My Shot

by David Fleetham

Underwater, it is easy to lose the bigger picture. A diver can spend so much time studying the small details that the reef itself fades into the background. It is the old problem of not seeing the forest for the trees, except the forest is coral and the trees are the thousands of tiny lives moving among it. I often find myself drawn to mushroom corals, especially the long-tentacled varieties that resemble sea anemones. Their extended tentacles sway gently in the current and their stinging cells offer shelter for a surprising number of small marine creatures that learn to live safely among them.

While diving in the Komodo region of Indonesia, I encountered a reef where these plate corals were everywhere. They covered the bottom in such numbers that it almost seemed excessive, like a field of living discs laid out across the sand and rubble. Among them was one specimen that stood out immediately. Its tentacles glowed a bright green beneath the filtered sunlight, and the coral was speckled with tiny rust-colored patches of acoel flatworms, Waminoa sp., scattered across the tentacles like dust.

The coral's mouth formed a natural center point, and I framed the image around that focal area. The tentacles opened and closed with the surge, and the flatworms shifted slightly as the coral moved beneath them. It was a simple scene, but the textures and colors made it compelling enough to wait.

Then something small changed the composition. A gravid commensal shrimp, Hamopontonia fungicola, appeared among the tentacles and moved toward the center of the coral. It was not a dramatic moment, just a quiet one. The shrimp settled into the coral's protection while the flatworms and tentacles continued their slow motion around it.

Moments like this are a reminder that patience is one of the most useful tools an underwater photographer can carry. The reef does not rush. If you stay still long enough, the animals will return to their routines and sometimes offer you something unexpected. In this case, a simple mushroom coral became a small stage for several different species sharing the same living space. The scene lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough.



Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 85mm f/2 Macro IS STM Lens, 1/100 sec, F29, ISO 400, with two very powerful Ikelite 232 strobes on TTL.

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