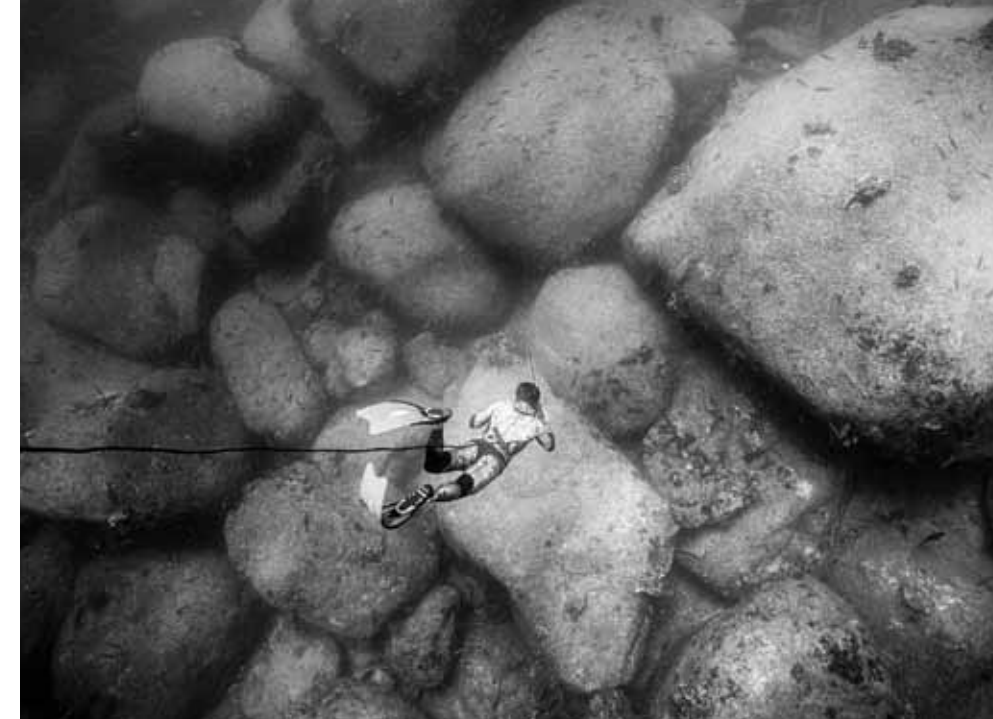
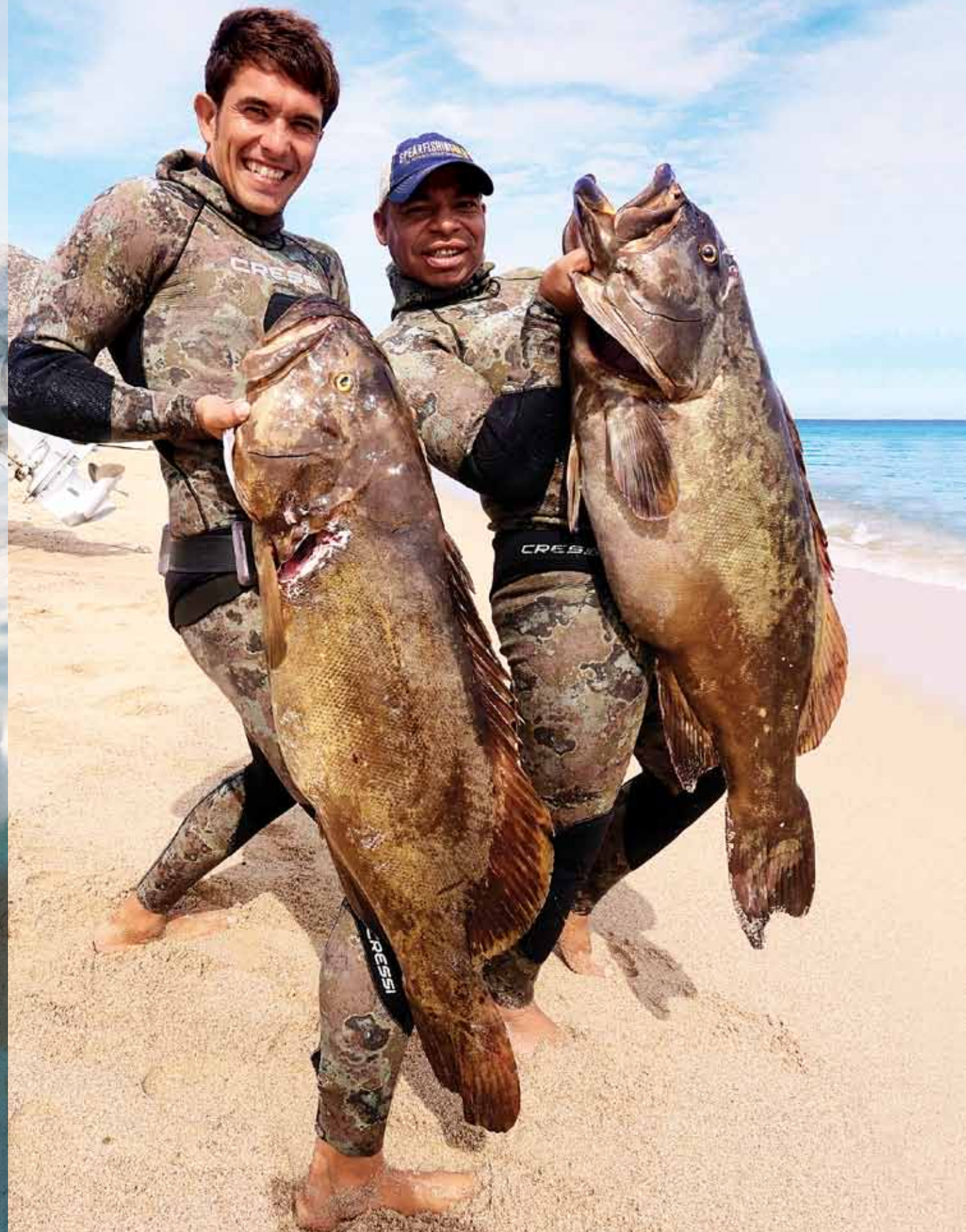


THE SEA
FEROCIOUS WITH LIFE
OF CORTICES

WORDS *Niko Bolduc* | PHOTOGRAPHS *Jacob Scuba*



I'M FREEDIVING AT 90 FEET on a sandy cliff, near a couple of square-shaped rock formations, when I get the shot I want, right through the gills of a 50 lb. cubera snapper. It's an exhilarating feeling, and I know when I get him back to the boat it will be the culminating experience of one of the best days of spearfishing of my life.

Then he runs for a hole in the rocks, and I get a quick spike of adrenaline. I rise to 80 feet and begin pulling with all the strength I've got left after a long day of hunting for prey beneath the Sea of Cortés. I pull and pull, pull until I can feel the mask starting to squeeze my face, that first pinch of hypoxia, and suddenly I know this isn't going to be any kind of easy. I'm in for one of the best fights of my life.

NOVELIST JOHN STEINBECK once described the Sea of Cortés as "ferocious with life," a poetic summation of one of the world's most fish-friendly environments, and a particularly apt description of the waters off Cabo San Lucas. That's where the Pacific Ocean and Sea of Cortés meet, creating a unique commingling of cold and warm, an upwelling that translates to a fantastically nutrient rich ecosystem, and a stunning amount of biodiversity.

Marlin are the ultimate prize for the thousands of boat-based fishermen who flock to the southernmost tip of the 800 mile Baja California peninsula. The world's richest fishing tournament—Bisbee's Black and Blue—is based in Cabo San Lucas, and pays out millions annually to the teams who bring in the biggest black and blue marlin.

But billfish are only a fraction of the magnificent variety of marine life found here. The place is teeming with tuna, wahoo, dorado, snapper, sierra and garropa grouper (called garropa locally); manta rays, dolphins and sharks are likewise abundant; and during the winter months migrating whales cruise the local waters. Humpbacks are by far the most common, passing by on the way to their traditional breeding grounds, but

greys too are habitual visitors, and I've also seen fins and sperms, and occasionally even orcas and blues.

Although I own and operate a spearfishing company in Cabo San Lucas, this particular day in May wasn't about business. It was fun time. I was out with a couple of friends—Jacopo Brunetti aka Jacob Scuba, an Italian born marine biologist and experienced professional underwater photographer, and Miguel, a Mexican fishing guide with big-game credentials—all of us committed to the same simple goal: to live and document the mind-blowing experience of being a spearo in the Sea of Cortés.

OUR INITIAL FORAY we plunged into a warm, aquamarine world, with vivid tropical fish and a smattering of small and large grouper swimming around rock coral and several large boulders embedded in sand. After a few warm-up dives, I marked my target: a big grouper that looked to go about 35 lbs. He bolted as soon as I approached, ducking into a shallow opening in the rocks. His head was pointed outwards, eyes peeled for any sudden movements.

I took my time floating up over the current, and slowly swam around and behind him. Then I moved carefully over the rocks until I was able to look down through an angled opening in the rocks. I had just enough room to put a shot through his gills, which I immediately did, before



jerking him free of his erstwhile hiding place. It was a nice bit of stalking, and I was as pleased with the process as I was with the result – that I had my first fish of the day.

My second was even better. We drifted with the current for a bit before freediving on a slightly elevated plateau crawling with colorful marine life. The visibility was fantastic, clear as tinted glass, and as Miguel and I went down to about 50 feet, we found ourselves surrounded by a massive school of grouper. Miguel missed his shot, but I placed mine perfectly. The shaft bent as it penetrated through the head of this huge hog of a 40 pounder, but I was able to reel him in and grab him without a problem, and was soon on the surface as Jacopo snapped another set of photos of predator and prey.

THAT WAS ENOUGH GROUPER FOR THE DAY. I don't like to put too much pressure on one species. Safe harvesting is the most important principle when practising this sport.

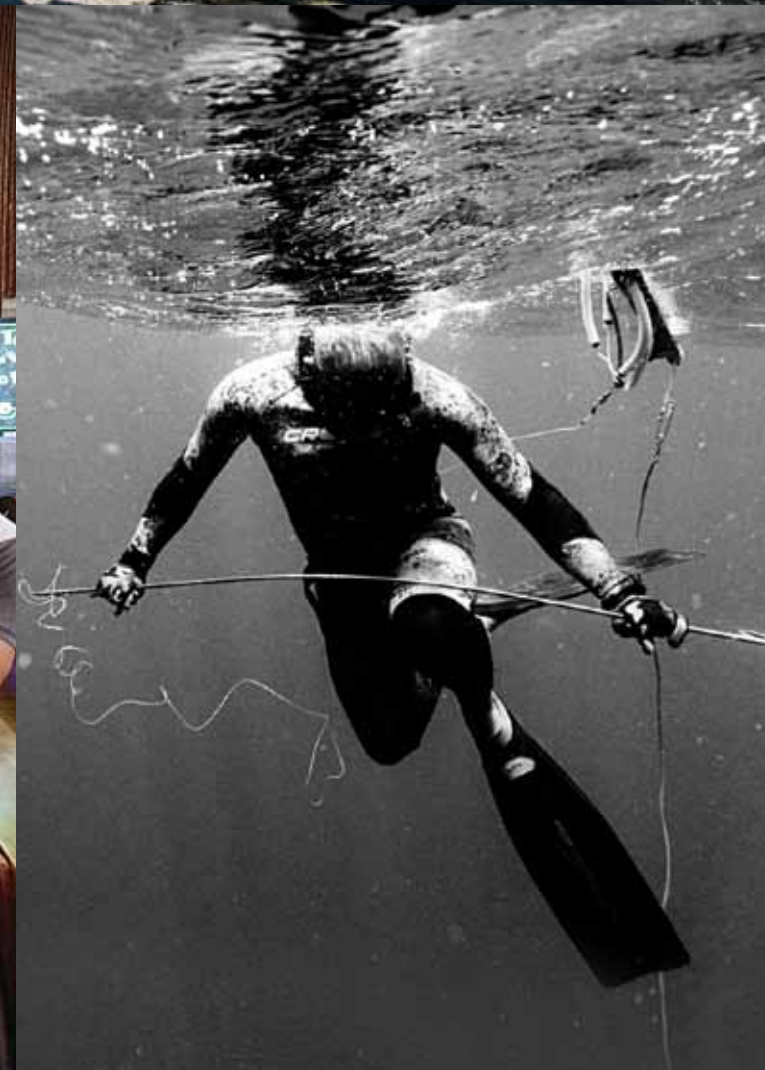
Our panga captain said he knew of a good spot for snapper—he claimed once to have caught a 130 pounder there, a boast so grandiose it almost had to be true—so we headed out to a deeper location, approximately 430 yards offshore.

My first dive, down to about 55 feet was enough to confirm the quality of the captain's information. Spread out below me was an undersea fantasia, a kaleidoscopic cluster of movement framed against rocks that looked like some kind of secret Egyptian stairwell. There were baitfish, amberjack, garropa grouper...a marlin tail briefly flashed in front of my eyes...but most of all there were Pacific cubera snapper.

It was a virtual cubera highway, with traffic flowing in all directions. "This is the place, boys," I called out upon surfacing. "We're getting a snapper."

My second dive I went deeper, getting off a shot at a 25 lb. cubera. He ran for the cavernous rocks, though, and rather than going in after

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him, I pulled and yanked the shaft back out. The third time wasn't the charm, either, and by this time I was getting tired. I start extending my top time by about 60 percent, taking up to five minutes between dives.

The sixth time I sat down at about 95 feet, and right away I saw him: a nice fat 50 lb. snapper. The one I had been waiting for.

I shot him right through the gills, puncturing his artery. He immediately ran for the rocks and I started pulling furiously, knowing it was over if he managed to dive into one of the tunnels.

I managed to hold him out, expecting him to lose fight as he started to bleed out.

But as I rose to 80 feet and pulled and pulled, I discovered I was starting to give in first. I felt the first stirrings of oxygen deprivation, and reluctantly began making my way to the surface. I signaled to Miguel as I ascended towards the boat, asking him to come take over for me. When I broke the water, however, I saw that Miguel was off fishing on his own in another area.

Jacopo grabbed the line in one hand – he had a camera in the other – as I hauled myself up and collapsed into the boat.

"Crap," I thought, "I should have never shot that fish."

There's nothing I hate more than damaging a fish, then letting it get away in that condition.

Jacopo dove down to take some photos, leaving me to continue working the line. I was so spent I thought I was going to black out. But I held the line, and tried to pull.

The line seemed as though it were jammed, but after what felt like forever there was a click and it started to ease...until there was eventually enough slack to slowly start bringing it up again.

Finally Miguel returned, and followed when Jacopo indicated a second shot was needed. Miguel went down and sent another one through the gills, finally ending the fight. He secured the fish and brought it up to the boat.

The battle, from start to finish, had lasted close to 25 minutes.

AFTER PULLING UP THAT HEROIC SNAPPER, anything else was going to be anticlimactic. Plus we had a full fish bag, and we were all completely exhausted. So the captain steered the boat for shore.

A stiff wind immediately kicked up, offering us one last choppy challenge to overcome.

Off to port were the evocatively shaped granite rock formations that stretched to Land's End, and once provided cover for the Dutch and English privateers. From the 16th to early 19th centuries, pirates would lay in wait for the yearly Spanish galleons that brought silks, spices and gold from Manila to Acapulco, but stopped off in San José del Cabo en route for fresh water.

In 1587, English captain Thomas Cavendish and his crew famously sank the supposedly "invincible" Spanish galleon Santa Ana in Cabo San Lucas Bay, making off with better than 120,000 gold pieces of eight.

Could Cavendish have felt any better than we did once we were up on the beach, popping cold cervezas in celebration?

Maybe, but somehow I doubted it. Flying a black flag promised never-ending adventure and bounty, but also never-ending trouble. When you fly a red and white flag, all you get is the first two.

We saluted our catch, and an incredible day we knew we'd never forget. But most of all we smiled, knowing we were going to be eating exceptionally well for the foreseeable future. **PAU**

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