Parting Shot

by Lee Newman

In the summer, easily the most talked about dive-related subject is visibility. Challenged by successive blooms of algae, the visibility often falls to just a few feet in the waters around Vancouver. The algae blooms start in the Spring, usually around April, when the rivers and streams swollen with snow-melt deliver an abundance of nutrients to the ocean.

The first of the blooms is usually brown - a combination of silt from run-off and phytoplankton. As the Spring rains give way to increased sunshine, the available nutrients cause a bloom of green phytoplankton that typically lasts for most of the summer.

For about eight weeks - in July and August, Vancouver enjoys mostly sunny days with very little, if any, rain - and it is these conditions that cause the red-tides. The red-tide can vary in colour and also in the species responsible. With the poor visibility, many of the area's divers reluctantly relinquish their sites to boaters and 'sea-sweepers'. However, some - myself included, steadfastly refuse to give up on summer diving and go regardless of the turbid water.

On a weekend in mid-July, on a routine dive at Porteau Cove Provincial Park, we experienced the horrible visibility associated with a dense red-tide at about 20', down about 30'. After that, we found ourselves under the bloom in relatively clear water (for summer, anyway) - with about 20' of visibility. Above our heads was the swirling red-tide. It looked like a storm at sunset - and me with no camera!

The following weekend we went back, this time armed with my camera and Tokina 10-17, hoping that the red-tide was still there. It was! We again groped our way through the bloom and into the clearer water below and proceeded to make some images. With Lisa's exhaust bubbles punching holes in the bloom, and the algae moving with the water (mostly tidal action), framing a shot became an exercise in pre-planning.



The author's wife, Lisa, under the red-tide. Canon 7D, Tokina 10-17 @10mm, 1/25th, f5, ISO 640, a single Ikelite DS-160 at reduced output.

I had to anticipate where I wanted to shoot, get in position and then wave Lisa into position before the bloom changed significantly. It was very exciting in a creative kind of way!

Luckily, during the summer the ocean tends to stratify with regard to temperature - despite the relatively large tidal exchanges. The temperature stratification of the water also tends to stratify the algae blooms - forming a layer of brown, green or red, which rises and falls with the tides. As long as you can get under it - and assuming there is still some ambient light, there are plenty of reasons to dive, and shoot!

Lee Newman

Do you have a shot which has a story within a story?
If so e mail it with up to 500 words of text and yours could be the next Parting Shot.
peter@uwpmag.com
and yours could be in UwP105