

Crocodile fish, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/2.8, 1/80sec, ISO 80
Natural Light

UNDERWATER INTERACTIONS

If you would like to try your hand at underwater photography, but have been unsure if it is for you, underwater wildlife photographer, **JAMIE HALL**, explains some helpful diving etiquette and useful techniques to ease you into the great blue yonder.

Underwater Interactions

When shooting underwater, not unlike other areas of wildlife photography, there are a few considerations that will greatly improve your encounters and ultimately your images. They are; patience, persistence and knowledge. Marine life is hugely diverse, from the largest fish in the ocean, the whale shark has been known to reach a staggering eighteen metres (60 ft), to the tiniest little sea spiders, nudibranch

A rebreather is a breathing apparatus that absorbs the carbon dioxide of a user's exhaled breath to permit the rebreathing (recycling) of the substantially unused oxygen.

and isopods (which are often only 1-2mm in size). Whether you are in the presence of a king of the ocean, or one of its smallest residents, each species responds differently to humans and their interactions.



Feathertail stingray, Hurghada, Egypt
 Canon G16 with fixed lens
 f/4, 1/320sec, ISO 80
 Natural Light

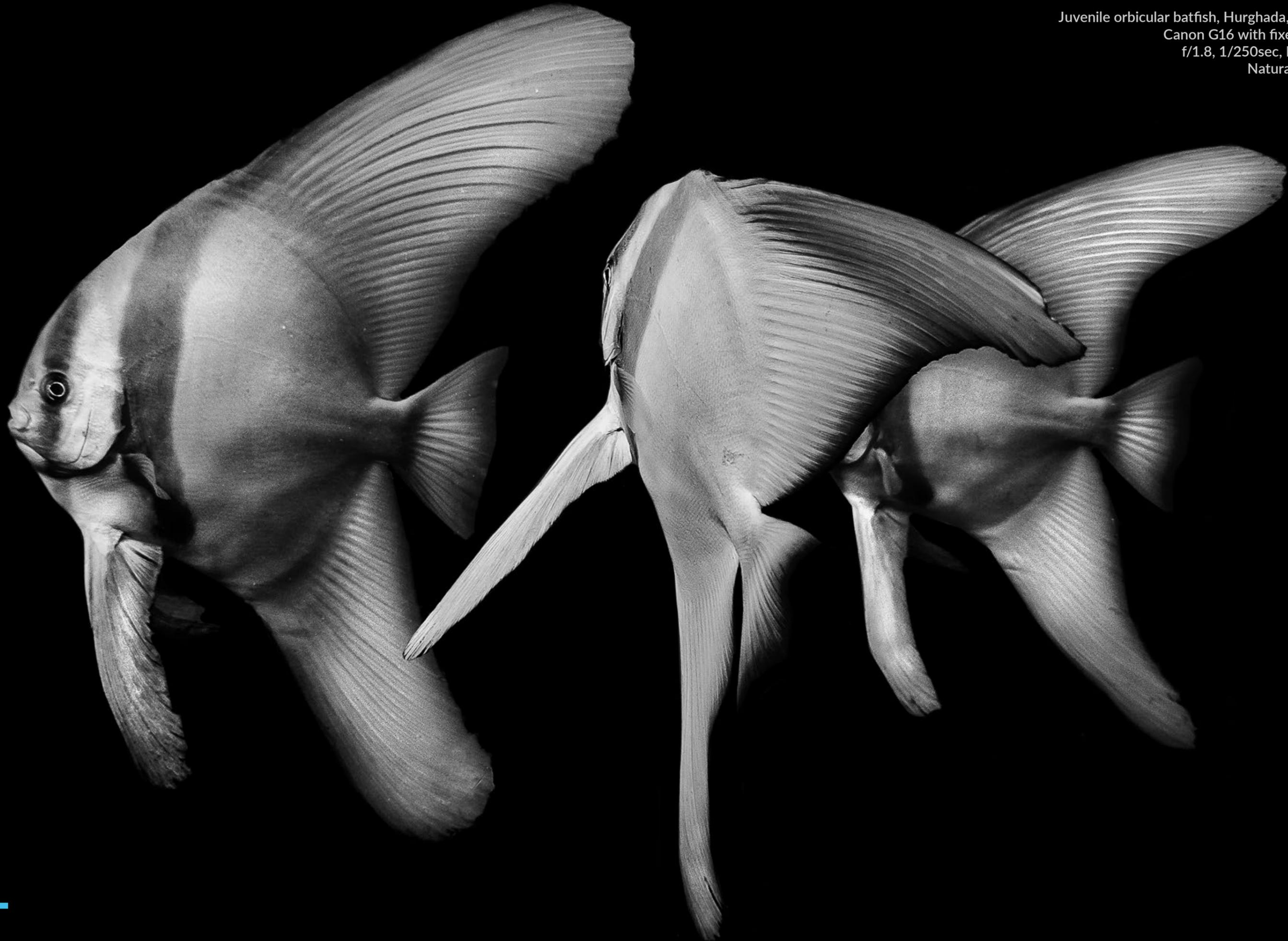
Whilst scuba diving, one element that can cause issues, when getting close to your subject, is the bubbles your equipment creates. Many small-to-medium-size fish are quite deterred by the air expelled from your regulator (mouthpiece). Ninety-nine percent of the time your bubbles travel straight up at a moderate pace, but there are places in the world where currents are so strong that your bubbles actually travel sideways and, even more scarily, downwards. There are dive sites in places like Galápagos (generally considered one of the best places in the

world to dive) and Komodo, for example, where the strong ocean currents will hit huge underwater walls with such pace that the current flow 'splits'. Many current splits will push to the left, or right, of an obstacle, but with the right obstruction and force, some currents are forced down into the depths of the dark ocean. This is obviously very dangerous and requires a huge level of local knowledge, skill and care to navigate.

Bubbles can interfere with your photography equipment as well. If you are low to the ground with your face

pressed up against the camera, the regulator itself can prove to be a pain; a bit like having a huge child's dummy hanging out of your mouth while you're trying to shoot. The bubbles that expel when exhaling can also interfere with your camera housing and rig, causing unwanted camera shake. Similar problems can occur if you are shooting out 'into the blue' with no visible surfaces, floors, walls or ceilings, but out into the open sea. This is one of my absolute favourite places to be. In the vast blue nothingness you ▶▶

Juvenile orbicular batfish, Hurghada, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/1.8, 1/250sec, ISO 80
Natural Light



▶▶ can feel very small, but it certainly helps you to realise some of the unfathomable vastness of the earth's oceans.

Out in the big blue you can face other challenges. On more than a few occasions, I have found that other divers, or photographers, are

directly below me. Not only does this mean their bubbles interfere with your shots as they make their way into your frame, but they can quite literally cause you to ascend as they hit your body and equipment. This can make you lose your position and composition but, in addition, you now

need to quickly readjust your equipment to compensate for your added buoyancy and shallower depth. This isn't hugely common, but sometimes overexcited or less experienced divers are not as aware of what's going on around them. They can be very focused on the subject and not a lot else.

One of the ways to avoid issues involving bubbles is to simply dive without them. Many places where you are able to dive with bigger marine species, such as orca or humpback whales, have local laws which dictate that scuba diving, specifically, is not allowed. As a result, many professional and accomplished underwater photographers choose to freedive, whether scuba is permitted or not. Freediving is when you dive

Some critters are never really aware of your presence, which makes capturing them much less of a challenge.

with no self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (scuba) equipment, instead relying on breath-holding. Some of the best in their field are averaging over four-to-five-minute breath-holds regularly and diving down to depths up to and beyond fifty meters - an amazing feat of human ability and one that, unfortunately, I have not yet achieved but that I am always striving to improve.

Another way to minimise bubble interference is with a rebreather, although this is pretty advanced diving. A rebreather is a breathing apparatus that absorbs the carbon dioxide of a user's exhaled breath to permit the rebreathing (recycling) of the substantially unused oxygen. ▶▶

Spotbase burrfish, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/2.8, 1/320sec, ISO 125



▶▶ The apparatus adds additional oxygen to replenish the amount metabolised by the user. Having no bubbles means that ultimately you are causing less disturbance and having less effect on the wildlife around you. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, this is going to allow you to have a closer encounter with marine life. I guess it could be compared to having a silent shutter on a new mirrorless camera, rather than a classic DSLR with a moving and audible part. I do some freediving and have got some great shots thanks to the lack of bubble intrusion, although I predominantly dive on scuba.

More often than not, my bubbles are giving away my position so, in order to get close to subjects, patience coupled with slow, calm movements are needed. I feel like a lot of underwater photography is a stealth mission, creeping up inch-by-inch, so as not to startle the creatures.

Some critters are never really aware of your presence, which makes capturing them much less of a challenge. Nudibranch (sea slugs), for example, are a favourite of underwater photographers. Not only do they come in a huge range of vibrant and elaborate colours and are stunning to look at, but they are slow-moving and rarely startled or

affected by your proximity to them.

In contrast, many sharks, fish, or other larger mammals, are easily spooked by the proximity of divers. There is a common practice of divemasters and guides 'alerting' other divers through sound when there is something exciting to see. Your voice doesn't travel very far at all underwater and you can't clap or whistle, so many divers carry something that is easily audible underwater. The most common things used are an underwater rattle, a type of 'horn' that uses air from your tank to make a sort of duck-like quacking or squeaking sound. Alternatively, anything small and metallic which can be banged against the scuba tank works and is often the go-to.

Used very sparingly, or in emergency situations, these can be important tools for scuba diving, but often these are used to excess and become the very things that scare away the objects

of interest that the guide was trying to draw a companion's attention to. This is especially the case with sharks. Nothing ruins a quiet, drifting dive than a dive guide banging away on their tank.

If you're lucky and a shark comes out of the blue, the best way to alert other drivers is to calmly point, or make small motions or gestures. This is the only way I will alert divers to the presence of a shark. If you are looking elsewhere, or miss the gestures, I am sorry to say that you may have missed your chance! It is important to constantly be aware of everything all around you whilst ▶▶

If you want to have a close-up encounter with a shark, you need to be calm, make no sudden movements and no sounds.

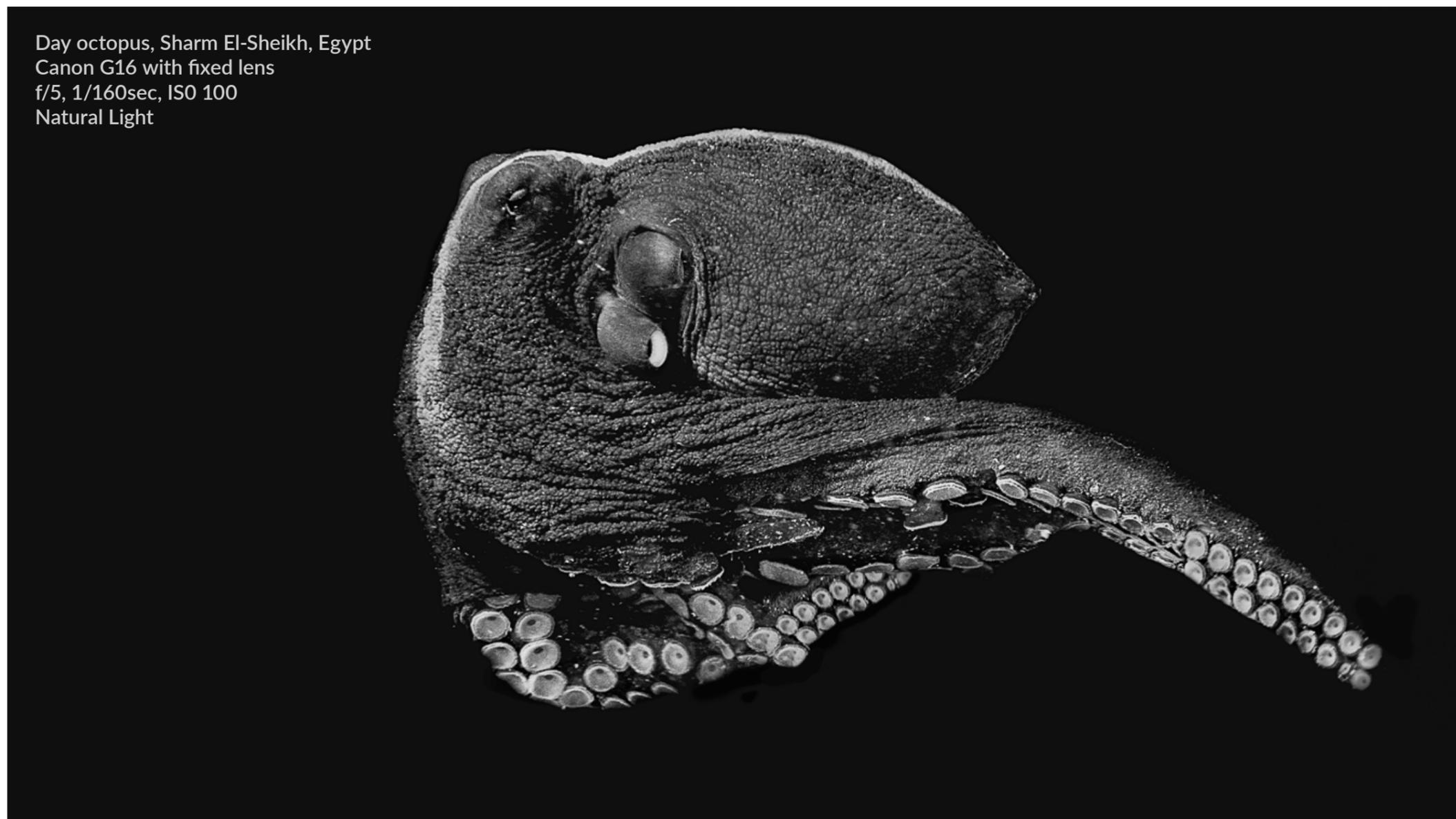
Hawksbill turtle, Hurghada, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/5.6, 1/200sec, ISO 80
External Flash



▶ diving. If you want to have a close-up encounter with a shark, you need to be calm, make no sudden movements and no sounds. This applies directly when trying to get close-up images of the more timid sea life.

There is a dive site in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, behind one of the main reefs where the currents are strong and the waves are rough. A couple of times a month (if you're lucky), there is a day that is beautiful and calm enough to venture to the far side of the reef. This is considered a 'blue water' dive; an all-or-nothing dive. The reason to come here is for hammerhead sharks. There is not much reef to speak of and it is so deep that the blue is the only thing around you, which can be a little disorientating. Hammerhead sharks often sit in strong currents and, at this site, they are generally found quite deep at about seventy to one-hundred metres, or more (much deeper than standard recreational diving limits of forty metres).

It is a gamble dive though. Maybe you will see the hammerheads, or maybe you might have a thirty minute dive barely seeing a single fish, but that is all part of the excitement. As with many aspects of photography, if you're not putting yourself in those situations and taking those risks where you might not see anything, you are not giving yourself the chance for those special encounters. Most seasoned divers and photographers will opt for these



Day octopus, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/5, 1/160sec, ISO 100
Natural Light

dives when possible as, in general, there is no higher prize than seeing a shark. If you enter the water at this dive site in a small group, keeping huddled together, calm and still, the sharks are often able to detect you through the deep electrical signals and, if you are lucky, they will come up from the depths for a closer look. I have seen hammerheads at this site on a few occasions, but unfortunately not had

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one come close enough for one of those fist-pumping shots.

Some of the really large creatures, whales, sharks and manta rays for example, can not only be curious, but actually appear to like the bubbles coming from a diver's equipment. Whale sharks often head towards the big bubble clouds with their mouths wide open. I don't believe there is a conclusive answer as to why, but

it seems likely that they either like the sensation, or believe them to be small schools of fish.

Much of marine life is very curious, but the recipe for success in getting 'that shot' is often the same. Octopus, although quite wary, can often be very inquisitive with divers. When I see an octopus, I will either slowly sink to the floor and remain motionless (making sure there is no possible life or coral that can be harmed below me), or hang in the water hovering perfectly ▶

▶ still. Octopus like small holes and crevices in the rocks. If you are frantic or jumpy, they will likely retreat and you probably will not see them poking their head out again, but if you are calm and slow-moving, they will often start to make their way outside of their den. Seeing an entire octopus, arms and all, has to be one of my favourite encounters on any dive. They have stunning and unique eyes that watch you, trying to figure you out. Those moments when eye contact is shared with any animal, marine or otherwise, is always special to me and those exchanges are one of the biggest reasons why I dive. Capturing these encounters with a camera is such a fulfilling experience and reminds me how fortunate I am to share this natural world with its inhabitants.

Although humans have had some terrible effects on marine life, ecosystems and ocean health, there

are still many places that feel truly wild, thanks to positive action and conservation all over the world. To me, diving gives you an opportunity to feel part of that world. Through experience and knowledge, you can learn the behaviours of these water-dwelling animals and, when you are cool, calm and considerate, you will get experiences that are just not possible with many land-based wildlife encounters.

Under the waves, submerged in the blue, is a beautifully peaceful and quiet place. Most of the time the only sounds you hear are the clicking sounds of the reef, the waves crashing on the rocks overhead and your own breathing, as you slowly inhale and exhale. Like a form of meditation, this tranquility and oneness with marine life is what keeps bringing back divers and underwater photographers to the water time and time again. ●

JAMIE HALL

A full-time scuba dive instructor, Jamie is also a part-time travel and underwater photographer and a passionate ocean conservationist. His aim is to share the beauty of the marine environment and its inhabitants in the hope of improving worldwide ocean health and also through raising awareness and education.



Various, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt
Canon G16 with fixed lens
f/5.6, 1/80sec, ISO 80
External Flash

