

Digital Underwater Photography Course - May 2010 by Hilary Jenkins

There is a quieter side to the extreme sport of scuba-diving, as 3D's latest batch of Digital Underwater Photography (DUP) students found out this weekend when they made the "Groot Trek" to Marico Oog for the qualifying open water dive.

We were lucky to have Darryl Hammond (Photographic Editor of the Sunday Times) co-present this course and add valuable insight and comment on our photographic efforts.

Saturday was spent splashing around the pool at Chartwell trying to make the ordinary look extra-ordinary and creative, putting into practice what we had learned during the theory session, and at 6 am on Sunday while everyone else was still sleeping we hit the road for North West province.

Despite the boys' best efforts to take us via every tourist feature between Johannesburg and our destination and the efforts of the staff at Wimpy Koster to delay our arrival even more, we finally arrived at Marico Oog at about 11 !!

Abandoning our vehicles, we trooped down the narrow pathway, comprised of a number of very rickety paving slabs and layers of conveyor belting, and were completely blow away by the beauty and peaceful air of the 'Eye'. Tall reeds surrounding the water moved gracefully in the breeze. At the waters' edge, a multitude of green lily pads with white and mauve lilies floated lazily, framing crystal clear views of the underwater flora.

Back at base, Greg briefed us on our photographic task for the day - to take as many interesting, artistic, creative shots as we cared - all the while being conscious of our buoyancy and place in the 3D world beneath the surface. There is a huge amount of silt in the Eye which gets stirred up very quickly, so fin stroke and the ability to control buoyancy play a huge part of good diving skills in this particular environment. Management limits the number of divers to 6 at any one time for this very reason.

Happily we donned our equipment, and cameras clutched in hand we made our way into the water. A fairly chilly 20°C trickled into our wetsuits. There were some of us chicken enough to wear dry suits (notably our course director and senior instructor!) standing by and laughing as one by one we descended into another realm. We very quickly learned just how easily the silt could turn the viz to zero, and all adjusted our weight at the 5m grid provided for the purpose before launching off to explore our surroundings.

Short grass, tall stems of lilies, light filtering through the water and the plant life, fish of varying sizes, crabs, snails, amazing contrasts in colours, light and shade all made for some incredible diving and photographic opportunities. Being shallow (our average depth on the dives was in the region of 8m) meant we could spend plenty of time below the surface.

Once our dives were done, we indulged in the divers' next favourite occupation: fizzy suckers followed by a braai, comparing notes, experiences and photographs. Greg debriefed us and signed off log books and announced that, as part of the course he was holding a competition for the best photographs. Each of us will be selecting our top ten pictures and submitting

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them to Darryl for his evaluation, critique and judgement. The winner will be receiving a free specialty course of their choice, and a selection of the pictures will be on the website and/or Facebook soon.

Marico Oog is literally in the middle of nowhere (check out their website www.dive4life.co.za/marico-oog/), somewhere between Zeerust and Lichtenburg - a 200km+ journey - but well worth the trip. The setting is idyllic, with several cottages dotted around the property, a wooden jungle gym and a couple of slides for the kids. We had a fantastic day of diving, education and fun there before setting off for the long return trip.

The drive back carried its own adventure as there are major roadwork's between the Eye and Koster, with hold ups of about 30 minutes. Our erstwhile CD opted to take the plunge and carry on regardless of oncoming traffic, so not only did we get a photographic course we also had first hand experience of an off road driving course! Mel and I were sure that Monday's headline story would read "3D Dive arrested in its entirety during outing. Course Director Greg Wharram, his senior instructor, Trevor Jones and various other *professional* level divers and students have been remanded in Koster Wimpy awaiting trial for completely ignoring the rules of the road. If found guilty, they will have to face the prospect of stopping at the Wimpy every time they visit Marico Oog. Until their release, the shop in Rivonia will be running on a skeleton staff"

The DUP course is well worth the effort and will add a new, quieter dimension to your diving. Inland dives can be fun and offer amazing opportunities, and Marico Oog is probably one of the best places to combine the two.

Try it - you'll like it!