

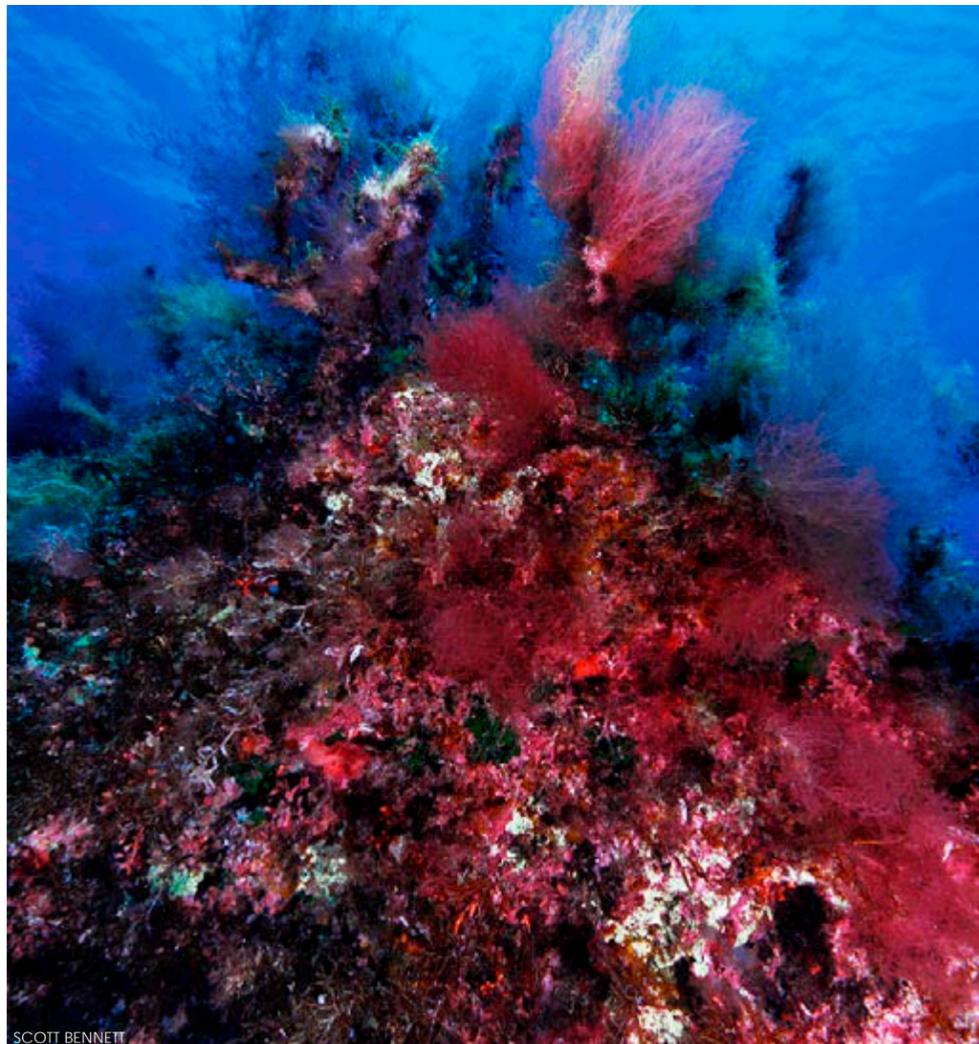


Malta's **GOZO Island**

— *Ancient Oasis of the Mediterranean*

Text by Scott Bennett. Photos by
Scott Bennett, Peter Symes & Gunild Symes

"Somehow, I can't imagine lawnmowers being a high selling item here," was one of my first thoughts while traversing the Maltese countryside. Dry and stark, the rocky landscape couldn't be more different than the soft green of Denmark we had left behind a mere four hours earlier. However, it was instantly appealing and quite unlike anything I had seen before. In every direction, the sense of history was palpable. Age-old walls of stone criss-crossed the hills while the limestone buildings appeared to meld with the landscape instead of being separate from it. The rays of the setting sun burnished the entire scene radiant orange, creating a timeless scene like something out of North Africa or the Middle East. I immediately knew a remarkable week was in store. And there was going to be diving, too!



SCOTT BENNETT



SCOTT BENNETT



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Azure Window is Gozo's most photographed natural attraction; A five-spotted wrasse peers from an eelgrass cluster in Xlendi Bay; Comino Island's colourful reef. PREVIOUS PAGE: Underwater photographer at a richly decorated wall of the dive site, Inland Sea

To be honest, Malta as a holiday destination, let alone a diving one, had never even crossed my mind. However, when X-RAY MAG's very own Peter and Gunild Symes announced a weeklong dive trip and asked me along, I was immediately intrigued. Having never visited Europe outside of the United Kingdom and eager to experience something new, I agreed in a heartbeat. Besides, who in their right mind could refuse the Mediterranean? In the end, Malta proved to be one of the

most pleasant and unexpected travel experiences that I've ever had.

Comprised of the primary islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, the Maltese Archipelago is located in the Mediterranean 93km south of Sicily and 288km north of Africa. Occupying a strategic position on the trading route between Europe and Africa. Malta has been conquered and occupied by numerous civilizations during its 7,000-year history, from Bronze Age Neolithic peoples



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Panoramic view of Xlendi Bay from the St. Patrick's Hotel's rooftop patio; Xlendi Bay's scenic walkway at sunset; Happy cappuccino and biscotti at the Xlendi Bay promenade

us to one of the furthest outposts of the European Union. My guidebook certainly wasn't kidding; Malta *is* small. While descending for the final approach, I could easily discern the entire archipelago from my window without even craning my neck.

From the airport, it was then an hour transfer by road to the ferry terminal at Cirkkenwa where we boarded an inter-island ferry to Gozo. Our home for the week was the St. Patrick's Hotel, located in the small resort town of Xlendi. By the time we checked in and had a change of clothes, it was already 9:30pm. I initially thought we were out of luck dinner-wise, but this was Europe. Unlike at home in Toronto, dinner hours hold no bounds and all the restaurants were open. Not surprisingly, Maltese cuisine has a definite Italian influence, a result of its close proximity to Sicily. After a delectable meal of seafood marinara and Gozo wine, the 'Med' had officially won me over!

Still on Canadian time, I arose early the next morning and went up to the hotel's rooftop patio to get my bearings. The view was spectacular!

Occupying a magnificent position at the end of a long, narrow bay hemmed in by imposing limestone cliffs, Xlendi passed the Three Bears test: not too big, not too small. Just right!

After breakfast and a much-needed jolt of cappuccino, we headed over to the St. Andrews Dive Centre to sort out our gear. The shop was already a hive of activity, with a multitude of people readying themselves for the morning dive. On hand to meet us was manager Mark Busuttil, who quickly gave us the rundown on our week's activities. As we had arrived so late the previous evening, none of our camera gear was ready, so we opted out of the morning dive. I think Mark was somewhat relieved!

Diving

When I discovered we would only be doing two dives a day, I was initially disappointed. However, Gozo soon proved to be a dive destination unlike any I'd experienced before; part of the adventure was just getting to the dive sites! While a number of

the island's 54 sites can be reached by boat, the majority are shore dives accessible by road. With up to ten divers or more per trip requiring several vehicles for transport, some serious co-ordination is required. Fortunately, the island's compact size ensures dive sites are never more than a 20-minute drive or boat ride away.

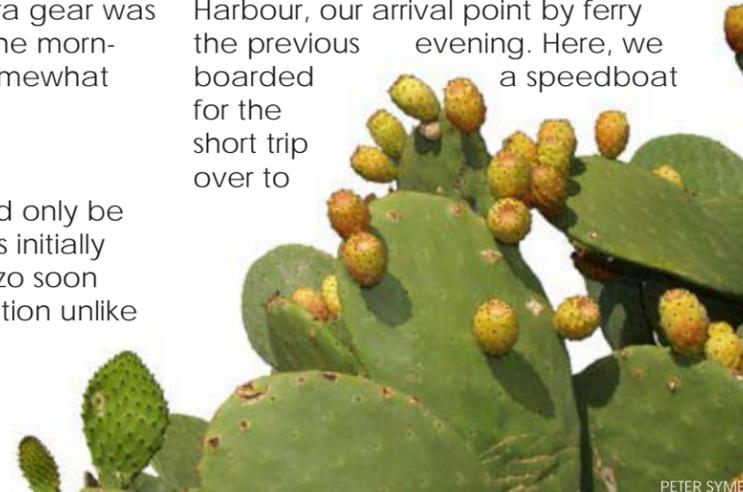
As the effects of recent unsettled weather were still hampering conditions, Mark decided our afternoon dive would be at neighbouring Comino Island. Piling into Mark's car, we then headed to the marina at Mgarr Harbour, our arrival point by ferry the previous evening. Here, we boarded a speedboat for the short trip over to



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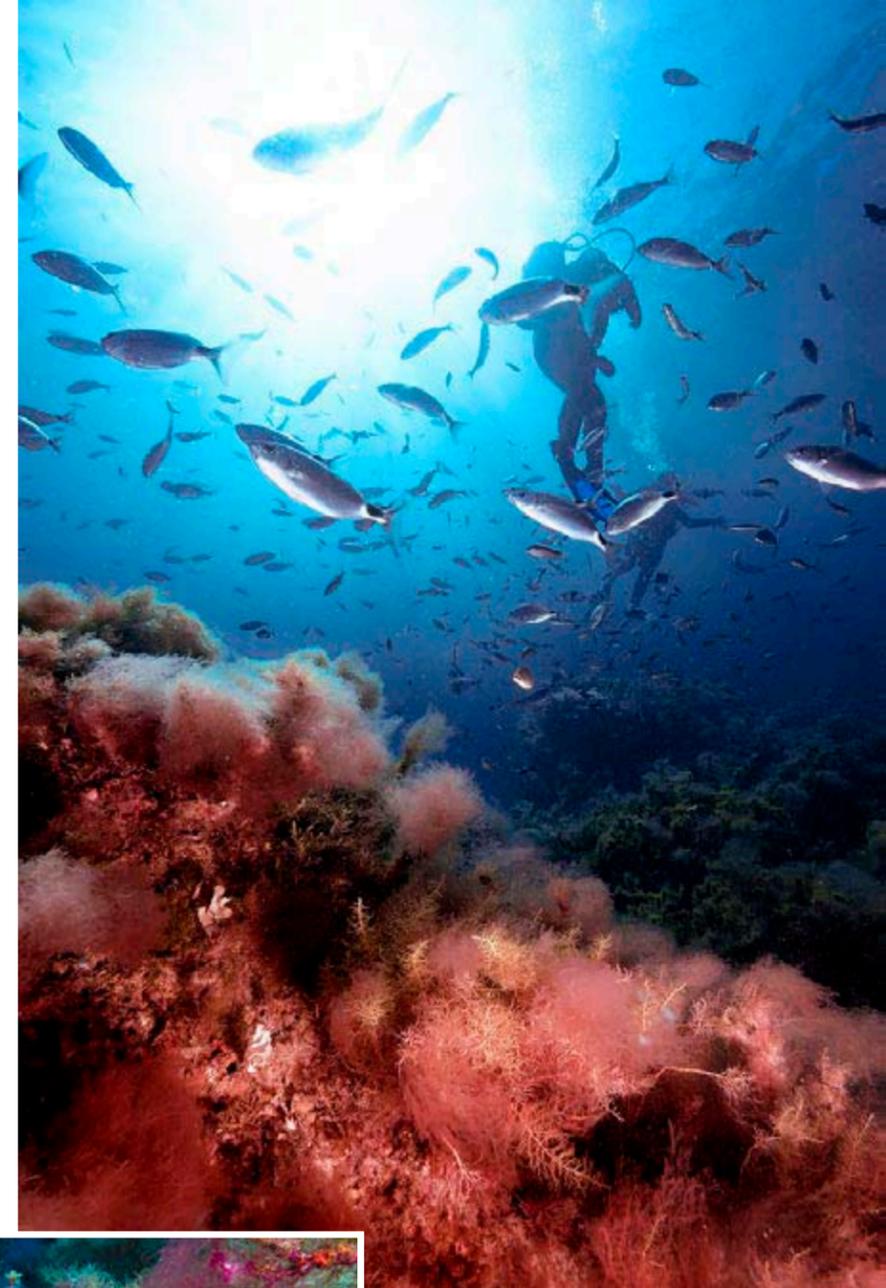
Malta's Gozo

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Reef scene at Comino Island; Dino (inset), our affable dive guide; Comino Island's Blue Lagoon is a favourite destination for day-trippers; Eager for a handout, swarms of fish engulf divers outside the Comino Caves; A mosaic of pastel-hued algae at Comino Island; The network of caves at Comino Island make for a fascinating dive. All images this page by Scott Bennett



entered a large cave at 16m and ascended a chimney through the limestone plateau. Fortunately, the

prospects dicey, but we loaded our gear in a battered land rover, which soon proved to be the Maltese equivalent of the Energizer Bunny.



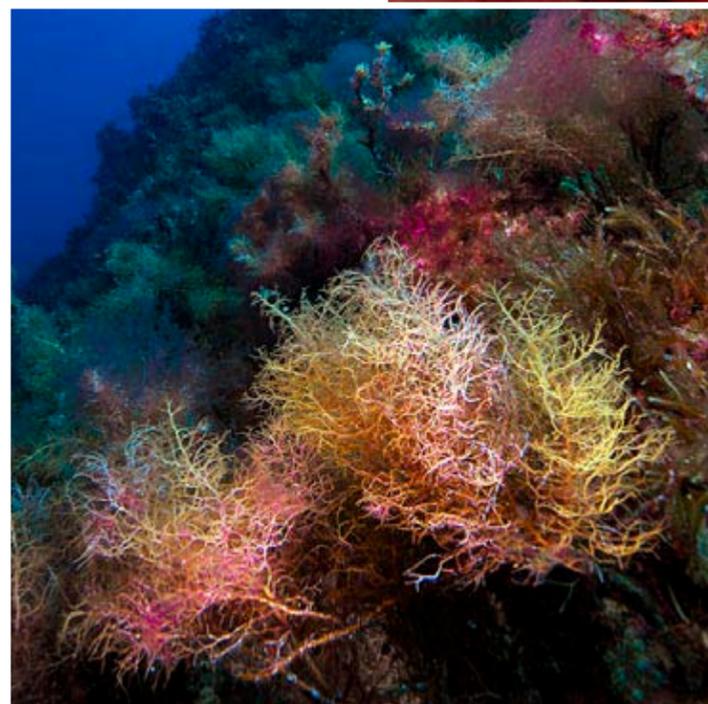
(L-Irqieqa), situated off the island's southwest corner. From the anchor

tunnel was wide enough for divers to maneuver without touching the sides. I was already eager for more!

Back in Xlendi, we met up had a pre-sunset walk down the narrow path leading to the old watchtower guarding the bay's entrance. The light was superb, with a multitude of photo ops at each and every turn. We didn't make it all the way to the tower, but the sunset was truly spectacular, igniting the clouds and rugged cliffs with glorious colour.

The following morning at the dive centre, Mark introduced us introduced Dino, who was to be our guide and driver for the remainder of the week. An affable Chilean boasting a broad smile and flowing silvery hair, he suggested the Blue Hole for day's first dive site. Menacing overcast skies made

point, we descended to a low rocky shelf at 6m. Happily, my 2mm suit was more than comfortable in the 25-degree water. I was immediately struck by the reef's appearance, which was quite different than anything I'd seen in the tropics. Stubby corals and lush green vegetation carpeted the slopes, resembling grassy terrestrial hills. Mirroring the rugged coastline above, a series of imposing boulders have created a network of huge caverns and swim throughs made for a contorted albeit fascinating dive. Near the end, we



Dwejra Point

Situated on Dwejra Point a 15-minute drive from Xlendi, Gozo's most popular dive site features a circular formation of limestone creating a large, clear rock pool. Dominating the proceedings is the Azure Window, a colossal natural arch that is one of Malta's most photographed natural attractions.

Upon arrival, we immediately headed over to a vantage point to judge the situation. Alas, the Blue Hole looked like a jacuzzi, with relentless waves spilling



Comino. By the time everyone was geared up and aboard, I could see why there were only two dives a day.

Wedged between Malta and Gozo, tiny Comino Island boasts a permanent population of four. Ringed by cliffs, it is home to the dazzling Blue Lagoon, where a combination of powder-white sand and clear water combines to give the appearance of an immense swimming pool.

Lantern Point

Our destination was Lantern Point



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A delicate flabellina nudibranch (left) provides a splash of colour at the Karwela wreck; Beaded fireworms are routinely encountered at Gozo dive sites (above); A tiny cuttlefish (right)

over the narrow isthmus of rock separating it from the adjacent ocean. A few hardy Russian divers braved the churning waters, while a nearby fisherman sat oblivious to the entire scenario. As we had cameras, Dino recommended giving it a miss. Disappointed, we hopped aboard the land rover and returned to Xlendi. Back in town, we discovered conditions were rough pretty much everywhere, so we decided on the sheltered waters of Xlendi Bay.

Xlendi Bay

After gearing up, we walked along the promenade to our entry point, a small ladder bolted to the rock face. Although the surface was calm, the visibility was limited to only a few metres. I was already kicking myself that I had brought wideangle instead of macro. Despite losing Dino for a short time, we managed to stick together as we kept

our eyes peeled for critters. We managed to locate some interesting scorpionfish, including a particularly photogenic orange specimen. Curse you, wideangle lens! However, the reef's most conspicuous residents were beaded fireworms. Boasting slate blue bodies accented by a multitude of puffy white hairs, some specimens were nearly a third of a metre in length.

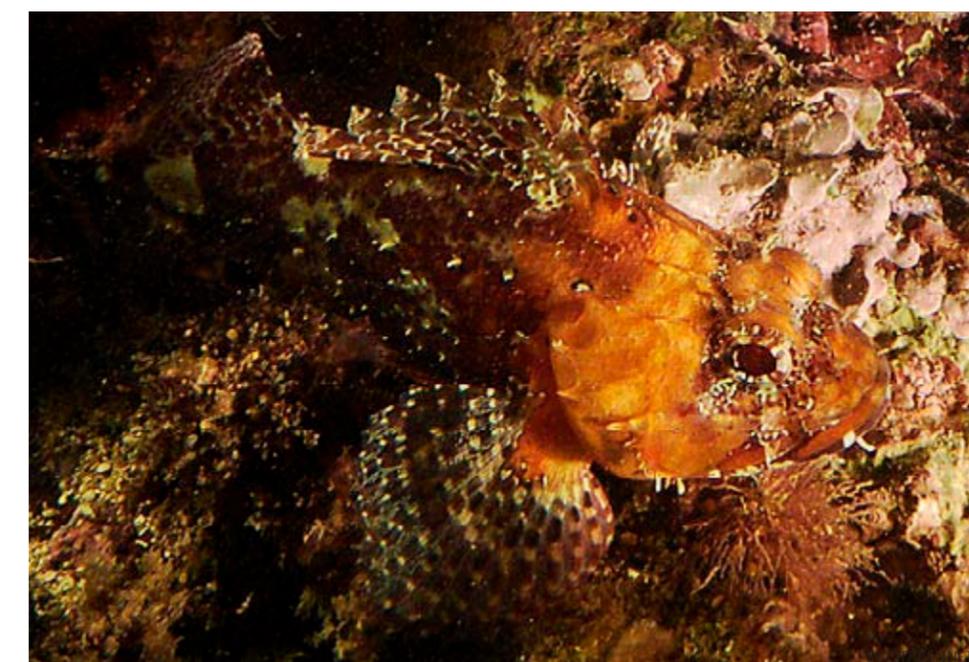
Back at the dive centre, Mark told of one hapless Swedish diver who was so captivated by the 'pretty worms' that he placed one on his forearm for a photo. The following day it had ballooned to Popeye the Sailor proportions and required serious medical attention. So remember folks, look but don't touch!

Glancing at my watch, I discovered there was only a half hour before the next dive. I hurried over to a nearby sandwich shop to buy us some lunch. Still clad in my dripping wetsuit, no one even batted an eye.



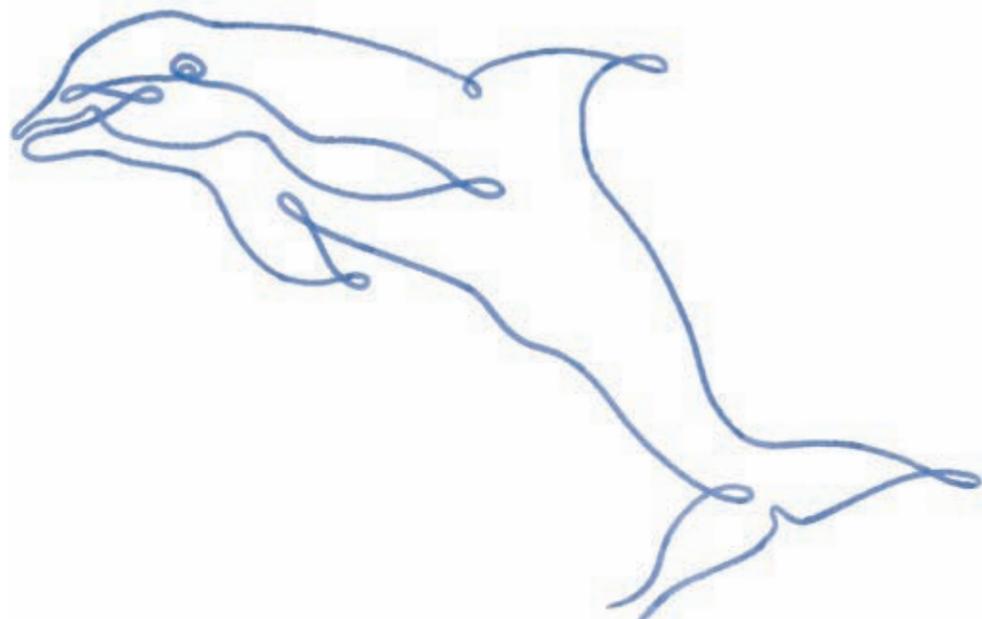
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Accessing the Blue Hole requires an arduous trek over slippery jagged rocks (above) A scorpionfish rests underneath a large boulder near Xlendi Bay (far left)





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THIS PAGE: Resting on the sandy bottom near the Cirkkenwa ferry terminal, the Rozi is a magnet for fish and divers alike. All images this page by Scott Bennett

Rose Wreck

After inhaling our curry wraps, we were back in the land rover heading for Mgarr harbour. This time our destination was the Rose Wreck across the channel just off Malta. I couldn't help but notice how much faster the speedboat was than the ferry. Situated near the Cirkkenwa ferry terminal, the wreck is a tugboat sunk in



Malta's Gozo

1992 as an attraction for tourists on submarine tours. Although the tours have long-ceased, it is now a popular dive site.

Entering the water via giant stride, I was instantly struck by the visibility. Easily 30+ m, it was a world away from the murky waters of Xlendi Bay, with vivid blue water right out of the tropics. Sitting upright on a broad expanse of sand at 30m, it had already been colonized by colourful marine growth. A magnet for fish including chromis, bream and sand smelt, the vessel was quite photogenic,

and I could have easily spent an additional half hour photographing. However, my computer had other ideas and we soon had to ascend to shallower water. Enroute to our safety stop, we passed through a sizeable underwater arch. As impressive as it was, I would later discover it to be the smaller sibling of a much larger relative. Back on the boat, Dino nonchalantly informed us the visibility was merely average that day, as it sometimes extends to up to 50m.

The next morning, we decided to give the





Blue Hole another try. Unfortunately, conditions remained maddeningly uncooperative, so Dino suggested the nearby Inland Sea.

Inland Sea

Created millions of years ago when an immense limestone cavern collapsed, the shallow lagoon is linked to the sea via a 100m long tunnel through a nearby cliff. After gearing up by the land rover,

we strolled over to the jetty, which was already chock-a-block with divers. Sliding into waist-deep water, Dino remarked that it was to be the easiest of the week's shore dives, a comment that bore decidedly ominous overtones.

Finning to the entrance, an immediate descent proved necessary to avoid the relentless stream of tour boat traffic. Upon



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A juvenile Portuguese man-o-war stands out from the vivid blue waters of Crocodile Rock; Divers congregate at the Inland Sea's entry point; The sheer drop offs of Crocodile Rock cascade to the depths below; The reef top at Crocodile Rock. All images this page by Scott Bennett

entering, we were greeted with an amazing sight. Dwarfed by the sheer immensity of the tunnel, a procession of divers passed, silhouetted by a narrow ribbon of blue leading to the exit beyond. At a depth of 18m, there was certainly no danger of colliding with anyone in here.

Continuing onwards, we entered the open ocean, with visibility easily reaching 30m. To the right and left, vertical fissures scarred the cliff face, while lush green growth and sponges shrouded the walls. During calm conditions, it's possible to

swim all the way to the Blue Hole.

Back in Xlendi, we were happy to discover the speedboat anchored near the dive shop. With 90 minutes to spare before our next dive, we had time for a leisurely lunch.

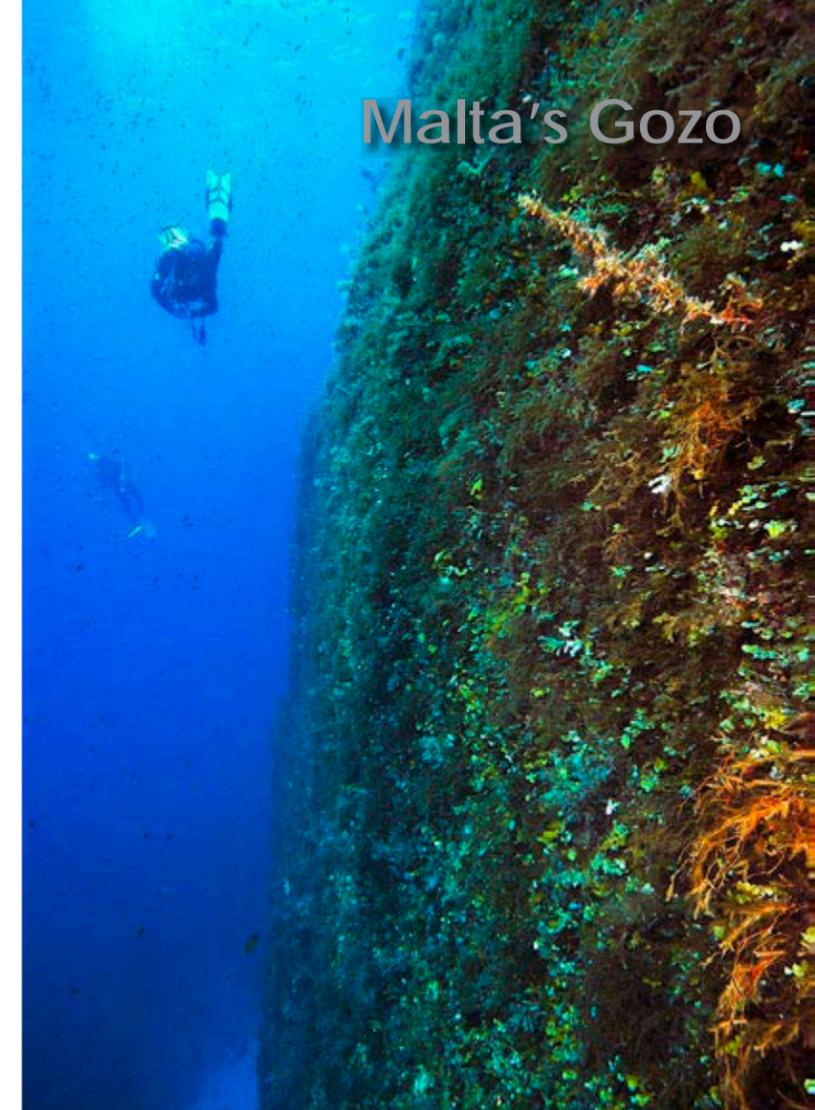
Grabbing our housings, we wandered over to the promenade and procured our usual seats at the St. Patrick's outdoor patio. Another day, another sumptuous pasta dish. The hardest part was fighting off the temptation of a glass of wine.

Crocodile Rock

After lunch, it was a full boat as we headed for Crocodile Rock, positioned offshore near Dwejra Point and the rather unglamorously named Fungus Rock. Passing alongside the towering limestone cliffs, the sea route was decidedly more scenic, not to mention expeditious!

We soon discovered it wasn't one of those fancifully named locations where one has to strain their imagination. It REALLY

does resemble a crocodile's head! From the anchor point on the reef top, we descended to a rock platform at 7m. Following the reef to the rock's southern edge revealed a sheer-sided natural amphitheatre plummeting to the depths. We also had company; swimming in the blue was an impressive school of Mediterranean barracuda. Unfazed by our presence, they tolerated a close approach, allowing for endless photo opportunities. Continuing our circumnavigation, the vertiginous walls coupled with the 30m + visibility made for a truly spectacular dive. Immense undersea formations towered above distant divers as sea bream; rainbow wrasse and parrotfish flitted past. Enroute, we chanced across a diminutive jellyfish, pulsating white against the vivid blue. We later discovered it to be a juvenile Portuguese man-o-war, making me grateful I didn't get too close.



Malta's Gozo





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Victoria

For a change of pace, we all decided to head into Victoria for the evening. Gozo's principal town, it was originally known as Rabat before being renamed in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. However, many locals still refer to it by its old name, which translates as "superb" in Arabic and archaic Maltese. Even with the main road linking Xlendi and Victoria closed due to resurfacing, the detour took all of 12 minutes to get to the bus terminal near the main square. Getting around was quite simple, as all signs were in English.

The town's dominating feature is Il Kastell (The Citadel), dramatically positioned on a hill overlooking the town. Before heading up to we made quick stop to photograph St. Francis Church located on the Pjazza San Franġisk. Dedicated in 1906, the church was stunning, bathed in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. Despite being armed with a guidebook and map, it didn't take long for us to get pleasantly lost amidst the tangle of narrow streets. At every step, honey-coloured houses adorned with an intriguing medley of ornate covered balconies beckoned for photos. Maltese houses all have names, ranging from the traditional (Maria), to

the somewhat non-traditional (Hakuna Matata).

After a few more wrong turns, we finally discovered the road ascending the hill to the citadel's entrance. Compact and picturesque, it was originally constructed by the Arabs and hosts a cathedral and several museums. Just within the main gate lay the 17th-century baroque Cathedral of the Assumption whose imposing façade was infuriatingly obscured with scaffolding. It is famous for the remarkable trompe l'oeil painting on its ceiling, which depicts the interior of a dome that was never built due to a lack of funds. A walk around the bastions offered stunning panoramas of the entire island, with the Mediterranean visible in each direction.

With feet and cameras exhausted, we decided to stay for dinner before heading back to Xlendi. There was no shortage of restaurants and we soon settled on It-Tokk (Meeting Place), overlooking Victoria's main square, the Pjazza Indipendenza. From our table on the second story outdoor patio, we were spoiled with stunning views of the now-floodlit citadel. I couldn't resist getting out my camera for one last photo.



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Victoria's dramatic citadel of Il Kastell as seen from the road to Xlendi Bay; A typical narrow winding walkway found in the quaint inner streets of Victoria; St. Francis Church in Victoria; Homes are given names such as Maria, the patron saint chosen for this abode; Il Kastell's ramparts command spectacular views of the Gozo countryside; Mopeds are common in the quiet narrow alleys of the town



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Third time's the charm

With our remaining diving days limited, we set out once again the next morning to try our luck at the Blue Hole. Arriving early to beat the morning rush, the third time proved a charm, as sea conditions were perfect. However, just getting to

the pool proved to be an adventure. After traversing a flat shelf of rock and descending some metal stairs, the going got rougher. Clambering over a multitude of wet, jagged rocks through a cleft in the limestone, I didn't wish to contemplate the results of a misplaced

foot. Finally reaching the pool, we descended 8m to an archway mirroring the Azure Window above. The actual size was difficult to comprehend until a group of divers passed directly beneath it. The scale was simply jaw dropping. Dino then



led us to a massive undersea cave. Entering the interior, we descended to 21m, where our torches startled a pair of hefty groupers resting on the flat, sandy bottom. Annoyed by the intrusion, they made a hasty retreat to the safety of the dark interior. Our 50-minute dive simply wasn't long enough.

Comino Caves

The afternoon saw a repeat visit to Comino. At the north side of the island Comino Caves consists of a large system of caves and tunnels extending in excess of 30m through the limestone headland. With a maximum depth of 11m and no noticeable current, the dive was quite leisurely. It also proved to be the week's 'fishiest' site with legions of saddled bream, two-banded bream and damselfish approaching divers for a handout. Entering a large cave entrance, torch beams revealed walls shrouded with a mosaic of pastel-hued sponges, corals and algae. A number of the passages were a bit on the tight side, but we all managed to squeeze through without any difficulty. However, a few errant fins resulted in a snowstorm of

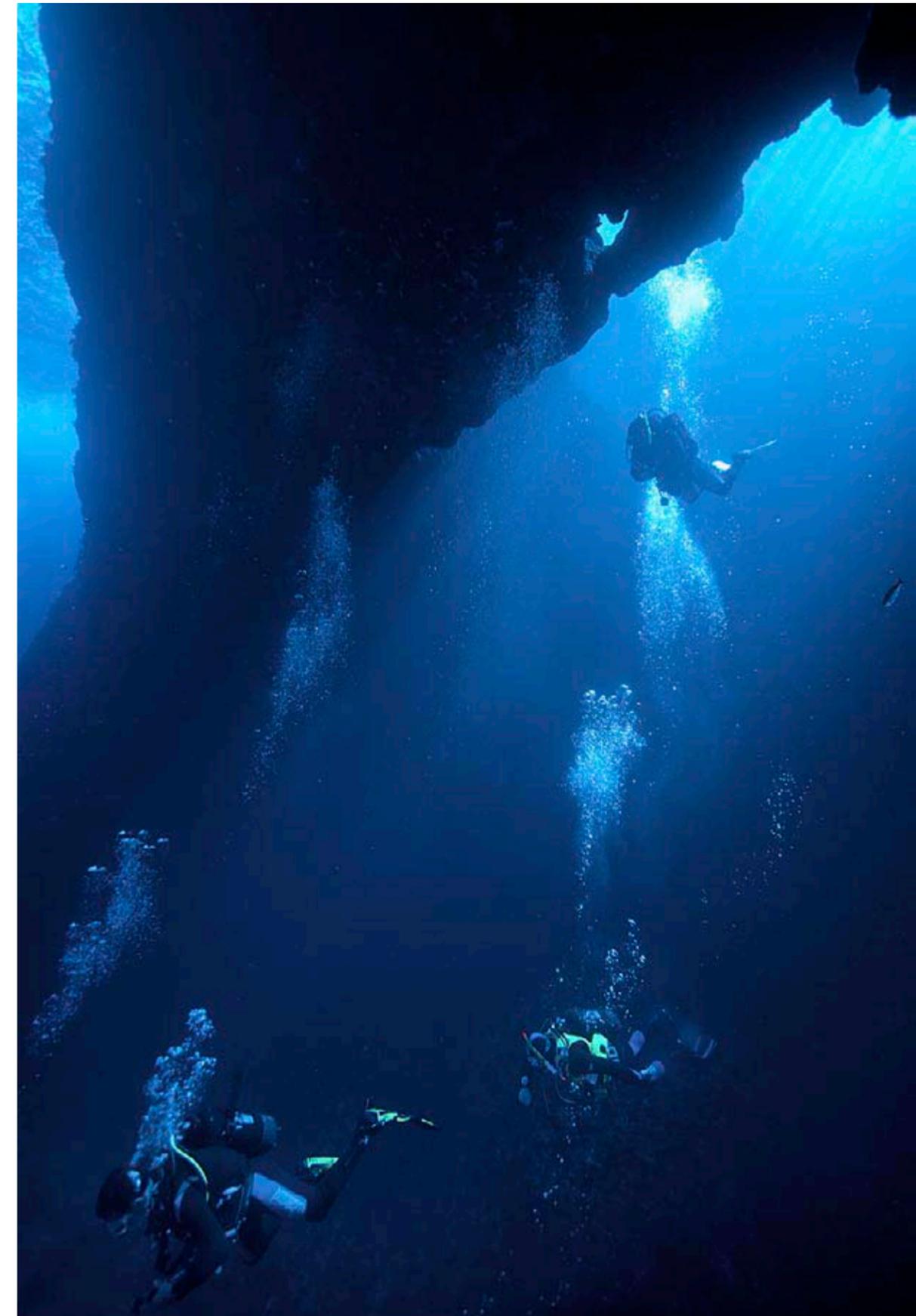


fragmented algae.

After the dive, Mark dropped us off for a shore excursion. The beach was quite possibly the smallest I have ever seen. Crammed full of sunburned holidaymakers in beach chairs, I was reminded of an overcrowded penguin rookery. Wading through throngs of tourists, we followed a trail along the rocky hillside. The air was

LEFT TO RIGHT: Cave entrance on Comino Island; Mediterranean barracuda cruise the blue at Crocodile Rock; The Blue Hole's incredible undersea arch towers over passing divers. All images this page by Scott Bennett

Malta's Gozo



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redolent with a familiar aroma that I later discovered to be wild thyme. A high vantage point offered a spectacular panorama of the entire lagoon and tiny Cominotto Island, with the northern coast of Malta visible in the distance. Dominating the horizon was the Comino tower, a fortress erected by the Knights of St. John in the 17th century as part of an early warning system to protect the area from marauding corsairs, pirates and Turks. It obviously had no effect on ice cream trucks,

which had somehow colonized the car-free island.

Topside excursions

The next day, we decided to take a break from diving to experience some of Gozo's land-based attractions. Our first stop was the extraordinary temple complex of Ggantija situated outside the village of Xaghra.

Ggantija

Translated as "Giant's Grotto",

Ggantija's two temples are the largest and most complete of Malta's megalithic shrines. One of them, estimated to have been constructed between 3600 and 3000 BC, is the oldest stone structure in the world, predating the Great Pyramids of Egypt by hundreds of years. According to legend, the temple walls were built in one day and one night by a female giant named Sunsuna, who accomplished the feat while nursing a baby.

A place of pilgrimage for Malta's ancient inhabitants, archaeologists believe the temples were dedicated to the Great Earth Mother, a goddess of fertility. Characterized by round, curved architecture, the two shrines suggest the body of the Earth Mother, with broad hips and full breasts. It is still a mystery as to how the island's ancient inhabitants were able to hoist such massive stones, with some weighing in at more than 1000kg.

Salt Pans

Afterwards, we headed to the island's north coast towards the resort town of Marsalforn. Along the way, we stopped at an overlook to admire picturesque Ramla Bay with its sandy beach, a rarity on Gozo's

rugged coastline. Just outside of town along Xwieni Bay, the peculiar natural formation of Il-Qolla l-Bajda (white hill) overlooked a man-made one; an intricate patchwork of salt pans hewn into the rugged coastline.

Produced only during the summer months, sea salt production has a long tradition in Gozo. The first step is the easy part, with rough weather flooding the pans with seawater. Once sizzled dry by the sun, the residual salt crystals are then harvested utilizing backbreaking manual labour carried out in the scorching heat.

Ta'Mena

The morning's most pleasant surprise was a visit to the Ta' Mena Estate. Situated in the Marsalforn Valley between Victoria and Marsalforn Bay, Ta' Mena is Gozo's first agritourism development. Upon arrival, we met owner Joseph Spiteri who showed us around the property. The estate includes a fruit garden, olive grove with about 1,500 olive trees, over ten hectares of vineyards and a state of the art winery. The diverse assortment of produce ranges from Mediterranean herbs such as thyme and rosemary to olives, lemons, oranges, pomegranates, strawber-



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Gozo's ancient temple complex of Ggantija predates the Great Pyramids of Egypt by hundreds of years; Olive trees; An intricate patchwork of salt pans is hewn into the rugged coastline near the resort town of Marsalforn; Ramla Bay features an expansive sandy beach, a rarity on Gozo's rugged coastline



ries, tomatoes and watermelons.

Joe explained that the property was unique in Gozo, offering accommodation for those wanting to take part in agricultural experiences such as fruit picking, grape and olive harvesting, winemaking and olive-oil pressing. Just procuring the land has been a major undertaking, with ownership of the surrounding countryside being passed down by a number of families through many generations. With the advent of immigration, purchasing up the property has required a

worldwide search that took a number of years to complete.

After our tour, we all sat down to a delicious buffet-style lunch prepared by Joe's wife and daughter, with the majority of the ingredients

coming right from the property. Especially delectable was an appetizer of fresh bread called hobz slathered with sun-dried tomato paste and a drizzle of olive oil. Much thicker than the usual tomato paste with a more intense flavour, I never would have imagined it as spread for bread. I was so smitten that I purchased a hefty jar to bring home.

Along with more standard Maltese fare such as salami, salad and eggplant, the most unusual dish was salad of mint, watermelon and gbejniet, unpasteurized goat's milk cheese flavoured with salt and crushed black

peppercorns. I never imagined such disparate ingredients would meld so superbly!

Afterwards, Joe also showed us the proper (and highly complex) procedure to peel and open a pomegranate. If a test had been required afterwards, I would have no doubt failed miserably.

During the meal, we had the opportunity to sample a splendid selection of Gozo wine including red, white and rose. We even sampled one of Joe's specialties, liquor prepared from the fruit of the prickly pear cactus. The latter proved especially dangerous, and we were all grateful our tour was finished after lunch. It was hard to believe we could fit so much into half a day.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The vineyards at Ta' Mena Estate; The owner, Joe Spiteri, demonstrates how to peel a pomegranate (inset); Delicious Ta' Mena lunch with fresh produce; Olives and olive oil of Ta' Mena



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Despite being sunk only recently, growth has already started to colonize the vessel; Dive guide Dino poses in the wheelhouse of the *Karwela*; Peter photographs a flabellina nudibranch perched on a mast; Resting at 35m, the *Karwela* is a former passenger ferry sunk to create an artificial reef. All image this page by Scott Bennett

headed down a bone-jarring track that would have mortally wounded the suspension of an average vehicle. The views were dramatic, offering uninterrupted views of farmland sloping to the rugged shoreline below. Our land rover took it all in stride and Dino expertly delivered us to the parking lot without incident.

lying upside down between 35 and 40m. "They're all heading there just because it's deeper," mused Dino. To avoid the impending undersea bottleneck, he suggested the nearby *MV Karwela* instead. We certainly started the day with a healthy dose of exercise, as it was a bit of a hike to the entry point. After descending steps hewn into the rock, we traversed a series of rock slabs that fortunately lacked the Blue Hole's jagged entry. As we were going to gear up at the water's edge, several trips were necessary to haul everything

down. By this point, the Germans were already enroute to the *Xlendi* so we headed straight for the *Karwela*. Within five minutes of descending the slope, the vessel's dim silhouette broke through the gloom. The *Karwela* is a 50m long passenger ferry sunk in 2006 to create an artificial reef. Not quite as deep as the *Xlendi*,

she rests upright a depth of 35m. Although barren in the growth department, it was nonetheless a fascinating dive. It's also possible to enter the wheelhouse, which

Dino did to pose for a photo. Peter also discovered the week's first nudibranch, a beautiful pink flabellina (which I unfortunately missed). Due to the depth, I hung

More diving

For our final day of diving, Dino recommended another wreck dive. We then loaded our gear in the land rover for one final time and set out. Turning off the immaculate main round, we

MV Xlendi & MV Karwela
We arrived to discover a sizeable contingent of Germans already gearing up. Their destination turned out to be the *MV Xlendi* a purposely-sunk passenger ferry



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Steeped in history, the intricate tangle of Mdina's streets is a pleasure to explore (left); The Strand at Silema (above) provides fantastic sunset views of neighbouring Valletta



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With Mdina's citadel a popular film location, costumed extras are a common sight

around the upper portions of the deck towards the bow. I later discovered that we missed a unique sight; an old VW Beetle had later been sunk on the vessel's rear deck.

With the spectre of deco looming, we reluctantly ascended the nearby slope to shallower waters. Healthy meadows of eelgrass hosted abundant populations of fish. On the seabed, small ridges of overhanging rock proved to be a popular hangout for an array of critters, including red scorpionfish, flatworms, octopus and even a tiny cuttlefish.

Malta

After a wonderful six days of diving, it was finally it was time to bid Gozo adieu. After catching the ferry back to the main island, we immediately headed to our overnight accommodation, the San Antonio Hotel and Spa in St. Paul's Bay. After Gozo's sleepy environs, the bustling resort atmosphere of St. Paul's was like Miami Beach. After a quick check-in

and cappuccino (yes, ANOTHER one), we set out on our afternoon tour of Malta.

Mdina

Our first stop was the city of Mdina, a UNESCO world heritage site a fifteen-minute drive from the hotel. Occupying a commanding position atop a rocky promontory, the fortified bastions of medieval Mdina loom high above the azure Mediterranean.

Derived from the Arabic word 'Medina', the city's present name comes from the Saracens who arrived around 870 AD. Christened the "Silent City" by residents and visitors alike, the narrow streets are mercifully off limits to cars. Entering the old city walls was like stepping into a time capsule, its enchanting labyrinth of meandering laneways crammed with churches, palaces and stately houses. Rounding a corner, I was startled by the appearance of an assembly of

men clad in medieval garb. The illusion was quickly shattered; not only were they wearing wraps but one fellow was eating one. I then discerned a series of snaking cables leading to a nearby film crew.

Fronted by a large square, the impressive Cathedral of the Conversion of St Paul is the centrepiece of the old city. Constructed between 1697 and 1702, it replaced the original Norman church destroyed by an earthquake and is believed to occupy the site of a villa belonging to Publius, Malta's first Roman governor. While admiring some intricate balconies adorning the square's buildings, I asked our guide Vince what the local people called them. "Balconies" he quipped with an utterly deadpan expression. Old English style phone booths and mailboxes provided a charming reminder of the days of British colonial rule.

We could have spent hours exploring, but we had one final stop to make



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The Cathedral of the Conversion of St Paul is the centrepiece of Mdina's old city



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Malta's compact capitol of Valletta occupies one of the most outstanding natural sites in the Mediterranean; The stunning interior of St. Paul's Co-Cathedral is a masterwork of Baroque architecture; Interior of the Grand Master's Palace

across Marsamxett Harbour. As the light waned, the city lights transformed the historic skyline into a mesmerizing vision against the deepening indigo sky. As the last vestiges of light dissipated, cameras and photographers were exhausted!

Valletta

Our final day in Malta proved to be a whirlwind of activity, with our first stop being Valletta, the Maltese capitol. Occupying one of

the most arresting natural sites in the Mediterranean, Valletta was simply extraordinary. Perched atop the rugged Mount Sceberras peninsula separating Marsamxett and Grand Harbours, the

city was named after its founder, Jean Parisot de la Valette, Grand Master of the Order of St John. Encompassing a compact area of 600m by 1,000m with a population of 7000, the diminutive city is a cultural cocktail of European art and architecture.

Constructed by the Knights of St. John starting in 1566, the city is one of the first planned towns in Europe.

The island's principal business centre and the seat of government, its network of constricted streets boast some of Europe's finest art, churches and palaces. Upon being named a World Heritage site in 1980, UNESCO declared Valletta among the most concentrated historic areas in the world. Right away, I could see a mere morning wouldn't be nearly enough time.

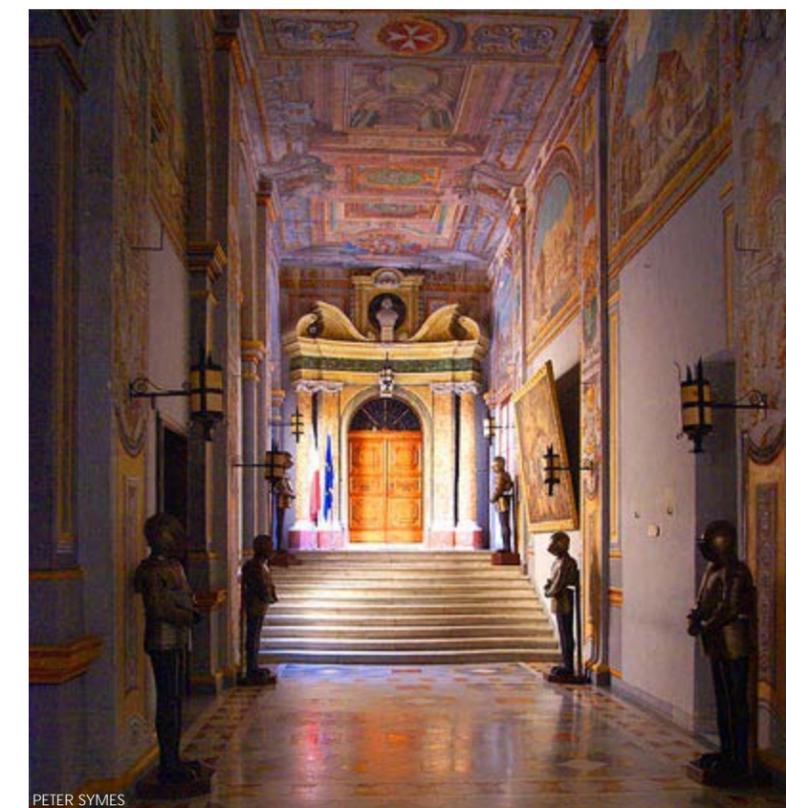
Upper Barrakka Gardens

After parking the van, a short stroll brought us to the Upper Barrakka Gardens. Created in the late 16th century, the colonnaded gardens offered a welcome respite from Valletta's bustle while a viewing platform offered a stunning panorama of Valletta and the Grand Harbour. In the distance, Fort St. Elmo guarded the harbour's entrance facing Ricasoli Fort on the eastern arm of Grand Harbour. Contrasting sharply with the harbour's vibrant blue, a hodgepodge of ochre-hued buildings jostled for space along the steep hillside creating a photographer's dream. I didn't want to leave.

St. Paul's Co-Cathedral

The remainder of the morning was spent exploring Valletta's bevy of attractions.

Constructed between 1573 and 1578, St. Paul's Co-Cathedral is Malta's largest church. Framed by twin bell towers, the unadorned exterior is no preparation for the wonders that lay within. A riot of Baroque splendour, the magnificent interior was truly wondrous to behold. The Cathedral contains eight chapels, each dedicated to the patron saint of the eight langues (divisions based on nationality of the Knights). High above, every centimetre of the vaulted ceiling was covered with paintings depicting scenes from the life of St. John., while a collage of more than 300 tomb slabs in a rainbow of colours covered the floor below. Numerous side altars, columns and alcoves were emblazoned with a wealth of intricate details including the distinctive Maltese crosses, the insignia of the Knights of St. John. Gold shrouded



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before dinner. Negotiating Friday afternoon rush-hour traffic, we arrived at Silema's Triq ix-Xatt (the Strand) in the nick of time to catch the setting sun gloriously illuminate the Valletta shoreline



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The ruins of Hagar Qim; Colourful fishing boats called luzzu bob in Marsaxlokk's picturesque harbour; A thoroughly decadent ricotta cheese dessert; The spectacular Blue Grotto on Malta's southern coast; The distinctive 'Eyes of Osiris' adorn a fishing boat



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virtually every surface, adding an opulence that bordered on sensory overload.

Grand Master's Palace

A short stroll away on Palace Square lay the Grand Master's Palace. Now hosting the President's office, it has been the seat of Maltese government since the time of the Knights. In these days of heightened safety measures, it was downright surreal wandering the superbly appointed rooms and passages with a complete absence of guards. At the parliamentary entrance, the only semblance of security was a few suits of armour. A highlight was the Council Chamber, adorned with priceless Gobelin tapestries woven in France for Grand Master Ramón Perellos y Roccafi.

Marsaxlokk

From Valletta, a short drive brought us to the coastal village of Marsaxlokk (marsaxlokk) for lunch. Its name is derived from marsa, meaning "port" and xlokk, the Maltese name for the southeasterly Mediterranean wind known as the Sirocco. Home to 70 percent of the nation's fishing fleet, the harbour was used as an anchor-

age by the invading Turks during the Great Siege of 1565. Today, it is famous for its flotilla of double-ended fishing boats called luzzu. Boldly painted in hues of yellow, blue and red, many were ornamented with the distinctive "Eyes of Osiris" to ward off evil spirits, a design thought to date back to the ancient Phoenicians.

Hagar Qim & Blue Grotto

With time running out, we just had time to visit the ancient ruins of Hagar Qim and the striking natural arch of the Blue Grotto before heading to the airport to catch our flight.

It is said that the massive stones of Hagar Qim were erected around 3600 and 3200 BC, and are considered to mark one of the most ancient religious sites on Earth.

Located on the southern coast of Malta, Blue Grotto is actually a group of sea caverns in which each morning various blue colors are reflected off the waters by the sun and the phosphorescent colors of underwater flora are visible.

Despite the country's diminutive size, we barely scratched the surface of all the cultural, historical and natural sites to see,



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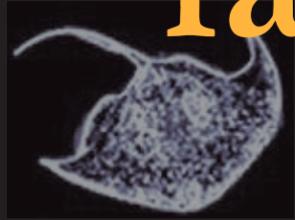
not to mention the high end shopping district in Villetta as well as the quaint street boutiques and antique shops of Victoria.

During our stay, we did a total of nine dives each offering a broad array of environments. While fish life was less than I've encountered in Asia, the spectacular undersea landscapes and tremendous visibility made for some truly enjoyable diving experiences. Along with the remarkable history, friendly people and sumptuous food, I'd go back in an instant. While small in size, Malta is big on attractions! ■



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fact file



Malta



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History With the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1814, Malta was formally acquired as a crown colony of the British Empire, remaining a staunch supporter of the United Kingdom through both World wars. Upon attaining independence in 1964, the nation remained in the British Commonwealth until becoming a republic a decade later. Since about the mid-1980s, the island has transformed itself into a freight transshipment point, a financial center and a tourist destination. After a narrow vote in a national referendum, Malta became an EU member in May 2004. The Euro was adopted as the national currency on 1 January 2008, with coins displaying the Maltese cross. Government: Republic. Capital: Valletta

Geography Comprised of an archipelago of five islands, Malta is situated off Southern Europe in the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and North Africa. Of the five, only the three largest islands—Malta, Gozo and Comino—are inhabited. The tiny islets of Filfa

lines, providing excellent natural harbours. Although bounded by sea cliffs in many areas, the landscape is primarily dry, low and rocky, with no mountains present on the islands. The highest point is Ta'Zuta on the island of Malta, which rises to a height of 253m. Neighbouring Gozo is noticeably greener, with terraced hillsides and flat-topped hills. Malta and Tunisia are currently discussing the commercial exploitation of the continental shelf between their countries, particularly for oil exploration.

Climate Malta's climate is Mediterranean with mild, rainy winters and hot, dry summers.

Environmental issues Due to its compact size, Malta faces a number of serious environmental issues. Along with such world-threatening issues such as air pollution, biodiversity, ozone layer protection and climate change, other localized concerns include desertification, endangered species, hazardous wastes, marine dumping and ship pollution. In addition, limited natural fresh water resources have seen an increasing

RIGHT: Location of Malta on global map
BELOW: Location of Xlendi on map of Malta



tem and to its prudent risk-management practices. However, with the economy contracting by 2.2 percent in 2009, the government took steps to supply direct grants to struggling local businesses. Due to its geographic location between the EU and Africa, Malta has become an ever-increasing target for illegal immigration, which has placed a tremendous strain on the islands' political and economic resources. With limited fresh water supplies and few domestic energy sources, Malta produces only about 20 percent of its food needs. Along with natural resources including limestone and salt, the islands' range of agriculture products include potatoes, cauliflower, grapes, wheat, barley, tomatoes, citrus, cut flowers, green peppers; pork, milk, poultry and eggs. Effects of the global economic downturn, combined with elevated electricity and water prices, have dam-

aged Malta's economy, which is heavily dependent on foreign trade. Tourism is the predominant industry, supplemented by electronics, shipbuilding, construction, food and beverages, pharmaceuticals, footwear, clothing, tobacco, aviation services, financial services and information technology services. Natural resources: limestone, salt, arable land.

Currency Euros (EUR)

Population 7406,771 (July 2010 est.). Ethnic groups: Maltese (descendants of ancient Carthaginians and Phoenicians with Italian heritage and other Mediterranean stock). Religion: Roman Catholic 98%. Internet users: 198,800 (2008)

Language Maltese (official) 90.2%, English (official) 6%, multilingual 3%, other languages 0.8% (2005 census)

Hyperbaric Chambers
Gozo General Hospital, Victoria, Gozo. Tel: (21) 561600 or (21) 562700

Mater Dei Hospital, Msida, Malta. Tel: (356) 2545 5269 or emergency 112.

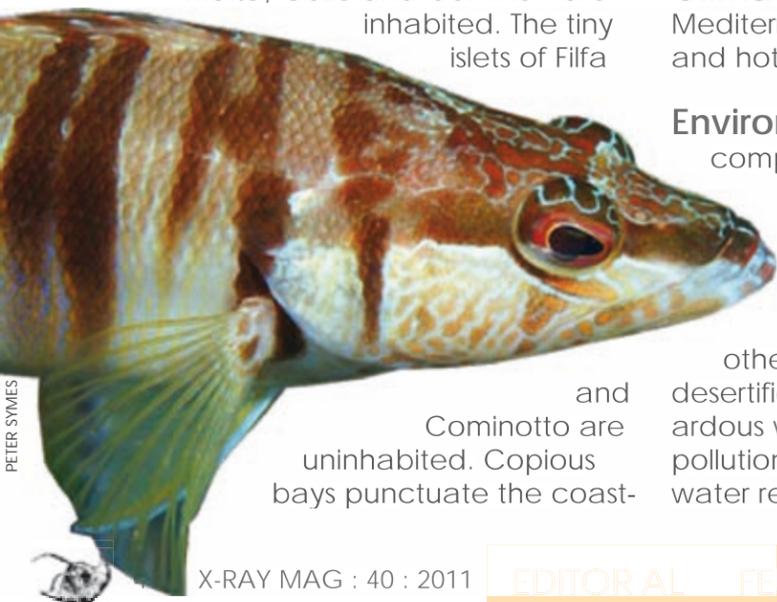
Websites
Malta Tourism
www.visitmalta.com

reliance on desalination. Malta is party to agreements including Air Pollution, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands.

Economy Malta's financial services industry has grown in recent years, escaping significant damage from the 2008-09 international financial crisis. This was largely due to the sector being centered on the indigenous real estate market and not being highly leveraged. Locally, the restricted damage from the financial crisis has been attributed to the stability of the Maltese banking sys-



Tiny little cuttlefish hiding in the reef



and Cominotto are uninhabited. Copious bays punctuate the coast-



Diving the Land of Volcanoes

Kamchatka

— *Russia's Mysterious East*

Text and photos by Andrey Bizyukin, PhD



Bears, steller sea lions and orcas are the real lords of this wild land. PREVIOUS PAGE: When you fly into our dreamland, that is Kamchatka, you see only volcanoes in and around the majestic mountain ridges. It is still a world of untouched wild nature

“Is there diving in Kamchatka?” my buddy asked me while inspecting a map of Russia on Google. It was such an unexpected question, it put me in a stupor. As a Russian dive professional, I certainly should know about all the dive sites and dive centers around the country, but I was stumped with this question about Kamchatka.

The question and the uncertainty got so deeply stuck in my head that the hasty decision to go to the state of Kamchatka and check out the diving there was immediate, and I was determined to make it happen as soon as possible. I decided to investigate everything about Kamchatka and get rid of this annoying

blank in my chest of diving knowledge.

Each more or less erudite traveler I questioned told me that Kamchatka is the land of volcanoes. Of the more than 600 volcanoes on the planet, 160 of them are located on the peninsula of Kamchatka, and 30 of them are active. Volcanoes are even on the flag and emblem of the state of Kamchatka.

Official statistics state that Kamchatka has only about 15 thousand tourists annually, and the majority of them are citizens of the United States, Japan, and other foreign visitors. I was amazed that the percentage of Russians in these numbers was a lot less than half, in comparison to the approximately three million Russian tourists that visited very similar environments in Alaska. All these numbers pushed me to thinking that something was not quite right about my fellow countrymen’s knowledge of Kamchatka.

Most of the travel agencies (operating tours to Kamchatka) offered me hiking or helicopter excursions to the volcanoes, white water rafting on wild rivers, fishing, photo sessions with wild bears, bathing in hot springs and other small pleasures for boring philistines. But in regards to diving on Kamchatka, there were only rare, atypical replies, which brought me big doubts about the professionalism of the operations there.

The Internet—the best friend of divers today—informed me that August was the best season to travel to Kamchatka. We found only one PADI dive center, Orca-Diving, in the town of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. This information wet my appetite and growing desire to dive even more, together with real professionals, on the coast of the mysterious volcanic peninsula.

We booked our flight for March to save money on seasonal airfare increases



Overview (above) of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky—the capitol city of Kamchatka; Anna Butkovskaya, PADI instructor and director of Kamchatka's dive club (inset); Location of the state of Kamchatka on map of Russia (left)

group of 19 brave underwater adventurers land on the concrete airstrip of Elizovo Airport.

History

Since ancient times, Kamchatka has been occupied by the tribes of Ilmen, Koryaks and Ainu. The first visit by a Russian to Kamchatka is not dated precisely, but Georg Wilhelm Steller (Stöller)—the historian of the first Kamchatka expedition—mentioned that Russians already lived on Kamchatka in the 17th century. There was even history about a certain person, Fed'ka, who travelled across Kamchatka and lived there for some time.

Officially, the peninsula was explored much later by Yakuts and

Anadyrs Cossacks who traveled there from the continent. Unfortunately, many documents of that time have been lost, as they were written on birch bark and stored in wet conditions in an old state office.

Eventually, Europeans discovered Kamchatka in 1729, when the Russian flotilla under command of Vitus Jonassen Bering—the Dane in the service of the Russian sovereign—rounded the peninsula from the south and made maps of the bays of Kamchatka and Avachinsky.

The peninsula is bordered by the Ohotsky and Bering Seas and the Pacific Ocean. The only overland way to Kamchatka, via the northern isthmus connecting Kamchatka with the continent, is through a land of bogs and very difficult to pass—



Map of the Kamchatka Peninsula

for such popular locations as Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. We were not in error to do so! In summer time, Russian air-monopolists raise the prices more than double the going rate, and tickets to Kamchatka become more

expensive than flights to the United States, Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila or Tokyo.

It is a nine-hour non-stop flight between Moscow and the state capital of Kamchatka. Finally, our



The orca pod (above) was very friendly with us. They were very curious, liked our boat and sought contact with people; Puffins (inset above) can dive deep, about 30 meters, to hunt for fish. This red-beaked bird had even caught a few small fishes and tried to hide them from us; Our boat named *Orca* (right & below) really attracted all the local orca families. Did they like the sound of our engine or our maybe our experienced Captain Sergey (previously a professional submariner) in blue, standing on the stern? The sea otter (left inset) is the most clever creature of the sea

feelings of freedom of movement in three dimensions and communion with the underwater world that left indelible impressions on me for the rest of my life. Even now, as a PADI professional with hundreds of dives under my belt, I still enjoy diving, weightlessness and the feeling of comfort underwater.

almost impossible for any surface transport. Therefore, all the most necessary items for normal life for people there are delivered by ships or planes from Vladivostok. At present, Kamchatka exists as an isolated island removed from mainland Russia.

Dive operator

We were happy with our guide. In Petropavlovsk, we met Anna Butkovskaya, PADI instructor (MSDT #636191) and head of the Orca Diving Club. "Diving is my hobby which has become my favorite work now," said Anna. She told her story: "Ten years ago, I did my first dive in the Red Sea—bright unforgettable impressions—

"But Kamchatka's diving is special," Anna said, more seriously. "Here, it is difficult, much more severe, sometimes rough, diving. The water temperatures range from 14°C to -2°C depending on the season and depth. The visibility is 6-10 meters. There are thermoclines and tidal currents. The eastern (Pacific) coast of the peninsula is cut with sheer cliffs and has many deep and long gulfs and bays. This coast is



Sea lions, worried about hunting orcas, jump out of the water onto the safety of the rocks





sights and hiking the volcanoes, but for diving, August is by far not the best time. Frequent storms and poor visibility (due to many types of plankton) will make lots of problems for us.

“The underwater world of Kamchatka is unbridled—an often unpredictable element. Here, a diver is only a small particle. It attracts, frightens and commands respect simultaneously. I love our Pacific Ocean, and I will not exchange it for any warm seas. I have seen many oceans, but I’ve never seen another place with the unique underwater world that is here in our Kamchatka. Here, there are more than 350 fish species, seals, sea lions, sea otters, octopuses, walruses, orcas, whales, fur seals, king crabs and sea hedgehogs,” said Anna.

Avachinsky Bay

The next day we went on our first dive trip to Avachinsky Bay. The bay is the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rocky coast of the Pacific side of Kamchatka; Unique rock formations near Starichkov Island look like huge stone whale fins from the Stone Age; Orcas patrol the local waters like Nature’s coast guards

traditionally the most interesting and convenient for diving, but it is almost like diving in the ocean. It’s possible to feel how strong ocean rip currents are even at 20 meters depth, and believe

me, not every diver can dive safely in such harsh conditions. By the way, you have chosen the wrong time of year for diving here. The end of summer is a good season for visiting the topside



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Diver with huge anemo-
nes in Avachinsky Bay;
Say, "Aaaaah", with su-
per big Kamchatka crab;
Hugging seaweed fronds

penetrated into my body, head and hands; and the bottom was not visible. In order to read the color screen of my dive computer, it was necessary to bring it face to face with my mask. The nervous divers and beginners could not handle any more; they inflated their BCDs and left us. Go back to the sun, folks!

We continued our descent in hopes of finding clear water below two thermoclines. But in the absolutely muddy, gray-green, dark waters, I wondered why I had to fly to the other side of the world just to dive in such terrible conditions. The irritating question itched inside my head. So far, the first dive on Kamchatka was a real upset. But finally, I got something hard underfoot—apparently, the



second largest in the world. It looks like a tiny sea—24 kilometers long with a maximum depth of 26 meters and capable (the experts say) of hosting all world's fleets in just one convenient spot.

The guides told us about a local favorite dive site named the Three Brothers—the three separate rocks—sitting at the mouth of the bay. They promised canyons decorated with sea anemones, sea hedgehogs, crabs, octopuses, plus an "adrenaline splash", as the dive could have low visibility, extremely cold water and strong currents.

Indeed, we jumped into very cold water. We did a last bubble check and started the dive. Visibility was simply not present; a piercing cold

sea floor.

It was necessary to lie down just to see the sea bottom and the stones. Even at this depth, the visibility was less than one meter. But the unique forms and colors of the surrounding landscape were quite unusual. Sponges, seaweeds and small sea anemones covered the stones and had surprisingly bright yellow, orange, pink, snow-white and red colors. Such a variety of colors I had never seen before altogether in one area of the sea.

However, in this incredible low viz, I lost my buddy immediately. With no compass and no guide, there was nothing to do but wait. The preliminary dive plan was all but





Fishers (like this guy at left) like to eat freshly caught salmon—within five minutes of the catch, they eat the salmon salted; Quadrocycles, or off-road vehicles, are the most convenient form of transport in a country without roads; Both people and bears hunt the salmon that swim up river for the last time to spawn; Divers enjoy a hiking trip to the local valley of geysers to see the boiling lakes and clouds of steam



destroyed, but I decided to stay on the bottom just a few minutes more to try to see something else.

Large Kamchatka crabs were busy here; they coupled and chewed something, feeling themselves safe under the stones. Huge sea anemones hid between big boulders. But since the visibility did not exceed one meter, I was diving like a blind kitten, perceiving the world around me with touch alone. Suddenly, from the muddy environment there was a diver's hand which grabbed for one of my fins. Good luck was with me—it was my buddy. We knelt opposite each other at a distance of 50 centimeters and gesticulated madly. There was nothing more to see. The diving in the Avachinsky Bay was really extreme.

Our skipper told us that the best visibility in these places happens only in June and July. In the beginning and middle of summer, there is less sun, overcast skies or rain, but the sea is quieter and the water is clear.

Topside adventure

Nobody from our team wished to dive more in the bay. All understood that the time had come to look for new places in the open ocean, but a

strong wind and high waves changed our plans. We decided to wait for good weather, and instead, made a short land journey across Kamchatka to bide our time. Our topside



adventure included a rafting trip down the "Big Fast" river; an excursion into a mini valley of geysers at the volcano, Mutnovsky; and a quadrocycle trip to the foot of the Avachinsky and Koryak volcanoes.

Time on this adventure flew by very quickly. It was exciting to plunge into the wild nature of the peninsula, to observe wild

bears hunting for salmon, to cook food on an open fire, to spend the nights in tents, to drive quadrocycles on the forest roads as fast as possible and to photograph salmon heading to their spawning grounds through rough river rifts. But as keen divers, we quickly started to miss diving and waited with anticipation for the first possibility to go back to the ocean again.



A hunting orca (above) looks like a perfect weapon and even scares a guillemot (inset below); An unforgettable moment of diving (right) inside a massive cloud of jellyfish; Diver with one of Kamchatka's brightly colored seastars (bottom right)

Starichkov Island

The mouth of the shallow Avachinsky Bay to the ocean had changed our perception of Kamchatka considerably. The strong ocean rip current shook our small dive boat, and foamy waves broke violently along the rocky coast. Here, everything looked totally different—rugged, majestic and mystical. We were surrounded by the North Pacific, full of the power of nature and wild life. Puffins and guillemots flew over the sea and dived into the water. In search of food, they plunged to depths of 30 meters for several minutes and came back with mouths full of fish. Our presence frightened them and they sped away flapping and running with webbed feet on the water's surface to take off and fly away from our boat.

Orcas

"Orcas on the right side!" the skipper exclaimed. Everybody raced onto the deck and scanned the ocean. The first fountain of mist blew and a large one-and-a-half-meter dorsal fin of a huge orca male rose over the waves. Behind it rose more and more fountains and dorsal fins of lesser sizes. Orca cubs appeared surrounded by orca females. It was a group of orcas of no

less than 20 individuals (males, females and cubs). They passed by, along the rocky coast to the south in the direction of Starichkov Island, like we were.

"Orcas know and love our yacht," the skipper told us. "They have learned to identify the sound of our engine and propeller, have gotten used to our frequent presence in these places and have stopped being afraid." We followed the orcas with a parallel course. The orcas were busy hunting for fish. They stunned the fish with the loud noisy blows of their tail fins. The orcas dived under our ship, and it seemed that they very much enjoyed posing before us divers in order to be photographed. So, together with



these magnificent animals, we reached our next diving site.

At this dive site, Anna told us, a very amusing story happened. "Two divers saw an octopus underwater. One of them wanted to get a closer look, so he got very close to the octopus. The octopus was frightened by the diver and decided to attack the diver, spurring out black ink into the diver's mask and ran away. The diver was so frightened by the inky reaction that came right into his mask, he jumped out of it. From the outside, it looked really funny: the frightened diver and the octopus quickly running from each other and the mask thus remained laying on the sea bed," explained Anna.





A humpback whale's tail fin tips up out of the water when it dives deep to hunt fish

We dived near the island. The sea water here was much colder; my dive computer registered 2°C. We went along a stony bottom to a depth of 20 meters where there were supposed to be huge sea anemones. A recently ended storm had mixed everything about; therefore, the visibility was about three meters.

Bright yellow, orange and red colors of the underwater landscape are pleasing to the eye, but at depth, all colors fade. In such conditions, a good underwater torch is very useful, as it was in this case.

There were huge, prickly crabs of bright red color covered with an uncountable quantity of sharp thorns, self-confidently walking slowly among luminous thickets. I attempted to play with one of the crabs; it went into a menacing pose and tried very hard to take off my finger with its monstrous claws. The big sharp thorns can easily pierce even thick neoprene gloves. It is necessary to be very cautious with such impressive Kamchatka monsters.

A forest of gigantic sea anemones

and seastars appeared at a depth of 17 meters. The tallest of the anemones reached half a meter in height. We took pictures of them, but quickly got cold and subsequently decided to start a quick ascent to the surface right from this spot. But just a couple of meters up from the bottom, we got into an extraordinarily dense layer of jellyfish.

It was a real underwater phenomenon, like a jellyfish wedding or a macabre underwater festival of pulsating globes. The jellyfish were so active, that even when I tried to push one aside, it quickly, purposefully and persistently ran into me again. We forgot about the cold and stayed in the thick of the jellyfish cloud, enthusiastically observing their movements and taking pictures. Other skilled divers have told us that they have seen a similar jellyfish gathering, only it was in a tropical lake—Jellyfish Lake on Palau. But finding a jellyfish cloud in ice cold Pacific waters on Kamchatka was doubly exciting, interesting and delightful.

Orcas also use their tail fins, whacking the surface of the water loudly to stun fishes they then eat (above); Views of humpback whales (top)

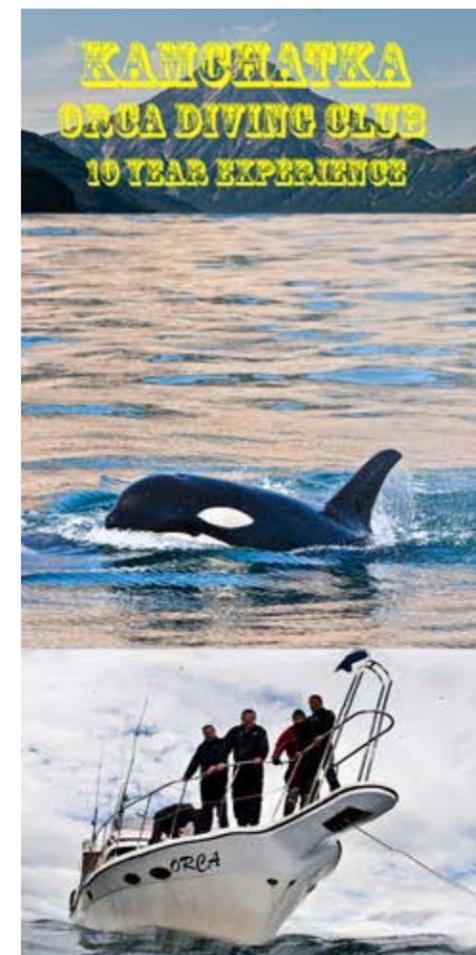


Close-up view of jellyfish



THIS PAGE: Exciting diving with curious sea lions looking to communicate and share contact with divers. It is the absolute highlight of diving on Kamchatka

Kamchatka



Back on the boat, fascinated by what we had seen, talking loudly, discussing, admiring and swinging our hands about, we turned back towards the town of Petropavlovsk. But then, humpback whales grabbed our attention. They were feeding directly at the mouth of Avachinsky Bay.

These huge underwater giants, of a size much larger than our boat, blew up noisy fountains of mist and circled around us with big, wide, gaping mouths, collecting something tasty from the sea surface. Periodically, they lifted their tail fins and dived deeply; then they again rose to the surface—paying no heed to our noisy shouts of excitement and the sound of our boat engine—and continued to be engaged in their important whale affairs.

Yes, the long-awaited day of diving had gone wonderfully right and well. We saw orcas and humpback whales, dived with monster crabs, swam through actinium gardens and spent some enthusiastic minutes in a natural stew of live jellyfish. Life was good.

Diving with sea lions

We left Petropavlovsk at 4:00am the next morning in order to have time to reach Russian Bay—a cozy, rocky place on the coast where sea lions have chosen to make a home for themselves.

Huge rust-colored sea lions (steller sea lions) spend all their summers here—feeding, warming



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The alpha male (sea lion bull) with his harem, very protective of his girlfriends and jealous of us; Diving seal (below right) demonstrates incredible mobility

themselves in the sun, getting fat, raising pups and hiding from orcas. In order not to disturb the large animals, we silently entered the water from our boat about 200 meters from them. We swam to a site where we could observe the seals underwater. We stopped at seven meters depth and waited in hopes of a miracle—that the natural curiosity of the sea lions would get them to dive into the water and come see us.

Really, curiosity is the surprising natural phenomenon pushing both people and animals into improbable adventures. Within five minutes, a group of sea lions of at least ten to 15 individuals came to examine and sniff us out from all sides. They obviously discussed us among themselves.

They came as close as possible to us. With big, wide open, brown eyes, they looked directly into our masks, carefully bit our fins, tasting them, and one even gave me a kick in the back for good measure—for in front of me, there was “a terrible” bulky camera with wide-spread strobes.

The sea lions did not lose interest in us for the entire hour of diving. I was delighted to be able to take around a hundred shots or so of these wonderful creatures and only came up to the surface when when my air tank was empty. All of us divers were full of euphoria.

The female sea lions had disappeared somewhere, but the big five-meter-long sea lion bull came up out of the water 50 meters from us. His head was



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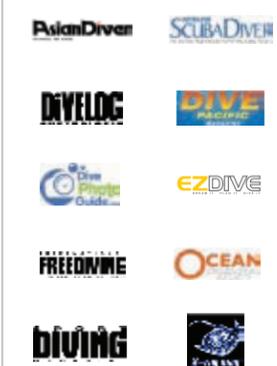
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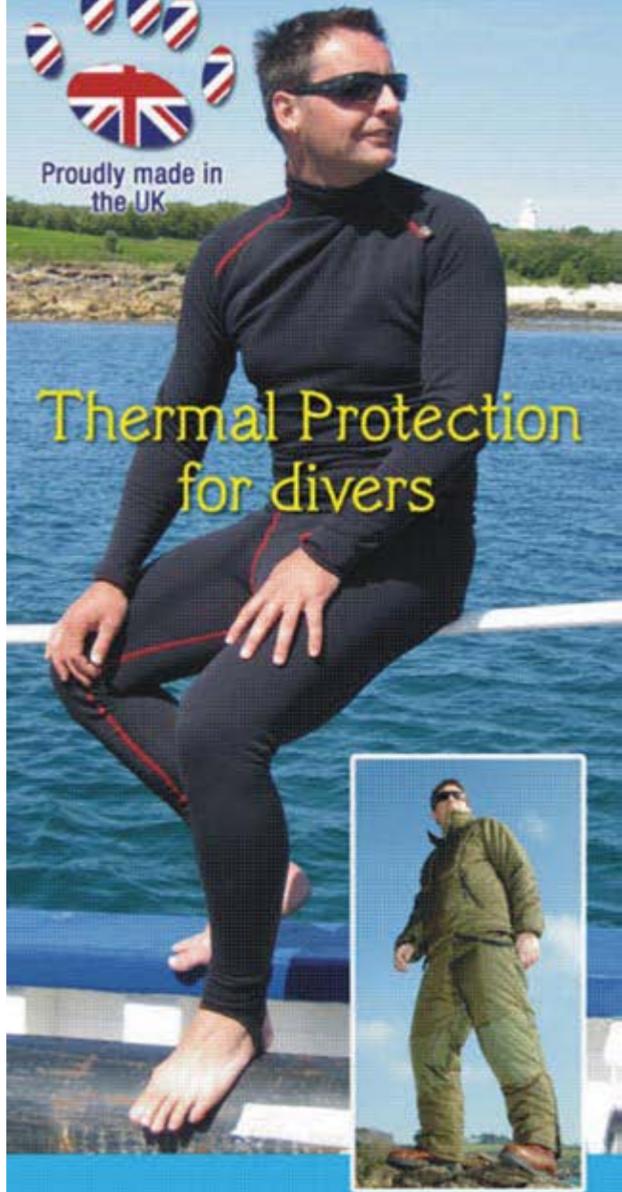
Kamchatka

similar in size with that of an adult bear. He was very protective of his territory and his harem of sea lions, looking at us with such jealousy that we instantly felt we had exceeded our stay, challenging his permission and intruding on his private territory.

In an instant, as if by a single command, we all switched on our "fifth gear" and forced our fins into action desperately trying to reach our boat. The excited sea lion bull charged with such force and speed when he rushed at us that we understood at once that we were dead meat. In actuality, we did not have a prayer to get out of the confrontation. Only a miracle could rescue us, and so, it did—in the form of an inflatable boat with a motor and a skilled diver at the helm who kept control of the situation and reacted instantly. At

Support team (left) picks up divers on the surface; Hot springs at +40°C sooth muscles after a long day of hiking (bottom left); Fresh caught sea food make a feast for us cold water divers (below)

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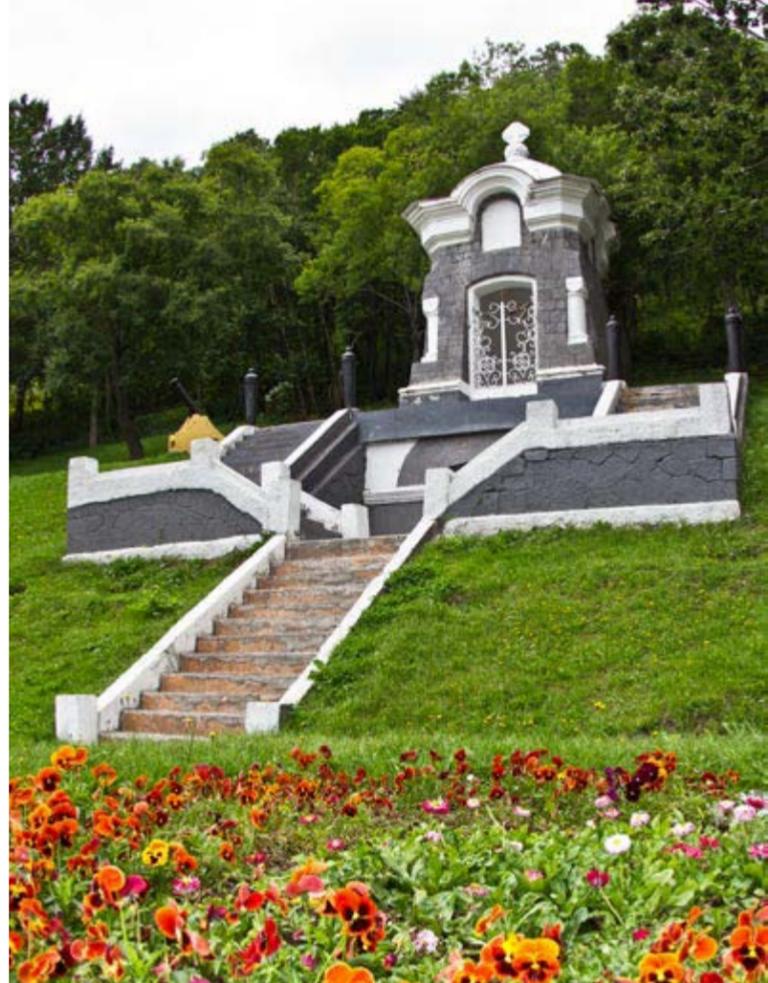


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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The quadricycle tour to the foothills of Avachinsky Volcano (left); Anchorage near mouth of Russian Bay; Memorial for British and French Navy seamen who died in an attempt to capture the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky during Russian-Turkish war; Aerial view of Kamchatka

full speed, the zodiac “cut off” the path of the bull charging us, and frightened off the animal, effectively discharging the heated situation.

The technique of diving with sea lions was thought up and tested personally by Anna Butkovskaya, and its prime directive was an insistent requirement: do not pursue sea lions, just stay in place and wait for a miracle. Sea lions should not associate with divers because of the possible danger; divers should tease the sea lions’ natural feeling of curiosity only. And such a philosophy works 100 percent of the time. “Sea lions here are absolutely

for all the difficulties of our first days of diving on Kamchatka. The general conclusion of all the members of our group was unequivocal, we had to fly back again to Kamchatka just to dive with these graceful and extraordinary, flexible and charismatic animals.

Afterthoughts

Before coming back home, all of the divers in our group discussed diving on Kamchatka together. As a long-term resident of the peninsula, Anna explained the underlying vision of her

pristine. Just developed, this is my favorite dive site. Diving here is like diving on one breath,” Anna told us.

Diving with the sea lions provided emotional highs and delights which completely compensated

quest: “I am very enthusiastic about the preservation of our underwater world. People often destroy more than they create. Sometimes just to get food or money for living, people do not spare the underwater world. On Kamchatka, there are still untouched virgin places, and there is a lot to see. It would be desirable, that, as much as possible, divers could see our still untouched underwater world while we still can conserve it and save it from the fate of the Asian seas where there are now absolutely empty underwater regions. Let’s save and protect the natural world of Kamchatka! I wish to address this call to all the divers who live and dive on the peninsula, and also to all those who come to visit.

And I also have another dream: to organize a dive trip to see the orcas of Kamchatka. Orcas are worthy of our respect and sincere admiration. I have



not seen anything better in the world than the orcas of Kamchatka. Come with me next time, and we will dive

together! And you will be convinced that Kamchatka will not leave you indifferent,” said Anna as she finished her story. ■



Realm of the Giant Kelp
Channel Islands

Text and photos by Matthew Meier

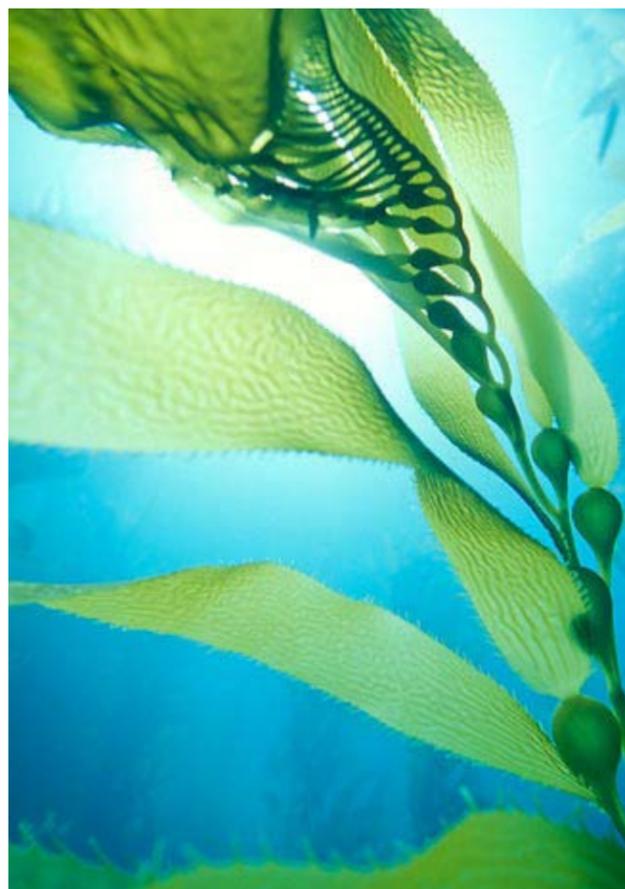


A two-spotted octopus (*Octopus bimaculatus*) moving along the sandy bottom (above), Santa Cruz Island. PREVIOUS PAGE: A school of jack mackerel (*Trachurus symmetricus*) fish in a giant kelp forest off Catalina Island

For those of us fortunate enough to call Southern California home, the Channel Islands offer world-class diving in our own backyard. Comprised of eight islands stretching over 160 miles of Pacific Ocean, the Channel Islands boast over 2,000 terrestrial plants and animals, including 150 endemic species, rivaling the Galapagos for diversity. Below the surface the islands play host to forests of giant kelp and a multitude of abundant marine life, supported by nutrient rich, cold water upwellings. The rocky reef structure is covered with algae and sponge growth, bryozoans and hydroids, anemones, tube worms, burrowing sea cucumbers, sea stars, urchins and nudibranchs. Spiny lobster, moray eels and octopus shelter in crevices, while fish species too numerous to mention, range from the resident bright orange Garibaldi to colossal giant sea bass.

My first underwater photos were taken at the Channel Islands, and I have returned every year since. On my most recent trip, the liveaboard

spent two days anchored at one dive site, in which time, none of the 20 photographers and videographers onboard ran out of subjects



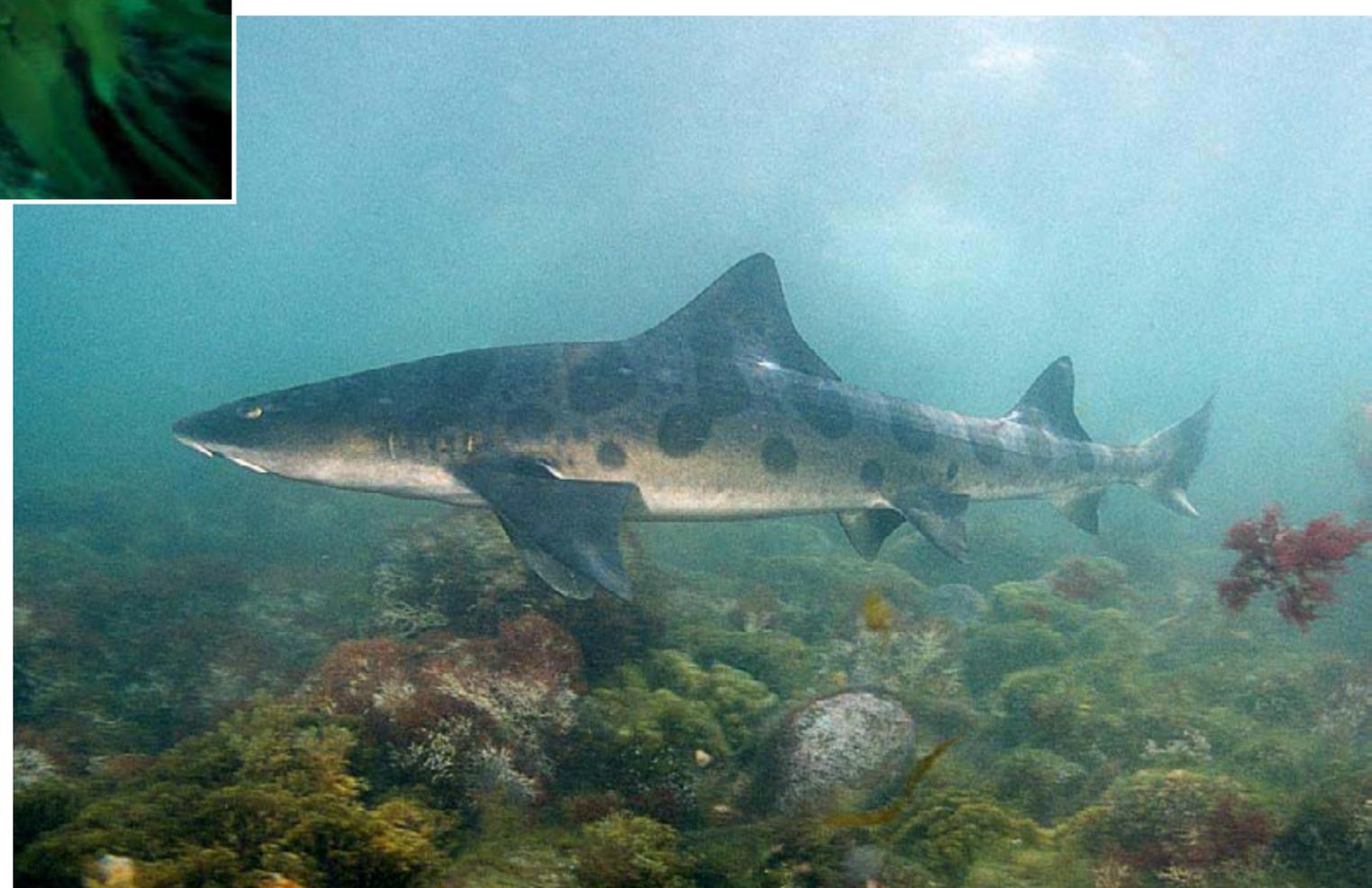
Giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*) lit from behind by sunrays, Santa Cruz Island



Ochre sea stars (*Pisaster ochraceus*) and purple sea urchins clinging to the rocky reef (above) off Santa Cruz Island



LEFT INSET: Horn Shark (*Heterodontus francisci*) laying in a rock crevice, Catalina Island



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Soupfin shark (*Galeorhinus galeus*) with jack mackerel swimming over kelp, San Clemente Island; Giant sea bass (*Stereolepis gigas*), adult, also known as black sea bass, Catalina Island; Leopard shark (*Triakis semifasciata*) in shallow water filtered with sunrays, San Clemente Island

to shoot. We were privileged to have harbor seals and California sea lions nearby, a vertical wall of rocky reef full of macro subjects, bat rays in the sand below the boat, and schools of Jack mackerel, opaleye and blacksmith fish, along with soupfin and leopard sharks swimming in the shallow waters of the giant kelp forest.

On one particular night dive, I discovered an elusive two-spot octopus moving across my fin, as I knelt in the sand. Octopuses are not often seen during the day, preferring to stay in their den or else hidden in plain sight, camouflaged against the rocky reef. With no room to get down on its

level, I was left to hold my camera just above the sand, shooting blindly as it moved away. Days later, when my film was developed, I was rewarded with one of my more unforgettable octopus images.

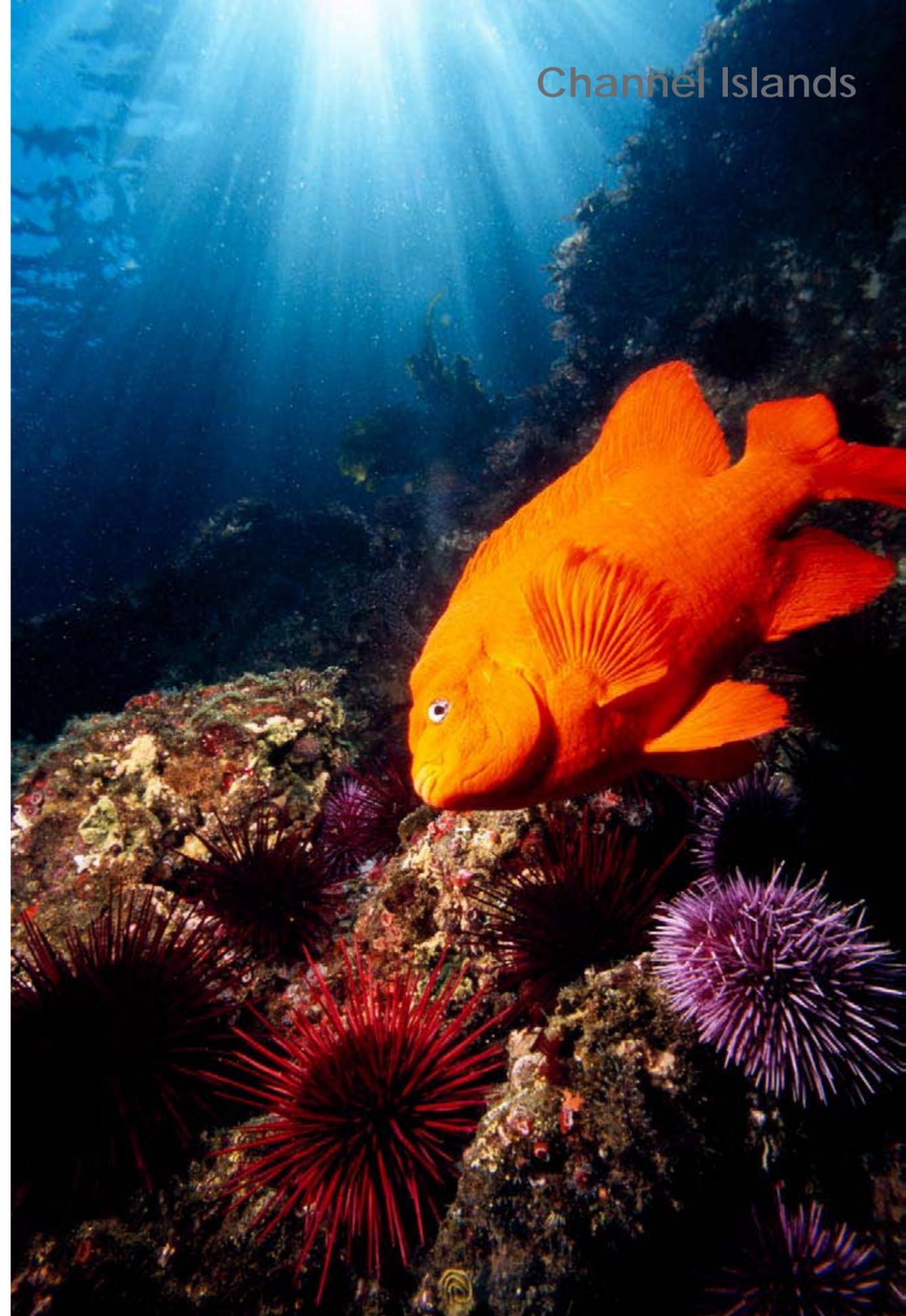
Big fish

Spectacular to see underwater, giant sea bass are the largest species of fish living in the kelp forest. They can grow to be over seven feet in length and weigh upwards of 700 pounds. Due to their dwindling numbers from overfishing, giant sea bass have been protected in California waters since 1982. While still listed as a critically

endangered species, giant sea bass are slowly making a comeback. Swimming alongside one of these behemoths is truly an amazing experience.

The Channel Islands support numerous shark and ray species. I have had good luck photographing soupfin and leopard sharks at San Clemente Island, horn sharks at Catalina and bat rays at most islands. It is also possible to see blue sharks, mako sharks, angel sharks, swell sharks, stingrays, shovelnose guitarfish and electric rays to name a few. In the 60's and 70's, basking sharks were common in the Santa Barbara Channel, but by now they have all but disap-





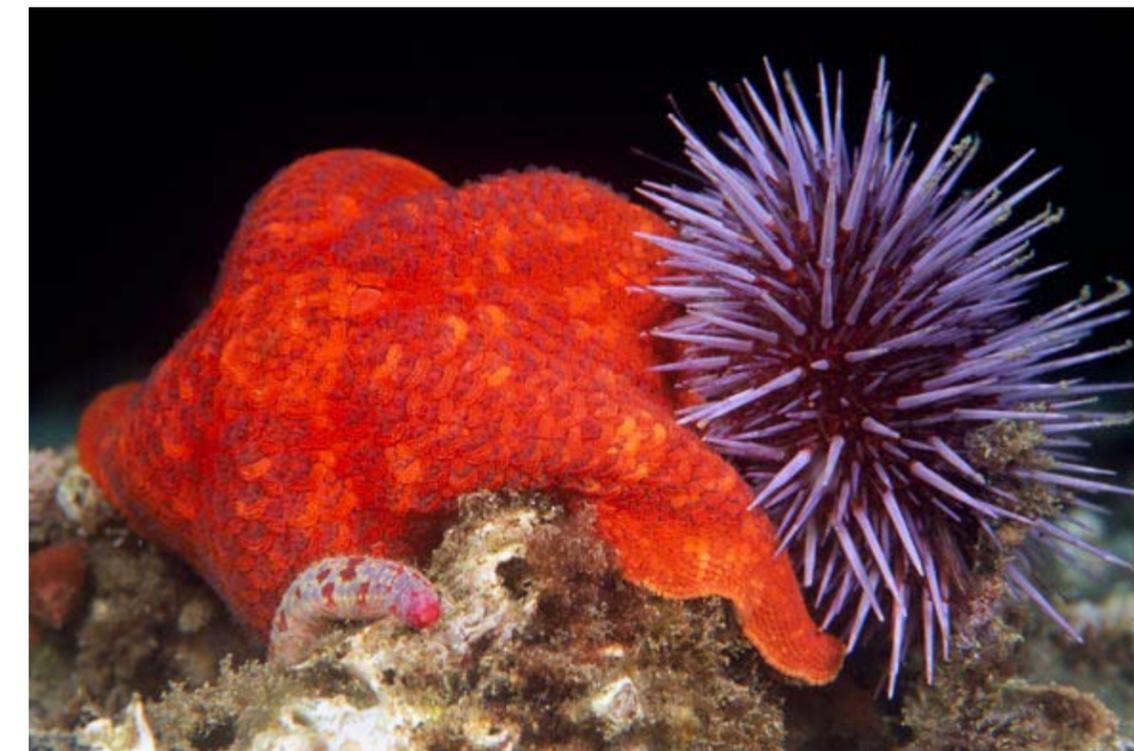
peared.

No visit to the Channel Islands is complete without encountering the charismatic and vibrant garibaldi, California's official state salt water marine fish. They are found only in the Eastern Pacific Ocean from Monterey Bay down to Baja and are abundant at the Channel Islands. Garibaldi are the largest member of the damselfish family, growing up to 12 inches in length and are a striking orange in color. A juvenile Garibaldi's color is slightly less vibrant, and it has luminous blue spots that disappear by the time it reaches adulthood. In summer, male Garibaldi construct circular nests on flat sections of rocky reef and then guard their nests after the female deposits her eggs. They are incredibly territorial during this time period and will attack much larger fish and even humans to protect their developing young.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Club-tipped anemone (*Corynactis californica*); Coonstripe shrimp (*Pandalus danae*) sits at the opening to a crevice in the rocky reef; Garibaldi fish (*Hypsypops rubicundus*) graced with sunrays. All images this page from Santa Cruz Island



Channel Islands



Diving

Scuba diving at the Channel Islands is almost exclusively achieved by means of a day or multi-day boat trip from the mainland. Dive boats run out of harbors like Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Pedro, Dana Point and San Diego. Single day trips usually allow for three to four dives, before returning back to the docks in late afternoon. Transport times differ depending on the harbor, boat and destination, but most range between one to two hours. The charters vary from intimate, six passenger vessels to 30+ passenger liveaboard boats.

Diving in California is for the hardy and self-reliant. The water is cold, the gear extensive and the pampering virtually nonexistent. On most boats, divers are required to provide their own equipment, tanks and even weights and to transport that gear onboard themselves. Once in the water, divers are expected to be able to read their



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Red bat star (*Patiria miniata*) and a purple sea urchin (*Strongylocentrotus purpuratus*); Detail view of a green rock scallop attached to the rocky reef; Sunflower star (*Pycnopodia helianthoides*) moves over the ocean floor. All images this page from Santa Cruz Island, except the three California rock lobsters (*Panulirus interruptus*) in a crevice (right) on the rocky reef off San Clemente Island



Channel Islands

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Silhouette of the lighthouse at sunrise over the east end of East Anacapa Island; Yellow zoanthid anemones (*Epizoanthus giveni*) growing on the rocky reef off Catalina Island; Anacapa Island (at sunset) and Santa Cruz Island make up part of the Channel Islands of California; A large sheep crab (*Loxorhynchus grandis*) moves across the sand amongst the sea grass, Catalina Island



to Catalina, though helicopter and plane rides are also available. Once on Catalina, there are a wide variety of quaint hotels and restaurants to choose from, the vast majority within walking distance of the ferry dock. Several dive boats operate out of Catalina and shore diving is also available. A must see is the Casino Point Marine Park, which was established as a marine reserve in 1965 by the city of Avalon. This shore dive is easily accessible by concrete steps taking you straight into the water.

The four northern Channel Islands (Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel), along with Santa Barbara Island comprise the Channel Islands National Park (CINP). The National Park expanded the protec-



tions of the Channel Islands National Monument, created in 1938 by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which covered only the islands of

may not even get wet. The reward for all this effort however, is magnificent diving and absolute freedom underwater. Plus, you finally get to prove you were paying attention during that navigation specialty course.

Visibility at the islands averages 30 feet and on a good day can reach 100+ feet. Water temperatures typically vary 5-10 degrees from the northern to southern islands. Average winter surface temperatures range from 53-59°F, while summer temperatures fluctuate between 62-70°F, though the water is typically cooler at depth. A drysuit or 7mm wetsuit, hood, boots and gloves are recommended.

The islands

Santa Catalina Island maintains the only permanent, non-military settlement on the islands, with the majority of residents living in either Avalon or Two Harbors. Boat ferries are the most common means of transportation

compass, manage their bottom time and find their way back to the boat. Dive masters typically do not conduct a follow-the-leader guided tour and



Hilton's aeolid (*Phidiana hiltoni*) nudibranch moves over the rocky reef off Santa Cruz Island



Sarcastic fringehead fish (*Neoclinus blanchardi*) in a shell, with brittle stars all around, Santa Cruz Island

heading south from their Arctic feeding grounds towards the warmer waters of Baja California, Mexico, to give birth. In the summer months of July to September, humpback whales, fin whales and blue whales come to feed. This aggregation of blue whales is the largest of its kind, with nearly ten percent of the world's population gathered in the Santa Barbara Channel.

Visitors will frequently see large pods of common dolphins and occasionally much smaller pods of Risso's dolphins at the surface. Less frequently encountered are Pacific white-sided and bottle-nose dolphins. A few lucky visitors will experience dolphins or even a whale underwater while diving around the Channel Islands, but the vast majority of these sightings will be from the deck of a boat. Several tour boat operators run

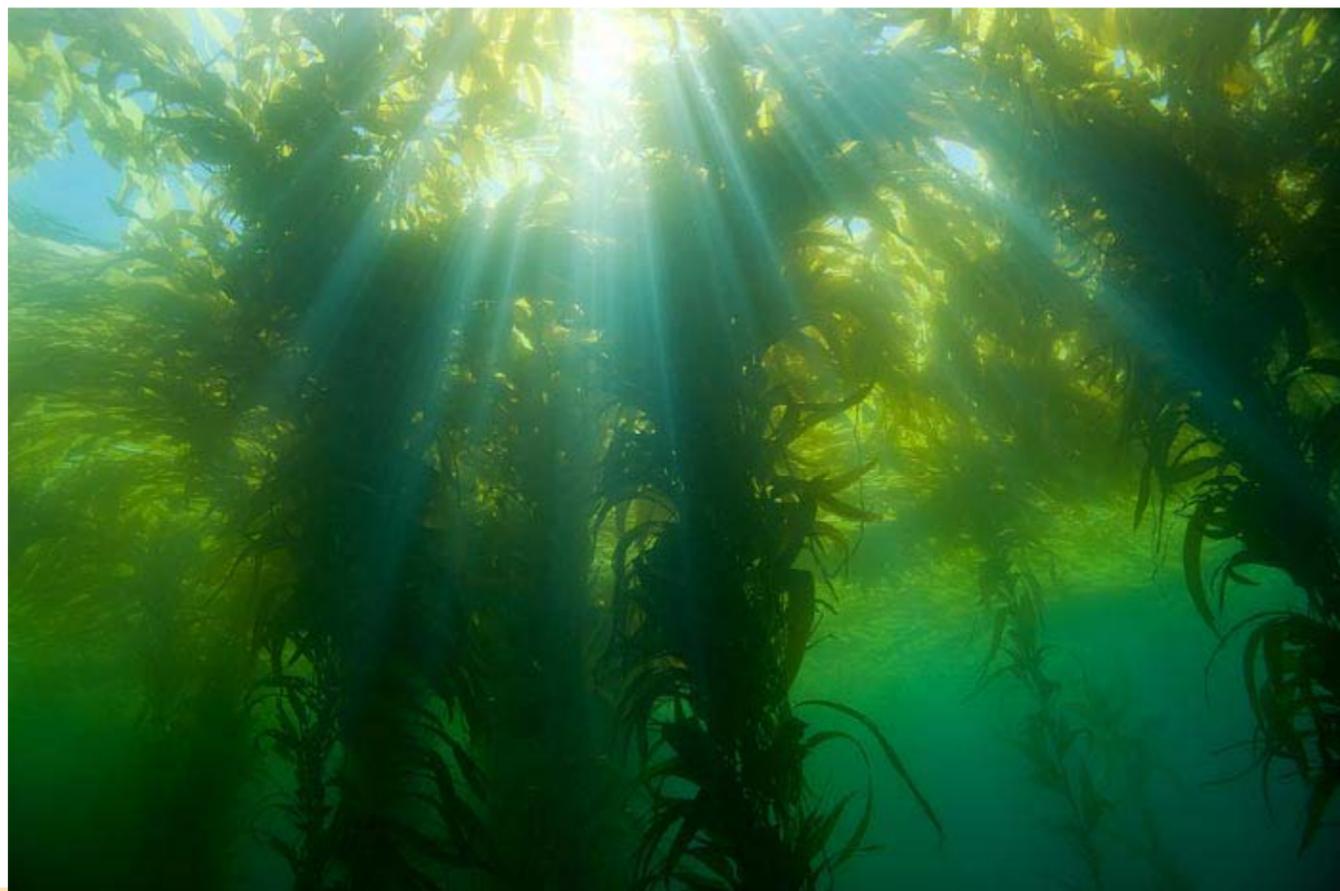


California sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*) blowing bubbles upside down, Santa Barbara Island

Anacapa and Santa Barbara. Surrounding the entire CINP is the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary (CINMS). The sanctuary is a marine protected area administered by NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) that encompasses 1,250+ nautical square miles of the Pacific Ocean, from the high tide line of the CINP, to six nautical miles offshore. Both were established in 1980 and together they help to protect the natural and cultural resources on the islands.

Marine mammals

A wide variety of marine mammals call the islands home, and at various times of the year, many more pass through on their migratory routes. Nearly 30 species of cetaceans (dolphins and whales) have been observed, with 18 species listed as residents. Pacific gray whales migrate during the months of December through March,



Beams of sunlight shine through the canopy of a forest of giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*), Catalina Island

whale watching cruises, specifically to search out these majestic creatures.

A few years back I had the pleasure of watching a humpback whale in the Santa Barbara Channel while returning from a

dive trip. The whale was leaping out of the water, in a behavior known as breaching, at seemingly regular intervals. As we waited for its next breach and tried to estimate where it might reappear, the whale advanced much closer



Channel Islands



LEFT TO RIGHT: Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) breaching at Anacapa Island; Large pod of common dolphins (*Delphinus capensis*) off Santa Cruz Island

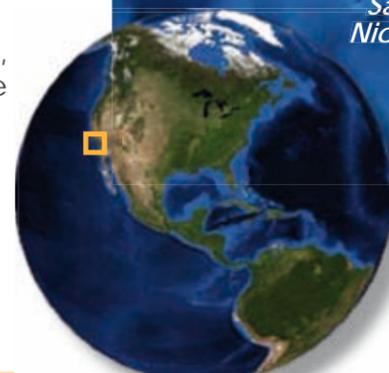
past, Guadalupe fur seals and stellar sea lions also visited the islands, but today, are rarely seen. On the northern most island of San Miguel, hundreds of thousands of pinnipeds gather, breeding at different times of the year, to form one of the largest congregations of wildlife in the world.

The leeward side of Santa Barbara Island plays host to a rookery of California sea lions. Hundreds of sea lions haul out on the rocks at night to sleep or to laze about in the sun during the day. Pups are born in the spring and learn to swim under the watchful eye of adults in the calm, shallow waters close to shore. By mid-summer, they are graceful swimmers and curious to explore their world. This is a popular dive destination and well worth the trip. Some of my most memorable dives have been at Santa

Barbara Island watching playful sea lions swim circles around me.

Topside adventures

The Channel Islands offer a wide range of activities for non-divers as well. Water-based activities include whale watching, kayaking, boating, fishing, surfing, tide pooling and snorkeling. Camping and hiking are allowed on all of the islands except San Clemente and San Nicolas, which are controlled by the U.S. Navy and off limits to the public, though diving is permitted in the waters around those islands. Limited backcountry camping is allowed on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa. Facilities differ, but most are primitive, so be sure to check on conditions and necessary equipment



Map (above) of Channel Islands of California and their location on the global map of the world (left)

than anticipated. I was able to snap four photos as it breached perhaps 20 yards from the boat and landed with a monstrous splash. Thanks to modern technology, my photos were actually in focus, though much more tightly cropped than I envisioned. To this

day, that is one of my favorite wildlife viewing experiences.

There are four species of pinnipeds (seals and sea lions) at the islands, including the California sea lion, harbor seal, northern elephant seal and the northern fur seal. In years



Detail of green anemone
(*Anthopleura sola*),
Santa Cruz Island

FACT FILE

Southern California's Channel Islands are geographically broken into the Northern and Southern Channel Islands. Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel make up the northern islands, while the southern islands consist of Santa Barbara, Santa Catalina, San Clemente and San Nicolas.

Climate The climate at the islands is similar to the Mediterranean, with cool, wet winters, hot dry summers and moderate temperatures year round. December to March are the coolest months and July to October are the hottest. The majority of the rainfall occurs from November to April, with January and February being the rainiest. May to October is considered the dry season, accounting for only one percent of the annual accumulation. Morning fog is common in the spring and early summer due to the humid ocean air and high nighttime temperatures.

Diving Diving is possible year round at the Channel Islands, however the visibility is typically better from mid-summer through winter.

Websites

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channelislands.noaa.gov
www.ladiver.com
www.truthaquatics.com
www.californiadiveboats.com
www.santabarabara.com
www.sandiego.org
www.discoverlosangeles.com ■

before you go. Hiking trails vary from maintained roads and paths with directional signage to rugged, unmarked, and mountainous. Day hikers need to plan their routes accordingly, to be certain they are back at the dock in time for their boat ride home. In late winter and spring, the islands are usually lush and

alive with wildflowers in full bloom.

Bird watching at the islands can be spectacular. Over 60 species of seabirds winter, feed, nest or migrate through and 99 percent of all Southern California seabirds utilize the islands for nesting and feeding grounds. The islands also play host to the only nesting population of

brown pelicans on the U.S. west coast. Once threatened by pesticides like DDT, the California inhabitants have made a remarkable comeback.

Divers and non-divers alike will appreciate the diversity and beauty of the Channel Islands. ■

Matthew Meier is an underwater photographer and dive writer based in San Diego, California. For more information and to order prints, visit: www.matthew-meierphoto.com

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