Divers descend with torches alight upon a Curtiss SB2C Helldiver, a carrier-based dive bomber aircraft made for the U.S. Navy during WWII. She now lives on the hanger deck of the *USS Saratoga*, Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

Shooting Below Decks

Text and images
by Joseph C. Dovala

Not all sunken ships are the same. There are shallow wrecks, deep wrecks, very old barely discernable wrecks, wrecks sunk in war, wrecks sunk to make artificial reefs, even wrecks placed on the sea bed for Hollywood movies. While each ship has a different history and characteristics they share one thing in common—they all have been transformed into undersea time capsules.

The ship's design reflects how life at sea existed in a particular era, and personal effects that went down with them signs a personal signature to those that walked and worked the decks. Even vessels placed intentionally on the bottom as man-made reefs, often have glorious histories contained within their hulls that can be felt by the astute diver during a visit.

As artificial reefs, they tend to attract, and ultimately, possibly sire their own population of critters from encrusting invertebrates to apex predators. Between the assemblage of marine life and the ships themselves there's no shortage of photographic opportunities. The emphasis of this article will be on bringing back meaningful images from inside the passageways and compartments—AND do it as safe as possible. In no shape or form is this piece intended to be an all-encompassing text on wreck penetration or photography, but merely a primer of some things to think about.

So, you want to crawl inside what's essentially a submerged man-made cave, place hundreds or thousands of tons of steel over your head, and then work in near total darkness? The absolute first criterion is to evaluate your skill and desire level long before you book that trip. If you do not have the proper training and gear, then entering any overhead environment is foolhardy. Yes, it's done all the time, and every year the fatality statistics show some a mere portion of the results, as the number of near misses don't make the list. There is a BIG difference between managed risk and home grown risky behavior.

Preparation

Serious wreck explorers make a substantial investment in education and equipment before making penetrations. They also study maps and drawings of the vessel to learn as much as possible before getting wet. Paying close attention to briefings and soliciting information from others is an integral part of the dive plan. The immersion calls for strict adherence to bottom times, air consumption rates, desired length of penetration, and most importantly, emergency contingencies. The degree of planning is reflected in their equipment. They carry adequate gas supplies for the objective which usually consists of twin cylinders, but could also be a large capacity single with a smaller tank (sometimes called a pony bottle) for a redundant gas supply held in reserve. Breathing gas is managed based on consumption rates of those divers making the plunge. The highest breathing rate and decompression obligations of the dive are usually the limiting factors for its duration. One common technique of managing gas supply is called the "rule of thirds." One third of the available gas is used for entry, one third is used for return, and the last third is held for emergency use only. Redundant regulators, multiple powerful lights, guide reels, computer/bottom timer with backups are also required before every significant penetration. Adequate

Dive guide Jim Akroyd investigates dentist chair (left) and medical cabinet (below) deep within the *USS Saratoga*, Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

cutting tools—at least two, are a must as well. Besides the cables, ropes, lines, etc., that most sunken wrecks are "equipped" with before they are sunk, there most likely will also be a nice selection of fishing line, anchor line, nets, and maybe even diver guide lines left behind by visitors after sinking. A sharp blade for ropes and nylon lines and a pair of shears for cables, wires and other metals need to be added to the wreck diver's kit.

Technique

Techniques and skill development are as important, if not more so, than having the proper gear. Buoyancy and propulsion techniques have to be mastered before swimming inside overhead environments. These two diving inherent skills, while not overly difficult, do require effort and practice. Far too many certified divers, including "advanced" c-card holders, show a lack of ability in this department. Ricocheting off the deck with fins and arms flapping all over the place is not a pretty picture and becomes dangerous quickly in a confined space. Even a small amount of silt kicked up will pretty much negate any chance of capturing good images. The nuances of buoyancy control apply to the entire dive team.

Ideally, you want as horizontal a position as possible without needing to do excessive hand or foot movement to maintain it. This can be achieved through shifting a small portion of ballast weight around the body as needed. For instance, if your feet float, you can shift a couple of pounds to the lower legs with ankle weights. If head up is a problem, you can put a few pounds on the upper portion of the air tank. A combination of BC jacket weight pockets and a belt will also spread some of the weight around. Make sure to pay attention to roll, as a little too much lead or gear on one side or the other can make it very difficult to stay right side up.

With the plethora of weighting options available to us today it has never been easier to achieve balance in the water. If you can maintain a horizontal position with a foot or two of water beneath you without stirring up or crashing into the bottom, you're buoyancy skills are in excellent shape.

Flailing arms and legs are the single biggest enemy of keeping the water clear inside a wreck, so being proficient with your fins is far better if it's not an after thought. Large kicking sweeps suitable in open water have no use inside a confined space. A number of other fin movements such as the "modified flutter" work well and still give adequate propulsion. The legs are bent at the knees and only the ankles are used to power the fins, the thighs are kept stationary. Another popular method is the "shuffle kick" where again the knees are bent upward and you use small sideways motions with the calves bringing both legs out and then back in together.

The key is small efficient movement as far away from sediments as possible. Hand movements are also controlled with only gentle minimal sculling or a single finger used to keep balance. Wildly swinging arms will not only dislodge sediment (or a buddy's mask), but also give you a fairly decent chance of having to rummage through the first aid kit after the dive because of skin to steel impact. The wreck diver's mantra, indeed every diver's mantra, should be to keep your hands to yourself and know where your fins are.

Configuration

It is not only the dive kit that needs special attention for penetration but also the camera configuration. Long multiple arm sections on strobes might be great for open water wide angle but inside a ship they can be grabbier than a drunken frat boy. A single arm on each side works far better. Keeping the strobe arms collapsed parallel with the camera housing body helps to keep a low profile while navigating passageways and hatches.

I find that keeping just enough tension on the flash arm joints to keep them in place works best. This way, it's a simple matter of pulling them into position and collapsing them again without having to constantly fumble with the ball clamps. Unless

Jim Akroyd places teapot on display table near "Officer's Country" within the *USS Saratoga*, Bikini Atoll, Marshall Island

you're in a very large compartment such as a cargo hold, you'll generally want the flashes pointed close to 45 degrees, or more, away from the lens direction. Even if you have perfect fining technique there will always be at least some particles forced into the water column.

Ever heard of "thousands of tiny scrubbing bubbles...?" (From an old TV toilet bowl cleaner advert) Well, unless you're on a closed circuit rebreather, every exhale is going to send a barrage of "scrubbing bubbles" heading for the overhead and rust, paint chips, silt, and crud is going to come raining down. The first couple of minutes, or seconds, is when you generally have the clearest water for image making when first entering a particular section or compartment. This is why you don't want to waste precious time fumbling with strobe arms just prior to a shot.

For smaller compartments it sometimes is better to send the model in and then just stick your camera through the hatch and fire away. This method keeps your bubble trail out of the compartment and may buy you a couple of extra frames. Once a section is even partially silted out the game is over.

Lighting

Photographically speaking, lighting is arguably the biggest concern when shooting below decks. While backscatter as mentioned above is a primary problem there are a host of other less obvious illumination issues as well. A full power strobe blast can ricochet off bulkheads like a Hollywood action movie bullet. Even the darker rust/silt covered varieties of older ships reflect more than seems reasonable. Newly sunk artificial reef vessels can positively glow. At other times, they soak up light like the office rummy with alcohol at the company Christmas party.

The trick is to try and use the reflective light as an ally when setting up composition and exposure. Direct full lighting with flashes can result in harsh murky hotspots with very dark backgrounds. There is little sense of "being" there as from the perspective of an exploring diver. For an example, the image of the hellfighter in the hanger loses much of its mystery when over lit up from multiple high power strobes. Using only diver HID's and a touch of ambient light gives the scene a more "realistic" look, as though the viewer is actually on the dive. Admittedly, this takes far more effort and cooperation from your dive buddies to pull off, so make sure you have something to bribe them with.

Using lower output lighting usually means far slower shutter speeds and wider apertures. The new breed of high ISO performing cameras are perfect for this kind of shooting.

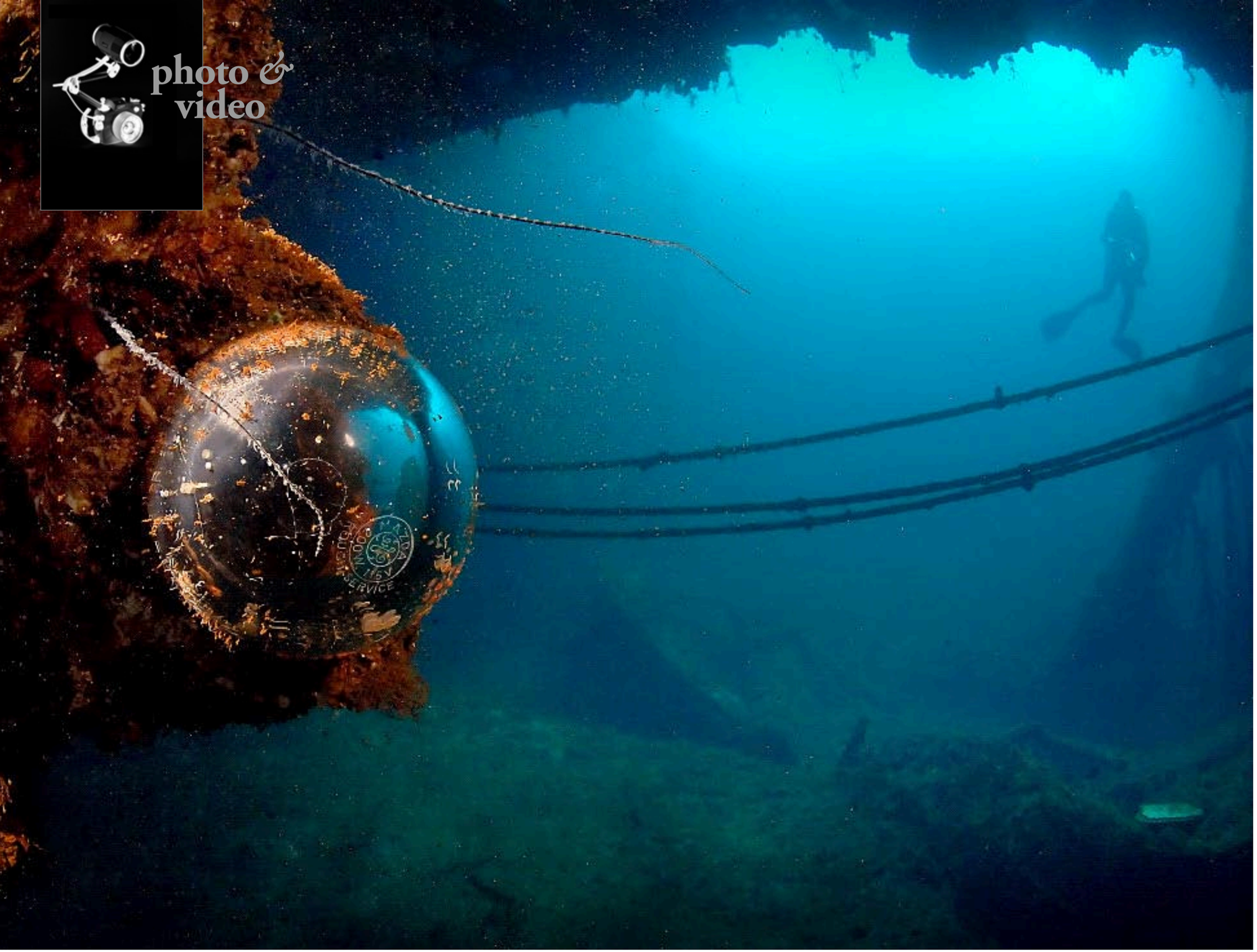
Camera stability becomes more of an issue once below 1/30 second give or take. On land, of course, you'd break out the trusty tripod. While tripods can and are used underwater by a number of photographers, they definitely increase the complexity. Taking yet another piece of bulky gear on a penetration has to be weighed against the increased hassle factor and risk.

I have used tripods in open water but prefer to try and use naturally existing supports inside of wrecks. Fortunately there are often pipes, beams, cabinets, etc., that can be used as an impromptu camera stabilizer. Extreme care must be used maneuvering around these objects. Besides the obvious potential entanglement issues, all one needs is solid jagged steel contact with the dome port to end that good nitrogen narcosis feeling.

As on land, breathing techniques can help in steadying the camera. Typically, some version of holding your breath is used just before pressing the shutter release. For a variety of reasons, I try to avoid doing this underwater especially on decompression dives. When I'm doing things right my breathing rate is slow and steady with deep inhales and slow extended exhales. During the last second or two of my exhalation I try to be in position to take advantage of the "natural" interval before taking my next breath.

While this takes a little practice, the method works quite well and becomes second nature in no time. The trick is to let the time gap between breaths be conducive to one's own breathing cycle and not consciously extended (that's holding your breath) to get that extra time delay.

Using strictly natural available light usually means having a port, hatch, torpedo hole, or some other opening letting in the sun. This kind of illumination can make for very dramatic images. Mostly, this means silhouettes, but by adding a touch of



Intact G.E. light bulb with filament in place has survived two nuclear bombs and the ravages of the sea for over 60 years. Hanger deck, *USS Saratoga*, Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

flash and letting the ambient light "take over", the exposure you can create an ethereal quality to the photo.

When I shot film my waste basket tended to fill with slides of ambient-light-take-over accidents. With the immediate feedback of digital it has become easier to fine tune just the right amount of over exposure for the look you want.

Available light is also the king of black and white shooting. The high contrast ranges can make for very effective grey scale images. Again, with the versatility of digital you can visualize for both color and black and white on the same dive with just one camera.

Most image makers I know shoot in color and then convert later on the computer. Better black and white images are generally of higher contrast and strong shapes but don't ignore the mysterious look of muted grays and dark contours that ship wrecks can provide.

Models

Working with models below decks takes very good communication that starts well before anybody starts blowing bubbles. Underwater instructions must be clear and simple. Often the best outcome requires multiple dives in the same area to figure out the best way accomplish the task. When that isn't possible, learning as much as possible about what to expect from someone else who's been inside is quite useful. And an experienced professional guide is invaluable.

Once you've formulated an idea, make sure to talk to your model(s) in enough detail so they won't have to second guess you down below. Ad-libbing during a penetration dive is NOT a good idea, for no photo is worth jeopardizing the safety of the dive team.

Taking the images have to be secondary to all else of the dive exploration. Keep in mind when working with people in overhead situations that they are already task loaded. Avoid hitting them with point blank high power strobe blasts. Watch your own fins. Pay attention to time, depth, and other dive requirements. You can often let some of these parameters slide in open water but not here.

Wearing some kind of color on the model really helps with separating them from the dark background. Lively fins, mask, and gloves are a big help as are red and yellow BC's. They don't have to be gaudy but having something other than light sucking black makes for a brighter image. And make sure to let the model dive.

A wreck explorer is always in some kind of action, albeit slowly. Static looking divers staring at the camera rarely exude the excitement of adventurers. Pulling an artifact from the muck or showing a perfect fining technique through a silted out compartment can help share some of the thrill.

To be sure, the "keeper" rate is low shooting in this environment. There is increased risk for both you and your equipment. Finding buddies who'll put up with your crazy filming ideas are hard to come by. And there're more than enough challenges for all who venture inside, but the chances for some unique images are definitely under all that steel.

Joseph Dovala is an internationally published dive writer and photographer with a background in the U.S. Coast Guard, ocean technology and molecular biology. For more information, visit: ***www.jcdovala.com*** ■

Inon Snoot

The INON Snoot Set for Z-240/D-2000 is an accessory for a range of INON strobes to change beam angle. The various combination of packaged parts supports six different beam coverage with the following sophisticated effects. It blocks extra diffused light eliminating backscatter, highlights a subject by illuminating the subject only, and gives a spotlight effect on a subject. The Rubber Hood is securely attached on a compatible strobe via supplied dedicated aluminum sleeve, which is screwed on diffuser mount screw holes on the strobe. **www.inon.jp**

Hartenberger Video Maxi

The set consists of a power pack with a four-position power setting switch (50/75/100/125%), two Lamp Heads and the charger (LG) off-shore 1/12. The power pack utilises the latest generation Nickel-Metal-Hydride cells and is rated at 14.4V / 4.5Ah. The burn time with 2 x 50 Watt halogen Bulbs at 100% power setting is approximately 30 minutes. The cell pack is a plug-in unit and can be replaced with a spare cell pack within seconds. **www.hartenberger.de**

10bar gf1

As its brand name suggests, all 10 Bar underwater housings are 10 bar (300 ft./90m) pressure-tested, they are tough enough for heavy-duty deep dives. This sturdy aluminum housing is specially designed for the Panasonic Lumix DMC-GF1, a micro Four Thirds camera with interchangable lenses, DSLR image quality and focusing speed. **10bar.com**

UltraLight GoPro

Ultralight Control Systems has released two new mounting options for the GoPro HD camera housing. The GoPro HD Ball mount cage fits over the GoPro HD camera housing. It serves to prevent loss of the camera if the housing's plastic mounting tab breaks. The ball attachment allows for the housing to be attached to a still camera housing, for example, giving the option of recording on video what you are shooting. **www.ulcs.com**

Clip-On Screen

A new clip-on LCD monitor from Sony gives DSLR camera owners a bigger, better view of their footage while shooting HD video. The CLM-V55 is a portable video monitor featuring a high-resolution WVGA (800 x 480) (5") LCD panel. Attaching easily to most Interchangeable Lens Digital cameras and compatible HD camcorders via the supplied adaptor, it displays video footage during shooting/playback with excellent clarity and a wide viewing angle. The clip-on screen tilts and swivels to any angle for comfortable framing in any position—even self-shooting when you're in the picture. **www.sony.eu**

Ikelite

An ultra compact housing for Panasonic Lumix TS10 and FT10 cameras. All camera controls are fully functional through the housing and depth rated to 200ft (60m). Easy open latch and drop in camera loading make set-up a breeze. Two 12-24 threaded mounts on the bottom of the housing allow for the secure attachment of optional trays and lighting accessories. Includes one 1cc tube of silicone lubricant, vinyl lanyard, flash diffuser, flash deflector and vinyl port cover. **www.ikelite.com**

Bonica

GZ-HD300 and HD320 represent the latest technology in hybrid camcorders, both have built-in hard-drives (60GB and 120GB respectively) and accept micro SD cards for storage. Equipped with an impressive 20x optical zoom lens, they are capable of capturing stunning 60 frames per second video at full HD resolution (1920x1080). Bonica packages the above cameras with the WR-MG250 housing from JVC and one or two of Bonica's new 1500 lumen LED video light G8-V15. **bonicadive.com**

128 Gb

The SanDisk Extreme Pro CompactFlash card features 128 gigabytes of storage and up to 100 megabyte per second write speeds. With a set of features optimized for professional photographers and videographers, the 128GB SanDisk Extreme Pro CompactFlash card is ideally suited for imaging applications requiring Full HD3 1920x1080 resolution, up to 50Mbps bit rate and 4:2:2 color sampling. **Sandisk**

Aquatica AD7000

Made from carefully selected alloy of aircraft grade aluminum and premium grade of stainless steel, the housing is machined on the latest five axis computer assisted machines available. It will be protected by anodizing to North American military specification. While anodizing in itself is a necessary step in protecting the housing from the environment, it will fade and discolor if left exposed to the elements. For further protection, Aquatica provides corrosion inhibiting zinc anodes as standard equipment and coats their housing with a baked on, tough as nail, powder coating. This extra level of protection does make a huge difference. **aquatica.ca**

Sekonic meter

The new L-308DC DigiCineMate is a simple and easy-to-use compact light meter that is ideal for today's DSLR videographers and digital cinematographers as well as still photographers. It features a full range of shutter speeds plus a special grouping of cine speeds and shutter angles and indicates exposure in f-stops to one-tenth step. The unit's LCD readout can be customized to display only specific functions needed for the task at hand for fast, easy operation.

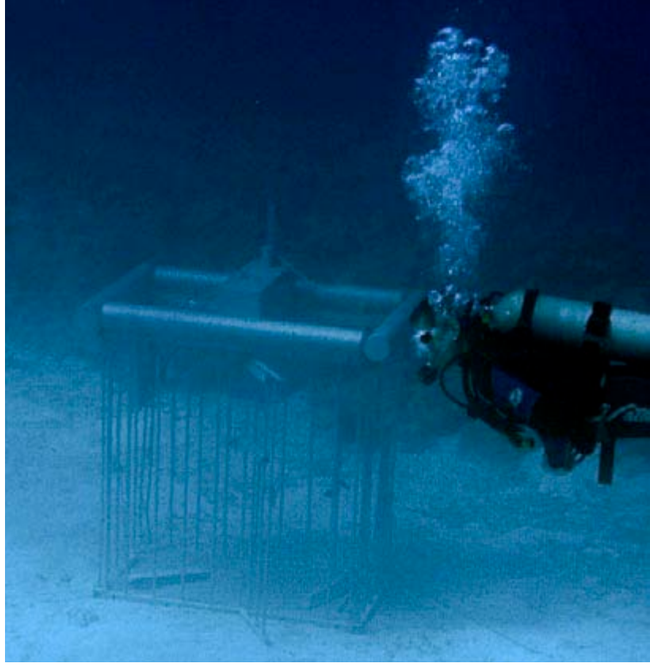
Bahamas

Underwater Hollywood

Nassau — New Providence

MythBusters have done a number of shoots in Nassau leaving objects behind for divers to explore (right)

The Cessna (below) was used for the filming of *Jaws: The Revenge*. The site is popular with both divers and snorkelers



Text and photo by Millis Keegan

Are you a movie buff? Or even a movie fanatic, under the spell of Hollywood, watching hours and hours of adventures wishing you were part of the experience? Well, you can, in a sense, anyway. If you are reading this, chances are that you also dive. It is time for you to start logging some Hollywood dive sites!

Start the adventure in the Bahamas. Film history was created here. You will hit the jackpot right from the start. It began as early as 1915 when the classic silent movie, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, first filmed underwater scenes outside Nassau. In 1954, Captain Nemo and his submarine, *Nautilus,* was back, and the first remake of Jules Vernes' classic was produced, once again in Nassau.

Perfect location

What makes this the perfect location for shooting film underwater is the extraordinary visibility. The reef area dedicated to Hollywood, and film makers in general, is situated on the south side of the island, New Providence in the Bahamas, or Nassau, which is the more common name for the island.

The sandy bottom resting between coral heads, the water flow and the incredible reef walls ending thousands of meters deep down into the big blue is part of reason. Add to that the surrounding reef that keeps the water within calm and bam! There you have it— the formula for crystal clear water conditions and an ideal environment to capture underwater scenes.

James Bond

—the one and only

Even if *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was the very first movie with underwater scenes filmed in Nassau, the James Bond sequels really set the tone. *Dr. No* was the very first in the

The crystal clear water conditions in the area (left) makes Nassau, Bahamas, the perfect location for Hollywood

James Bond spy movie series filmed there, with Sean Connery establishing the spy character that enchanted the entire planet.

Left resting on the sandy bottom lays remains from the movies. Take the 30-meter (98-foot) long wreck the *Vulcan Bomber,* for example. It was used when James Bond headed out on his fourth mission in 1965, in the movie *The Thunderball*. When the terrible SPECTRE organization hijacks a NATO plane carrying nuclear warheads, James Bond is forced to travel to the Bahamas to deal with the situation. He ends up in an underwater battle of epic proportions. We all know the ending. As always, James Bond saves the world.

In *Never Say Never Again* (1983) an adaptation of *Thunderball*, Bond was back again. This time the epic battle took place in and around the wreck, *Tears of Allah*.

The wrecks used in the battle scenes are still there. They have seen years go by, and display no more than a thin skeleton structure, but lilac gorgonian sea fans and beautiful, colorful sponges cover them—so, who cares! Sean Connery fought for our future right here, on these wrecks. Film history was created here. One can feel it.

Other James Bond movies shot in the Bahamas were *For your Eyes Only* released in 1981 and *The World is Not Enough* released in1999.

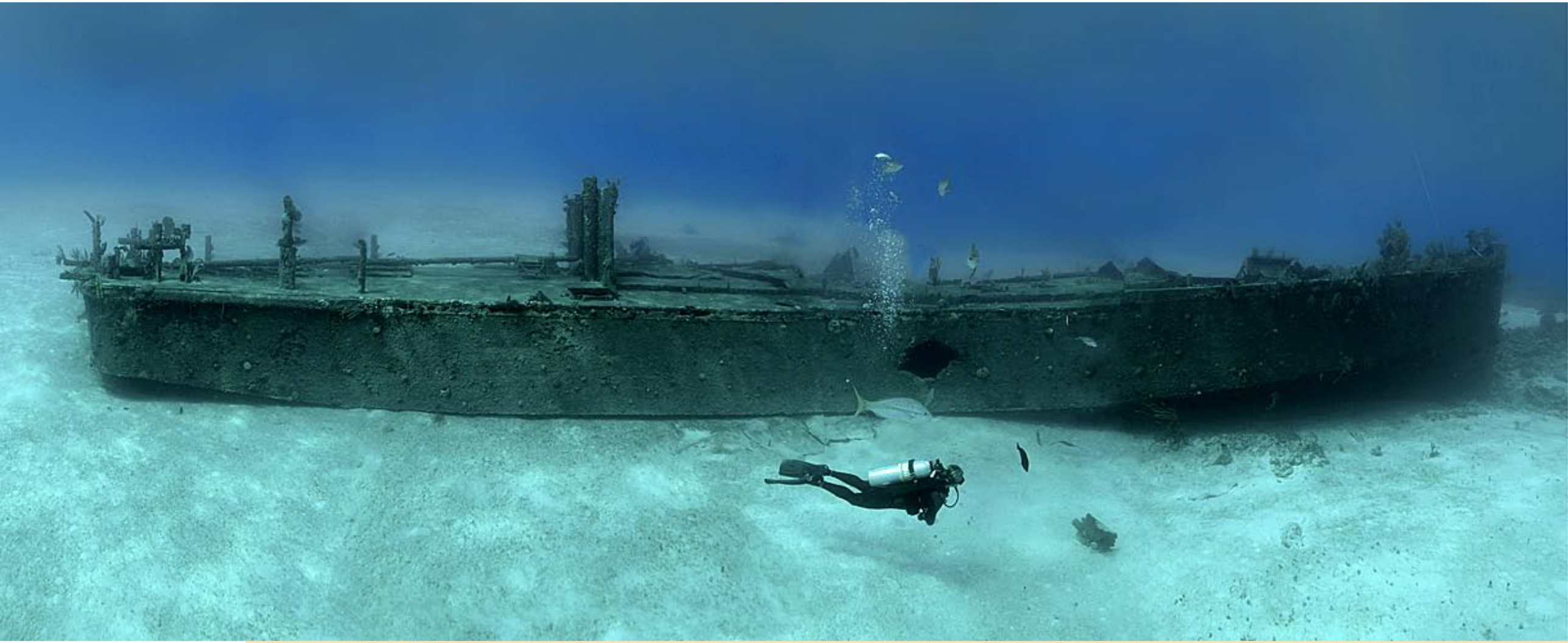
For those of you that are not turned on by James Bond, enough movies and TV shows have been taped here to make a visit worthwhile for any film enthusiast—*Splash, Cocoon, Speed 2, Spy Kids, Into the Blue, Flipper* and *Jaws IV* to mention a few. If you don't know any of these movies, just face it—you are not a film buff.

Not all sets are in bad shape. Take the Cessna that was used for the filming of *Jaws IV*, for example. It is in great shape and rests in a relatively shallow area, suitable for both diving and snorkeling.

Shark wrangling

There to help film crews over the years, and a reason why Nassau in particular has been the chosen destination for Hollywood, is the dive center, Stuart Cove's. That is not by chance alone. It all started when Stuart himself was quite young. He got a job as a shark wrangler with the James Bond movie, *Never say*

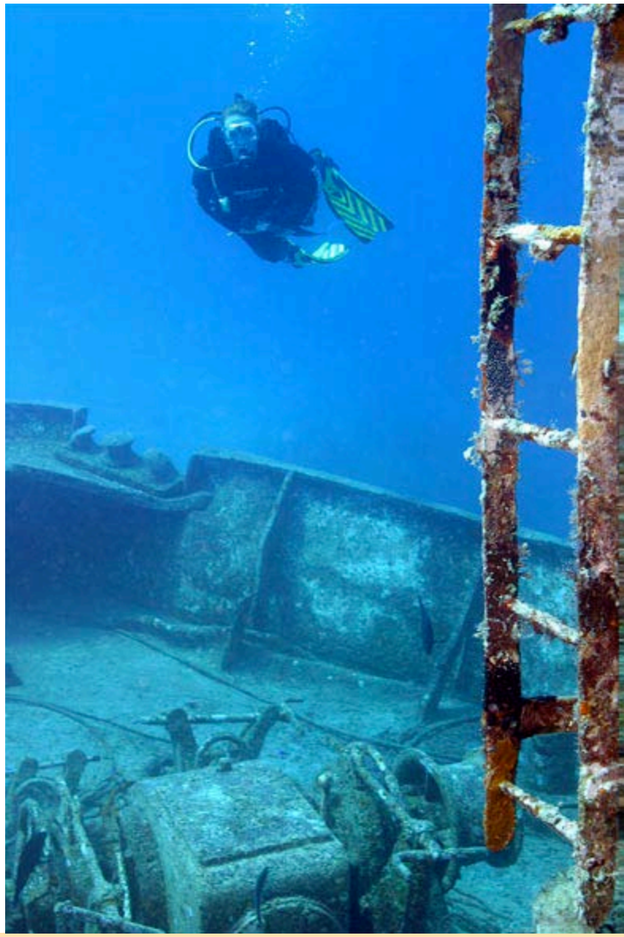
BELOW: The skeleton remains of the wreck *Tears of Allah* used in the movie *Never Say Never Again* (1983) is still a cool dive site. After all, this is where James Bond saved the world, yet again



captions this page

SHARK IMAGES THIS PAGE: Choreographing sharks is not an easy task, but a useful skill for many underwater scenes. Shark images courtesy of Stuart Cove's Fin Photo

Wrecks (left and right) create a dramatic background set for any shoot, whether it's for a film, advertising campaign or a magazine spread



Never Again—and you tell me what young guy wouldn't have jumped at that opportunity!

That was his very first taste of working with Hollywood, and from that point on, one thing led to another. For many movie scenes, attacking sharks plays an important part. Shark wranglers are rare, but Stuart Cove's Dive Center can be of service.

Popular television series get below the surface as well. It is not that unusual these days to run into film crews getting ready to shoot a scene on the dock of Stuart Cove's Dive Center.

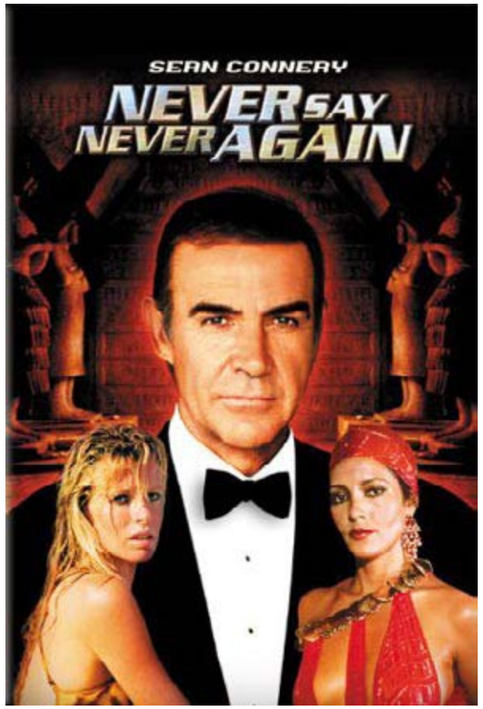
Take MythBusters, for example. They come with a mission, to confirm a myth —or not. As I visited the dive center, they were trying to figure out if it is possible to control a shark's movements with magnets. To do so, they mounted two electromagnets on each side of the nose of a shark. To get the shark to turn left or right, weak electrical pulses were sent to each respective side. In case you haven't seen the episode, the results will remain a myth—for now.

Left on the seabed stands a cage with a sign that says: "Science experiment".

Diving A-list celebs

It is said that Sean Connery learned how to scuba dive during the takes in Nassau. It is a rumor, but the fact is that he did his own stunts, so why not? He is a diver, and has been seen diving in the Bahamas may times. He is in good company.

Many A-list celebrities have been spotted bubbling around in the underwater world of Nassau, either as scuba students or dive



guests—Tom Hanks, Elijah Woods (Frodo from *Lord of The Rings*), Sandra Bullock, Sidney Poitier, Jessica Alba, the fashion icon, Heidi Klum, and another James Bond character, Pierce Brosnan, to mention a few.

Other destinations

Nassau in the Bahamas is not the only place film history has been made. The real diving film buff needs to visit Silver Springs, Florida. That's where the infamous *Creature from the Black Lagoon* was produced (1950-1960). Take a dip in that spring, if you dare! Then, there is Mexico where even though it was far away from any icebergs, *Titanic* was filmed in 1997. *Pearl Harbour* (2001) was true to its destination while filming, and why not, it's Hawaii! Plane and shipwrecks from the film were left behind. If you know about a dive site where underwater scenes are shot for feature films and television series, tell us about it. ■

INTERVIEW WITH STUART COVE'S

I had a talk with Pam Christman, manager at Stuart Cove's U.S. reservation office. She has worked with the production end of it all in film over the years.

MK: You told me the story about Stuart wrangling sharks in the Bond movie, Never Say Never Again. *That was a long time ago, but somehow you are still involved in helping with film crews. Can you tell us why they still choose Nassau for their productions?*

PC: It does help that Nassau helps in making life easy for the film crews, with permissions and other hurdles.

MK: Cutting through the red tape, basically?

PC: Yes. Film crews coming here is a big push for the local economy. They need a place to stay, they need transport, they need to eat and all that. For the diving they come to us for service.

MK: And what kind of service are we talking about?

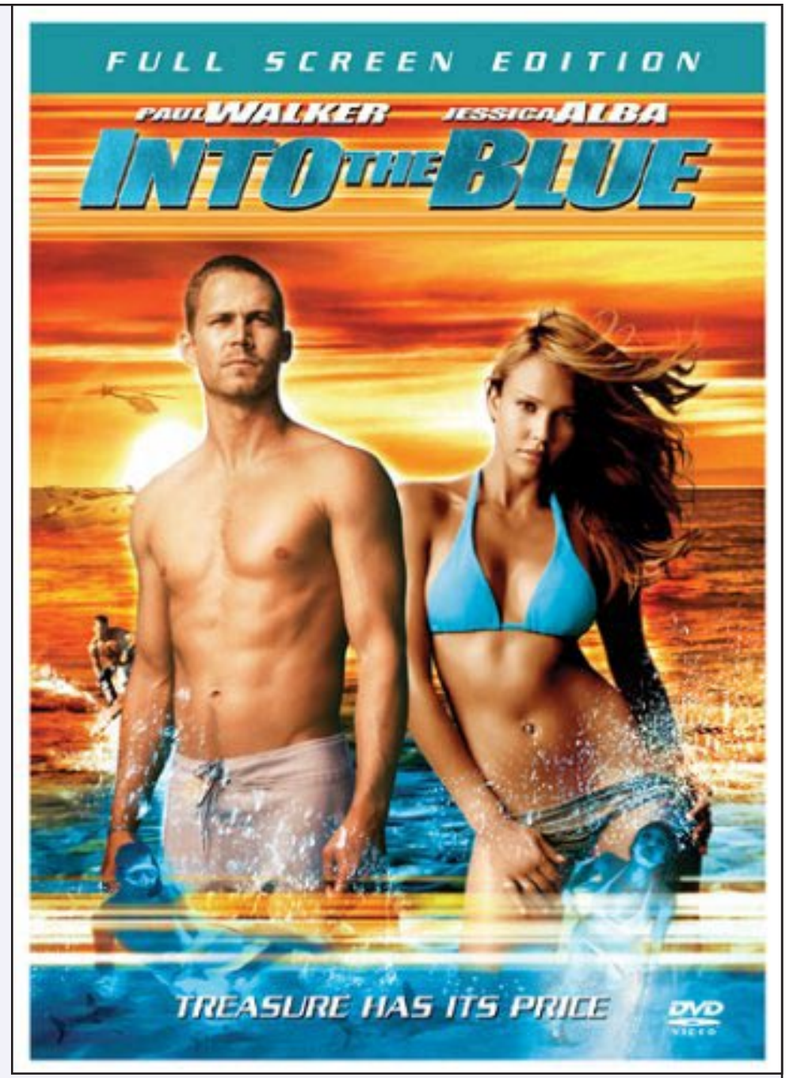
PC: They are shooting scenes at our locations, and mostly it is about logistics around the productions. We can provide underwater models, film extras and boats. Over the years, we have built up a local network of talents and contacts to be able to provide to productions coming to the island. Not too long ago, a film crew wanted a family. We provided a family. If they need a bus driver, we find them a bus driver.

MK: And what about sharks? No thrills in an underwater scene without a few sharks circling around, right?

PC: We have a select few working with sharks. We can help choreograph scenes with sharks and even though sharks are not always that co-operative, you would be amazed at how much you can actually make them do. It's all about incentive.

MK: I would like to see that! I know you are a busy dive center, with lots of divers coming your way. The filming, does it interrupt your guest divers?

PC: No, not at all. We have so many great dive sites to choose from, that is never a problem. Also 10am-2pm provides the best light for filming, which partly is lunchtime for diving guests. Mostly a production team pops in for one scene, for a movie or a TV-production. The last big motion picture that we did was *Into the Blue*. Everything was done right there.



MK: Thank you Pam, one final question— list some people who come here to film, outside Hollywood productions.

PC: *Myth Busters* have done a number of episodes here. We have 3-4 shoots per year with Discovery Channel. Then we have photo shoots for magazine layouts, advertising, billboard advertising—lots of different people coming in with different needs.

MK: Sounds exciting, Pam! Thanks.

For more information, visit www.stuartcove.com ■

IMAGES THIS PAGE COURTESY OF AMAZON.COM

Alex Vanzetti

P O R T F O L I O

THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS PAGE: Images from the *Underwater Fantasy* series by Alex Vanzetti

Vanzetti

Text by Gunild Symes
Images by Alex Vanzetti

With Valentine's Day just around the corner, images of mermaids spring to mind when thinking of romance and the sea. There are many timeless romantic stories and images of these mythical creatures in the art of cultures around the world. Surrounding the myth is the magic of the underwater realm and the connection, and even romantic entanglements, between its mystical creatures and human beings, as in Hans Christian Andersen's famous tale, *The Little Mermaid,* in which a mermaid falls in love with a sailor. We looked for modern day images of the female figure underwater and found the stunning work of fashion photographer, Alex Vanzetti, who recently received recognition for his photography at the 2010 Epson Red Sea Underwater World Shoot-Out in Eilat, Israel.

Alex Vanzetti was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, Russia, in the midst of a period of stagnation. After he graduated, he went into army service in the Russian border region along Afghanistan. After his tour of duty, he was accepted into the Physical Training Institute to study sport and excelled in boat-racing.

In 1990, Vanzetti moved to Israel with his wife and small child. He has lived in the Holy Land ever since. However, he said that he is not particular to any specific nation. "I have no favorite country, as a sailor has no favorite sea."

Artistic background

Vanzetti has dabbled in photography since childhood, he said, "composing from different chemical compounds (hydroquinone method, waterless potassium sulphite) various developers and fixing agents for my black and white pictures, which I was giving to my favorite girlfriends as presents and objects of pride, since I prepared them by myself".

He said he has admired the aesthetic image since he was a young boy, crediting much of this appreciation to the efforts of his mother to expose her young son to art and culture: "I cherish love, indelible love towards beauty, which arose when my Mom took me in my early childhood to the halls of my favorite museums—the Hermitage and the Russian Museum. When I grew older, I wandered those museums on my own, contemplating. Thus, my first pictures were born, or, more exactly, my first artistic ideas, since I never knew how to draw, but the art of painting attracted me in a strong way."

Vanzetti tried his luck in graphics and watercolor painting and hoped to practice the art of oil painting as well. Life was still very much ahead of him, he said.

"My favorite category is the depiction of people. People have always attracted me, through their psychological peculiarity, their emotions, or simply through their strange faces, as if they came from other worlds... There are not so many strange faces, and I always select them from the ordinary mass and try to convince them to let me photograph them... It is not always a success, but many portraits were created in this way," he said.

The underwater realm

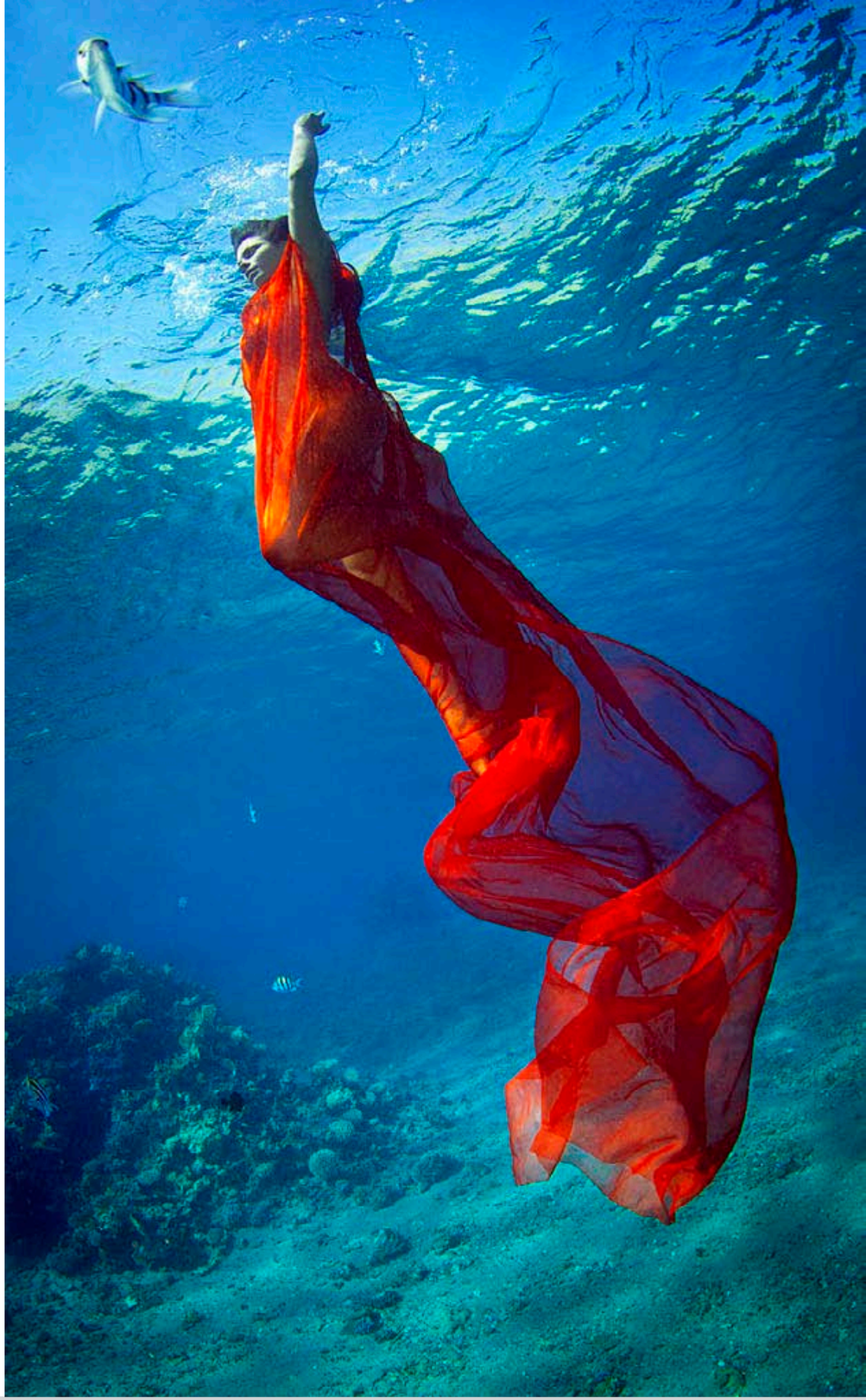
Vanzetti said that water was a special subject for him. "One day, many years ago, I paid attention to a slide I took with a medium format Pentacon Six camera [before digital was big]. It was a depiction of a girl lying on the surface of the Dead Sea, and it was odd; her reflection

Yanika Land is the model in all the images in this article

Vanzetti

LEFT: *Who Are You?* by Alex Vanzetti

RIGHT: *Dance with the Fish*, by Alex Vanzetti



was distorted in an unreal way, so that one could think about some fantastic forces contributing to the making of this picture. Yes, don't smile—it was like that when I saw it for the first time. It was the first time I paid attention to this fact. Later on, when I did serious photographic work at the Dead Sea, I looked for an explanation to this interesting phenomenon, which was obviously contrary to the laws of physics. Thanks to my pictures, I started realizing that the fundamental law of physics of "equal angles of incidence and reflection" does not always work!"

In San Francisco in 2003, he exhibited his images for the first time. He said that people did not believe him when he told them that the images were real photographs, untouched and unprocessed in Photoshop. It wasn't until he showed them a clip of his work in photography and a slide show of his other images that they were finally convinced of the authenticity of his underwater images, he said.

After the exhibition, he travelled often to observe water reservoirs similar to the Dead Sea, such as the Salton Sea in California, the Mramor Sea in Turkey, and the salt lakes of Kyrgyzstan. "I have found nothing similar to the Dead Sea... or found an answer as to how such reflections are achieved."

Artistic theory

Vanzetti has specific thoughts about how to create a good image: "In my opinion, when we photograph a nude model in a studio, we achieve only 50 percent of the harmony with all the components present. When we photograph nature without human presence, we also achieve 50 percent of the maximum perception of the picture possible. But when we connect two halves into one whole image, we achieve 100 percent of the effect. For this reason, I prefer to photograph the nude body on a natural background, surrounded by the harmony ensuing from nature."

He said that he has always been attracted to the idea of the "mirror realm" of the underwater world and that his journey into underwater photography was finally enabled by the opportunity to participate in the Epson Red Sea World

Image from the *Underwater Fantasy* series by Alex Vanzetti

Shoot-Out in 2010. He entered several works in the category of Nudes and Fashion. It was then, he said, that he was first exposed to the numerous problems involved with underwater photography of the nude.

Having worked in photography for many years with not many technical difficulties, he found that underwater photography posed new challenges. He said, "The technique of underwater photography implies good command of many aspects of underwater technique in general. The results of which are presented to your attention."

Working as an artist

Vanzetti said that he considers himself a lucky person. "I work in the field of my dreams, and I have come a long way towards achieving this objective—deriving my sustenance from my creative work. Many people can only dream about that," he said.

Because he derives a proper livelihood from his artistic work, he has the possibility of investing money in future creative projects, and he has a lot of them, he said.

"My immediate project is the publication of a big book (a coffee table book) with pictures from Africa, Asia and the Middle East," he said. It is the production of a large project connected to his recent work in underwater photography and the publication of his other coffee table book of photography entitled, *Beautiful World Around.*

As for models for his photography, he said that they find him now, which was not quite the case in the early years. "In the beginning, when I worked at the Dead Sea as a life guard, I found my models after getting acquainted with them and offering them a chance to participate in a certain project. Now everything is much easier. They find me, they know my work, and I do not

suffer from the lack of models," he said.

A note on exhibitions

Vanzetti said that he's not too much into exhibitions. He feels that this venue is not profitable or advantageous and does not aspire to showcase his talents in the way that many other photographers do in solo exhibitions of their work. He said that many of his photographs are bought at auctions by private collectors, "They pay good money, according to the modern standards." However, in the start of the new millennium, his works were shown in galleries on the west coast of the United States in San-Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. He later stopped traveling there.

Vanzetti said that these days, the most effective exposure of his images is not through exhibitions, with the exception of joint exhibitions on the international level, but via the Internet on his own website. He gets much more traffic and visibility this way, he said. The amount of people that visit his website to see his work cannot be compared to that of exhibitions, magazines and newspapers, he said. "My popularity grows when my pictures are recognized everywhere, through their style, the manner of conveying the material, etc," he said—this, without particularly participating in lots of public advertising campaigns.

For more information or to order prints, email: ***vanzetti_studio@yahoo.com.au*** *or write: Alex Vanzetti, P.O.Box 954, 80700 Arad, Israel* ■

THIS PAGE: Images from the *Underwater Fantasy* series by Alex Vanzetti

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