

DIVING WITH... DON SILCOCK

PT Hirschfeld chats to Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor Don Silcock, who certainly racks up the airmiles with his globe-trotting dive adventures

Photographs by Don Silcock, Vladimir Chubenko and Martin Voeller

Australia, Indonesia, PNG, the Philippines, Timor Leste, Tonga, Japan, the Americas, South Africa, the Azores ... It's little wonder that Scuba Diver ANZ Senior Travel Editor and acclaimed underwater photographer Don Silcock has so many divers asking if they can 'carry his bags'.

Travel has always been an integral part of Don's professional and recreational lives: 'I had two careers: 25 years in the oil and gas industry, living for 14 years in Libya, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Then, I worked for a corporation in Australia for 25 years that took me all over Asia, China and India, including being based in Shanghai for two years. I can ask for a beer and say thank you in every language in Asia...'

Don first dived in Malta in 1978, becoming 'certified' with a one-day introductory course. Eventually he became a BSAC Advanced Instructor. Now 70 years young with 3,500-plus dives under his weightbelt, Don retired from full-time work at the end of 2019 ('Perfect timing', he notes, in light of global events) to concentrate on diving and underwater photography.

Growing up in working-class northern England, Don was always fascinated by the ocean, but never imagined he would get to see as much of it as he has. Currently he has home-bases in Bali and Sydney, from which he continues to explore the underwater and topside worlds extensively.

His life above water centres on family (including two grandkids) and motorcycling. Adventure riding has taken Don throughout Vietnam, the Indian Himalayas, Tibet, Morocco, Myanmar, Australia and the US (as chronicled on his nomadicpixel.com website.)

Don barely seems to sit still between adventures. On average, he logs 250-360 dives a year: 'I try to do a big trip, about three weeks every two months. Typically I dive at least three times a day each trip.' He's made 26 visits to PNG in 25 years, continuing to regularly expand his comprehensive online 'Complete Guide to Diving Papua New Guinea': 'PNG was really the first place I went to after moving to Australia.



American crocodile

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Don getting ready for a dive

I've been enthralled by it ever since. I like to think of PNG as 'our Africa', so close to Australia yet so completely different.'

Don's visually sumptuous website posts and frequent magazine articles allow readers to live vicariously through his extensive travels and enviable underwater highlights. In addition to a keen topside interest in landscape photography, he's a versatile, world-class underwater photographer: 'I'm besotted with big animal, wide-angle photography!'

On the flipside, he acknowledges that, 'Macro, particularly wide-angle macro - is a fantastic way to show the personality and character of the amazing smaller creatures we encounter underwater.'

He recalls, "Without doubt, my best ever experience was in 2022 with El Blanco, a white southern right whale calf in Argentina where I was in the water on snorkel for five days. On the fourth day, I'd had probably the scariest animal encounter I've ever had. A large but still immature southern right whale calf charged my buddy and I ten to 12 times, turning at the last minute and coming out of the water one to two metres above us, being really aggressive. The boat was worried but couldn't get in between us to get us out.'

'After that we wondered if we even should get in the water the next day? But we did and had a sublime experience with a rare white calf for over two hours. The mother was in the background with a watching eye. In 2023,

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I entered an image of the white calf and won a category in Underwater Photographer of the Year, which is like the Oscars for underwater photography.'

Other highlights of Don's adventures include diving with oceanic mantas in Socorro, American crocodiles at Chinchorro and giant salamanders. He adds, 'Manatees in the Crystal River and all the shark stuff I did in the Bahamas were also pretty special. And the whale head runs in Tonga were incredible!'

Don's equally excited by Australian diving, having made 15 pilgrimages to the great whites in South Australia and seven visits to Whyalla's annual cuttlefish aggregations. He acknowledges that 'None of this would be possible without having a wonderful wife who lets me do it - and a lot of exercise!' (He keeps physically fit by doing crossfit sessions around five times a week when not travelling.)

His websites and magazine articles suggest that authenticity is a fundamental principle for Don. His posts are commercial free, offering honest opinions and only including images that represent what he actually saw while present at any given destination, as opposed to cherry-picking from a collection of images taken over time: 'Truth and integrity are paramount for me. I don't like all the clickbait nonsense the internet and social media have become. I go out of my way to be as honest as I can.'

'What I basically try to do is understand and concisely explain why whatever I've seen and photographed is happening. That takes a lot of work. But I benefit from it as my personal understanding of how the oceans work has really improved. This deeper focus allows me to conceptualise the 'big picture' of it all.' Speak to any serious long-term diver, and their observations of that 'big picture' often yield informed perceptions about ocean health. Don



Don in his element



White southern right whale calf

says, 'There's no doubt the oceans are really stressed and suffering from all that is wrong. But nature is incredibly powerful and resilient. I've been able to witness examples that give me optimism that the oceans can bounce back if we humans do the right things.'

He notes shark ecotourism in the Bahamas as one example. 'The first step in addressing problems, even those as big as the ones we are facing with the oceans, is to recognise they exist. That, in my opinion, seems to be happening.' Don remains ever hopeful and excited about what the future holds, for both the ocean and his personal experience of it: 'Top of my list is an extended stay in Baja, Mexico to fully explore the Sea of Cortez and parts of the Pacific coast. I hope to do that next April. Then there are the sperm whales in Dominica, and critter diving in Japan ...' You can keep up-to-date with many of Don's past and future dive adventures at www.indopacificimages.com, and through his regular feature articles in the pages of Scuba Diver's global collection of magazines. ■



Scenic reef in Tubbataha

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