

La Jolla

Classic Southern California Diving

Text and photos by Brent Durand





A slow shutter speed helps create a sense of movement in these giant kelp detail photos. PREVIOUS PAGE: California sea lions play in the shallow sea grass of La Jolla Cove.



A classic La Jolla underwater scene, complete with Garibaldi fish (*Hypsypops rubicundus*), sea grass and sunrays

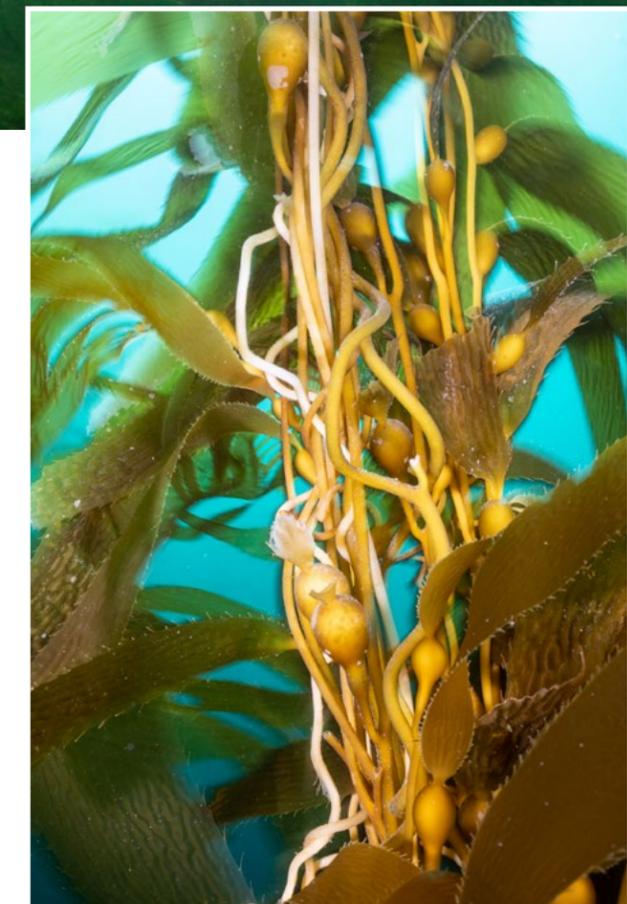
Cool sunlight slowly crept down from the horizon to the kelp beds off La Jolla in southern California. I took another sip of coffee. Sea lions barked on occasion as small groups of pelicans flew up the coast to start their day.

The two-hour drive south had ended with a spectacular sunrise, saturating the coast in a deep pink that one could feel and breathe. I arrived early to ensure I could find a much-coveted parking space. It was clear and calm—the reason I picked today for a dive trip down the coast.

This first dive would be solo, shallow and relaxing. I wandered back to the car to begin laying out my gear: a 7mm wetsuit, 5mm hooded vest, gloves, booties and, of course, my trusty camera, with wide-angle lens and dome port attached.



A California sea lion plays hide-and-seek with the photographer in the sea grass.



THIS PAGE: Playful California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) are a highlight of diving La Jolla Cove.

La Jolla Cove

Wading out into the water was peaceful, and I passed a harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*) plus several California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) while kicking out past the point toward the kelp bed. Descending at the edge of the forest, fronds of giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*) towered up and around like a three-dimensional display of green stained glass, dancing in the twinkling morning sunrays. Sea surface ripples reflected on the sandy bottom littered with spotted reef structure, luring me into an instant meditation.

I swam out to begin navigating a triangle-shaped dive plan, noticing large sand channels between fingers of reef. Small spiny lobsters dotted holes and ledges in the reef. Garibaldi (*Hypsypops rubicundus*), the California state fish, swam around their homes, some more concerned with my approach than others. A female California sheephead fish (*Semicossyphus pulcher*) decided I would be fun to follow.

The rest of the dive was classic California shore div-



ing, and I spent some time shooting close-ups of kelp pneumatocysts. I found my sea lion friends upon swimming back into the cove, and we played hide-and-seek for a solid 30 minutes. As soon as the young sea lions' interest waned, I looked under ledges, tossed kelp into the water and sang, becoming instantly interesting and building up a crowd of pinnipeds once again. I think I loved the experience even more than the sea pups did!

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Detail of giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*)



A green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) covered in algae is very comfortable with the camera (top left) and swims over the algae-covered bottom with a piece of red algae still stuck to her mouth (left); A leopard shark (*Triakis semifasciata*) found while snorkeling at La Jolla Shores (top right)

La Jolla Cove, walking into the village to order tacos and relax on the patio of a Mexican food restaurant.

La Jolla Shores
Snorkeling La Jolla Shores Park is a must for any beach diver

At the car once again, I learned the mid-day snorkel with friends was pushed back a couple hours and decided I would hop right back in the water with the sea lions, leaving the tank and strobes behind this time. A frisky bunch of adult sea lions were playing in the surf, and I joined right in, holding my breath to roll with them under the waves, surging back and forth with the motion of distant ocean swells.

With the sun now high in the sky, I took advantage of the amenities at

visiting San Diego, and I was fortunate to meet up with a couple of local friends who swim here on a regular basis. We geared up on the side of the road next to our cars and were soon walking into the water on the south side of the beach. Kayak and SUP tours paddled up and down the shore, requiring us to frequently look up from snorkeling to monitor paddler distance.

The snorkeling comprised extensive seagrass beds, undulating with the gentle surge. The shallow depths allow snor-

kellers of all levels to get a close look at the marine life living on the sea floor.

It was not long before I heard my name called. We spotted our first green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) of the day! I held my breath, trying hard to film steady video of the turtle as we both rolled gently back and forth, with the turtle grabbing mouthfuls of red algae on each drift. Swimming again, we started to notice leopard sharks (*Triakis semifasciata*) swimming around, shying away as soon as they realized we were floating on the surface. A broadnose sevengill shark (*Notorynchus cepedianus*) swam past us about four meters away, just where visibility faded to a sandy haze.

Eventually, we started swimming towards our exit point, walking out of the ocean to be surprised by friends. We chatted for a few minutes and then changed out of our gear by the cars.

Before long, I was driving north on

the I-5 Highway, heading home, reminiscing about a day well spent. The sun was dropping low in the sky, hinting that it would soon deliver the piercing orange summer sunset so typical in Southern California. ■

An avid diver for over 20 years, Brent Durand is a widely published underwater photographer and dive writer who has served as editor-in-chief of the Underwater Photography Guide and imaging expert at Scuba Diving Magazine and Sport Diver. With a reputation for insightful-yet-simple reviews and tutorial articles, he has written for most of the top dive publications. Helping hundreds of divers "take their photography to the next level," Durand has led underwater photography workshops in California, the Bahamas, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Please visit: tutorials.brentdurand.com.

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