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'AND THE WINNER IS...'



Martin Bruce takes on the competition in an underwater photography shootout in Sardinia before trying his hand at breath-hold diving with help from a world record-breaking freediver

Photographs by **MARTIN BRUCE**

Diving isn't really a competitive sport, yet there are a few occasions when recreational divers can pit themselves against one another in competitive action. On a recent trip to Sardinia to cover a new event designed to promote diving and tourism in the northern town of Palau, I had the chance to enter into competition with other divers for my first stab at an underwater photography competition, and freediving.

The Undersea Palau event in September was the first of its kind to be held, and is typical of the kind of events springing up giving divers and non-divers the opportunity to try something new and add a different dimension to their diving.

The three days of activities began with a presentation of diving equipment by Mares, Nikon, and the Italian camera housing manufacturer Nimar. Divers could try the range of gear, and as we were yet to get our hands on the new Carbon 42 regulator from Mares, I made a beeline to get my hands on one to take for a dive.

Mares kit demonstration

Pick up one of the Carbon 42 regulators and



The new Mares Carbon reg was available to try

it appears to be aimed squarely at the latest breed of lightweight regulators, the Apeks Flight and the Aqualung Mikron, the lightest regs currently on the market. The Carbon 42 second stage weighs just 190g and is 65 per cent lighter than a metal second stage. The DIN first stage weighs 452g and the International is 646g.

Our regulator group tests are usually performed in single-figure temperatures in the depths of winter, and while the Carbon 42 is designed for cold-water use, it was a balmy 23C when I took it for a dive in Sardinia. It certainly looks like no other reg you can buy; the carbon effect covering on the second stage means it stands out from

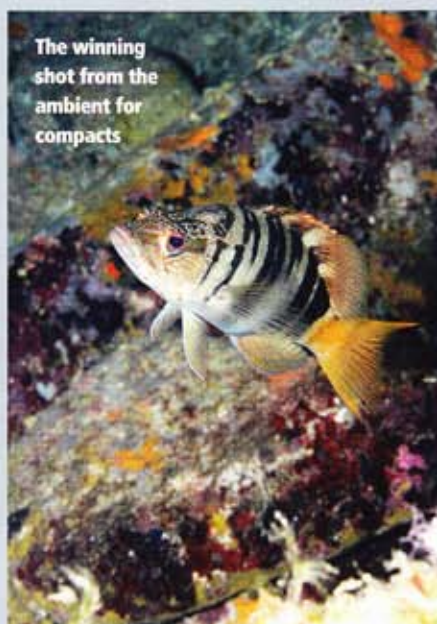


The event attracted divers from all over



Competition prize-winners

This shot captured the spirit of the Palau event



The winning shot from the ambient for compacts



Photographers had 50 minutes in which to take a winning photo

the crowd. The purge button is large, and powerful when you press it. The exhausts are quite long and sweep back away from the second stage. They are not obtrusive around your chin however, and serve to disperse bubbles really effectively.

As with other light regs, the Carbon 42 has the flexible braided hoses as standard, which improve both on flexibility over

normal hoses as well as shedding weight from your set-up. With these weight savings, the Carbon is naturally going to be popular with travelling divers, but its cold-water ability means it's also a great all-rounder.

It'll be interesting to see how the Carbon 42 compares with its rivals when we conduct our next regulator group test early in 2010.

Photography competition

There was around 80 divers for the weekend of festivities, with around half Italian, the majority of whom were diving with the main event organiser, Scuba Point. I was diving with Nautilus, who catered for the multinational divers, and from a personal point of view it was nice to return to a dive centre I had dived with in



Nudibranchs were a hugely popular subject



The winning shot from the DSLR ambient category



Freediving with a champion



I'd been looking forward to the freediving most. Organisers had lined up Italian freediver and multiple world record holder Gianluca Genoni to coach and demonstrate the sport to anyone who wanted to try. It was an opportunity not to be missed.

Seeing first-hand a human seemingly defy what you consider possible by diving to a depth of 40m and returning to the surface looking completely unflustered by the experience is incredible. Gianluca performed multiple dives while us snorkellers watched from the surface. Then it was our turn.

A few were clearly quite into freediving and were already well-practiced. Most, including me, were attempting to breath-hold for the first time. Wearing a wetsuit, mask, snorkel and fins and just enough weight to sink, I waited my turn. Julian was the first to go from our boat. The rest of us watched as he turned upside down and finned into the blue using a line as a guide. He kept going, and going. 'Christ, that looks deep', I thought as he eventually scrambled back to the surface.

Lying face down on the surface staring at the line disappearing into the depths while



Gianluca demonstrates freediving with a DPV

DID YOU KNOW?

Freediver Gianluca Genoni holds the current world record for static apnea (breath-hold at the surface), which he set on 24 November 2008 by not taking a breath for an incredible 18 minutes and three seconds.

other pinching my nose to equalise, I entered the world of the freediver, where men are at one with the marine environment, swimming gracefully like a fish, or something like that. I think I managed about 8m in my four attempts – not bad for a beginner, I thought. While I'm not about to make the switch from scuba to breath-hold diving, I would be up for giving it another go. To be honest I didn't feel entirely comfortable. It didn't feel quite 'right' to be heading underwater with no air supply. The fear is always 'am I going to be able to make it back to the surface?' When you reach the turn around point it feels and looks deeper than it actually is, and bear in mind you are only half way through the dive. But ascending is actually less stressful than I imagined. I think it's one of those mind over matter things that with practice only becomes easier. Give freediving a try if you get the chance.

trying to concentrate on deep breathing to relax, it was hard not to feel apprehensive. I took one last breath, spat out the snorkel, duck dived and began to fin downwards. With one hand on the guideline and the



September 2007. I'd done plenty more dives since seeing owners Stephanie and Vincenzo Apuzzo first time, and I was hoping my underwater photography would also show some improvement. It was good to see a large amount of divers get involved in the photography competition. There was a range of camera equipment on display; from impressive DSLRs to divers who simply hired a point and shoot for the day.

We were all dropped in at the same site and told we had 50 minutes in which to get our photos. I was armed with my Olympus SP550 and Inon D2000 strobe, competing against fellow divers in the compact camera section. I'm hugely competitive and wanted to win, although I had no idea what the standard of competition was!

I was on edge during the dive. Competitive diving was a new concept, and I desperately hunted for the perfect subject to nail the winning shot rather than just knuckle down and get on with shooting. It was eight minutes before I even fired off my first image, and finally began to relax. Conditions were perfect, with fantastic visibility – no excuse for sub-standard shots!

I decided to concentrate on what I knew best, and where I thought my strengths lay; reef shots. The 50 minutes sailed by all too quickly, and while I thought I had some reasonable shots, I wasn't convinced any of them would be competition winners. Each photographer could enter just one image. Later, all the entrants



Martin gets some tips from Gianluca Genoni

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Palau, Sardinia



Where is it?

Sardinia is in the Mediterranean, south of Corsica. The town of Palau is in the north of the island, around 40km from Olbia airport.



How to get there

The most convenient route to Palau is via Olbia airport, which is a two-hour flight from the UK. Alternatively, you can use Alghero airport. Easyjet and Meridiana fly to Olbia from London Gatwick and Bristol. Ryanair flies to Olbia from Birmingham, and to Alghero from London Stansted, Dublin, East Midlands and Liverpool. Jet2 flies to Olbia from Edinburgh, Manchester, and Leeds/Bradford.

When to go

The diving season in Sardinia runs similar to the UK. Water temperatures vary from the low teens early in the year to mid-high 20s in late summer.

“Conditions were perfect for UW photography”

Entry requirements

No visa is required

Currency

Euro. (£1 = €1.07).

Where to eat

Il Porticciolo is a busy restaurant set back from the harbour which does great pizza and pasta dishes at bargain prices.

The local brew

Try an Ichnusa, which is the local Sardinian beer, a pale lager at 4.7 per cent.



SPORT DIVER VERDICT

Undersea Palau in the beautiful surroundings of northern Sardinia is an event that will surely go from strength to strength



Sardinia is often blessed with fantastic visibility and colourful reefs

gathered to view the final line up at a public exhibition. I didn't fancy my chances.

Results are announced

To finish the weekend, everyone gathered for a buffet of local food and drink while the winners of the underwater photography competition were announced. For the first running of such an event, it was pretty successful, and I think organisers are keen to repeat it next year, working out where improvements can be made or things added.

Vincenzo Apuzzo of Nautilus Dive Centre said he would like to see the photography competition feature more heavily, with a practice dive organised, workshops with a



All the photos went on public display

professional photographer, and then two competition dives rather than one.

He added: "You should know that this weekend of photo competition here in Palau actually had the highest number of participants ever in Italy, which made us a little proud."

Maybe two competition dives would have allowed me to build up a better portfolio of images, I'll never know. Look out for this event next year; these kind of weekends help bring divers together to take part in what they enjoy, try something new, or travel to a different place even. You might even surprise yourself and take prize-winning images. If you were wondering; no, I didn't win. But there's always next time. ■

Dive centres

Nautilus Dive Centre www.divesardegna.com
For a full list of dive centres in Sardinia, visit the Directory on page 96 or check out padi.com



A diver hunts for a subject