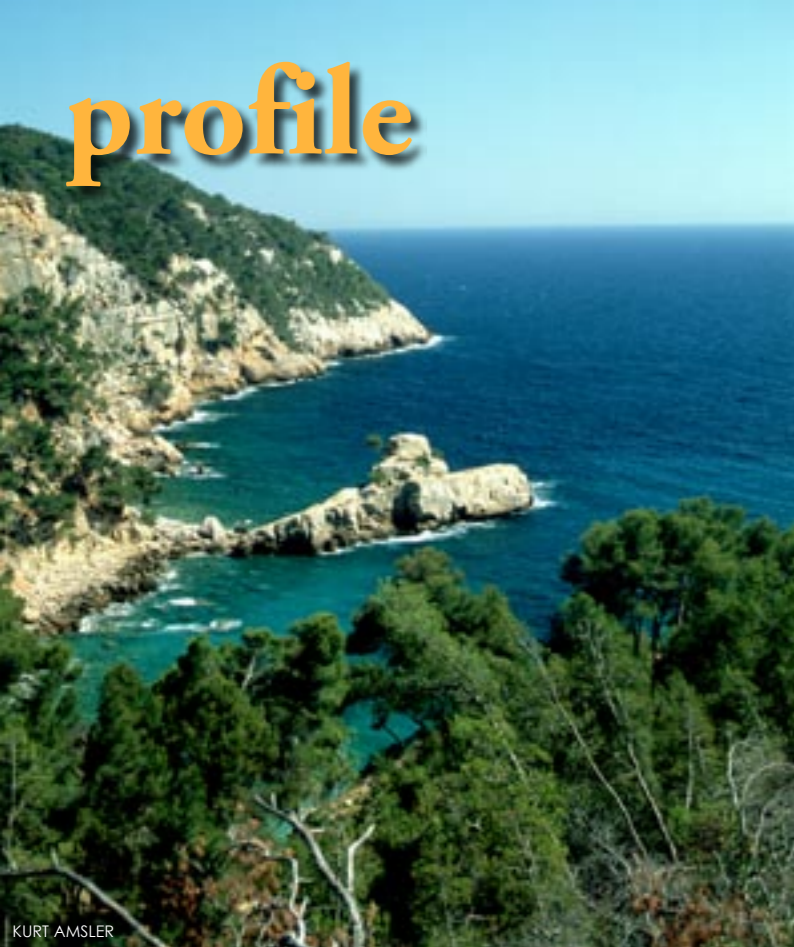


Books by Amsler include: *Corsica Diving Guide*, *Diving Guide to the Red Sea Wrecks*, *The French Polynesia Dive Guide*, *Underwater Caribbean Dive Guide*, *The Caribbean Dive Guide*, *Maldives Diving Guide* (click on the book cover to order from Amazon)

RIGHT: Amsler's drum set still comes in handy at the Antibes Festival each year in France. Photo by Peter Symes



profile



KURT AMSLER



Kurt Amsler

LEFT TO RIGHT: Amsler's home overlooks the azure blue waters of the Mediterranean

Amsler in his office discusses his work and mission in helping conservation of endangered species of the world

Amsler said that all the awards and recognitions he has received over the years are nice, but the really important benefit of them is the ability to use the fame achieved from the awards as power to help save endangered creatures and promote conservation of the oceans. All photos of Kurt this page by Peter Symes



PETER SYMES

sive equipment to dive, but the industry never learned to become professional, so it cannot happen."

Kurt said that things did get more professional in Europe after NAUI came and improved conditions previously set by the dive club federation system, but then PADI decided to expand after seeing the potential of how Kurt's school was run. However, as Kurt put it, "They didn't realize that they dug their own hole, because they started to train all these instructors and these instructors need to make money." He said, "If there are thousands of

instructors, how is one instructor going to have 200 students per year?" The industry has shot itself in its own foot according to Kurt.

Likewise, manufacturers began to sell equipment too cheaply, explained Kurt, saying that some brands made all kinds of equipment and sold them so cheaply "you could sell them out of the trunk of your car". Kurt said, "Only Scubapro was the serious one. They kept their prices and quality high. You pay the same price for Scubapro anywhere in Europe—it is the same."

Again, Kurt reiterates, "They never learned to be professional. If you don't want to be strict with your prices, you can't make any money. Yes, in the beginning you might lose money, but after, you make money," if you stick to high standards he said.

But the most important point Kurt wants to make is that business professionalism means everything. "Look at the dive shops in Switzerland...There are maybe two who are run by real businessmen. All the rest are something else. They were carpenters, taxi drivers... I don't know

what. Nothing against these professions, but it makes a difference. They became divers, then they became instructors, and then they were motivated by the distributors to open a dive shop in their garage. That's it. They don't know how to calculate. They do not keep a 35-45% margin. Maybe they mark up the equipment by 10-15% and bring that in, but they do not calculate in the electricity, the water, the rent, etc. And this is the reason the dive industry is not making money."

In addition, Kurt says appearances matter. He thinks dive shops deal with the

wrong people. "If you want to make money, you have to deal with the people with the money. You have to know how to deal with these people... how to present yourself to them... how you look, how you act, the way you work. And then you have the people with the money."

Personal image also counts. Kurt relayed a recent moment where he found





Kurt Amsler works with his students in the underwater photography workshops he runs. Photo courtesy of Kurt Amsler. LEFT: Great White Shark. Photo by Kurt Amsler

who the instructor is."

Kurt tells his instructor candidates, "Not only do you have to work on the students, you have work on *you*," he takes one look at their bellies and says they might be able to teach a couple classes here and there but, "You will not be accepted by your clients like this."

tourists in my opinion. But I was one of the first tourists, I was number 95."

Conservation action

Kurt served as the manager of Project Aware for seven years. In that time, he ran several successful conservation projects

himself standing in front of a group of instructor candidates he was to train for certification.

"They were like bookkeepers and accountants with bellies out to here. Well, I am usually a guy who says what he thinks. So, I say, I don't see who is the instructor and who is the student," he said, "You look the same as the student when you stand there, and underwater, you move your arms and legs all over the place like the student, so how am I supposed to tell who is the student and who is the instructor?"

Kurt says when he goes to the mountains and looks around at the classes on the slopes, he can tell who is the instructor and who is the student. He said he can see the difference. The instructor is dressed as a sporty type and acts and moves like a sporty type. He said, "Then when I see the driving of the individual skiing down the slope, it takes me half a second to know

Favourite dive sites

Amsler has travelled all over the world as one of the pioneers of underwater photography, yet he finds some of his most favourite dive spots close to home in the Mediterranean. Top of the list is a prime spot just half an hour south of his house in southern France.

However, widening out to the global level, Kurt says that the Maldives cannot be beat for the ultimate diving experience. "You just go 50 meters from your bungalow and you are on the dive boat. If it is windy on one side of the island, you go to the other. You can go outside the reef, inside the reef in the lagoon, you have all the possibilities," he said, "I have been coming to the Maldives since 1972. Yes, there are more tourists now... too many



RIGHT: Kurt's Seacam housing with notes. Photo by Peter Symes



Participants of Amsler's underwater photography workshops stay at La Bastide, a cozy country hotel in the small town of Les Lecques by the Mediterranean Sea, where classes are held in the inn's meeting rooms and on the patio outside. Photo courtesy of Kurt Amsler



industries. By collecting thousands of names to petition the Balinese government to protect the endangered sea turtle, the organization hopes to pressure the government to take action against the killing of the animal for their meat (gourmet soup), eggs (Asian aphrodisiac) and for their shells to make

jewelry and tourist souvenirs. These souvenirs have now been banned in many areas due to the organization's actions.

The sad fact is that tens of thousands of sea turtles still suffer terrible deaths caught in fish nets or at the hands of poachers—many turtles are skinned alive. Now the animal is nearing extinction. To learn more about SOS-SEATURTLE and what you can do to help, please visit the website: www.sos-seaturtle.ch

In addition to saving turtles, Kurt was instrumental in the banning of shark fishing in seven Maldivian Atolls. He continues to generously supply his photographs for free to all environmental organisations involved in ocean conservation and animal protection. To learn more about the Shark Project for which Kurt is an ambassador, visit: www.sharkproject.org

Learning from the master

Each year, Kurt runs several underwater photography workshops in Les Lecques, a small village on the Mediterranean in southern France. The next workshop this year takes place August 20-26. Up to 12 participants enjoy six theory classes and five boat dives in a fast and comfortable dive boat, quaint lodging in a charming hotel, photo lab with light boxes. Dives cover drop-offs, wrecks and caves. For more information, visit the website at: www.photosub.com ■

LEFT TO RIGHT: Octopus; Moray eel; INSET: Nudibranch. All photos this page by Kurt Amsler

including creation of artificial reefs, planting of reef balls, campaigns to protect specific endangered species such as sharks and turtles in several regions around the world.

"You can only be successful, if people can touch what you do, and that was what I did," said Kurt.

An ongoing project Kurt established in 1980 is the SOS-SEATURTLE organisation, which promotes publicity for this endangered animal in media and the travel and diving

Layang Layang
ISLAND RESORT
MALAYSIA

The South China Sea is the world's most exciting dive destination
—Becca Saunders

www.layanglayang.com

The advertisement features a blue background with a yellow border. It includes a logo for Layang Layang Island Resort Malaysia, a quote from Becca Saunders, and the website address. The background image shows a diver and a large fish near a coral reef.