



UK DIVING

The Light Fantastic

Simon Rogerson enjoys some classic shore dives along the Dorset coast, focussing on the photographer's preoccupation with light in the sea

I live in the Thames Valley and my nearest decent dive sites are mostly to be found along the Dorset coast. If the weather looks settled, I prefer to book a hotel and enjoy leisurely evenings rather than hopping up and down the M3. I had the opportunity last year to stay in a newly refurbished hotel in Weymouth, The Gresham, which was helping to promote an arts festival in the town. I used the town as my base for exploring the area and indulging my fondness for shore dives.

Now we're stalking

Kimmeridge is one of those places that has managed to slip under the radar of today's depth-seeking divers, only to be adopted by underwater photographers. It's a beautiful drive down to this idyllic spot, even with the knowledge that the western half of the bay is off limits thanks to longstanding military use as part of the Lulworth Ranges.

My buddy and I arrived to be greeted by Paul and Allison Pettit, both talented photographers and members of the Isle of Purbeck SAC. "I've never seen it like that

down there," Paul spluttered as he made his way up the slip. "It's gin-clear and there's good light. You lucky swine!" Those may not have been his exact words.

Kimmeridge Bay is defined by a series of ledges that increase in depth the further you venture - you can see them from the cliffs above. It's a fertile habitat for the little critters you can expect to find in shallow water, and in glorious 12-metre visibility there was little to stop us finding them.

Stars of the show were the beautiful little stalked jellies that underwater

photographers cannot resist. Once you've got your eye in, you can't help seeing them hanging gamely from kelp and seagrass. They are completely unlike the other jellies you see in UK waters, especially in the way they root themselves to seagrass instead of free-floating. Each one seems to reflect light in a different way, a living jewel the size of a 50 pence coin - remember coins?

Spotting my first critter opened some cognitive floodgate, because after that I couldn't glance at the reef without seeing some miniature beast. There were opossum

shrimp, *Neomysis integer*, each no bigger than 10mm, but dancing around a piece of kelp like disco kings and queens. Next came an unfamiliar-to-me nudibranch, *Palio nothus* which my Seasearch friends tell me is common all over the UK.

The procession continued - sea hares, bivalves, dragonets, painted gobies... an enormous tompot blenny. The seabed was bristling with life and I had plenty of time to seek it out. In the end we surfaced after a glorious 100-minute bumble, ready for coffee and carb-loading at the nearby cafe.



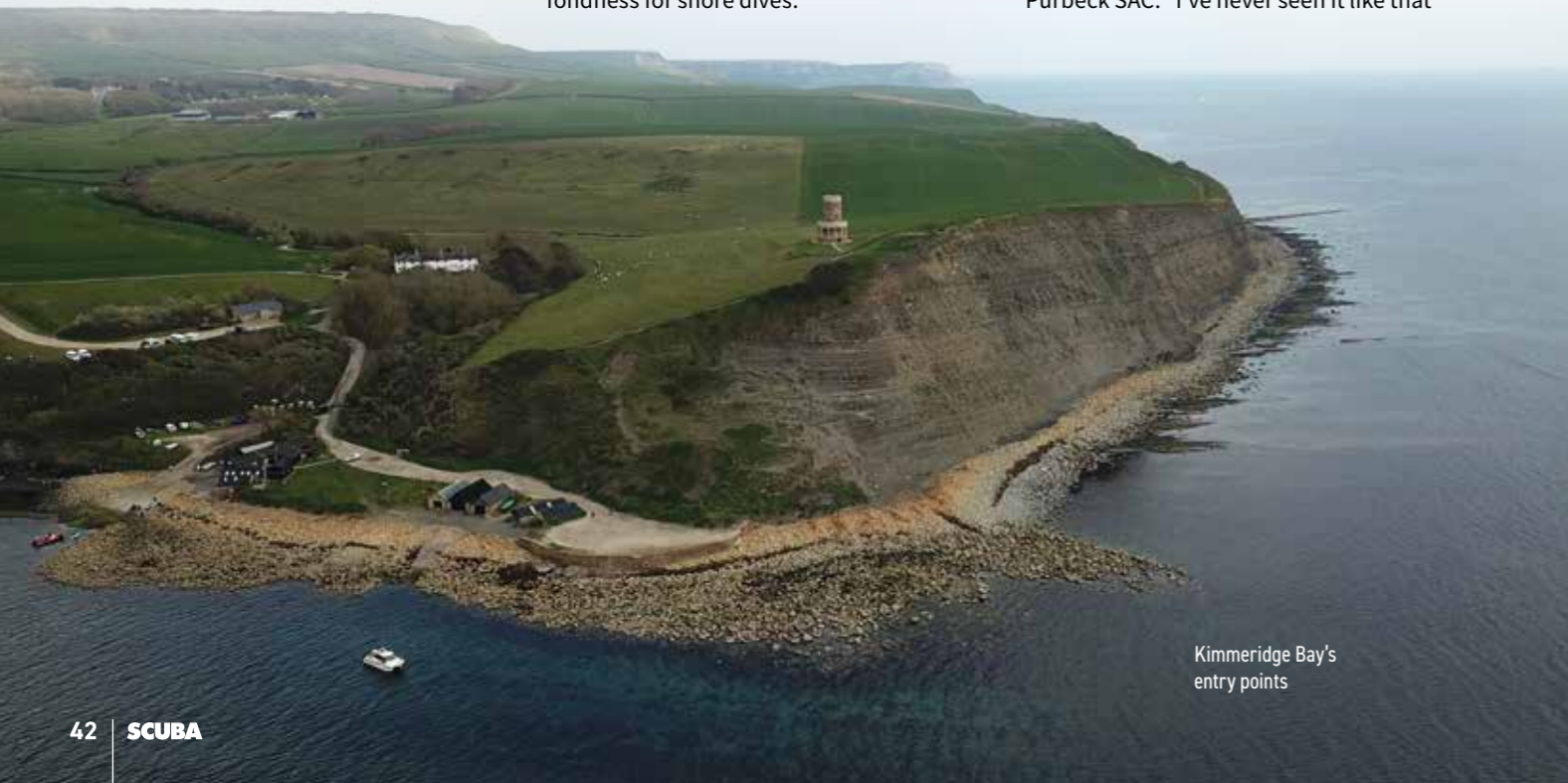
Tiny opossum shrimp



Palio nothus nudibranch



Stalked jelly feeding



Kimmeridge Bay's entry points



Painted goby at Kimmeridge



Weymouth Essentials

■ **Accommodation:** Simon Rogerson was a guest of The Gresham Hotel, email enquiries@greshamhotel.co.uk; web: greshamhotel-weymouth.co.uk; tel: 01305 785897. This stylish, friendly hotel has been under new ownership since 2021 and was recently awarded four stars by VisitEngland. Top tip – reserve parking in advance.

■ **Eats and treats:** For dinner we can recommend Shalim's Balti House at 24, Commercial Road shalimbaltihouse.co.uk for great quality curries. For a prime position along the seafront and lovingly prepared Italian food, check out Almolo at the Pier Bandstand, almolo.co.uk, tel 01305 839888.

■ **Diving services:** Weymouth and Portland Sub-Aqua Club www.wapsac.co.uk; Aquatec dive shop sales@aquatec.co.uk; Old Harbour Dive Centre, oldharbourdivecentre.co.uk; Jurassic Aqua Sports jurassicaquasports.co.uk; Skin Deep Diving skindeepdiving.co.uk; O'Three custom drysuits othree.co.uk

That evening I wandered around Weymouth, where holidaymakers glowed a complimentary red as the sun set behind the harbour. This light show was complimented by a raucous procession across the town by a troupe of giant puppeteers, to mark the culmination of Inside Out Dorset, a two-week arts festival. The towering figures emanated ghostly light as they swaggered along St Mary Street towards the Jubilee Clock Tower.

Light remained a constant theme the next morning as I drove east towards Swanage, the low sun illuminating misty fields. All very romantic, but at times it was hard to make out the road and we were relieved to make it to the pier before all the parking spaces had gone.

As a dive site, the best thing about Swanage Pier is its dynamic nature.

It always seems to offer something unexpected, a new mystery to be unlocked.

On this occasion the novelty was schooling fish, sand eels and smelt, which had accumulated in shifting shoals. We positioned ourselves at the end of the pier, gazing up as silver streams of fish rippled through the water column. And that's all we did, for two long dives... As the day progressed, incremental changes in the sunlight created a different cast on the water, catching the flanks of the fish as they danced in and out of the shadows.

All the same, I'm glad I occasionally looked down at the seabed, or I'd have missed a Sergio Leone-like standoff between two male tompot blennies. There were no surprises – the big lad on the left sent the challenger packing after a high speed dust-up.

The darkness beckons

The Dorset shore had one final surprise in store for me as I convened with some locals for a night dive in Portland Harbour. Where exactly I cannot say, as they swore me to secrecy as to the location. I was again diving with Paul Pettit who convened an informal group of underwater photographers he called the 'FOMO Group'. The idea is they're so competitive and dedicated, their collective Fear of Missing Out has become a defining characteristic.

A night dive needs proper darkness, so we fussed our kit while gloom gave way to twilight. Then finally, buddy checks and a short amble in full kit across the beach and into the water. We turned on our dive lights and the bay was illuminated by several thousand pounds' worth of highly priced artificial light.

Our supposedly secret dive site was so simple and shallow, it made Kimmeridge look like St Kilda. Soft sand means you've got to be fin-aware, but a handy pipeline provided a focus for navigation. It's the sort of place where you can find all manner of tiny animals, but on this evening the wildlife was sparse. A few painted gobies here and there; a pipefish; some of the silver fish I had seen at Swanage, now in rest mode. We gave it an hour, then turned around and headed back towards the entry point.

Then, a flicker in my torch light. Not even the animal itself, but a shadow cast on the seabed. Suddenly alert, I scanned the water column, blinking salt from my eyes until finally I pinpointed my quarry. A European squid, some 3-5cm in length, with iridescent spots that alternated yellows, reds and browns. A perfect little cephalopod.

Behind me, Paul was flashing his torch for

attention, but having established he wasn't actually drowning, I turned my attention to the tiny figure dancing in a circle of light. It seemed sensitive to my camera flash, so I limited myself to two or three shots while tracking it across the seabed. Its wariness was marked by curiosity; at times it would bob closer to me, sometimes too close for me to take a photo.

Eventually, it melted away into the night and I realised I had lost the group. On such a shallow dive, losing one's buddy isn't exactly a drama, but it was a signal to end the dive. I headed to the surface and looked out across the calm water. Enveloped in stillness and silence, the lights of Portland shone invitingly in the distance. However, the beach was in another direction; so I turned onto my back and started finning toward that secret shore, watched only by the stars and the night sky. ●

PHOTO: SARAH HICKSON



Clockwise from top left: Weymouth Harbour sunset; European squid, Portland; tompot blenny standoff; sand eels under Swanage Bay; Dundu and the Worldbeaters perform in Weymouth

