Flirting With a Blue-Ringed Octopus (Again)

All divers have a sense of adventure, whether it's deep diving, following an underwater cave system or relishing a close encounter with venomous and yet beautiful creatures. Like Elizabeth Cook's and Robert Yin's fascination with the blue-ringed octopus: in the III 2005 issue, they treated us to a graceful story about the perilous beauty of this creature. This story, too, reminds us of the reasons why we travel to all parts of the world to dive and appreciate nature's hazardous bounties. Kapalai is a beautiful, truly graceful place, once described as "a dream suspended between sky and water." It rises unexpectedly, like an illusion out of the Celebes Sea, as one of the islands in Malaysia. The pitched roofs of elegant water chalets sat regally on stilts above turquoise, fish-filled water. As my boat pulled closer, I couldn't help but think, "This is an architect's dream."

Exhilarated by the spectacle, I considered whether I should run up the dock and explore this village on water or simply jump overboard and start my acquaintance with the local fish population. I chose for the more graceful arrival and was helped onto the dock by smiling staff members who gathered my gear and guided me to my chalet.

Nightlife Underwater

Thirty minutes later, geared up and dive lights in hand, the divemaster and I entered the water for a dusk-to-dark check-out dive. We worked our way around a sleepy-eyed crocodile fish submerged on the bottom step of the dock, then gently dropped down a 45-foot (13.7-meter) wall of coral formations, sea fans and coral rubble, all three serving as condominiums for crabs, gobies and dragonets. We paused long enough to pay homage to the mating mandarin fish in their ornate royal colors. We easily identified the males, which are two to three times the size of the females. Four or five females flitted in and out of the rubble; a single male pursued them. It was as though they were playing a game of tag. As the male "tagged" an interested female, the pair raised themselves about a meter (3 feet) in the water column, released eggs and sperm, then quickly returned to the safety of their rubble. We continued past a large, dignified octopus entwined around the top of a large coral head. He seemed undisturbed by our presence. Our dive lights picked out a garish clown frogfish strolling on a red encrusting sponge. As we watched, he attempted to tantalize dinner into striking range. In a onetwo-three motion, he cast his lure, opened his jaws incredibly wide, and snapped them shut. The entire scenario happened so quickly that nearby animals went about their business unruffled. I wasn't sure whether he caught his snack or not. Too soon, the divemaster turned us around, and we headed back to the dock. I had a head full of potential photos for the next morning, and I was finally ready to get some sleep.

The Morning After

At dawn, I folded back the handsome floor-to-ceiling wood shutters that made up the back wall of my chalet. Opening the front door, I felt the warmth as the rising sun poured across the hardwood floor. I worked on my camera and considered the existence of Kapalai, which many years ago was a small island with sparse vegetation. It is part of Ligitan Reef, an extensive reef system bordering the deep Celebes Sea. Over time the island's vegetation has disappeared, and erosion has reduced it to the tiny underwater sandbar it is today. Sometimes, at low tide, one can walk on the island. However, when the tide rises, the submerged sandbar becomes a nursery for baby, blue-spotted ribbontail rays.

My dive buddy arrived via the Celebes Sea, a local liveaboard. We talked about the reefs and marine animals those aboard had seen in recent days. Among other wonders, he mentioned spotting a pair of

mating blue-ringed octopi. The rarity of this sighting didn't register with me. The only thing I remembered about the blue-ringed octopus is that it can be quite deadly. We spent a few days acquainting ourselves with the under-the-dock water life. We also enjoyed boat dives on various nearby reefs surrounding Kapalai. Visits to nearby "Paradise" at Mabul allowed us to photograph sea horses and delight in the exotic collection of shaggy filefish, sea moths, mosaicpatterned snake eels and other unknown muck critters. We passed up the opportunity to go to nearby Sipadan, with its magnificent turtles, jacks and barracuda, only because we'd spent many dives there on previous trips. Instead, we chose "The Platform," which is more properly known as Seaventures Resort, a cleaned-up oil platform refurbished for divers. The Platform offered its own unique bounty, including yellow frogfish the size of my head and elegant batfish posing inside a submerged superstructure.

A Deadly Visitor

Several days into our diving, my dive buddy discovered another blue-ringed octopus. He was elated. With vigorous hand signals, he encouraged me to get close, and even closer, to this venomous little creature. The goal, which I clearly understood, was to use me as a human yardstick and place my head next to this tiny octopus. I obliged and studied the little 6-inch / 15-cm sprite tap-tapping with its arms, seeking small crustaceans and fish in the cracks of the rubble. As blue-ringed octopuses are noted for being extremely toxic (although not aggressive), I paid close attention to its movement, speed and agility: I respect the animal's potential deadliness. My friend captured several shots of the octopus before it slithered into a crevice. Later, my buddy told me that in 40 years of diving, with thousands of dives under his weight belt, he had only had a handful of encounters with the blue-ringed octopus. As I listened to him, I thought that I might never see this animal again.

A Romantic Opportunity

As the days passed, I gravitated more and more toward diving the slope of rubble under the pier, leaving the boats and time schedules to others. I decided it was time to photograph the lovely and challenging mandarin fish. I gathered my camera and cruised down the slope to the "Mandarin Palace." I selected a spot and arranged my head in a small nook at the base of a large coral. With all my senses tuned towards my objective, I concentrated, trying to get a close shot of mandarin fish as they danced up from the scattered rubble. After a few shots and relentless vigilance, I saw a flitting, gliding motion at the edge of my mask. Still, I focused on the mandarins, ignoring the distraction. Again, I saw the flitting, and, again I ignored it. It moved downward on my peripheral radar. Irritated, I turned to wave it away. My head pulled back. Surprised, I saw a tiny octopus covered with brilliant, pulsating blue rings.

I nearly seized up with excitement. I shifted my camera to the octopus. With shaky hands, I adjusted my strobes, all the while tracking the octopus out of the corner of my eye. I lowered my head to the viewfinder, focused, and then snapped my head back and stared, wildeyed, over the camera. I was not only looking at one blueringed octopus, but two! They seemed deeply in love; the male was securely wrapped around the mantle of the female. My heartbeat quickened. My mind was dumping all the photographic know-how it contains in one huge load. How much film did I have? Were my strobes at the right angle? Have they re-cycled? What f-stop was I on? Did I have the little beasties in focus? Almost reflexively, I fired and impatiently forced myself to let the strobes re-cycle between shots – the longest seconds in my life. One, two, three shots. The blue-rings stayed with me. "One more shot, just one more," I prayed. "Ack! Come out from behind that rock!" I said to myself, but wishing for the creatures to move.

Unbelievably, they glided directly toward me, then warily jettisoned to the side. I fired again and got one last chance before they slipped into a tiny cavern guarded by a curtain of mandarin fish. With a sense of

certainty and satisfaction that at least one of the shots will be good, I breathed deeply and finned backward away from the rubble. Upon surfacing, I couldn't wait to share my good fortune with my dive buddy who surfaced nearby. He and the divemaster didn't even wait for me to finish; they just wanted to know where the octopi were. And they went back into the water, practically before they snapped the backs of their housings into place. Sad to say, they never discovered the mating pair or even another single, blue-ringed octopus again during our stay. Several months later, I reflected on my experiences at lovely Kapalai. It was hard to remember precisely all 38 of the dives that I had enjoyed. At times though, I remembered the excitement of my discovery that day. But honestly, I couldn't see the mating octopi in my mind's eye. Could the elegant magic of Kapalai have created an illusion in my mind? To reassure myself, I pulled out my slides one more time.

Safety Tips for Underwater Photographers

- Remember to breathe. Always practice the "golden rule" of scuba diving: never hold your breath. Holding your breath can cause serious and even lethal lung overexpansion injuries.
- Master buoyancy skills: From a purely practical perspective, excellent buoyancy skills are critical to a photographer. Suspending yourself above a reef keeps you from damaging your camera, the reef and animals such as nudibranchs, anemones and other slow movers. Good buoyancy also ensures your fins aren't stirring up the sand, irritating other photographers and adding backscatter to your photos.
- Watch task-loading: Underwater photography is probably the most challenging type of photography. Because mistakes can kill you underwater, divers need to be completely comfortable with their diving skills before they take on the added weight of camera gear and the extra thinking and distractions that come with it.
- Check yourself: Make checking your gauges an even more regular habit. Set yourself a firm air limit and honor it. When your air reaches 500 psi, that's when the whale shark will appear. It takes real discipline to establish a limit and stick to it. But your life and that of your dive buddy could depend on it.