

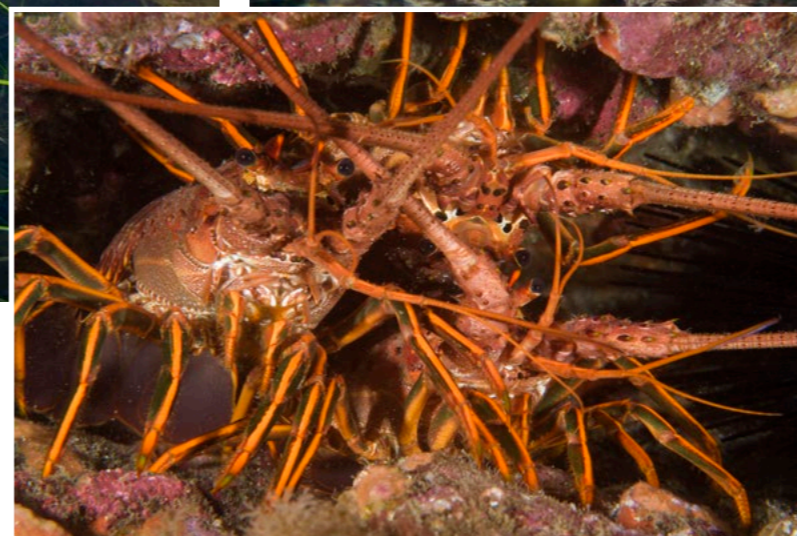


Lockdown Local Diving

— *Dives Found in Contributors' Backyards*

Text and photos by Andrey Bizyukin, Larry Cohen, Brent Durand, Dmitry Efremychev, Jennifer Idol, Kate Jonker, Matthew Meier, Pete Mesley, Don Silcock, Olga Torrey and Martin Voeller

As many divers face travel restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic, our contributors highlight the often overlooked or unsung yet intriguing diving that can be found in one's own backyard. *X-Ray Mag* contributors share their favorite local haunts—from a spring-fed Texan lake to a quarry and a sinkhole in Russia to the temperate waters off New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, New Jersey and Northern California to the subtropical waters of Southern California and Sydney, Australia—where they captured compelling underwater images.



School of opaleye and garibaldi among sea grass and feather boa kelp. PREVIOUS PAGE: School of juvenile seniorita fish in the kelp and sea grass beds

Bat Ray Cove, San Clemente Island, California, USA

Text and photos by Matthew Meier

Thankfully, local diving is still possible during the pandemic, and while this dive site requires boat access, it is still one of my favorites. San Clemente Island is located off southern California and is controlled by the US military. As such, it is not always accessible, but when conditions allow, it offers spectacular diving. Bat Ray Cove has a multitude of underwater topographies, which make it possible to dive this site repeatedly. I once spent two full days here, without moving anchor, and never ran out of things to shoot.

There is a shallow sea grass bed up against the island, which transitions into feather boa kelp, and ultimately, a giant kelp forest anchored in only 40ft (12m) of water. In the shallows, you can find leopard sharks, schools of juvenile seniorita fish, opaleye and garibaldi.

Soupin (tope) sharks can be seen swimming in the shallows and among the giant kelp, along with schools of blacksmith and jack mackerels. California sea lions will swoop through intermittently, and the occasional harbor seal will play peak-a-boo in the kelp.

Under the boat is a sandy bottom where angel sharks, stingrays and the namesake bat rays bury themselves. Adjacent to the kelp forest is a rocky reef wall, which is covered in fascinating marine life. Here, you will find moray eels, California spiny lobster, anemones, rock scallops, sea stars, blennies and kelp rockfish. We were even lucky enough to have a giant sea bass hang out under the boat one afternoon. These behemoths once faced local extinction, but conservation efforts, which have protected them from commercial and sport fishing since 1982, have helped to rebuild the population. It is always a thrill to swim next to a fish that can grow up to 8ft (2.5m) long and weigh as much as 500lbs (227kg). Visit: MatthewMeierPhoto.com



Portrait of a giant sea bass (above); Three California spiny lobsters hiding in the rocky reef (center inset); Leopard shark swimming in the shallows (top right); Bat ray swimming along the edge of the kelp forest (upper right); Soupin or tope shark swimming over kelp in shallow water (bottom right)





THIS PAGE: Underwater views in a dolomite quarry near the town of Shchelkovo in Russia

Dolomite Quarry, Shchelkovo, Russia

Text and photos by Andrey Bizyukin

Moscow during the pandemic: All the shops, restaurants, night-clubs—everything is operating, but there is no way to fly out of here to dive in distant lands. The borders are closed. What can a withering diver do in the capital? Out of despair, my dive friends Andrey Loginov and Alexander Nyrov and I began traveling to nearby lakes in search of new dive sites. A dolomite quarry near the town of Shchelkovo, just 20km from the capital, immediately caught our attention.

Here we found clear waters, good visibility, lush seaweed on the bottom, large colonies of Spongillidae green sponge (which is known to be an excellent water purifier), and an underwater forest with trees abundantly covered with shells. With comfortable diving depths of 5 to 7m, we were able to see and enjoy all these beauties found in this freshwater underwater world. The water temperature was 6 to 8°C, and the dive time was about one hour. For this dive, drysuits are recommended.



Compared to what one may find in tropical seas, this quarry had a completely different underwater landscape but still an interesting one, exciting enough for divers who have no place to go yet. If you are bored looking at your four walls in Moscow during the pandemic, we say, "Welcome, let's go diving together!" Please visit: xray-mag.com/contributors/AndreyBizyukin

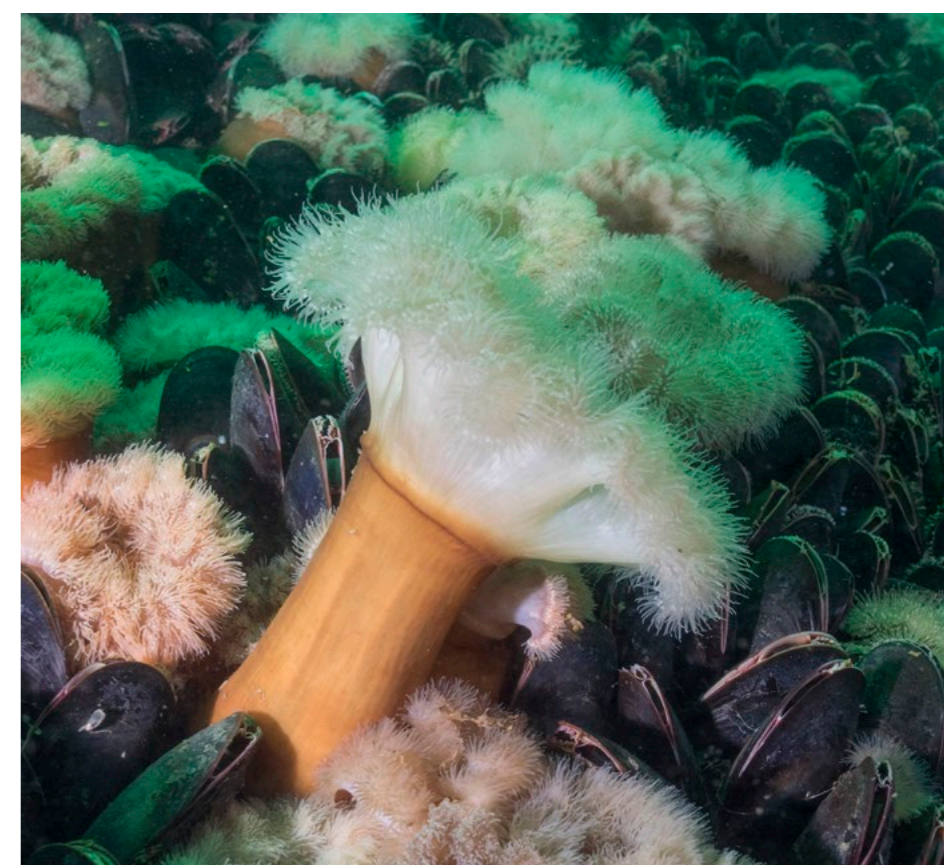
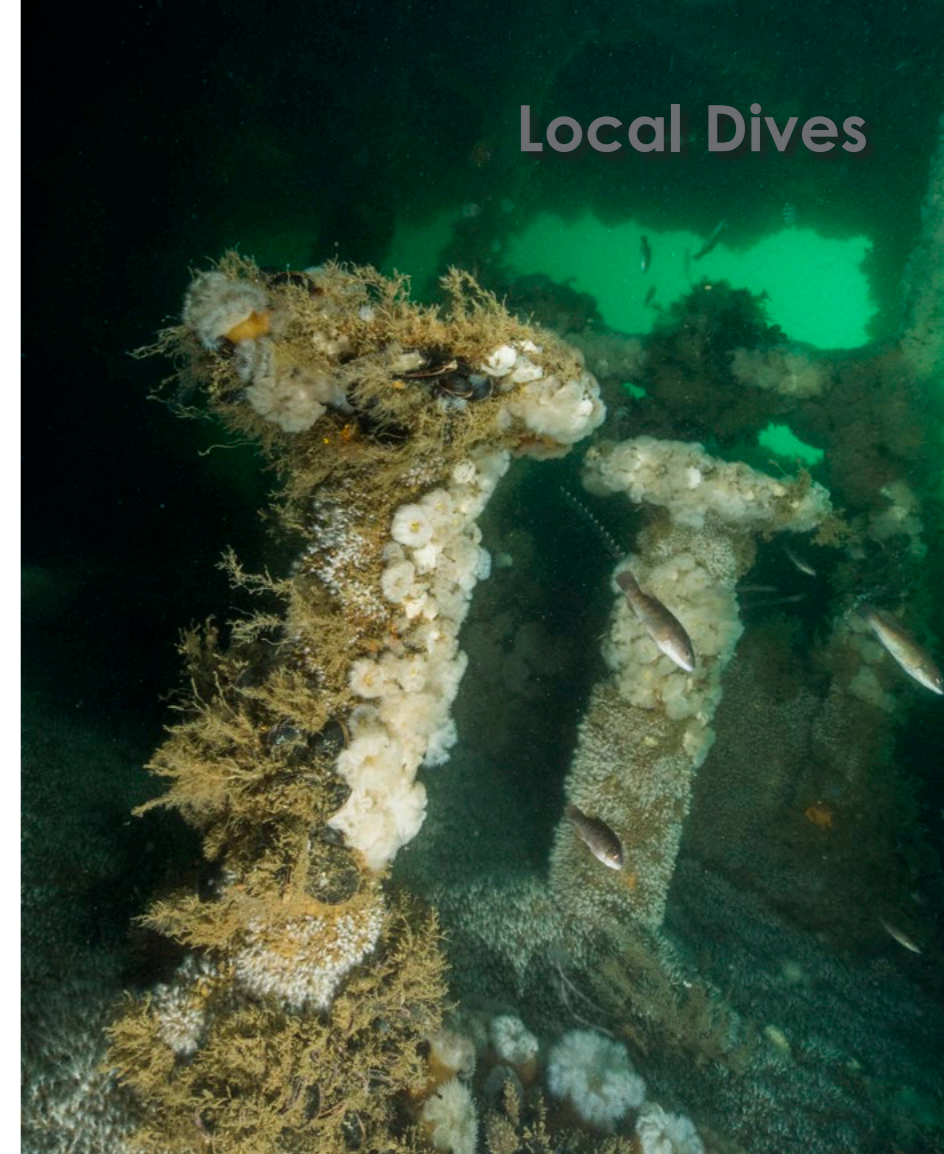
At the dolomite quarry in Shchelkovo, Russia, one will find clear waters, good visibility, lush seaweed, colonies of green sponge and a submerged forest of shell-covered trees.





Diver Olga Torrey explores the *Stolt Dagali* (far left); Hatch area inside the *Stolt* (left); Table supports in the crew's dining room (right); Plumose anemones decorate the wreck (bottom right).

Local Dives



area. One of the most popular was the *Stolt Dagali*.

The *Stolt* was a 582ft (~177m) M-class tanker with a 70ft (~21m) beam. Built in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1955, her homeport was Oslo, Norway. On Thanksgiving 26 November 1964, the ship left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and headed to Newark, New

Jersey, with a cargo of vegetable and coconut oil. That night, there was heavy fog, and the Israeli luxury liner SS *Shalom* was heading out for a Caribbean cruise. Around 18mi (~29km) southeast of Manasquan Inlet, the *Shalom's* bow crashed into *Stolt*, slicing the ship's portside at a 45-degree angle and cutting her in half. The 142ft (~43m) stern section is now sitting in 130ft (~40m) of water and comes up to 65ft (~20m). The bow stayed afloat and was refitted onto the MT *C.T. Gogstad*, which was renamed the *Stolt Lady* in 1965.

The wreck starts at a reasonable depth, so it is a great dive for both intermediate and advanced divers. The structure is gargantuan, with an interesting exterior. Advanced divers trained in wreck

penetration will enjoy exploring its interior. In the crew's dining room, at 65ft (~20m), you can still see many table supports that used to hold wooden tables. This interior area has many openings with plenty of light. Deeper in depth and

enclosed, the engine room can be entered.

Before the pandemic, hardcore divers visited the wreck year-round, but the main New Jersey dive season was from April to November. Visibility on the wreck is usually good and can reach 40ft (~12m). The water temperature on the wreck is around 50°F (10°C). In the fall, the Gulf Stream moves closer to the *Stolt*. This is when the temperature is the warmest and visibility is the best. The *Stolt* attracts marine life all year round, but in the fall, we see tropical fish that get caught in the Gulf Stream. One fall, my dive partner Olga Torrey and I were astounded to see a huge barracuda, which had taken residence in the upper section. The *Stolt* is decorated with plumose anemones and is home to lobsters, mussels and scallops, which may make a nice dinner for divers carrying a goody-bag.

We want to travel like most divers. But during this time of lockdowns, we are lucky to have a large assortment of historical wrecks, including the *Stolt Dagali*, close to home. Visit: liquidimagesuw.com

SOURCES: EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 146 BY GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY PHILIP D. MURPHY, NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY SYSTEM, NJSCUBA.NET, SKIPSHISTORIE.NET

The *Stolt Dagali*, New Jersey, USA

Text and photos by Larry Cohen

The coronavirus pandemic kept New Jersey charter boats at dock, but in the middle of May, they were given the go-ahead to run with restrictions. To adhere to social distancing rules, boats were limited to ten people. Booking a spot had to be done online or over the telephone to limit physical interactions. Signs showing 6ft (~2m) spacing between people had to be on the deck, and all enclosed spaces were closed to passengers. With the "new normal" rules, divers in the US Northeast were happy to have transportation to many of the wrecks in the





Gerstle Cove, Sonoma Coast State Park, California, USA

Text and photos by Brent Durand

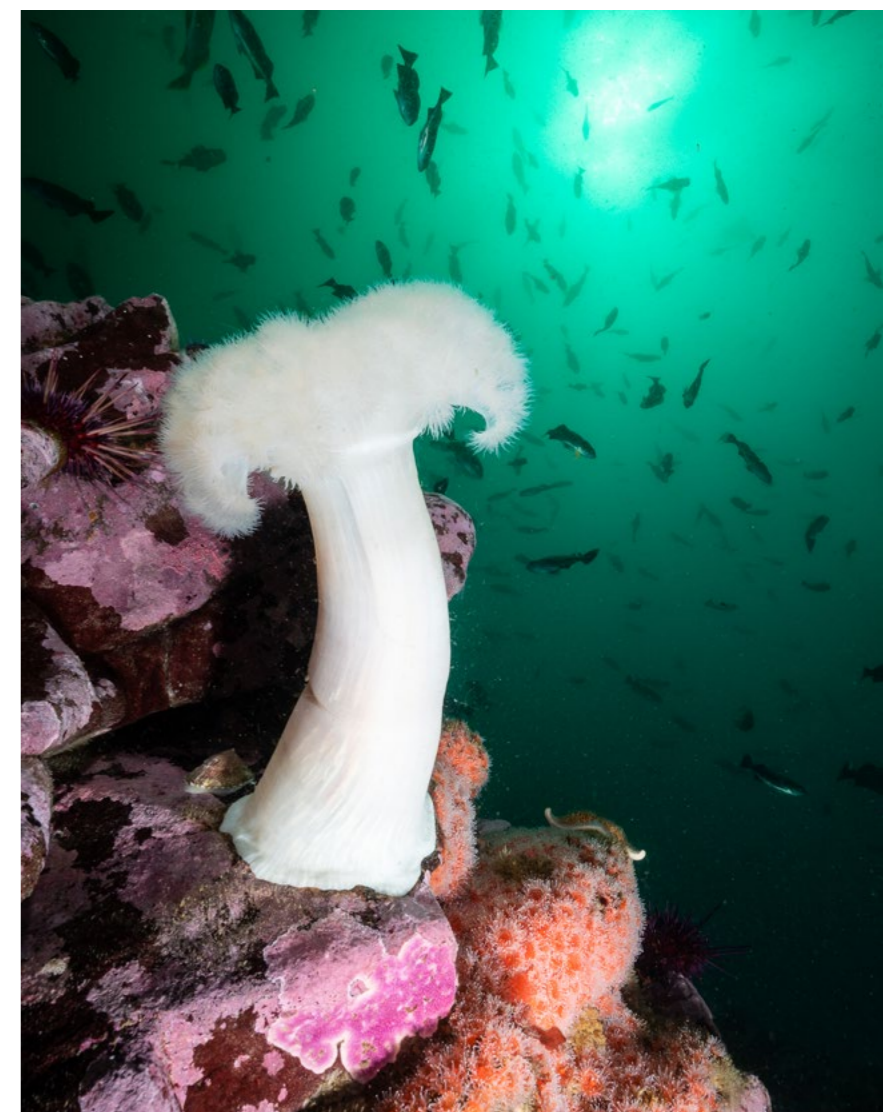
Closures due to COVID-19 have been affecting industries across the world, including scuba diving and dive travel. At home, California closed public beach parking, which kept me, and most divers, out of the water for weeks. I am facing personal challenges like most of us, but I am also very fortunate that once the beaches reopened, I was back out there safely diving as much as usual.

One of my favorite local dive sites is Gerstle Cove in Sonoma Coast State Park. Gerstle Cove is one of the first nice dive sites you will encounter when exploring the Sonoma coast from south to north. The underwater terrain features massive boulders, rocky reefs and submerged pinnacle structures, which you can spend many hours exploring. This rugged terrain is a prelude to the even more impres-

sive dive site topography you find diving farther north in the county and through Mendocino.

Marine life includes lingcod (*Ophiodon elongatus*), cabezon (*Scorpaenichthys marmoratus*), many species of rockfish, giant fish-eating anemones (*Urticina piscivora*), plumose anemones (*Metridium farcimen*) and a healthy assortment of macro life. You can enjoy searching for critters in cracks and swim-throughs, and when keeping an eye out to the green water, look for stellar sea lions and harbor seals.

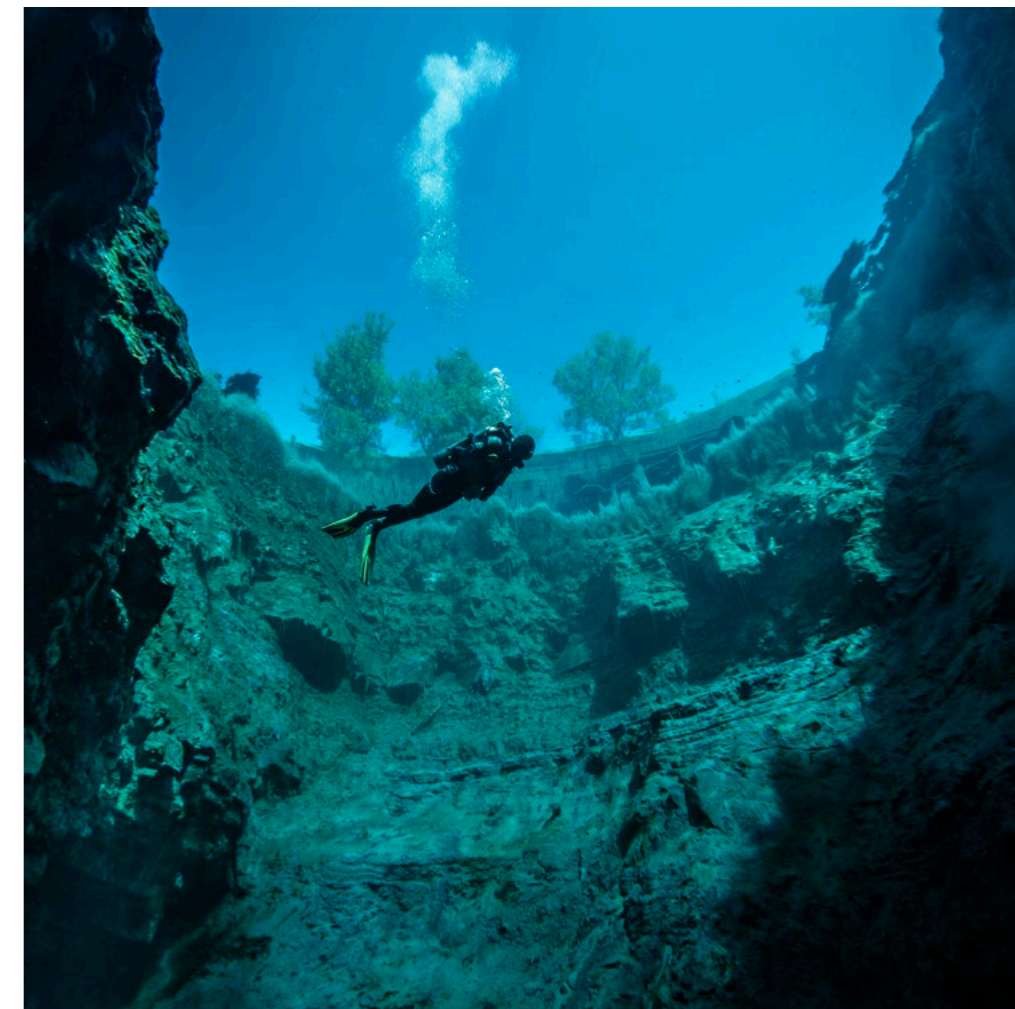
Gerstle Cove has been a marine reserve since 1971, and even though the ecosystem is facing a number of different challenges, the combination of marine life, unique dive terrain and the sense of exploration you inherently feel when diving here make it a dive—or many dives—to remember. Visit: tutorials.brentdurand.com



Fish-eating anemones, or *Urticina piscivora* (above and top center); Pacific sea nettle, or *Chrysaora fuscescens* (top right); Giant plumose anemone, or *Metridium farcimen* (bottom right)



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Blue Lake, a limestone sinkhole near Samara, in the middle of Russia, far from the sea



Blue Lake, Samara, Russia

Text and photos by Dmitry Efremychev

In the beginning of 2020, no diver could ever have imagined that our lives and the global dive community could change so dramatically, and that it would be so difficult to find places to dive. As the coronavirus pandemic broke out all over the world, countries began shutting their borders and the world became closed. A difficult situation developed for active divers, and questions arose about how to find at least some kind of local diving in their regions in order to keep the diving spirit alive.

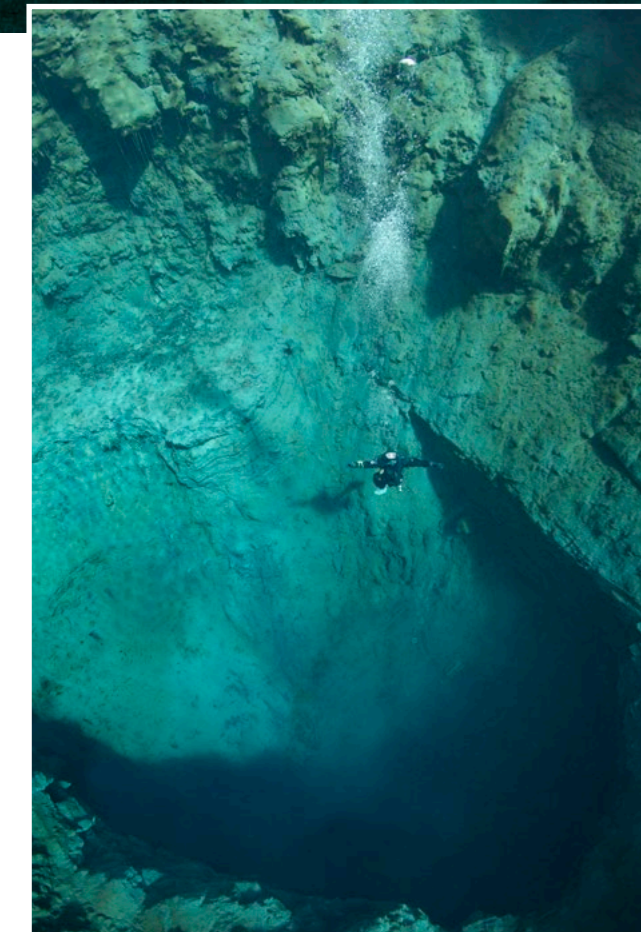
As a dive instructor in Samara, Russia, I was located in what one might call the real "outback," thousands of kilometers away from any sea or ocean. So, I began looking for new dive sites in my own region, and found one just 130km from the city, in the Sergievsky region. Here, I found a very unique little lake, 50m in diameter; it is a limestone sinkhole, 21m in depth, with great visibility and clear blue water.

From the shore, it is easy to see the lake bottom. When you are underwater, looking up at the surface,

you can actually see the faces of people on the shore, because it is so clear. The water in the lake contains hydrogen sulphide, so sometimes you can smell its pungent scent. The lake does not freeze as there is a constant flow of water out of the lake, and the water temperature is only 7°C all year round.

While the lake is called Blue Lake, it is a world of charophyte green algae and various microorganisms live here. Blue Lake has changed over time. At first, it was 18m deep, then the lake bottom collapsed, and its depth became 30m. An underwater cave formed under one of its walls. When the first explorers came to this underwater cave, they saw that the cave opened up and its walls expanded into huge chambers, with great depths. Later, due to the erosion of the lake's opposite wall, the cave collapsed and was filled up.

Reading up on the lake's history and diving there, my fellow divers and I began to understand that the depth of the lake had changed often; it is like it is alive, and at any moment, it will reveal to us more unknown underwater galleries. According to scientists, a very complex and deep underground water system passes through here. Visit: scuba-mafia.ru.

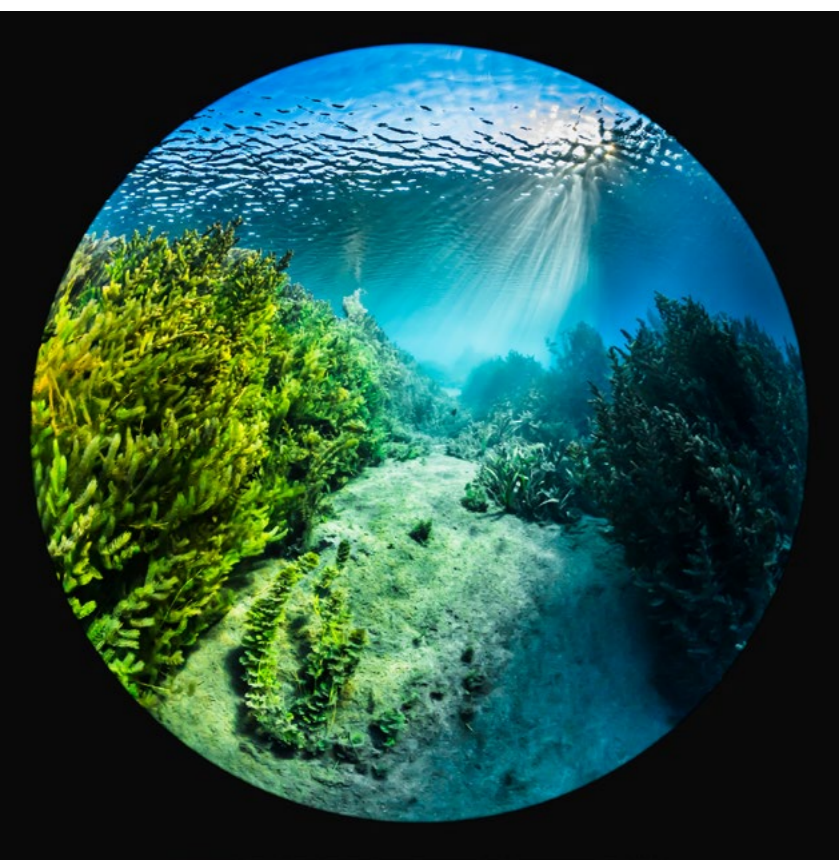




Spotted gar (*Lepisosteus oculatus*) thrive in Spring Lake and can often be found schooling (above).



View of Spring Lake from the dive area (above); The yellow-bellied slider is a water turtle (right). Six species of turtles in Spring Lake hide within the Cabomba vegetative growth.



Heading toward Rio Grande Springs, vegetation surrounds the limestone springheads.

Spring Lake, Texas, USA

Text and photos by Jennifer Idol

Local dive sites can be magical opportunities for exploration and photography. Just a short drive from my home in Central Texas, a very special ecological resource is home to a diverse aquatic ecosystem that includes seven endangered species. Since the time of the Clovis Native Americans, people have been drawn to the pristine waters of Spring Lake, fed by the Edwards Aquifer through limestone springs.

Once known as Aquarena Springs amusement park, Spring Lake is now managed by the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment as part of Texas State University in San Marcos. The site has been designated

a critical habitat and, under the new management, has been restored to its natural state.

Just 15ft (4.5m) deep, the shallow and clear waters provide innumerable types of subjects from macro to fisheye. Among my favorite subjects are turtles and spotted gar, which hide from divers. I prefer to dive in the mornings or evenings to capture angled sun rays in the water column.

As a volunteer diver, I help keep invasive plants, including algae, out of the springs. I enjoy contributing my time to this local body of water while I appreciate its beauty. I have been visiting these springs since my childhood and have enjoyed every state of its evolution, from Ralph the diving pig and the world's longest dive to the educational center and its glass-bottom boats.

Open year round with consistent water temperatures, the possibilities are endless for creating unique photos at the springs. A dam at the southern end keeps the water level constant and

scientific instruments measure the flow of many of the springs.

Divers giant-stride from a floating dock to enter this entirely-other world. Closed for most of the coronavirus outbreak, Spring Lake has finally reopened. I look forward to going home.



For further reading on local diving, I have showcased local waters in my book, *An American Immersion*, a quest in which I became the first woman to dive 50 US states. Please visit: uwDesigner.com



Local Dives



The rock formation that resembles a dog, giving Stone Dog dive site in Gordon's Bay its name (above); Divers leaving Harbour Island in Gordon's Bay, wearing required masks during lockdown (left); Speckled klipfish at Pinnacle dive site in Gordon's Bay (top left); Protea dorid at Stone Dog dive site in Gordon's Bay (bottom left); Dancing maroon-lined flatworm at Stone Dog dive site in Gordon's Bay (below)

Gordon's Bay, South Africa

Text and photos by Kate Jonker

I live in South Africa and in September, we were still in lockdown. When lockdown started on 16 March 2020, we were banned from the beaches. All forms of water sports (including surfing, boating and diving) were prohibited. Six months later, we were given the green light to launch again, and we did our first lockdown dives in Gordon's Bay in mirror-flat, clear blue water.

It was sheer bliss to roll back into the ocean. It was like coming home. As we descended, it felt as if the fish were coming up to greet us. I swam to my favourite spots on the reefs to see if my fish and

nudibranch friends were still there.

The rare protea dorids had grown from just a few millimetres to over a centimetre in length. The soft coral nudibranchs had also quadrupled in size, and despite there being fewer around, egg ribbons adorned the soft corals. Flatworms danced in the gentle surge as they reared up, searching the water column for the scent of a mate or food, or both. With spring just having sprung, I expect to see tiny nudibranch and flatworm babies popping up on the reefs any day now.

As I glided over the reefs, the fish followed me around. Octopuses peered out from their homes under rocks, and cuttlefish rested on their perches, watching us (and the world) go by. It was

interesting to observe the changes on the reefs, something one would not usually notice when diving them every day. The soft corals and sponges had spread and blossomed, and even the false corals had grown.

It was great to be back in the water again, to be lulled by the ocean's gentle hand and to relax to the sound of marine life crackling on the reef. People refer to a "new normal" emerging after lockdown, but for me, this is the normal, and I hope it never changes. Visit:

katejonker.com





The *Canterbury's* Main Operations room and captain's chair (above); Starboard side main deck corridor, encrusted with colourful sponges (right)

HMNZS *Canterbury*, North Island, New Zealand

Text and photos by Pete Mesley

One of the positives to come out of the global pandemic and with 100 percent of my international business just stopping dead in the water, was re-establishing my backyard diving haunts. The diving in New Zealand is without a doubt some of the most underdiscovered temperate diving on the planet. But unfortunately, most of my business has taken me out of the country for much of the year. So, I am pretty lucky to be able to have this at my doorstep.

Probably one of my favourite wreck sites is the Leander-class frigate HMNZS *Canterbury*. This vessel was purposely sunk in 2007 as an artificial reef and wreck diving site for keen "rust heads." This 113m-long warship sits bolt upright in a well-protected cove, in about 36m of water. This makes it one of the best wreck playgrounds in the North Island

of New Zealand. I was lucky enough to dive the wreck quite a bit when she first went down but have not had the opportunity for quite some time to dive her since then. Until recently.

Good mates and slick dive operators Shane Housham and Julia Riddle from Northland Dive play host to taking people out diving *Canterbury* and other amazing sites around the Bay of Islands. We came out of lockdown in May, and one of the first dive trips I did was visiting *Canterbury*. And, what excellent conditions greeted us—some of the best visibility I had ever seen on the wreck! So, that was well appreciated. Since then, I have been back numerous times, teaching advanced wreck penetration programmes and photography workshops. All in all, I cannot really complain, having this wreck site only a few hours' drive away. Visit: lust4rust.co



Canterbury's sonar control room, just forward of the Main Operations room



Aft entry into the gun bay turret area, which housed the 4.5-inch gun



Australian pineapplefish, or *Cleidopus gloriamaris* (left); Hairy striate anglerfish, or *Antennarius striatus* (right); White's seahorse, or *Hippocampus whitei* (below); The public jetty at Clifton Gardens in Chowder Bay, Sydney, Australia (bottom right)



Clifton Gardens, Sydney, Australia

Test and photos by Don Silcock

Like many other divers who like to travel and explore global dive locations, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed my way of life in 2020. All the trips I had carefully planned for this year have been cancelled, I cannot get back to the island of Bali where my wife and I live most of the time, and we are well and truly “hunkered down” here in Sydney!

But inside every challenge, there is usually at least one opportunity; in my case with COVID-19, there have been two! First of all, once the gyms were allowed to open, I have been able to really concentrate on getting fit—no travel excuses now. Secondly, I have rediscovered Sydney diving and developed a “local” dive site in which I am beginning to really understand where to find things. Which means that I can plan images in advance and really finesse specific techniques—something that is rarely possible on most dive trips.

My local site is Clifton Gardens (aka Chowder Bay) in Sydney Harbour and part of one of the most expensive and desirable suburbs in the “Emerald City.” There are a few things that are quite special about CG, as it is often referred to as. Starting with the fact that although water temperatures are quite low, going down to 16°C in winter, the site has a number of exotic critters you would normally associate with warmer waters. Then, there are the White's seahorses (*Hippocampus whitei*) to be found at CG, together with an eclectic mix of other very photogenic subjects like the Australian pineapplefish (*Cleidopus gloriamaris*).

Plus, CG is very easy to dive—there is

a good car park to get kitted up in, and entry is from the sandy beach near the main public jetty. Usual depth is less than 10m, and the only real hazards are fishing lines, plus the resident large stingray, which often appears from nowhere to startle you. Clearly, a playful individual! Visit: indopacificimages.com



Diver Larry Cohen entering the Challenger 600 airplane to take photos of the salon's interior (left); Diver Anna Svanidze descending on the wooden boat (below); Divers Larry Cohen and Gregory Borodiansky descending upon the Challenger 600 airplane (right); Diver Gregory Borodiansky swims over the Cessna aircraft (lower right)



Dutch Springs, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA

Text and photos by Olga Torrey

The 2020 scuba season is very quiet, at best. With the coronavirus pandemic, the world came to a halt, and scuba divers had to find new ways to get wet, work on their skills and continue to learn. While I cannot travel to faraway dive destinations, just 90 miles from my home in New York City is a fantastic playground for divers!

A 50-acre lake, Dutch Springs has attractions at depths of up to 100ft (~31m). Because it is fed by a spring from an underground aquifer, which filters the water through limestone, it has excellent visibility. I like diving the quarry because of its diversity. There are plenty of attractions underwater and on the surface. Dutch Springs has it all: a Challenger 600 jet, a Sikorsky H-37 helicopter, an air force crane and other submerged vehicles, boats and

structures. The pump house, from the time when the site was a working quarry, is now underwater. Platforms have been placed in shallow water for students to perform skills as required by their instructors.

Besides the unique collection of rusty retired modes of transportation and working machinery, the lake is also home to marine life. On most dives, you will encounter largemouth bass, rainbow trout, palomino trout, pumpkinseed sunfish, koi, carp, goldfish, yellow perch, crayfish, freshwater sponges and zebra mussels.

Marine life can be seen in different parts of the lake. Pumpkinseed sunfish, koi, carp and goldfish occupy the pump house. Largemouth bass inhabit the steep walls. Rainbow trout and palomino trout mark their territory around heavy metal, which includes a school bus, silver comet and fire truck. As a photographer,



there is a wealth of subjects to photograph and practice my wide-angle, fish-eye and macro techniques.

The centerpieces of the quarry are the Sikorsky H-37 helicopter and the Challenger 600 airplane. The size and shape of these flying machines are spectacular. These "Big Boys" of the quarry are on display in midwater for the enjoyment of the dive community. Their little brother, the Cessna aircraft, is another

airplane wreck I like to visit. It sits in shallow water, on the top edge of the wall. Largemouth bass live inside the aircraft.

As a child, I dreamed of becoming a pilot and an astronaut.

Dutch Springs gives me the chance to fantasize about flying these aircraft. Sitting in the cockpit, I look out into the green water and see fish instead of birds.

Dutch Springs is normally open from mid-April to mid-November. In 2020, it opened in mid-July due to the pandemic. I enjoy camping on the Dutch Springs



grounds. This year, camping is not permitted. The water temperature at depth is around 50°F (10°C). Even in this cold water, diving Dutch Springs is a warm enjoyable experience. Visit: fitimage.nyc
SOURCE: DUTCHSPRINGS.COM





Shark Scramble, Ito, Japan

Text and photos by Martin Voeller

"Win-win" is a phrase often heard in the business world, meaning an interaction in which all participants can profit in some way. There is a great example of this scenario in the dive community of Ito (Chiba), Japan, namely at the "Ito Diving Service Bommie," where on any given day of the year, congregations of 300 to 400 houndsharks can be seen.

Members of fishing industry in Ito had been faced with an unsolvable problem for a very long time: houndsharks getting caught in fishing nets and devouring the fish, which were intended to be sold at the markets. These houndsharks, as seen from the fishing industry's perspective, were pests, affecting business in a detrimental way—up to 100 sharks would end up daily in the nets.

As all business relationships should be win-win, the local fishing industry and the local dive shop agreed on a deal: Members of the fishing industry would provide the dive shop with bait, and the dive shop would simply set up bait boxes far

away from the fishing nets, so as to lure the sharks towards the bait and away from fish in the nets. As a result, fishing as a business (and the fish caught in the nets) would be protected, and the dive shop could create more business by guiding divers to the dive site now called Shark Scramble.

This site has been my "backyard" of diving over the years. These gluttonous sharks create a tall tower around the bait box, and people now refer to it as the shark tower or "sharknado." It is definitely thrilling and will get your adrenaline rushing as you find yourself in the middle of a feeding-frenzy tornado. Shark Scramble is a unique dive site in its own right, and probably incomparable to any other dive site around the world. Visit: poseidonphotos.com

Banded houndsharks form a "shark tower" around a bait box at the Shark Scramble dive site in Ito, Japan (above); Close-up face shot of a banded houndshark inside a "sharknado" (top center inset); Banded hound sharks forming a "shark tower" around the bait box (center); Banded houndsharks swarming over the ocean floor (top left); Banded houndsharks inside the shark tower (bottom left)

