

ONE OCEAN

ASIA

TALES OF A WANDERING WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN IN ASIA

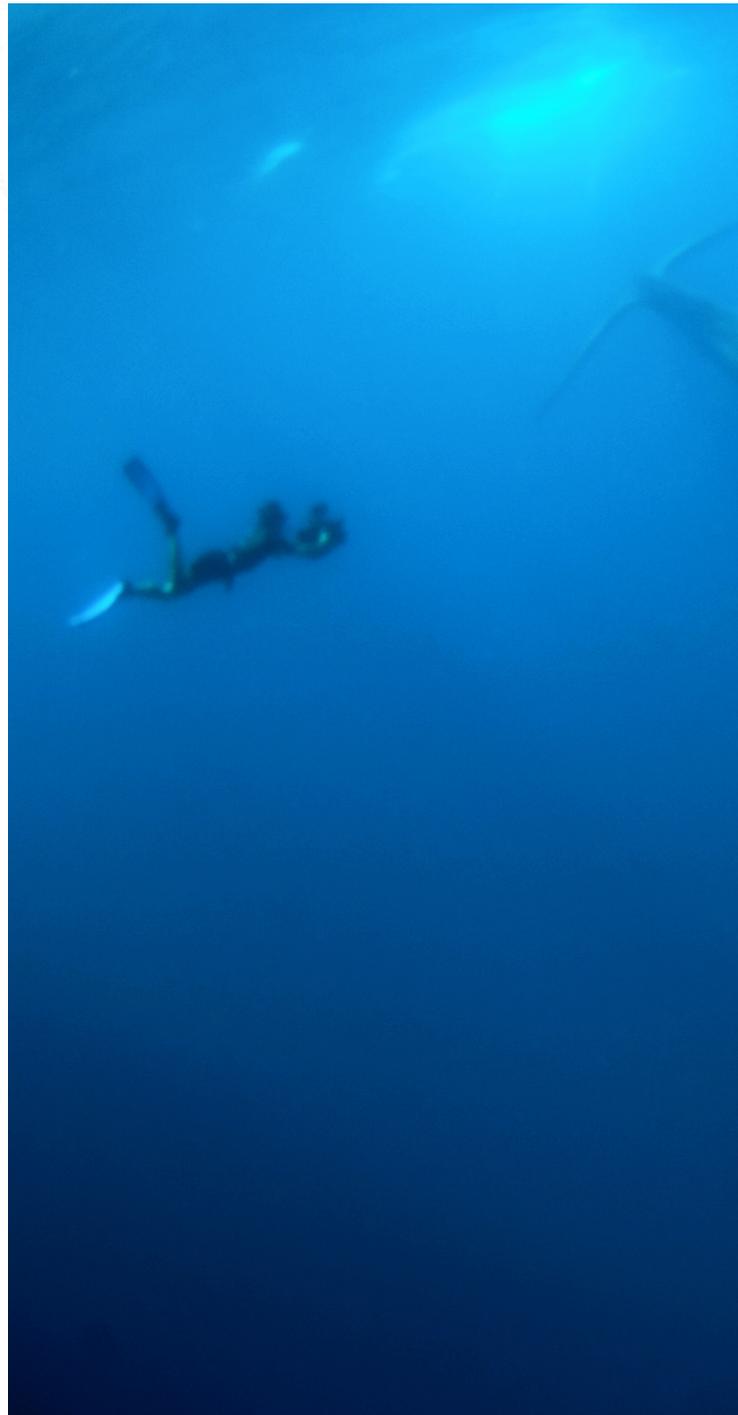
By Roger Munns

Filming the wild can be dirty, dispiriting and downright dangerous, but when it comes together it's a thrilling adventure, full of encounters with the ocean's most majestic, in some of their most intimate moments

I was never someone who had a clear idea of their path in life. I wasn't hooked on wildlife documentaries from an early age. I didn't idolise David Attenborough or dream of filming whales or turtles. In fact I was busy getting to the next level on "Jet Set Willy", or whatever the latest awesome computer game was on my Commodore 64.

I guess in the pre-Internet 80s and 90s most kids like me in rural areas of the UK had relatively humble and mainstream ambitions. Careers officers in my hometown of Camelford were not quick to suggest students try to become wildlife cameramen. Especially since there was a perfectly good cheese factory down the road which was hiring! Even if I had known back then that I wanted to be a cameraman I would have had my work cut out for me. There is no clear career path or set of qualifications to take in order to succeed in this niche field. Nevertheless, at the end of a long and twisty road, and with a healthy dose of luck, in 2001 I found myself being paid to film tourist divers at Pulau Sipadan for Scubazoo.

Fast forward 14 years and I'm still enjoying the challenge of telling underwater stories with my video camera. I've graduated from filming tourists to working on wildlife documentaries in exotic and remote locations, I've worked with talented and interesting people from all walks of life



and I've had the opportunity to get up close and personal with some of the most beautiful and bizarre marine creatures on our planet. I've also been away from home and family for long periods of time, worked long hard hours for very little pay to gain experience, and put myself in some potentially dangerous situations.

THE HAZARDS OF HORNY HUMPBACKS

One of those situations came about in Tonga during the filming of BBC's *Life* – the follow-up to *Planet Earth*.



1

The BBC's natural history unit is renowned for groundbreaking, dramatic and visually stunning programmes. Each new series is judged by the previous ones, so the shoots are generally challenging and ambitious, and ours was certainly both.

Humpback whales spend the winter months in Tonga's warm, protected waters to give birth and also to mate. We had come to film the part in between: the selection process by which the strongest and fastest male humpback wins the right to mate with a female. Aply

named the "heat run" this process is like stock car racing on steroids. A single female swims at the head of 10–15

male whales, each weighing up to 50 tons. This race has no rules and it's the last man standing who gets a date with his big-as-a-bus dream girl. The male whales will stop at nothing to beat their competitors and will whip flukes at each other, blow bubbles in a sort of smoke screen effect or even breach on top of a rival. Due to the

1. Roger Munns filming blue whales, *Balaenoptera musculus breviceauda*, for the *Wild Sri Lanka* series
Image © Jason Isley/scubazoo.com



brutal nature of this event, no one had attempted to film it before. But we were going to try.

It was 17 days of fruitless searching before we found our heat run and when we finally did there was no time for second thoughts. As the whales raced along at speeds of up to 15 knots, we brought the boat around a few hundred metres in front of the charging pack and jumped in the water.

Together with Jason, my safety diver, we both dived down to about five metres and waited. Hovering there in the blue, I tried to focus on making sure the camera settings were correct to keep my mind from straying to the reality of the situation. We were basically standing on a motorway about to face 10 speeding trucks. As they emerged from the blue and thundered past me, one after another, I focused on my job and held the camera steady. Out of breath I began to ascend when one final whale passed right over my head, forcing me to stop. Lungs bursting, the boys on the boat must have thought I was a small humpback as I breached from the water to take a huge lungful of air! I'd got the shot and Jason and I were unharmed. A great result. We went on to get more and more shots as we followed the heat run until it got too far offshore and we had to turn back.

There is a real satisfaction amongst the tight-knit team when you finally get the shots you need on location, and this time was no exception. There's not much partying on

shoots but we allowed ourselves a cold beer that night!

SOMETIMES LIFE IS ABOUT THE DESTINATION...

Travel plays a big part in my lifestyle. I usually have a minimum of 100 kilograms of equipment and personal items – and often more. The logistics of travelling with expensive, bulky and delicate equipment are a nightmare. Airline check-in brings out my full repertoire of charm, cajoling, negotiation and indignation in order to try and bring the excess baggage price down to something reasonable. And if I haven't broken my back getting the bags to the location then the customs and immigration will break my spirit by pulling apart every bag piece by piece. Whoever came up with the quote "it's about the journey, not the destination", has never worked as a wildlife cameraman.

Luckily for me, I am based in Southeast Asia – a hotspot for marine biodiversity, and a wealth of rare animals and fascinating underwater stories nearby that don't require long-haul flight torture.

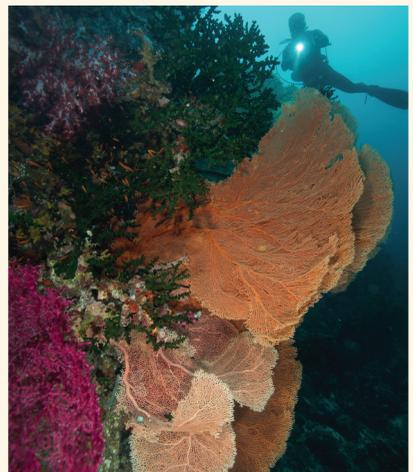
The destination can be less than salubrious as well. After three days travelling by plane, car and ferry I once spent a month in the remote Indonesian village of Lamalera, where I existed on a diet of boiled fish and rice while having to wait all day, every day, on standby within

3. Roger filming the traditional method of leaping from a boat platform to harpoon a whale. Shot in Lamalera, Lembata Island, Indonesia
Image © Jason Isley/scubazoo.com



AGGRESSOR FLEET® & DANCER FLEET® WORLDWIDE SCUBA DIVING AND TRAVEL ADVENTURES

SMALL INVESTMENT EXTRAORDINARY RETURN!



Ultimate Vacation Value. Once you travel to the exotic destinations and board our dive yachts, you will discover a remarkable return on your investment. Scrumptious chef-prepared meals, deluxe accommodations, breath-taking underwater encounters, and around-the-clock professional service await you for an all-inclusive great value. Delivering the "Ultimate in LiveAboards®" has been the mission of Aggressor Fleet and Dancer Fleet staff from Thailand to Belize. Join an inclusive Aggressor Fleet and Dancer Fleet adventure and discover the LiveAboard Lifestyle!

info@liveaboardfleet.com • +1-706-993-2531



www.seaofchange.com

www.aggressor.com

- Alor • Bahamas • Belize • Cayman Islands • Cocos Island • Dominican Republic • Fiji • Galapagos • Hawaii • Komodo • Maldives • Myanmar • Palau • Pulau Weh, Indonesia • Red Sea • Thailand • Turks & Caicos •



200 metres of the beach for a sperm whale to be spotted. I was there to film a native whale hunt, which never happened, and eventually I had to return home empty-handed. While I was of course disappointed not to get the shot I was, at the same time, happy that no whales were harmed.

DETACHMENT IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Marine turtles, for instance, are so abundant in some areas of Malaysia that you would never know they are threatened with extinction. Sipadan has a huge population of friendly green turtles and recently I filmed one female's struggles.

This particular lady had returned to Sipadan, after years in the open ocean, to mate and lay eggs. It was that mating that I was commissioned to film for David Attenborough's *Life Story*. For green turtles, coupling involves a fertile female being approached by a male. The male then has to turn the female around so that he can mount her. He will then get a strong grip with the bird-like claws on his

flippers and ride her while "sealing the deal". Mating can last for several hours and the female I was filming was struggling with carrying the 100-kilogram male on her back. Dragged down by the extra

weight it was very tough for her to reach the surface to get a breath. Despite that, she still swam like an Olympic athlete and it was all I could do to keep up with the pair and grab a few shots when they slowed for a rest.

It was during one of those rests that things got more interesting when a second male emerged from the blue. He chased the pair, using his sharp beak to bite the flippers of the incumbent male and make life uncomfortable for him in the hope he might dislodge him and get a chance to mate himself. This made life very uncomfortable for the man in the hot seat, but he took it stoically. The female meanwhile was even more laden down, with two males now attached to her by various methods. She tried in vain to lose the males by bolting up and down the water column. My computer was screaming at me as we performed a horrific saw tooth profile, but needs must!

Things, however, were about to go from bad to worse. Two more males arrived. One latched on to the mating pair. Now carrying 200-kilograms on her back and with two other males hanging on to various flippers, things did not look good for the female. Despite huge effort she was slowly sinking. The males refused to let go and the whole entourage were getting further and further from the surface. In situations like these it is very hard to remain dispassionate and uninvolved but that is what you must

3. Mating green turtles, *Chelonia mydas*, filmed for BBC series *Life Story*. Sipadan Island, Borneo, Malaysia
Image © Gil Woolley/scubazoo.com

4. Filming for the Mammals episode of *Life in Va Va'u*, Tonga
Image © Jason Isley/scubazoo.com





4

do as a cameraman. I am there to document and not to interfere, so I had to let things play out naturally, whatever the outcome. And to find out the outcome you will need to watch the courtship episode of *Life Story*...

IN THE PRESENCE OF OCEAN ROYALTY

Sometimes Scubazoo will decide to set up a shoot in order to receive a location for possible stories or to source footage for our online video library. On one such occasion I found myself in-between two busy shipping lanes with huge car carriers and oil tankers passing by on either side of my small boat. Together with my colleague Jason, we slipped quietly into the water and swam out into the blue, directed by the shouts of the skipper and our spotter Daniel. Finally in place, we dived down below the surface and were rewarded with a close encounter with the biggest creature ever to live on our planet, the blue whale.

These huge but notoriously shy animals make even other whales look like dolphins in comparison. With one casual flick of its powerful fluke the 20-metre-long long leviathan propelled itself downwards and we were powerless to do anything but return to the surface. We spent over 250 hours in the Indian Ocean on that trip and managed to collect just a few precious minutes of blue whale footage for our library. Open ocean shoots such as those are both mentally and physically taxing. Bouncing around in a small boat day after day with often nothing to show for it can put a dent in the most positive outlook. But being privileged to spend a little time with the undisputed king of the oceans is still one of my most treasured moments. *SDOP*

Roger Munns is an award-winning underwater cameraman who has been affiliated with Scubazoo since 2001. He has made over 4,000 dives with a camera and has filmed on many landmark broadcast productions, most notably for the BBC's Natural History Unit's *Life*, *Life Story*, *Human Planet*, and *Life in Cold Blood*. An accomplished underwater photographer, Roger's images and articles have appeared in many publications around the world as well as in several of Scubazoo's coffee table books including *Sabah's Underwater Treasure and Reef*.
www.scubazoo.com



Siren Fleet

Affordable luxury for
 liveaboard diving in
 Indonesia • Philippines
 Palau • Fiji • Truk



Contact us for further information
info@sirenfleet.com www.sirenfleet.com



Master Liveboards

Brought to you by Worldwide Dive and Sail,
 owners and operators of the Siren Fleet,
Master Liveboards is the new fleet of choice for
 diving the world's most exciting destinations.
 First on the list: Galapagos and French Polynesia.



bookings@masterliveboards.com
www.masterliveboards.com