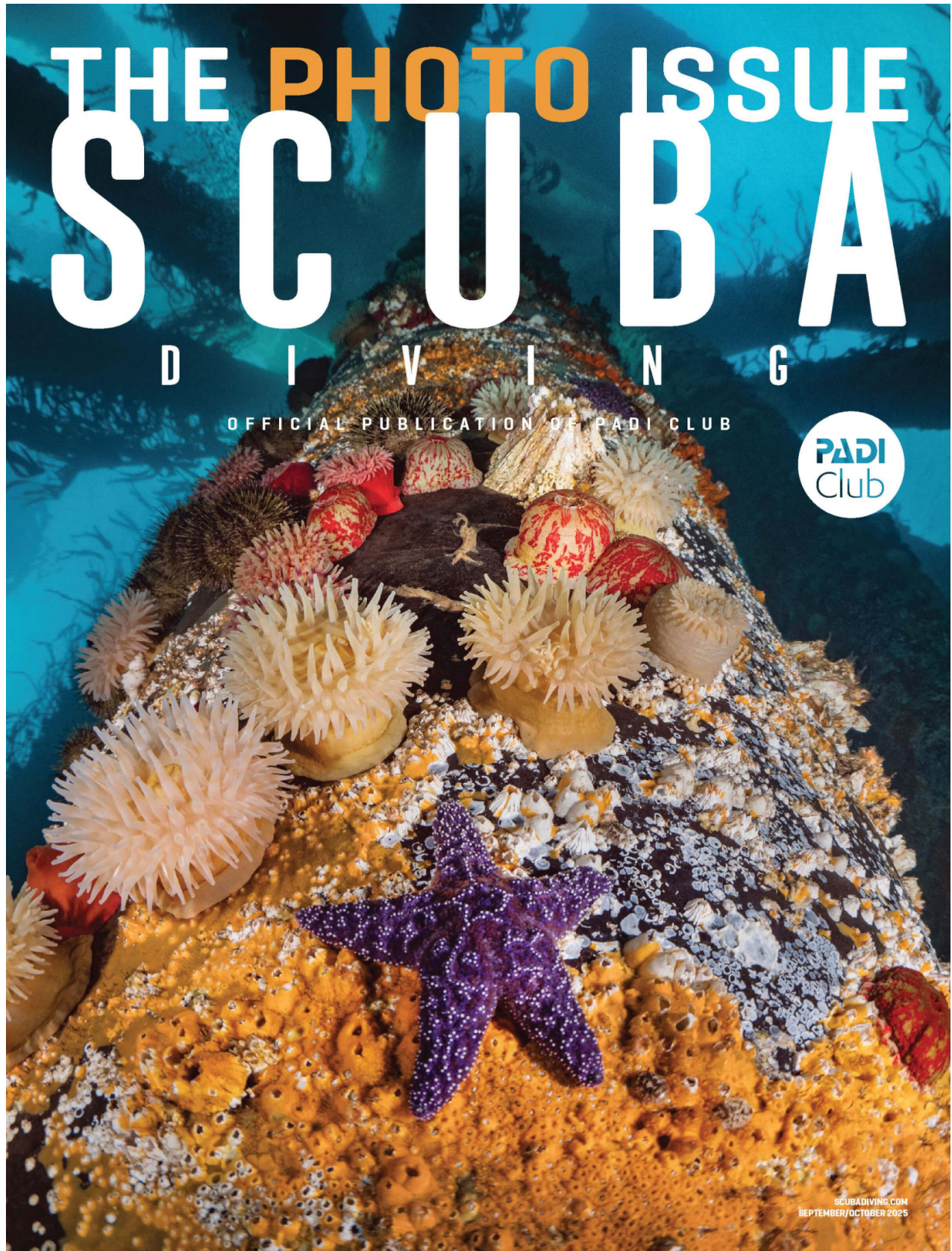






GO WITH THE FLOW

Drift dives are like a balm for the soul

BY TERRY WARD



ow more than ever—with the world turned upside down in so many ways and so much distraction by technology at every turn—I find myself turning to two things to retreat and find balance: my family and diving.

Nothing puts me more in the present moment and also takes me away from it all than a go-with-the-flow drift dive—my underwater path dictated only by the ocean's flow, and what I see left up to whatever crosses my path in the moments we're both

totally in sync with the ocean's currents.

Sometimes you get lucky and a drift dive carries in the greatest underwater hits: mantas, turtles, sharks and the like. Other times, you might find yourself at one with only tiny plankton and marine particulate flying past on a safety stop in the blue, swept somewhere away from the reef or wall. The SMB is deployed, the dive boat is on its way,

your dive computer is counting down to zero. So many times I have wished to linger just a little longer in that state of surrender.

On the best drift dives, the pace leaves no time to dally. I look at the bubbles of my fellow divers, their trajectory flattened in the rushing water like palm fronds bent in the wind. I see that I too am just a bubble at the mercy of the ocean's agenda until we reach our safe exit, a humbling and remarkable place to be.

I especially love when a drift dive starts with a negative entry, BCD deflated entirely. Back-roll or giant-stride in, and down I go to meet up with my buddy. All that's left to do is get horizontal and enter that true flow state of neutral buoyancy that a drift diver knows in a different way than a yogi on dry land.

My favorite drift dive was a lucky one indeed during a recent trip to Komodo aboard the Indonesian phinisi *Celestia*, diving the legendary dive site called Shotgun. It's a roller coaster of a channel dive in the northern reaches of Komodo National Park. Strong currents pushing through two islands create a conveyor belt that carries experienced divers through an underwater landscape of coral-covered dreams.

We enter the ocean on the islands' lee side on the falling tide, the water flowing from north to south, and soon enough are riding along with the current into a basin known as the Cauldron, shaped by underwater currents.

An enormous manta swoops in, and then two; we momentarily shelter within a crack in the reef to watch their wings, barely moving, keep them totally stationary in the storm. We aren't built the same way, of course, and are pushed on our way to the Shotgun, where the ride really begins as we're spit out to fly through the channel.

A drift dive is a reminder that everything is temporary and fleeting, and you will never go this exact same way, or experience the same dive, again.

TERRY WARD has visited more than 85 countries in 25 years of diving and travel writing. Her happy place lies where travel meets diving and people.

ILLUSTRATION: LAUREN REDBECK