

Patagonia

Diving at the end of the World



The rugged coast of Patagonia

Text and photos by Marcelo Mammano

Considered a windy place—I mean, very windy—so windy you must ask the wind about what you can do today. Consider the wind as “mobile” as the “Donna” of the opera. He changes his mood at any time with no warning. Mood, in terms of wind, is direction, force, temperature, humidity and all the weather changes that come with them. Now, put yourself in a flat place, a plateau, with no mountains or trees to protect you and where the wind surrounds you all the time. Stay there and wait. Take your time to look around. You begin to notice that the soil upon which you are standing is covered with marine fossils and guess rightly that this was the sea floor some millions of years ago.

You walk a few steps to the end of the cliff and watch the sea and the sandy coast 100 meters below you. Depending on what part of the region you are right now, you can see some different animals. Big animals, small animals. Say, some fifty or more right whales and calves, hundreds of elephant seals basking in the sun, or thousands of Magellanic penguins toddling everywhere—some of them walking right beside you. Perhaps you are lucky enough to see a killer whale grounding on the beach and catching a sea lion pup. Then you realize that you are in a very special place—wild, almost untouched. That is Patagonia.

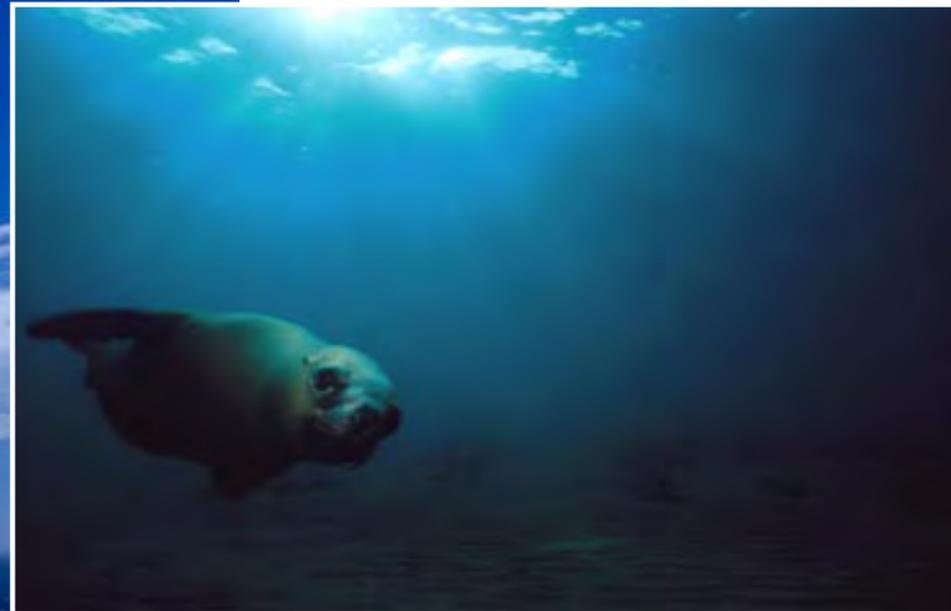
Patagonia is a region so vast that it would take more than one article to describe it. So, that is what we are going to do. First of all, and from our point of view (scuba divers and underwater photographers), there is a marine coastal region and there is a river and lakes region. The first faces the Atlantic Ocean and is dry and—you guessed it—very windy. The most attractive places for diving are the Valdés Peninsula in the north and the Beagle Channel at the end

Female Southern elephant seal, *Mirounga leonina*, showing us that we are too close





A dazzling Patagonia coast



LEFT: A curious sea lion bathed in sunrays peers into the camera lens



CENTER: The barnacle encrusted hide of a humpback whale



BOTTOM: Large male elephant seal snoozes under a warm sun on the dark rocks along the shore

of the world. The other place lies at the foot of the Andes, which you can imagine are like the Alps, but much more extensive, with beautiful lakes surrounded by mountains and green everywhere. You can dive in both places, which both share one similar condition: cold waters. But they are very different in other ways.

The country

A few words about the country will serve you to understand its diving attraction.

A friend of mine used to classify countries as those that "are" diving places and those that "have" diving places. Argentina is in the second group. It is not a dive destination, but has some pretty, interesting and seldom dived spots that are worth a visit.

Today, it is not the expensive country it used to be—economic crisis and the devaluation of the local currency are to blame—so expect to see lot of tourist activity.

Buenos Aires is considered by many as the least "Latin American" of Latin American cities. This is due to European influence and immigration. Cultural offerings in this city are incredible, people are kind and helpful with tourists, coffee shops are open until very late in the night (some never close), tango is everywhere and although Spanish is our language, you will find that most people can help you in English.

Patagonia

Patagonia is in the southern half of the country. Life there is more expensive due to the distanc-

es. You better travel by plane to reach your destination. Once there, no matter where it is, try to rent a car if you have some time to spare. This will give you time and freedom. Many places like the Valdés Peninsula offer so much in such a big expanse that it would take some days to really enjoy all the attractions.

The places we are about to describe are perfect for a family vacation and especially the kids will enjoy truly wild contact with nature. This is neither a zoo nor an African safari. There will be times where you will find yourself watching a colony of thousands of elephant seals with no human around you except your family members. Of course, if you choose to visit them in a tourist bus, you should adhere to their schedules and rules. Going by yourself will



LEFT: Strawberry anemone
RIGHT: Bright yellow hard coral
CENTER: Delicate blue anemone on hard coral



the Valdés Peninsula, water temperature is around 10°C, so a 5-7 mm wetsuit is okay for a couple of dives, but in the Beagle channel, expect less than 3°C, so drysuits are mandatory. You can rent or buy diving equipment, but I would advise you to bring your own mask and fins just to avoid fitting problems. Photo or video equipment rentals are seldom available.

take more time, but will allow you to enjoy a more personal approach. Go to Punta Tombo, for example. There, millions of Maguellan penguins form the biggest colony in the continent. You will be literally surrounded by these funny little animals. This is definitely a place for the family. But diving is better left for advanced divers. Although you don't need to be an expert, it would be ideal that you feel comfortable in cold and sometimes not so clear waters. With the exception of a few deep wrecks, diving is done in places no deeper

than 20 meters, mostly in the range of 12-15 meters.

You must ask special permission (in advance) if you want to dive with some of the animals in this region, because this is a protected area. An officer goes with you (not underwater) explaining what you can and cannot do. You can learn a lot from these guys. Some rules are a bit... (look around first to see if there is one of them around, please) ridiculous. For example, a diver cannot appear in the photograph with the animal.

(What?!?!?) But others rules are simply logical and perfectly understandable.

In the gulfs that surround



Valdés Peninsula

After a few days in Puerto Madryn (Argentina's diving capital) where we have dived some nice shallow wrecks in not so clear waters, we decided to head to the peninsula.

Puerto Madryn is a big city that was the first place touched by the Welsh immigration to Patagonia. This is a very nice spot to use as a base and visit the different places of the region.

Welsh tradition can still be enjoyed by visiting a couple of small and beautiful towns not so far from Madryn: Dolavon and Gaiman. There, you can enjoy a typical Welsh tea. Believe me, you won't want to eat anything the night before, so you can reserve your belly for it. Just try it. I will not tell you anymore.

Near Puerto Madryn there are some small beaches where, during the whale season, you can see those giants swimming and playing a few yards from the coast. El Doradillo, just 15 km. north of Madryn, is the best spot. You can dive in Madryn, and it is there where you can find most of the dive shops.

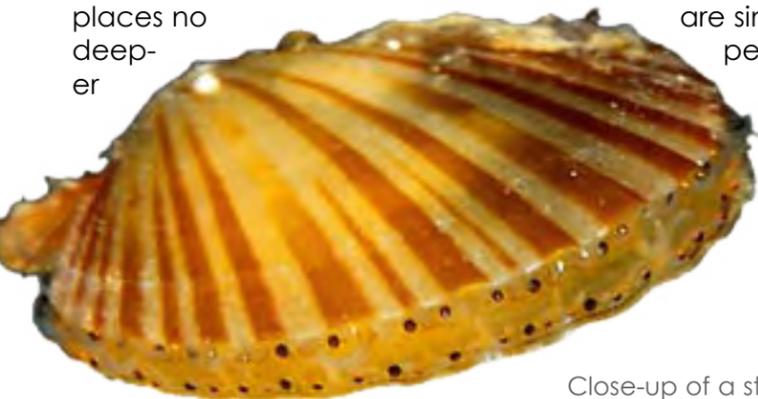
There are a couple of artifi-

Internet is everywhere today, but don't expect to find a good connection (or a connection at all) in some small villages. That's what you get when you want to

go to a wild place far from civilization.

We will leave the Beagle channel and the Andean region for future articles. Let's try first to

cover the Valdés Peninsula, as it is probably the most widely known place, and join me in a typical Patagonian diving adventure.



Close-up of a striated mollusc



Rugged coast of
Argentinian Patagonia

Patagonia

a main road and two short streets that connect it to the beach, a few houses and shops, some beach bars and that's it. It gets crowded during the summer months, but in winter, even with some tourist buses around, the place is still a paradise. There are a couple of nice small hotels in which to stay. You will enjoy the solitude, the silence, maybe some kids playing football in the streets, small houses with windows ornate with conchs and fossils, and very quiet and smiling people. A few dive shops can advise you about the better places for beach diving, which are not so far away.

In the afternoons, a walk in the surrounding cliffs will show you the vast expanse of the Patagonian

plateau. Marine fossils are everywhere. The air is clean, and you feel lucky enough to be able to enjoy such a place.

Let's go back to our diving.

Punta Pardelas

For a few days, the wind doesn't help our whale watching, so we do some beach diving instead. The most beautiful place is very near Piramides: Punta Pardelas. There, submerged in a rocky bottom, you can find colorful and delicate little creatures.

Be warned, however: Patagonia is not like the Caribbean where you can buy a card illustrated with fish and corals, which, once underwater, you can find and identify effortlessly. Here, you must look for them.

At first glance, all you see are just rocks. But then, you carefully begin to watch below the rocks and notice that the colors you have seen in warmer waters are also here. You simply cannot believe that such variety can exist in these rough conditions.

From time to time, small groupers, no longer than 15 cm, begin to bite you, trying to get you out of their territory. You let them try, and then go on your way. At no more than a meter behind you, you discover a sea lion that is watching you. It is big, bigger than you thought. Then, in a second, she (they are almost always females) disappears.

You spend more than an hour in waters no more than 12-15 meters deep. It is cold and you

cial reefs used mostly for diving "baptisms" no deeper than 12 m made with old cars and buses. Groupers, sea salmons, octopus and occasionally a sea lion will join you in most of the dives.

Wrecks were sunken on purpose here and are very interesting for black and white wide-angle photography. They are also in shallow waters, so when current is present, backscatter is a problem. The best wrecks are the *Emma*, the *Folías* and the *Albatros*.

With special permission (not difficult to get if you ask the dive operator), you can dive under some piers, which are covered with sponges, soft corals and anemones.

Best and less crowded places for diving are, however, in the peninsula. The waters are usually clearer and beach diving is pos-

sible with rock reefs very close to shore.

To cover the 90 km to the main village, Puerto Pirámides, we cross the Istmo Ameghino, a thin strip of land that, from time to time, lets you see the sea on both sides of the road: the San José Gulf at north and the New Gulf at south. Diving is currently not allowed in the northern gulf. This is to protect the fauna, especially the southern right whales. But don't worry. In the proper time of the year, you can see whales even from the balcony of your hotel room.

Puerto Pirámides

Puerto Pirámides is a small town (no more than 200 people living there) but is visited daily by thousands of tourists. Whale watching is a controlled and well-organized activity. That is why tourists

come here. But not us. Besides, I just get seasick even in a carousel. I prefer to see those beautiful beasts underwater.

Southern right whales come every May and stay here until late November. In these calm waters they mate, give birth and feed their calves. In summer, they depart to feed in colder and more plankton-rich waters, perhaps near Antarctica. These areas are still under study and not clearly identified.

During the whale season, boats depart from early in the morning until there is enough light to see the whales jump, rest on the surface, or play with their calves. A very nice experience indeed. Then, late in the afternoon, the last bus leaves the little town, and you find yourself almost alone.

Puerto Pirámides is very small—



Turquoise blue sea wraps around cliffs



TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: The impressive barnacle encrusted face of a humpback whale; Dramatic view from under a whale; Giant silhouette of a humpback enjoying a bubble bath expelled from a diver's air tank
BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT: Whale eye; Diving sea lion



feel the cold in your hands and lips. So, you decide that's it for the day.

Whales

On the next day, the wind calms. So, we go for whales. Rules are simple: you don't hunt them—just spot one, approach her very slowly and see her attitude towards the boat. If she is willing to stay, she will begin to make some passes below the boat, scratching her back against the boat bottom.

The officer says that we should look for young adults. Mothers with calves are a bit jealous and will not allow us to approach. Calves are also very curious, but still can't control their enormous bodies very well, which makes them a bit dangerous.

You can spend some days until you eventually find the whale that stays around long enough to be photographed. Maybe you are lucky and she is there the first time. But this is not the rule. On the days the whales decide not to "collaborate", there are other animals that would love to dive with you.

Sea lions

Sea lions are very common in these waters. From April to December, they can be found at Punta Alt, where a colony lives in the coast and little islets around. In the sum-

mer months, they migrate a few kilometers to the Punta Pirámides colony, where the shallower waters allow the puppies to swim safely.

We approach them slowly. We are still gearing up, but they have already jumped into the water. They are females. The males just stay at the top of the rocky islets, watching and monitoring us. It is better to dive a bit far from them, just in case.

Diving with sea lions is so magic that you can spend hours with them. They are fast, elegant, funny. You try to photograph them, but they move so fast, it is very difficult to compose an image. Worse yet. They bite you all the time. With their lips, they bite your hoses, snorkels, fins, everything. Yes, trying to photograph them is a nightmare. A wide-angle lens is a must. Since the dive is in very shallow waters, you must use strobes just for fill lighting, but most of the time (especially for black and white) you just use ambient light. With such movement, shallow waters and fine sandy bottom, backscatter is a problem, so you surely will end up leaving the strobes in the boat.

Elephant seals

Other animals we wanted but could not dive with were elephant

seals. They live in an enormous colony (population around 3000) in Punta Delgada. It's open sea, so water is neither clear nor calm, and these guys aren't as friendly as sea lions. So, we just visit them to photograph them on the beach. Males are big (5-6 meters long) and very, very heavy. But also, very fast if they think you are invading their territory. So, you better approach them slowly.

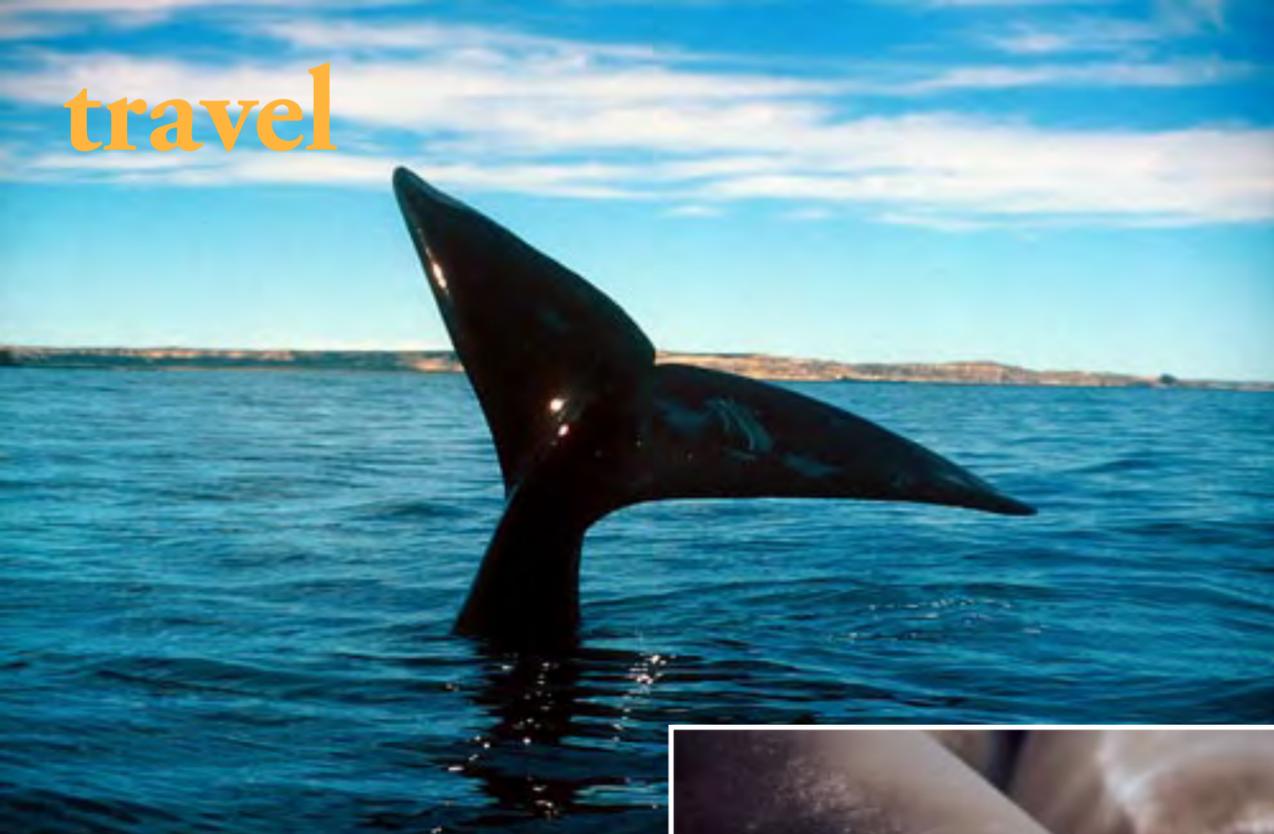
In a quiet afternoon, the big boss sleeps while some young males fight not far from him. He doesn't pay attention to them. They are still very young to compete with him.

All around, beautiful faces watch us. They are females. They are basking in the sun, blowing from time to time, to get rid of the sand that enters into their noses from the wind. We approach them as close as they allow us. Some ignore us, some show us their open mouth, and we slowly retreat.

In the afternoon, while the sun disappears on the horizon, we head back to Puerto Pirámides. We see some ñandúes (Patagonian ostriches, smaller than the Africans), maras (world biggest hares) and guanacos along the road. It's a long trip however, and we arrive late at night.

We left Punta Norte for another





LEFT TO RIGHT: Magnificent tale of a humpback whale; Sunning elephant seal gives a territorial bark; Detail of a red starfish; Green sea anemones cling to the coral reef in families; Curious penguins grin for the lens



opportunity. It is far in the north, and it is better to visit in autumn to witness nature in its wildest form: killer whales grounding on the sand trying to catch sea lions. Maybe this year...

Diving with whales

This is the day, I say to myself. The wind is calm, the sea is almost flat, and some whales can be seen from the coast. There we go.

To dive with a whale is different from anything you have ever done before. It's kind of magic. It's a privilege. Not from the government, but from Nature. A gift.

After looking for a "collaborating" whale for our photo session for more than a couple of hours, we spotted one that was in a typical position: head down, with the tail out of the water. Scientists still don't agree about why they do this. Some say they are just resting, others say they are "sailing", using their enormous tail as a sail, pushed by the wind. Others just admit they don't know.

Anyway, as we approach her, she adopts a more "normal" position, but doesn't go away. On the contrary, as the captain shuts off the engine and the boat slowly drifts to her, she begins to circle us. Usually, the photographer

goes first with a mask and snorkel to try to secure some photos, and then, if the whale remains around, the shooter goes back to the boat for scuba gear.

I am not the strong, athletic kind of diver. I am small, and diving with a drysuit and weights and snorkel is almost a torture for me. So, I decided to risk the opportunity, spend the time to gear up completely and go for her in scuba. My choice was correct. For the time, I begin my descent, she was still there, curious to see what was that black thing that was approaching her.

We are close to shore, in a place no

deeper than 12 meters. The water is green and visibility is scarce, no more than 5-6 meters. I will use my Nikonos V with a Nikonos 15 mm lens, an SB105, and TMax100 black and white film pushed to 400 ISO to increase the contrast.

I adjust my buoyancy and begin to swim. I can't see her. I am alone. A "safety" (!) diver, a boy who goes with us in the boat, snorkels on the surface. He signals

somewhere, but I can't see anything. Suddenly, a cloud covers the sunlight. A big, fast moving cloud. A cloud with an eye! There she was. With a delicate stroke of her tail, she passes beside me almost effortlessly, but fast enough to not giving me time to compose a first shot. I try to follow her, but it's impossible. She continues to play the same game, again and again. After ten minutes of swimming I am so tired, that I decided to rest on the sandy bottom.

Many have asked me if I was afraid of swimming with such giant animal. To tell you the truth, my biggest fear was

returning without a photograph. And after those initial minutes, I had almost breathed half of my tank and still had no photographs in my camera. You definitely need to learn to dive with these guys. That was what I was thinking about, when I saw the cloud again. Right over me, in the very place where my bubbles reach the surface. I begin to ascend with the air bubbles rising up. It seems that she enjoys the bubble bath, because she is completely turned upside down, with her belly to the sun and her back receiving the caresses of my bubbles.

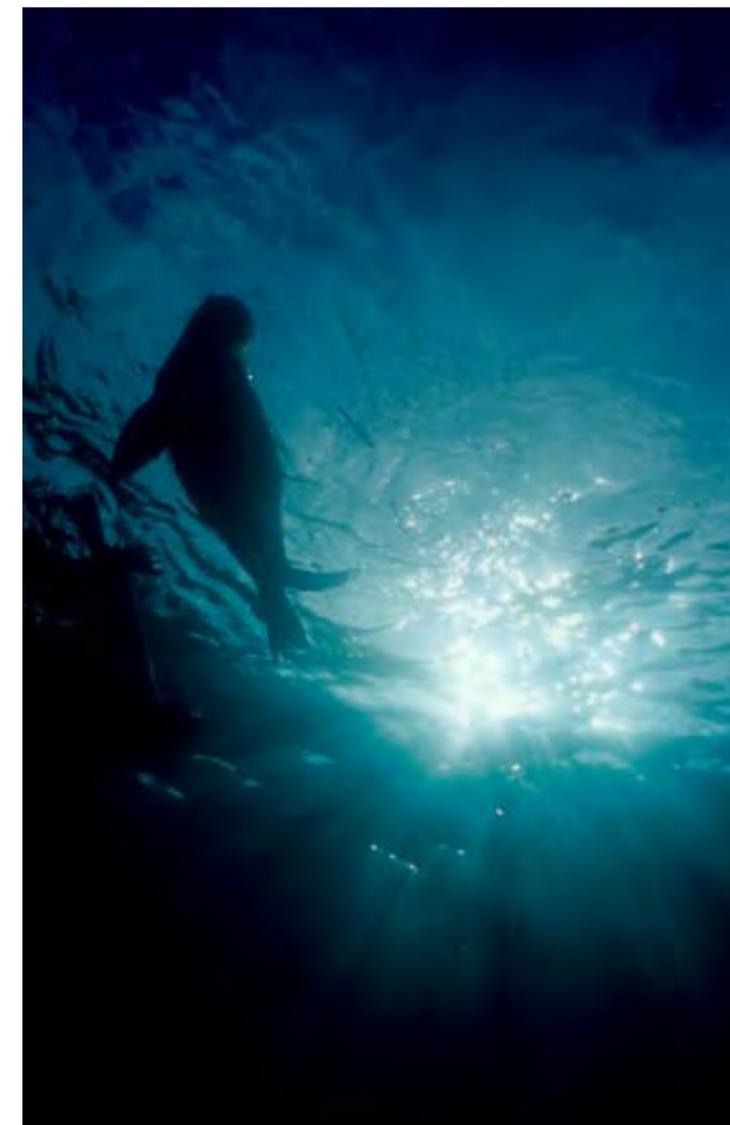
As I approach her, she notices me and begins to turn very slowly. I get a shot of her eye at no more than a few centimeters. As she turns her enormous body, all the water moves around me and we emerge together in an explosion of foam and waves, like a submarine. I grab a shot of her respiratory operculi and the little parasitic cyamids that surround them. I turn to my right and notice her tail approaching me, so I begin to move my legs trying to get far from her. I think to myself, I am going to die. Well, maybe not die, but I'll definitely

end this dive with some broken bones. The four-meter wide tail gets closer and closer and I stay still waiting for the best (or the worse). But nothing really happens. Like the pilot of a big Boeing, she maneuvers her body so perfectly that the tail passes beside me at no more than a few centimeters, without touching me. Amazing!

I lost her for



Penguins pruning their feathers populate the stony beaches to rest under the sun



awhile. I have a few PSI in my tank and only one frame left in my camera. The “safety” guy keeps pointing at her doing some gestures I cannot understand. After swimming with no direction for a couple of minutes, I eventually see her. She is in the upright position again. With the tail outside, her head almost touches the bottom, so she must measure about 14-16 meters. I begin to meter the background as I approach her from behind. I don't want to fail. I reach her holding my breath and shoot a vertical photo just before she moves on and disappears into the green water.

I get back to the boat. I am really exhausted. But it was a great dive and I am really happy. We slowly go back to

Puerto Pirámides. I have decided I was too tired and sick—seasickness is my karma—to repeat the dive. It was the last friendly whale of that trip. The wind blew so hard the following days that the port was closed and we couldn't dive anymore.

I dedicated those bad days to getting some photos of the penguins at Punta Tombo Reserve, some 180 km south of Puerto Madryn. But the whale dive was the highlight of the trip and will remain with me forever. Fortunately, whales keep coming every year, so I plan to dive with them again. There is a cycle to their movements and the same whale is supposed to come to Valdés every three years. Maybe, I can find her again. She is the one that loves

bubbles. The guys in Pirámides (they know about whales) had never seen such behavior before, so if you ever dive with a whale that uses you as her personal “Jacuzzi”, please, just give her my regards. ■

TOP CENTER: Detail of sea anemone
TOP RIGHT: Poka-dotted nudibranch
LEFT: Sea lion swims under a gleaming sun
INSET: Smiling female elephant seal



fact file

Patagonia, Argentina



History Argentina gained its independence from Spain in 1816. The following period saw internal political conflicts between liberals and conservatives and between civilian and military groups. The end of World War II saw the establishment of Peronist authoritarian rule in Argentina, after which continued political turbulence led to a military junta taking power in 1976. Democracy made a comeback in 1983, and remains despite challenges including a severe economic crisis in 2001-02 that erupted into violent public protests forcing the resignation of several interim presidents. Government: republic. Capital: Buenos Aires

Geography Argentina is located in the southern end of South America. Patagonia (a region shared geographically with Chile) occupies most of the southern half of the country. The Valdés Peninsula is on the coast of Chubut, one of the five provinces that are located in the region. Coastline: 4,989 km. Terrain: to the north, rich plains of the Pampas; to the south, flat to rolling plateau of Patagonia; to the west, rugged Andes along the border. Lowest point: Laguna del Carbon 105 m. Highest point: Cerro Aconcagua 6,960 m. As mentioned in the article, Patagonia is a vast plateau with the Andes to the west. This plateau ends in pebble beaches or sandy coasts usually (but not always) enclosed by high cliffs. Millions of years ago, sea level was 100 m or higher, so the current soil was once the sea bottom. Marine fossils are everywhere. Natural hazards: heavy flooding, earthquakes in San Miguel de Tucumán and Mendoza areas in the Andes, *pamperos*, or violent windstorms, hit the Pampas and north-east. Environmental issues: deforestation, soil

degradation, desertification, air pollution and water pollution. Argentina is a world leader in making voluntary greenhouse gas targets

Climate The coastal area of the Patagonia is arid and dry, due mainly to scarce rainfall (no more than 200 mm/year) and strong western winds that blow almost continually. Their intensity increases in the warmer summer months. Temperature: 15-18°C in summer and 6-7°C in winter. Water temperature: about 16°C in February and 8°C in August. Tidal variations are among the world's greatest, so in some areas there are strong currents. This, associated to wind and the topographic characteristics of the terrain (with some places with strong "up wellings" or cold water ascending currents) produces a rich biological area (plankton)

Seasons in the Southern Hemisphere, summer goes from December to March, and winter, from June to September

Economy Advantages: rich natural resources, high literacy rate, export-oriented agricultural sector and a diversified industrial base. Disadvantages: inflation, external debt, capital flight, budget deficits. Negative growth in 2000 due to skepticism of the government debt repayment while maintaining peso-US dollar exchange rate, bond problems, massive bank withdrawals, sliding consumer and investor confidence despite the government efforts to rectify the situation with reforms. Following a stabilization at a low level, growth is making a comeback driven by domestic demand, solid exports, and positive external conditions strong revenue performance and a budget surplus



while inflation rose to 12.3 percent in 2005. Agriculture: sunflower seeds, lemons, soybeans, grapes, corn, tobacco, peanuts, tea, wheat, livestock. Industries: food processing, motor vehicles, consumer durables, textiles, chemicals and petrochemicals, printing, metallurgy, steel

Currency Argentine peso (ARS) Exchange rate: 1 peso = .32 USD, .25 EUR

Population 39,921,833 (July 2006 est.) Ethnic groups: white (mostly Spanish and Italian) 97%, mestizo (mixed Amerindian and white ancestry), Amerindian, or other non-white groups 3%. Religions: Roman Catholic 92% (about 20% practicing), Protestant 2%, Jewish 2%

Language Spanish (official); English is widely spoken in main cities and tourist areas; Italian, German, French

Travel How to get there: definitely, go by plane. It's a long trip to Madryn. Once there, you can rent a car to travel the area. The only airline that currently flies there is Aerolíneas Argentinas. Check before you go to see if they go to Puerto Madryn. They usually don't, and you must fly to Trelew (about 70 km south of Madryn) and then take a bus. Your travel agent can arrange it. Once there, take tours, or better yet, rent a car. Distances are large, and the whole round trip to the Peninsula (from Puerto Madryn) is about 400 km. The only paved road is the one that joins Puerto Madryn to Puerto Pirámides. Drive easy and beware of the stones that other cars can throw when they are passing you. They can break your windshield.

Security The usual recommendations for big cities: don't walk alone, ask before venturing in some places (especially at night), don't leave your values unattended, etc. Life is definitely more peaceful in Patagonia. Voltage: 220 v.

Food/water Don't miss Argentine "asados" (barbecues) and "dulce de leche". Water is Ok for drinking, although many would prefer to dilute it with a good Malbec (especially with the "asados")

Seasonal fauna Whales: from May to December. Penguins: from January to December, but best from September to March. Sea lions: All year round. Elephant seals: All year round. Killer whales: from February to April. Dolphins: from December to April

Dive Links
Scuba Duba, Puerto Madryn
www.scubaduba.com.ar
Golfo Azul, Puerto Madryn
www.pinosub.com
Patagonia Scuba, Puerto Pirámides
www.patagoniascuba.com
The Paradise, Puerto Pirámides
www.hosteriaparadise.com.ar



Marcelo Mammana is an Argentine underwater photographer (and physician). He was born and lives in Buenos Aires. He has dived since he was 13, and has done so in the Patagonia, Brazil and the Caribbean. He is a self-educated photographer (he actually first learned to photograph underwater before top-side), and although he uses color film for editorial work, he prefers to shoot in black and white. Visit his award-winning website www.light-underwater.com. He is currently working on a photographic project on Patagonia.

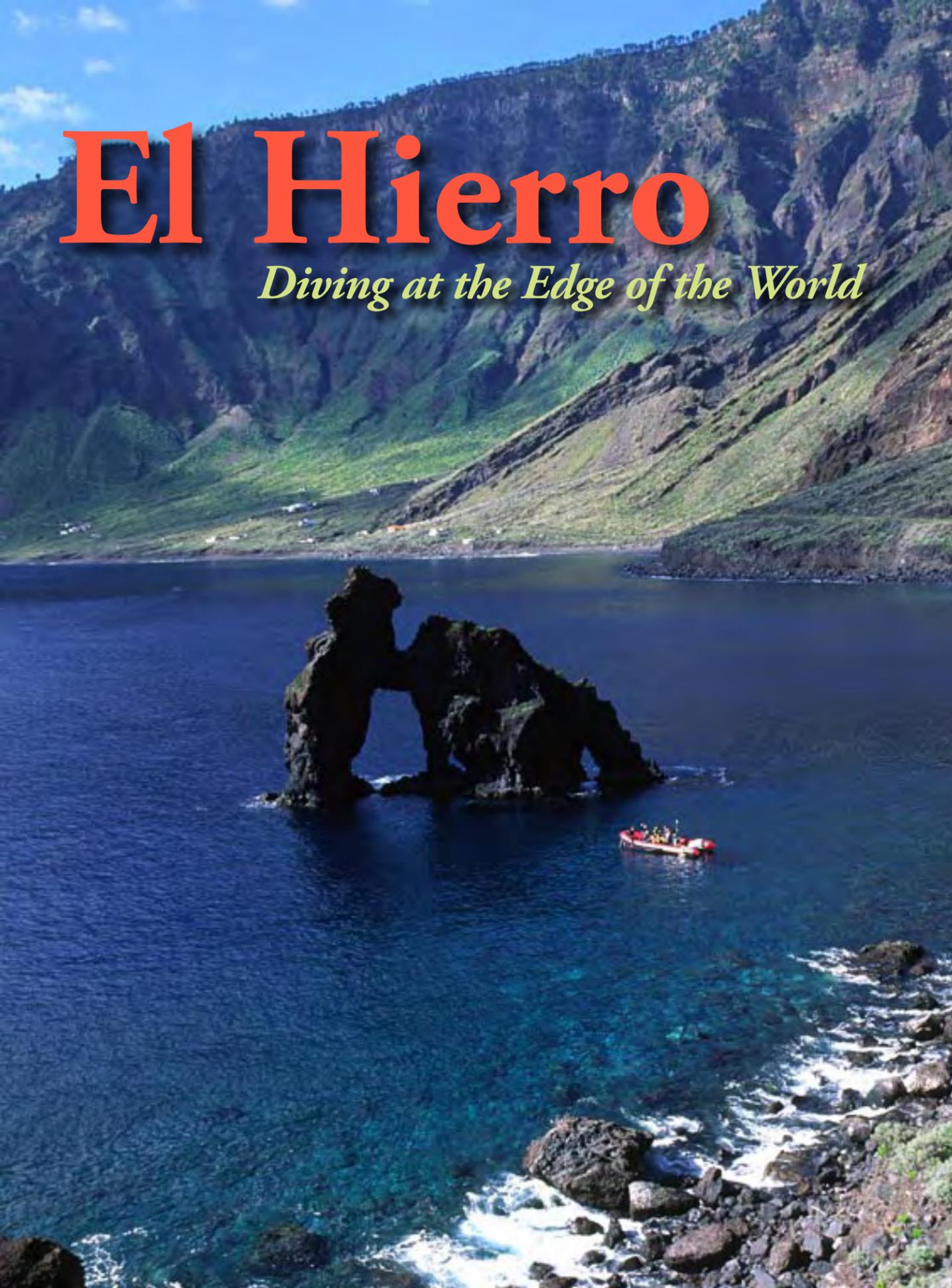
Marcelo's black and white images are taken with Kodak TMax100 (pushed 2 stops to increase contrast, in whale and sea lions images). He uses Fuji Provia for color shots. Underwater shots are taken with a Nikonos V, Nikonos SB105, Nikkor UW 15mm, Nikkor UW 35mm + extension tubes. Land shots are taken with a Nikon F601, Nikon AF 24 mm.

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Websites
Puerto Madryn Tourist Office
www.madryn.gov.ar
Province of Chubut
Protected Areas Office
Contact them in advance for permits
www.chubutur.gov.ar
AR Tourism, LLC
Argentina & Patagonia Travel Specialists
www.artourism.com

El Hierro

Diving at the Edge of the World



In Columbus' time, El Hierro was considered the limit of the known world in Europe. For over 1700 years, the smallest island of the Canaries was the land of the Zero Longitude and the ocean beyond was the realm of the unknown. Today, a lighthouse at the Western end of this enigmatic island marks the meridian site. Hierro's claim to fame does not end here. It is a beautiful and wild island of many contrasts. One of them being a near absence of tourists...

Text and photos by Jerome Hingrat

Hierro is not stuck in time. It's just that very few tourists choose to make the trip and the island has been spared the ghastly developments of its Canarian sisters. Besides, Hierro is still uncharted territory to many scuba divers from mainland Europe. Underwater, the spectacular diversity of its landscape is every bit as striking with a bewildering variety of cliffs, pinnacles, caves and lava fields. Dives have that special flavour that result from the meeting of Atlantic species with subtropical ones. Having dived in the rest of Canaries, I am struck by the diversity of the fish life around Hierro. It surpasses anything I have seen in the Canaries. The marine reserve and the absence of large-scale fishing around the island has something to do with it. But it is also due to Hierro's greater distance from the colder upwelling found off the African coast. As a warm Caribbean current encircles the island, the water here is warmer than off the eastern islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. It is June and the water is 24 degrees!

TOP: Scorpionfish
LEFT: Roque de la Bonanza

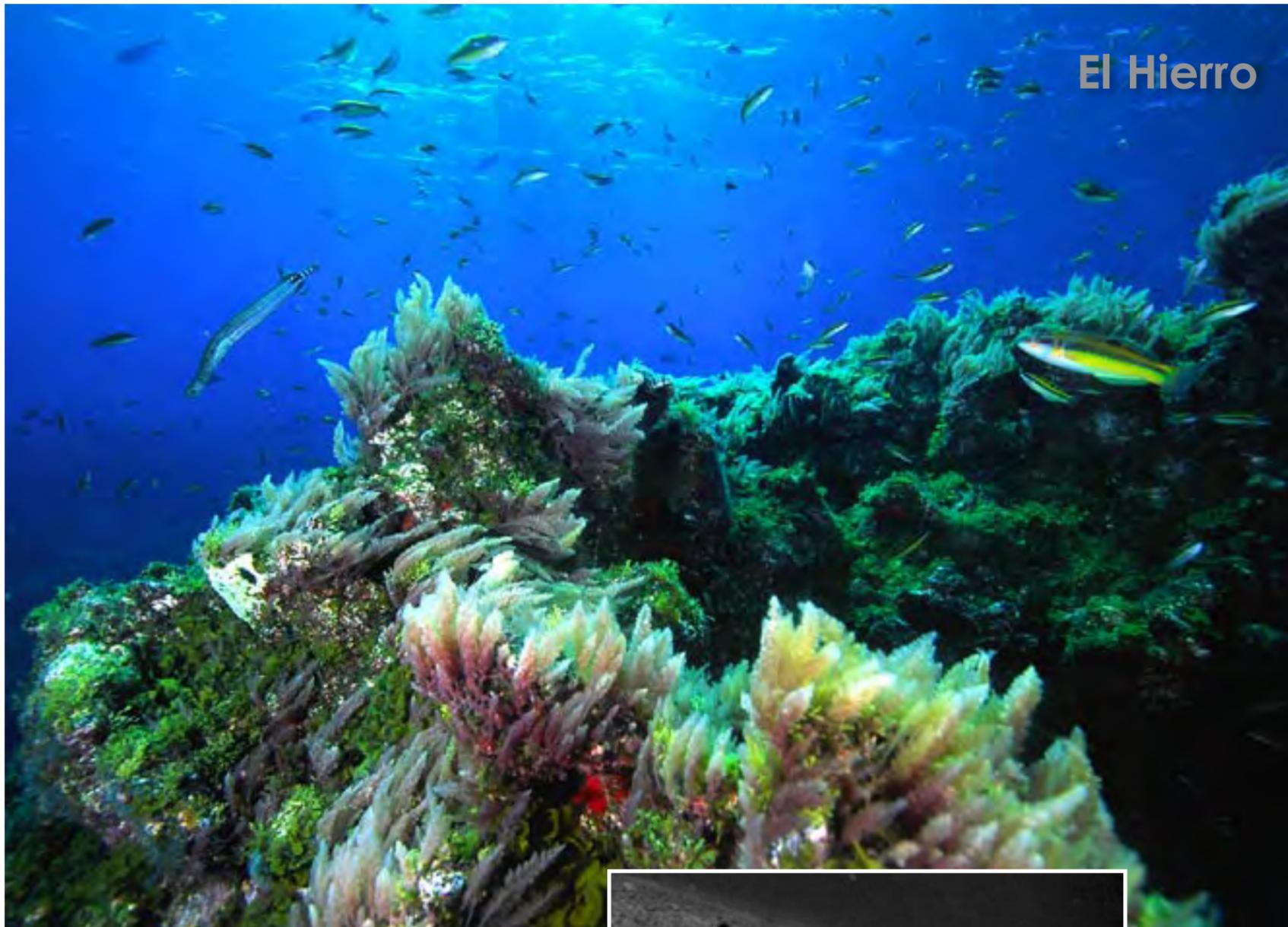


I soon learn to distinguish between chucos and ratones, I mean eagle rays and stingrays. We have come across all manners of rays: electric rays, eagle rays, stingrays and the stunning

butterfly ray with a wingspan of over 2 metres, one of the trademarks of Hierro. Antonio, my dive guide, tells me that Maromas (Manta rays) are also regularly spotted about the local dive

ABOVE RIGHT: Curious grouper with diver





ABOVE: A few meters below the surface
LEFT: Fireworm on lava sand



INSET: Stingray

sites. I put this down to a bit of Spanish blarney. But, back at the centre, a glance at the many photographs taken locally tell the story of their regular sightings. They even have a video of their last sighting filmed around the site of El Bajon. And the list doesn't just end here. Last month, a whale shark was spotted further off the coast and photographed by local divers.

Deep waters

In the absence of a continental shelf, deep waters are found very close to the shore. And it is not uncommon to encounter dolphin and pilot whales on

your way to a dive site. In the case of El Bajon, the most popular dive spot, the shore is within swimming distance. A steep double-humped pinnacle, El Bajon combines spectacular scenery and fish life. Oceanic currents ensure a constant supply of nutrients and a regular supply of visitors such as barracudas, bonitos, triggerfish, amber jacks, etc. I find myself drawn back to this site during my stay, which is less than ten

minutes by RIB from the harbour. The temptation to go deeper in 30 m visibility is hard to

resist... And if you want depth, El Bajon has plenty of it with maximum depths down to 70 metres! The saddle part in 10-15 metres is full of action and great for fish life. The place teems with a great variety of fish, from large pelagics to the shy Canarian lobster. One of its highlights is the swarms of bright ornate wrasse spawning en masse. If

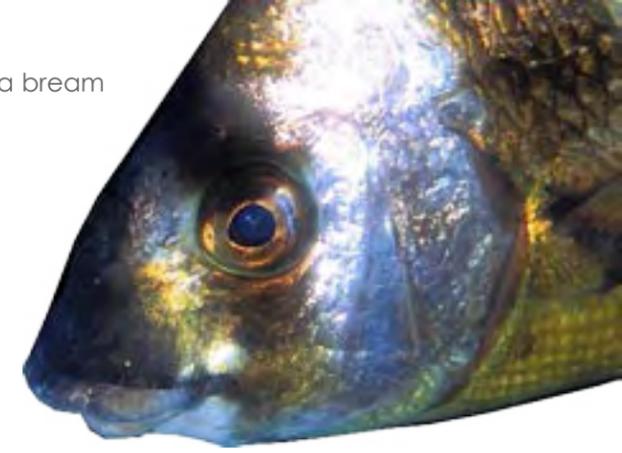


El Hierro



ABOVE: Phoenician Juniper (*Juniperus phoenicea*) at El Sabinar, El Hierro
LEFT: Moray eel with shell
INSET BELOW: Fast moving Zebra bream
RIGHT: Pancho, the friendly grouper

Up close with a Zebra bream



Fish life

The ray saga continues off El Dessierto (the Desert) where we come face to face with an impressive electric ray perfectly camouflaged with its beady eyes peering at us. If it wasn't for our guide, I would have missed it in spite of its size. On every dive, bright fire worms can be seen crawling on the dark volcanic sand and to say they're hard to photograph would be the biggest lie of the century. That's the thing with Hierro, macro or wide-

angle, you can find subjects for every lens.

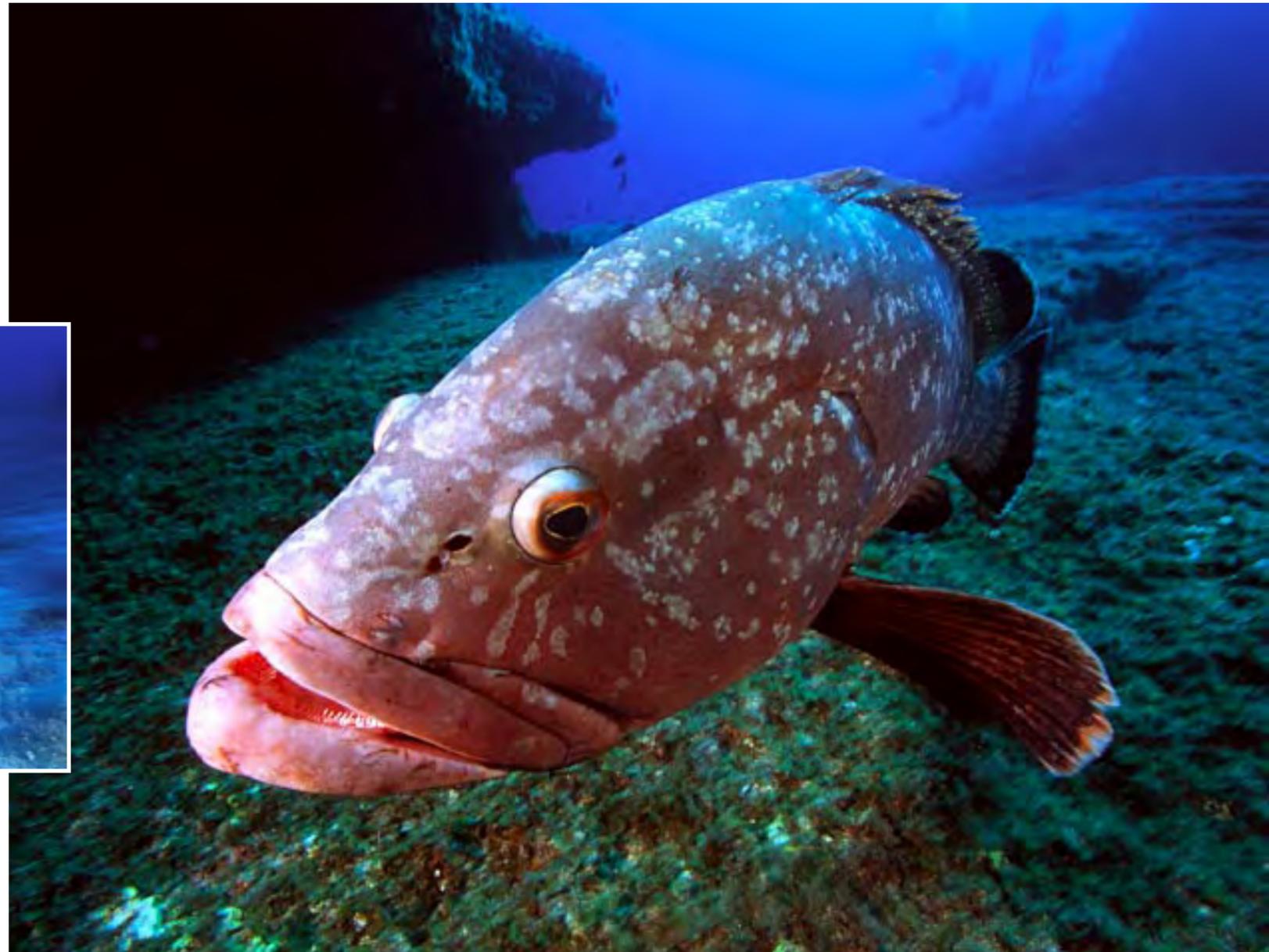
For a second, shallower dive, local caves around this end of the island. This is where the boxfish and tamboril are found hiding in the dark and it

you want action and exciting photo opportunities, look no further, El Bajon has it all, strong currents included. The cliff-like walls of the pinnacle offer protection for a safety stop.

In between dives, I decide to check the harbour after talking to Antonio. I slip off the moored RIB while everybody heads for lunch. As I make my way to the bottom, the dark sand seems to lift off: a large butterfly ray takes off like a magic carpet. Who says my camera should be turned off when the horizon looks deceptively clear? While I curse my luck, two large sting-rays take off in the opposite

direction. On another lunch dive, I come across a large nurse shark asleep in the sand. All this, in just eight metres off the harbour mouth, where the rays are known to hide in the dark ripples of the lava sand. Returning to the pier after nearly 80 minutes in the water, I find a turtle within meters of the pier. I'm out of film but not out

of luck as a local man tells me that the turtle is always around. Before I know it, I find myself considering another dive in the harbour!



travel

takes a torch to ferret them out of their crevices. Some grow to considerable size and inflate their spiny body to scare off their predator. In a local cave, we spot six Canarian lobsters on a ledge and a beautiful pair of red nudibranchs. On the way out of another cave at El Salto, we come across a shoal of trumpet fish, resting motionless in a dense formation, oblivious to our presence.

Marine reserve

Since 1995 the south tip of the island has been declared a marine reserve by the Spanish government. The protected zone runs along an area known locally as Mar de las Calmas (sea of calms). The area runs from the Orchilla lighthouse (historical landmark of the Zero degrees meridian) all the way to the har-

bour of La Restinga. The whole area is in the lee of the island and offers shelter from the prevailing winds. There's not that many diving areas that offer calm and crystal waters all year round with protection for both

divers and fish! A sizable portion of these coastal waters form the reserve and is divided into no take zones or restricted zones. The central chunk of the reserve is closed to both diving and fishing. Restricted areas are

open to sport divers but not to commercial fishing. This ensures the conservation of a pretty unique ecosystem. It is not hard to imagine that the presence of such a large concentration of fish attracts larger preda-



Red mullet find their food in sand



tors spotted regularly by divers and fishermen alike. This also means that large specimen and numerous species can be found all year round. Needless to say, fishermen and divers can be said to get on like a house on fire...

At El Desierto, the cliff dives along a black sandy slope which is home to a large colony of sand eels. The site is anything but a desert with a large sand eels colony the Red Sea would be proud of. Hundreds of them stick out in the black lava sand and are a sight to behold. Further along, a large grouper takes over the dive master duties and decides to escort us over its territory. The friendly and curious animal shadows us during every dive, posing for a

Angel shark

El Hierro



Moray with cleaner shrimp

few snaps. Back on the boat, I wonder about the life expectancy of this magnificent grouper. How long before Pancho (that's his name) strays away from the reserve and gets fished? Esther reassures me: Pancho is very territorial and dive centres have informed local fishermen about their grouper friend who have promised to release him should

they catch him by accident. How will they tell him apart? His size aside, the grouper has one clearly shorter spine on its dorsal fin that sets him apart from the rest...

More fish...

At La Herradura, I spot no less than five moray eels dotted around the rock formations, including the beau-

tiful fang tooth moray and golden tail morays.

But after several encores at Punta Restinga, just off the harbour, I've yet to exhaust the diversity of this site. It combines scenic and deep diving with a wide array of species. The beautiful pairs of scrawled file fish, a colourful variety of unicorn fish, are worth the dive alone. They can be a challenge to approach and photograph when swimming in pairs.

They seem more skittish swimming together than on their own. We follow a series of ledges and stop to look at a shoal of jacks hidden in a cave. The current picks up and we drop down to the temporary shelter of a spectacular arch at 45 m. While photographing the specimen of black corals, I stir up a large black stingray from the white sandy patch that lights up the water below the arch.

Trumpet fish (also known as cornet fish)



abound in the water around Hierro and I cannot recall any destination with such numbers. It is almost impossible not to see them on a dive. Their tube-shaped body is unmistakable and they're fascinating to watch. They sometimes join forces with a parrotfish or a non-carnivorous reef fish and follow them like their shadows. This is a handy way of getting prey by using the camouflage of their host. When grub is in sight, they harpoon it swiftly under cover of their host. On their own, their hunting behaviour is just as arresting. As they hover closer to their prey, they freeze, dip forward and hit their victim in a flash. They feed on tiny fishes, which only they seem capable of spotting. Many a diver has passed by them wondering if these weird looking fish had not smoked the weed. After a few days, you might think you've seen too many of them, but look again, you will eventually spot their strange feeding behaviour.

The major dive sites within the reserve are also marked with permanent moorings that are maintained by the local council and fishing patrols. We dived off a large RIB that our skipper Antonio has moored, only our skipper is also our dive master and so gets in the water with us. This is a feature of our diving week and we get used to the sight of RIBs floating seemingly unattended.

More to find...

The following Sunday, the Atlantic reminds us of its unpredictability. While sheets of rain unfurled, the locals are sorting out their differences on the black sand of a football pitch. Spectators watch the game from the shelter of their car and honk every time a goal is scored...

As I peered over a map of Hierro, I realise that there's a lot more left to dive. We decide to venture along the coast as far the impressive Roque de la Bonanza. A natural arch carved by the wind and sea sits in a large bay. The dive matches the spectacular scenery around

Jacks in slow motion

El Hierro



Diver has a chat with Pancho, the friendly grouper

us. Antonio tells me that the Northeast coastline offers spectacular diving and is virtually undived. Something tells me that I'll be back on Hierro...

Diving

The harbour of La Restinga is located at the southern tip of the island and offers plenty of accommodation within walking distance of the pier. The island has an impressive network of quality roads and is easy to visit. It is also a hill walker's paradise with some of the most stunning vistas in the Canaries. You can easily spend a week walking across the island without meeting any tourist. Most of the walks are quite steep and you will come across sleepy villages and isolated haciendas... The population is less than ten thousand that lives mostly in the two main towns of Valverde (capital) and La Frontera. With its relative isolation, it is the home of a large, prehistoric lizard that had seemingly gone extinct and has reappeared a few decades ago. We spotted a ridiculous number of birds of prey similar like kestrel. One of the islander's favourite past time is hunting, and they use typical Canarian hunting dogs.

Dive operators

With more than 10 dive operations, there is no shortage of dive centres and packages to suit all tastes. Another proof of the quality of diving here. We dived with El Tamboril www.eltamboril.com that overlooks the harbour of La Restinga. Run by a friendly Spanish couple, we had the RIB virtually to ourselves for 2 weeks and could go back to our preferred dive sites as we got more familiar with Hierro. Esther and Antonio went out of their way to please us and waited patiently for the photographer... Esther speaks fluent French and English, Antonio will help you brush on your Spanish. They offer full dive packages, with substantial discounts if you stay 10 days or more. They can also arrange accommodation locally if necessary. Our apartment was located 5 minutes from their dive centre.

Jerome Hingrat is a freelance underwater photo journalist. His articles and images have been published in Sport Diver in the UK, Océans in France and FINS in Ireland. He is an avid traveller and is currently working on his first book of photographs. For more information, please visit: www.jeromehingrat.com or email jeromehingrat@eircom.net

fact file



El Hierro, Spain



Canary Islands, Spain ▶



The island of El Hierro, Canary Islands, Spain

History In the 16th and 17th centuries, Spain was a powerful world empire. However, by the end of the 17th century, Spain's command of the seas finally yielded to England. In addition, Spain was slow to embrace the industrial and mercantile revolution, which put it well behind Britain, France and Germany in economic and political power. During the world wars, Spain remained neutral but suffered a devastating civil war in 1936-39. Following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, a peaceful transition to democracy came with rapid economic modernization. In 1986, Spain joined the EU. Nowadays, Spain is one of the most dynamic economies in Europe. It has become a global champion of freedom. However, the Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) terrorism continues to plague Spanish politics as well as relatively high unemployment; Government: parliamentary monarchy; Capital: Madrid

Geography Spain lies in southwestern

Europe bordering the Bay of Biscay, the Mediterranean Sea, North Atlantic Ocean and Pyrenees Mountains of southwest of France. Spain is home to two autonomous cities—Ceuta and Melilla—and 17 autonomous communities including the Canary Islands and Balearic Islands. There are three small Spanish possessions off the coast of Morocco—Islas Chafarinas, Penon de Alhucemas and Penon de Velez de la Gomera. Coastline: 4,964 km; Terrain: Plateau—large, flat to dissected—surrounded by rugged hills and the Pyrenees in north; Lowest point: Atlantic Ocean 0 m; Highest point: Pico de Teide (Tenerife) on Canary Islands 3,718 m; Natural resources: coal, lignite, iron ore, copper, lead, zinc, uranium, tungsten, mercury, pyrites, magnesite, fluor spar, gypsum, sepiolite, kaolin, potash, hydropower, arable land; Environmental issues: raw sewage and effluents from the offshore production of oil and gas pollutes the Mediterranean Sea; water quantity and quality nationwide; air pollution; deforestation; desertification

Economy From 1986 to 1990, the Spanish economy boomed, averaging five percent annual growth. In the early 1990s, Spain experienced a European-wide recession, but resumed moderate growth starting in 1994. It has a mixed capitalist economy, which supports a per capita

GDP that is 80% that of the four leading West European economies. The euro was introduced on 1 January 1999. President Aznar's administration advocated liberalization, privatization and deregulation of the economy. Tax reforms were introduced to that end. Unemployment fell steadily but remains high at 10.1%. Growth from 2003-2005 has been satisfactory given the background of a sluggish European economy. Economic and social reforms initiated by socialist President Zapatero, are generally popular but opposed by religious and conservative groups. Spain's challenges: adjusting to monetary and economic policies of an integrated Europe, reducing unemployment and absorbing widespread social changes. Agriculture: grain, vegetables, olives, wine grapes, sugar beets, citrus; beef, pork, poultry, dairy products; fish; Industry: textiles, apparel and footwear, food and beverages, metals and metal manufactures, chemicals, shipbuilding, automobiles, machine tools, tourism, clay and refractory products, footwear, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment

Climate Temperate; Interior: clear, hot summers and cloudy, cold winters; Coast: more moderate, cloudy summers and partly cloudy, cool winters

Population 40,397,842 (July 2006 est.); Ethnic groups: Mediterranean and Nor-

dic types; Religion: Roman Catholic 94%, other religions 6%

Currency Euro (EUR) Exchange rates: 1 EUR = 1.28 USD, .68 GBP, 2.02 SGD, 1.68 AUD

Language Castilian Spanish (official language) 74%; Catalan 17%, Galician 7% and Basque 2% (regional languages)

Diving Dive conditions are good all year round in the Canaries as the water is warm and CLEAR. Water temperature is 20-22°C in winter, 24-26°C degrees in summer

Travel information Flight to Tenerife, ferry from Los Cristianos (harbour nearby Las Americas), 4-hour crossing. It is possible to fly over. Hierro, in spite of its size, has its own airport

Websites El Hierro tourist office www.el-hierro.org

Dive operators & resorts Actividades Turísticas El Submarino El Matorral, 78. El Matorral

Base de Buceo El Submarino Avda. Marítima, 2. La Restinga 34.922557068. Fax: 34.922557068

Centro de Buceo El Hierro Avda. Marítima, 16. La Restinga 34.922557023. Fax: 34.922557023 ■

El Hierro International Underwater Photo Competition

The local council runs an open competition of high standard every year (usually around October) that attracts mostly Spanish divers from the mainland and a smattering of foreigners. It is run over 2 days with 4 dives on the top sites of the marine park, more information at www.openfotosub.com

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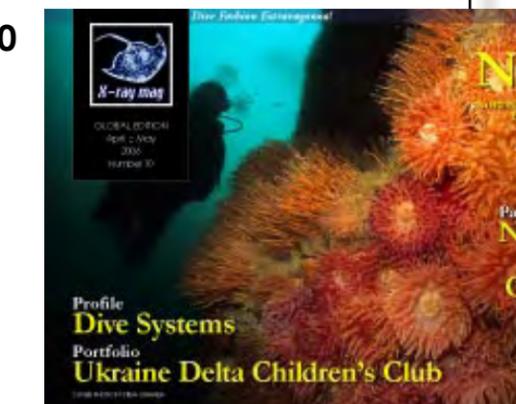
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