

Reflecting

the underwater world

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Delicate, strong and unique, the seahorse is a symbol of patience, persistence and friendliness. According to photographer Pete Bullen, it is also those same characteristics that are needed to photograph the silent, slow moving creatures. "Finding them is always a challenge" he says. "The technical difficulties also keep me on my toes and frequently the little animals don't pose well. If they feel threatened they will play dead and flop onto the sand or turn their backs."

To help him overcome those technical difficulties, Pete shoots with several Olympus Micro Four Thirds cameras, his current favourite being the OMD E-M5 whose low light/high ISO performance he finds perfect for underwater use. Switching between four lenses, the process of underwater photography is rigorously planned sometimes days ahead.

"It's rare that I go into the water without a plan. I can't change lenses underwater so I have to decide at the start of the day, if not several days earlier, what and how I'm going to shoot, whether I want wide angle, fisheye, macro, super macro. The choice of lighting is equally crucial and as any diver will tell you on top of all that, we have to plan the dive itself too."

There's also a fair amount of stamina and skill required to photograph seahorses. Once the equipment, issues with lighting and planning the dive itself are organised it's then a matter of finding seahorses whose habits, in many ways, are still rather mysterious.

"There are still a lot of unknowns about them and they are a difficult animal to study in the wild", says Pete. "One of the challenges they face is that their ideal shallow, sandy bottom habitat is also perfect yacht anchorage and they frequently have their habitat invaded by anchors and chains. The biggest challenge I have when visiting and photographing them is not to be spotted and then surrounded by loads of holiday divers with poor dive skills who can represent a massive threat to the seahorses with careless fins."

The seahorses in Pete's photographs are beautiful and undisturbed in their environment. The fact that Pete can capture any at all is amazing given that seahorses in Gozo are under strict protection under CITES international law. For example, it is illegal to touch, harass or photograph a seahorse using

Shot beneath the waters of the tiny Mediterranean island of Gozo, in the Maltese archipelago, this series reveals a surreal, otherworldly environment and celebrates one of its tiniest and most elusive creatures; the seahorse. Photographer Pete Bullen reveals his passion for underwater photography and the challenges involved in photographing the seahorse in its natural habitat.

a flashlight, which can cause them stress and affect their immune system. This means that Pete can only rely on ambient natural light underwater.

"The water itself is not a friendly environment. It doesn't transmit light well" he explains. "The extremes of light can often be a challenge, particularly in wide-angle work. It's not uncommon to have very deep shadow areas, bright sunlight and very blue ambient light all in the same frame so, balancing exposures is far harder than on land."

Thanks to Pete's research, experience and understanding of the seahorses, which he says equates to a degree in marine biology, he has developed a method to find and photograph seahorses without disrupting their natural habitat, managing to read their body language and behaviour to anticipate how to get the next shot.

"As all nature photographers will tell you, patience is the key to good shots", Pete says. "Seahorses tend to be very territorial so, if I know where one was yesterday there is a good chance I'll find it again tomorrow. What I won't do is touch or move the animal or, if it's hiding under some weed, remove it to give me better light. There will always be another day when the light is better or I can spend more time waiting for it to get brave and come out from its hiding place."

Pete's passion for photography started at the young age of six, when he took his first photograph of a snowy scene in front of him. Since then, his drive to capture beautiful imagery hasn't dimmed, but making a living out of his passion has proven to be a challenge. As well as being a photographer, Pete also teaches the skill, guiding and coaching students in all aspects of underwater and land based photography.

"By teaching others underwater photography I feel like I'm passing on my experience and I love seeing former students succeeding with their shots", he says.

"I try to reflect my love for the underwater world with my photographs. It's a special place and even after nearly twenty years diving I still get a massive thrill every dive."

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portfolio

The Seahorse Series

Photographed in Gozo by specialist underwater photographer Pete Bullen, this inspiring and intimate series of images captures the grace and beauty of the elusive seahorse in its natural environment. Endangered and strictly protected, the seahorse is one of the underwater world's rarest and most fragile treasures. Although different in every way, it shares its beauty with the elegance of all that is equine.

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