



LILY BEACH, MALDIVES
STUART PHILPOTT DISCOVERS
A FIVE-STAR HAVEN FOR
DIVING AND RELAXATION

RED SEA ENDEMIC
LAWSON WOOD DISCUSSES
THE 20% OF CREATURES
UNIQUE TO THE RED SEA

MEDES ISLANDS
WILL APPEYARD FINDS A
THRIVING MARINE HABITAT
THAT IS A MECCA FOR DIVERS

SCUBA DIVER®

TECH: ENTERING THE WORLD OF CLOSED CIRCUIT



In conversation with
**STEPHEN
FRINK**

We chat to the world renowned **underwater photographer**
about some of his most-memorable exploits and life
at the helm of **DAN's Alert Diver** magazine

+ COMPACT V MIRRORLESS ▶ INDONESIA ▶ MONTY'S MUSINGS

SCUBA DIVER ISSUE #97
WWW.DIVERNET.COM

SCUBA DIVER Q&A

STEPHEN FRINK PT I

We chat to Stephen Frink, undoubtedly one of the world's most-frequently published underwater photographers, about some of his most-memorable exploits, and what it is like to be at the helm of DAN's Alert Diver magazine.

Photographs courtesy of Stephen Frink



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Q: As we always do with these Questions and Answer sessions, how did you first get into scuba diving?

A: Accidentally, as is the case with many good things in life. I grew up in Illinois, far away from water. Unless you count the Mississippi River and it's six inches of vis. But, I was a competitive swimmer all the way through college, so all things aquatic had appeal. Especially scuba diving, with that hook planted by watching the exploits of Mike Nelson on the old TV series Sea Hunt. It wasn't a motivating passion though, at least not enough to go get certified until I was in graduate school in California. Each day I drove by the Long Beach Marina on my way to classes I saw a sign. Scuba Duba. I didn't know what they did but I needed a part time job so I stopped in. They were a service that cleaned boats and they did need some help. But, in order to be hired, I had to be a certified scuba diver. I took the course and got the job. I became a scuba diver in 1971 for the 25 cents a linear foot they paid me to scrape the barnacles off boats.

Q: When did you first get into underwater photography? Were you already a land photographer and took your interests with you as you entered the realm of diving?

A: My Master's degree is in Experimental Psychology, but honestly I wasn't all that interested in it by the time I got to graduate school. I'd finished up my course work but was still working on my thesis, which meant I had some time to spare. I enrolled in an elective class in basic photography, with an emphasis on black and white and darkroom work.



Stephen with some of his images

The alchemy of it all intrigued me, working under the amber safelight and seeing a print emerge while gently rocking a tray of Dektol. Photography became my passion and in the year I had left to finish my thesis, I took every photo class they offered.

As a curious aside, my thesis advisor took me aside one day and told me he knew I wasn't into psychology and seemed to be more interested in scuba diving and photography. I still needed a thesis topic and he said he could arrange an interdepartmental program with Dr Don Nelson, who I later found out was a very famous shark researcher. In our interview I asked what he needed his research assistants to do. He said he had a hypothesis that when sharks are poised to attack, they dropped their pectoral fins and arch their backs, and to study this behaviour they were chumming for blue sharks in the open ocean near Catalina. I had the thought that being the guy in the water whose job it was to piss off a shark wasn't all that bright. Of course, I'd do it today, but at the time that seemed a scary prospect. So, instead I studied the effects of 'Acoustic Confusability on Short Term Memory'. After the numbing boredom of that, most any job would have been better.



Stephen with his tools of choice



Blacktip reef sharks

“ I grew up in Illinois, far away from water. Unless you count the Mississippi River and it's six inches of vis ”



Shooting a grouper model

Q: You started in the world of underwater photography way back in the late 1970s, in the days of film cameras and E6 processing, and have seen digital technology from its infancy to where it is now. What have been the biggest changes for you as a professional shooter?

A: My early career was more in the darkroom end of things. After I got out of graduate school I moved to Kona, Hawaii for a while and had a job at night shooting tourists at luaus. I'd take the pictures of a Polynesian model putting leis on the necks of tourist. Someone else would make prints at night. Someone else would have them for sale the next morning in the hotel. That gave me the whole day off so I would go shore diving. By then I had a Nikonos II and a 35mm lens, but no strobe. Your can imagine my photos in the era were pretty monochromatic and miserable, but just taking a camera underwater was a revelation.

We didn't know each other then, but Chris Newbert was in Kona at the same time. He was waiting tables at night and doing underwater photography with his Canon F1 in a housing and Oceanic strobes. He was coming home with the seminal photos that eventually became 'Within a Rainbowed Sea'. I was shooting roll after roll of crap.

Actually, I pretty much dropped out of diving after that. I moved to Colorado and got a job as a custom colour printer at a commercial and advertising photography studio, making large Type C prints. But, a buddy of mine from the swim team who came to dive with me in Hawaii wasn't ready to be done with diving. He moved to Key Largo, Florida and got a job as a salvage diver on the shipwrecks of the 1733 ▶



Hawksbill turtle



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“ I use KUBI Dry Gloves when the water starts to become cold, I find the quality is perfect, the system is easy to use. I have had a long experience with them, and the latex gloves are very nice! ”

Jer Walky, Dive Factory
Belgium

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Spanish Fleet. They were still finding silver on the wrecks at the time and employed grunt divers to go fan sand and hope to locate a coin. I came to Key Largo to visit him in 1978 and looked around the town. No one was renting cameras to the tourists and I also saw an opportunity to process E-6 slide film for them. Underwater photography was a novelty then and for the most part, people didn't own their own cameras and E-6 could be done the same day, unlike the Kodachrome process that had to be mailed away. I met the guys at Ocean Divers and asked them if I could come back and rent a corner of their dive shop for a darkroom and retail counter. They said OK, and by November of 1978 I had moved to Key Largo to give underwater photography a try.

But, that's not the question you asked. You asked about digital technology. That was the watershed moment in underwater imaging, as it provided immediacy of review. I had that in a small way when I was learning underwater photography in Key Largo. Remember that when I moved there it was for camera rentals and film processing. I wasn't a pro shooter. I'd never shot macro or wide angle or even used a strobe underwater, But, I did have the opportunity to dive any time I wanted to with my pals in the local dive industry - Ocean Divers, Quiescence, and Atlantis. So, I could shoot a lot, process my film right away, and learn to

Motorcycle in the Thistlegorm



Split-level shot in the Cayman Islands



do it better the next day. That's what digital brings to the (light) table. You can see it at the point of exposure, and easily study and improve it on the computer screen immediately. RAW photos have far more exposure latitude than slide film, and there is no 'range anxiety' (to use an electric vehicle metaphor). My first serious housed camera was a Sea and Sea for a Bronica C, a 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 format that gave me 12 exposures. 12 exposures on a dive versus the virtually unlimited capacity from a digital capture system. That alone is another huge benefit

I migrated to 35mm film eventually, using EO (Electro Oceanic) connectors on each camera so I could carry three cameras on a dive but only a single strobe that I could wet-connect underwater. But even so, 36 x 3 = 108 exposures isn't much compared to what a digital shooter will get these days. The whole package of immediacy of review, shoot capacity per dive, exposure forgiveness of RAW, and ease of archiving so thoroughly subsumed any value there might be to film. Plus, the ecological waste of film and chemicals was pretty clear to me by having a film processing lab and worrying about what waste might do to the fragile corals offshore. I wasn't the earliest adapter. I give the nod to James Watt for that. But, by 2001, the digital die was pretty well cast for me.

“ After I got out of graduate school I moved to Kona, Hawaii for a while and had a job at night shooting tourists at luaus ”

Q: You spent many years on assignment for Skin Diver magazine, and later Scuba Diving, as well as contributing to many other titles – including my old title Sport Diver UK. What have been some of your favourite destinations, and why?

A: Actually, my first magazine gig was with another Sport Diver, the old title published by Richard Stewart in Miami. They had been blown out with gusting winds while shooting Marathon for a Florida Keys article, and I think they assumed ▶



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“ I find the simplicity and robustness reassuring, knowing that I can take my Kubi's and know they'll get me through the toughest dive trips ”

Patrick Ridley, O'Three
United Kingdom

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“ They had been blown out with gusting winds while shooting Marathon for a Florida Keys article, and I think they assumed that if I had a photo studio I must know something about underwater photography ”

that if I had a photo studio I must know something about underwater photography. I'd never shot wide angle by then, and certainly never with a model. But, I knew the magazine and what kind of photos they expected. So, I borrowed a Seacor 21mm lens from a friend, and a dive instructor from Ocean Divers travelled with me to Marathon to shoot. When I took the vis sheet of processed slides to Miami for review they liked them and asked if I could go to the Caymans for them the next month. In that moment I transitioned from operating a retail store with film processing to being a freelance underwater photojournalist. I did both, but eventually photojournalism and stock photography became my emphasis. With Miami as my gateway, my beat was the Caribbean. Cayman, Bahamas, Roatan, St Lucia, Bonaire, and obviously the Florida Keys. I did that for three years until the magazine folded and then I called Bonnie Cardone at Skin Diver to see if they had any work for me. They did, for the next 17 years actually, and then for Rodale's Scuba Diving for another ten years. My beat remained much the same. I travelled the Caribbean quite regularly, and the diving was pretty amazing back then. The Florida Keys had the fish, but everywhere else had the visibility and walls.

Yet, there was still a 'sameness' to it. The same fish anyway. No one was going to send me to the overseas exotics on assignment, and I couldn't really afford to go on my own as a tourist. So, I took the plunge. In 1982 I chartered the Sunboat in the Red Sea for my first commercial travel project. I don't know how I sold it out, but I did, and with even the first splash I was blown away. I had in mind I wanted to photograph a clownfish, a lionfish, and a model with red soft coral like the photos I'd seen from Rick Frehsee and Sari Gains back in the day. I had a week to make that happen.

On my first dive in the Red Sea I had opportunities for all three subjects, and that started a decades-long fascination with global tropical dive travel. My travel company, WaterHouse Photo Tours, typically hosts three exotic trips each year to the most-iconic general dive destinations... Indonesia, Palau, Philippines, Maldives, etc. But, we also do species-specific trips. Moorea or the Silver Bank for humpbacks. South Australia for great white sharks. That kind of thing. Typically we identify a target, it could be macro, beautiful coral reef, megafauna, etc. Once we decide what we want to shoot, we pick the best places on the planet that present those photo-ops. ■

SCUBA DIVER Q&A STEPHEN FRINK PT II

We conclude our conversation with Stephen Frink, undoubtedly one of the world's most-frequently published underwater photographers, about some of his most-memorable exploits, and what it is like to be at the helm of DAN's Alert Diver magazine.

Photographs courtesy of Stephen Frink



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Q: Now, as well as your photography assignments and photo workshops, you are also the publisher of DAN's Alert Diver magazine. How did you end up in this role, and what are some of the most-challenging aspects of the job?

A: I was pretty greedy for my time underwater when I was younger and more stupid. Which led me to staying too long on a dive in Vanuatu and getting bent for the first time. Actually, I was a pretty slow learner and I've been bent multiple times. In each instance, DAN took care of me, sometimes getting me evacuated from remote locations and always paying for my recompression treatments. Which led me to have a very favourable impression of DAN in general, and a debt of gratitude to them. They invited me to join their Board of Directors back in 2009 and I accepted.

As part of our duties on the BOD we did due diligence on the various aspects of the vast and varied DAN business

In the midst of a pod of dolphins



Inquisitive sea lion

Stephen kitted out for a shark dive



Oceanic whitetips

“ As part of our duties on the BOD we did due diligence on the various aspects of the vast and varied DAN business culture ”

culture. They published a magazine called Alert Diver, but it was pretty modest at the time. There were some good dive safety articles but it wasn't a compelling print publication. They sent it out six times a year to over 200,000 members, had no advertising to speak of, and were losing a fortune. I had an idea maybe we could do it better if we executed a coffee-table quarterly and expanded the topics to more of a scuba-lifestyle hook. Dive safety of course, as that is DAN's core mission, but also travel, underwater photography, and environmental topics. I crafted a dummy of what the concept might be and presented it to the BOD. I can't say everyone saw the wisdom of such a drastic change right away, but



Manatee

Baitfish swarm over a coral reef



enough did that I was authorized to give it a try. I resigned from the BOD so it would not be a conflict of interest, and at the DEMA show in 2009 we presented our inaugural issue of the redesigned Alert Diver.

We've done 61 issues now over the past 15 years, and I've been on press each one of those times, ensuring that we get the best possible ink on paper product for our DAN members. We print on a very high-quality paper stock from a managed forestry, which is more environmentally sound than using recycled paper stock which uses chemicals and creates waste. We don't use petroleum-based inks, and we never even considered using polybags to ship the magazine. I get to oversee the design and function as photo editor too. I get to see every photo in the magazine from receipt, to prepress, to on press. It kind of feels like my evolved reaction to seeing that black and white print pop up in the tray of Dektol when I see our finished pages roll off the web press. ▶



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Great white shark



Archive photo of Stephen back in the days of slides



Hard corals in the Florida Keys

What is the most challenging aspect you asked? The deadlines never stop. By the time I get off press for one issue we are 25% invested in the next issue already. I had the epiphany recently that I've been on deadline for dive publications since 1982. I can't quite decide if I'm gratified or depressed over that one.

Q: What is your most-memorable diving experience?

A: Travelling with my wife and daughter on assignments and photo tours over the years. My daughter is 32 now, but in those early years we travelled as a family all over the Caribbean, on African wildlife safaris, to the Red Sea and Papua New Guinea. My wife, Barbara Doernbach, was my model and when she was too young for school, our daughter Alexa could travel with us. Since we're talking about family dive travel I'll share a story.

We did a combo trip to South Africa, safari the first week and great white sharks the second. We had a core group each day going out on the white shark boats, but Barbara and Alexa were with the others in the group who wanted to do topside touring. One day I chartered a second boat so they could moor up beside us while we chummed for great white sharks, just to see what it was all about.

We had a good shark, a "player" in the idiom of shark wrangling, and I had the idea I wanted to shoot an over/under of the shark next to my dome. So, I laid on my belly on the swim platform and asked famed wrangler Andre Hartman to try to coax the shark right up to me. I had my eye to the swivel-45 viewfinder with a fisheye lens calling out 'Closer. Closer!' Well, Andre complied, to the point where the shark rammed his nose into my dome port and the forward momentum smashing my housing against my face. There was a big white water splash and a cacophony of shouts from my friends. 'Steve... are you OK? "Did you get bitten?!'" Then from the other boat a young child called out... 'Daddy, did you get the shot?'. To which I had to laugh. That was a pretty special day, and yes, Alexa, I got the shot. ▶



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“ I find the simplicity and robustness reassuring, knowing that I can take my Kubi's and know they'll get me through the toughest dive trips ”

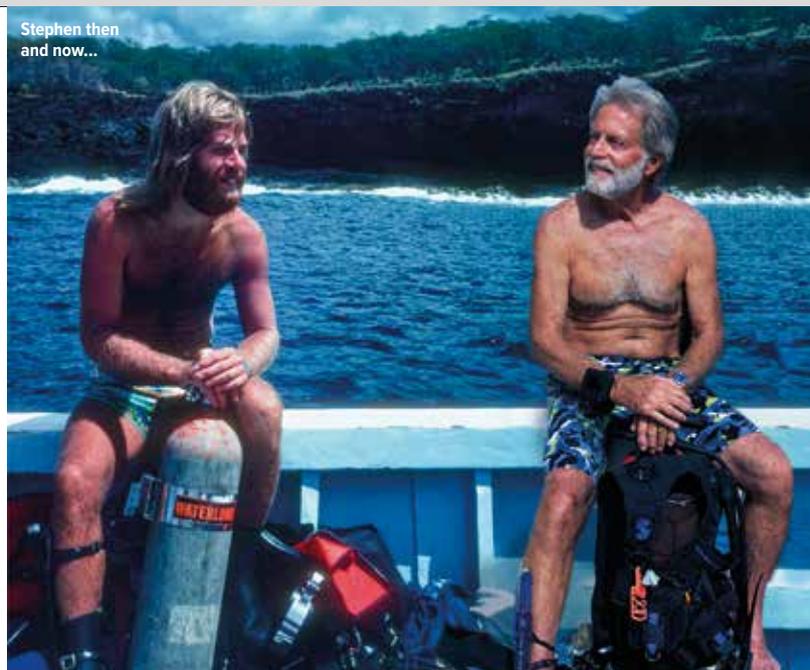
Patrick Ridley, O'Three
United Kingdom

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Stephen is known for his wide-angle shots, but still enjoys macro



Stephen then and now...



Q: On the flipside, what is your worst diving memory?

A: The worst memories are the trips I had to be evacuated for the bends. There were too many instances to recount, but there was a pretty bad patch before I changed my diving protocols. I now dive nitrox on air tables with an altitude adjustment dialled into my computers. If I'm doing multiple dives daily, like I would do on a liveaboard I use pure oxygen on my five-minute hang to off-gas, being sure to stay in less than 5m of water to avoid oxygen toxicity. It's all good now, and my archives are so mature I don't stress about having enough pictures to come home with anymore. I also find there is plenty to shoot in shallow water at the end of the dive so I can have safe multi-level dives, and still be productive until everyone is ready to ascend.

I think I came to DAN because they helped me get into the recompression chamber, but being the publisher of Alert Diver and reading the dive safety stories we publish, they've helped me learn how to now stay out of them.

Q: What does the future holds for Stephen Frink?

A: More of the same for a while. Stock photography used to be a big part of my career, but I stopped submitting to stock when the prices dropped so insultingly low. I don't shoot the dive catalogues or fashion gigs like I used to either. The art directors are typically much younger now and prefer to work with their peers, as it should be. So, the core parts of my career now are publishing Alert Diver and a few highly curated travel destinations each year through WaterHouse Photo Tours. I wouldn't mind dialling it back a little, and it's getting easier to say no these days. But I still enjoy it and I can still outswim most everyone on the boat. So nothing drastically changing at the moment, but there's also the realization nothing's forever. ■

Pipefish



Juvenile turtle

