Dive Site Interview

Description

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How did you first get into underwater videography?

In 1987 I had the privilege of leading a team of divers to explore Dragonâ??s Breath in Namibia, the largest subterranean lake in the world. It was in this mysteriously magical place that I found â??a world within a worldâ?•, bringing back childhood memories of reading Jules Verneâ??s â??Journey to the Centre on the Earthâ?•.

Here I worked with Gerald Favre, a Swiss filmmaker, who was producing a documentary on the cave. After assisting him with underwater filming and lighting in the challenging cave environment, I was hooked. On my return to Cape Town, I purchased a video camera and housing. As I am a professional diver by trade, I was able to spread my interests in underwater videography between filming pipelines, marine structures etc. to broadcast work.

What are some of the challenges that you face in your industry?

We are competing on an international level. For example, if a production company is looking for a specific sequence, they will contact underwater cameramen worldwide, often better connected and with better facilities than available to South Africans. The uncompetitively high costs of telecommunications in South Africa, including as much as R600 / gigabyte to stream HD video, is a big disadvantage. Hopefully the promised cheap high speed connections will become reality soon.

What makes the South African coast so special to dive in and, for you, film?

Famous British commentator, Sir David Attenborough, said: **â??South Africa is one of the sharkiest coasts on earthâ?•: in his narration for the BBCâ??s â??Shark Coastâ?•.**

The coast of Southern Africa is washed by two mighty ocean currents. On the west coast, the cold Benguela Current flows northwards from the Southern Atlantic Ocean while on the east coast, in the Indian Ocean, part of the South Equatorial Current breaks away to form the tropical Mozambique current and, in turn, this massive volume of water sweeps further south becoming the cooler Agulhas Current. These currents mix in a complex and variable system of giros and eddies off the southern tip of

Africa.

The result of this is an area of unique bio diversity, both marine and terrestrial. The three major marine ecosystems are: cold, temperate and semi-tropical. Furthermore, there are seasonal coastal migrations of certain sharks, marine mammals and birds and seasonal variations in temperature, mainly driven by prevailing winds (up welling) and localized coastal currents (counter currents).

Water temperature, visibility and available nutrients sometimes change rapidly over a relatively small area and vary, not only seasonally but sometimes daily or even hourly. This rapid change in temperature is particularly apparent in the west coast up welling region where the surface water temperature can fluctuate between 8 and 20 degrees Celsius over a relatively short period.

What is it about the sardine run that draws so many people?

The Sardine Run is the meeting place of many marine predators such as sharks, dolphins, whales, seals game fish, birds and humans. The energy of a baitball has to be experienced to be appreciated.

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Thanks to many television documentaries on the subject and in particular the BBCâ??s Emmy Award winning *Blue Planet* released in 2000, the Sardine Run has become popular with recreational and professional divers alike. It can be expensive, there is a risk of a no show, and its hard work but it is always worth the effort. In recent years the biomass of sardines associated with the Sardine Run appears to be on the decrease. While the debate continues as to the cause of this: overfishing or environmental changes, it has altered the dynamics of the Run. Less food for the same amount of predators results in more concentrated, higher energy activity and this is very exciting to witness.

Watch the Sardine Run at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-HPCYiLzgw

Technology is a rapidly changing industry and difficult to keep up with. What equipment are you currently using? and are there products that are outdated by industry standards that you still use because of the unique qualities?

I have a housing for the Sony 900r that is a large format, tape based, full HD camera. It is a classic camera but, fully rigged in housing, weighs 50 kgs so it is expensive to ship but very stable in the water. I also have a collection of smaller cameras and housings, towcams, polecams and other gadgets.

You must have some really cool stories about being underwater. Have there been any close encounters with sharks or any other predators?

Many exciting close encounters. Here are two of my favourites.

The Turtle and the Tiger Sharks

While on a shoot for German Television in Kwa-Zulu Natal, I was discussing how great it would be to have a dead turtle as bait. We had a single tiger shark working actively at the bait drum with the occasional glimpse of others. Then an amazing call came through. A large turtle carcass has been found on the beach close to where we were working. Before long we had the turtle on our boat that smelt as if the â??sell byâ?• date was long past.

Once in the water, a sole tiger shark swam up to the carcass a few times, giving it a tentative bump. Finally it took a bite at a fear flipper and swam off with the carcass. I battled to keep up with the action but got some good close up sequences. In spite of the fact that the carcass was quite old, an impressive volume of blood seeped out of it. This excited the tiger shark that started shaking the turtle, creating the illusion that it was still alive.

The current was strong and, by now, the action was fast. As a result I was unable to position myself correctly and was now up-current of the action. In other words, I was working in the chum slick. I was so engross with the filming I was only vaguely aware that more tiger sharks had arrived. The introduction of turtle blood into the water had a rapid and impressive affect on the sharksâ?? behaviour. The first thing that I noticed that the tiger sharks were turning fast and with purpose back onto us after being pushed away. This reaction was very different to their normally relaxed behaviour.

I felt myself being pushed forward. I was told afterwards by the safety diver that a large tiger shark had my diving cylinder in its mouth. At the same time another shark was taking a great interest in my camera. Not wanting to scratch my expensive glass dome port, I turned the camera around to hit the shark side on. When reviewing the footage later, that movement revealed Mark Addison, my safety diver, kicking and hitting a third shark that was going for both of us. It was impossible to work safely in these condition so, wisely, we made for the boat. My final clip of the sequence was taken by hanging over the side of the boat as a tiger shark swam away with the badly mauled carcass in a cloud of blood.

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The amazing thing about this encounter was that, in the space of a few minutes, one relaxed tiger shark became nine very hyped up tiger sharks. Evidently sardines in a bait drum are rather boring compared to a ripe turtle. During all of the previous days on this shoot we had never had more that a few tiger shark around the bait. How quickly things change when the right stimulus is used.

Watch this turtle sequence at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1mCH5yfHWU

The Brydes Whale and the Sardine Run

Without doubt, the brydes whales were the highlight of my 2009 Sardine Run. While I have filmed them underwater on previous runs, this time they were on most baitballs. Normally timid, they were lunging past me at high speed, at times so close that I could have touched them. While not large by whale standards, having a 25 ton animal charge past you, mouth agape, is an unnerving experience. â??Brydeâ?•, pronounced â??broodaâ?•, is named after the Norwegian consul to South Africa, Johan Bryde, who helped set up the first whaling station in Durban, South Africa in 1908 (closed in the 1960â??s). These whales are interesting in that the northern hemisphere population feed mostly on krill whereas the southern hemisphere whales feed on small shoaling fish, including sardines.

The last day was particularly eventful. The sea water had become very dirty due to river water that had been pushed to the north by the prevailing current. After a slow start we found some action and jumped in. We found a tiny baitball with every predator competing for a mouthful. The sharks were charging through the fish, snapping at everything, there were gannets everywhere and the dolphins were not to be found lacking in enthusiasm either. This intense predation was putting fish scales, blood and guts into the water, thereby contributing to the poor visibility. As the size of the baitball diminished before our eyes, the aggression became more intense. I was hit hard in the leg and stomach by sharks, nearly loosing my camera. In the meantime, my safety diver was fending off sharks that were attacking me from all sides. The dusky sharks were the most aggressive and also the largest. As we tried to swim

away from the action, so the sardines followed us as if to seek the refuge of our bodies from this onslaught. It was time to get out of the water.

Watch a feeding Brydes whale at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KckmtxjKoAc

Which is your personal favourite underwater animal to film and why?

While filming sharks and whales is exhilarating and exciting, I have a soft spot for Cape Fur Seals that are abundant near Cape Town where I live. They somehow remind me of pet dogs. They can be aggressive and they do have big teeth but, for the most part, they are playful and inquisitive. It is normally a very relaxing and easy dive as the seals come to the camera and perform on cue.

I love it when seals outsmart white sharks that they often do due to their manoeuvrability and intelligence. When hunting seals, the white sharkâ??s strategy is to use the elements of surprise and speed. However, if the seal spots the shark in time, it can position itself behind the shark and tailgate it until it is close enough to the island to take the gap.

Watch seals at play at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9cqNmAiPYU

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You have dived all over the world and seen some of the worlds most spectacular dive sites. Where is your favourite dive spot both locally and internationally?

I enjoyed the Red Sea and the Maldives but I was in both areas many years ago, before they became so commercialised. However, in the end, the sight of Table Mountain and the ever exciting False Bay and Cape Point will always remain close to my heart. Kwa-Zulu Natal and Mozambique also have a lot to offer with big tiger sharks, whale sharks, mantas and much more.

Watch South Africaâ??s marine biodiversity at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uz8xVW4YKqc

What advise would you give aspiring underwater videographers trying to break into the industry?

Buy an inexpensive camera and spend many hours underwater.

There are a lot of people who are fighting for shark conservation and trying to change the image portrayed by Hollywood of sharks. Have you noticed a significant decrease in the shark population worldwide.

It is a known fact that shark numbers have decreased worldwide. In some areas this is of great concern. Long lining and shark finning are two obvious culprits. South Africa pioneered white shark protection and, as a result, we have a healthy white shark population and the same goes for whale sharks. However, both illegal and legal shark fishing continues in South Africa. Sharks grow and reproduce slowly and require more strict protection than, for example, pelagic fish. I have been told that a large white shark jaw can be sold for up to US$50,000 on the black market.

Video has come leaps and bounds with the introduction of High Definition video. Have you filmed in High Definition and when are we going to see 3D underwater videography?

Everything is High Definition widescreen now. The only debate is the specifications of broadcast HD. A lot depends on bit rate (compression) and colour space (4:2:0 or 4:2:2 etc). You can buy a â??High Definitionâ?• consumer camera for under R10,000 now but, although it may look good on your plasma television set at home, it is not true HD and may present problems when colour grading and editing. If the cheap cameras were true HD, why would anyone spend R500,000 on a camera? However, these small cameras are great for special shots and can be used for about 10% of the total production running time.

3D underwater is definitely on the way. Watch this space!

What are the challenges you face as and underwater videographer?

To keep up with technology without wasting money on each new gimmick available. Good product research is important.

Safety is also an issue, especially when working with sharks and whales.

Keep enjoying the job however long you have been doing it.

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Tiger Shark Attacks Turtle

Brydes Whale Feeds on Sardines

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Date Created
July 1, 2022
Author
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