

Jennifer Chiongbian
jennifer@chiongbian.com
917-250-2284

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A Whale of a Time

Dive into an aggregate of 6-foot torpedo-shaped gray reef sharks in the Fakarava atoll in French Polynesia sounds like heaven? This professional underwater photographer's life will grab you by the lens.

Be the first person in the world to discover and photograph a new or rarely seen creature in the ocean. No punching a clock, work in an environment that plunges you in the throes of subaquatic nature, travel to remote places, and immerse yourself in animal underwater adventures; sound like your dream job?

With tons of jobs out there to focus on, this job is undoubtedly one of the rare, off-the-beaten paths to consider.

Mike Bartick is marketing director of the Crystal Blue Resort in Anilao, Philippines, and a professional underwater photographer at Saltwater Photo. He understands the need to tell a visual story of exotic locations and the underwater natural world's wonders through his lens. He's been working professionally in the dive industry for 15 years. He was the first professional underwater blackwater photographer to take a rare photo of a wunderpus in its larvae stage, in its natural environment.

The Wunderpus photogenic is a true wonder in the natural world, even deriving its name from the German meaning marvel or wonder. The wunderpus is a small-bodied octopus species that is a close relative of the mimic octopus and often confused with each other. It has long, thin arms with brown stripes and spots, ranging from 9 inches to 16 inches, mainly in Southeast Asia.

Bartick turned an underwater photography hobby into a full-time job which he describes as, "First of all, I never call it a job. And not only does he get to explore remote places, but he can also discover new animal life. As he puts it, "We're not talking about three or four more, we're talking about hundreds and hundreds more, and also the grand possibility of seeing a new animal life here." He also adds about his clients, "If you're in a place where people are coming to you on vacation, you're really going to have happy people."

A happy work environment with educated, well-funded happy clients is a perfect storm. According to Dive Equipment and Marketing Association 2018 Diver Study, the typical diver traveling from the U.S. to a place like Crystal Blue, 65% make \$100,000-\$150,000, 62% are in managerial, professional or technical fields, and 67% have completed college or grad school, and 99% own their home.

His only complaint about his job is typhoon season. Mike says, "What I least like about it is it's where I live, there are seasons, so instead of going every single day, 365 we have to take break periods. So, it makes it very difficult to dive during typhoon season, where I'm at in the Philippines. And I really wish I could dive there year-round. And then there's other places where I could go plan the dive seasons, but I find them totally lackluster."

Those who have never experienced typhoon season, it is depicted by obnubilated overcast skies, torrential downpour and rough seas, makes diving impossible during the monsoon seasons.

When asked to describe what makes Mike such a standout photographer, Walter Marti, a long-term friend, and professional videographer who would co-teach the Critterfest photo workshops at Crystal Blue, said, "Other photographers never evolve. They still take the same picture the same way. And they're not trying different things, like he tries snoots, he tries different colored lights."

His other longtime friend and boat captain, Jim Simmerman of Giant Stride Charters, describes him as, "He has a wealth of knowledge in his field and he's a very giving individual and would help you with anything as far as pertaining to certainly his business, and beyond. He would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it."

Jim had experienced this when he and Mike were first diving together in the Philippines and found themselves in a precarious 180' underwater situation. Mike came to his aid, assured him that he would be right by his side as a good dive buddy should be.

It isn't all fun and games though. As Mike puts it, "It's a lot of hard work, and when I'm in the resort, we're working all day. I don't get to sleep before midnight, I'm up at 5:30 a.m. every morning before we get out (on the boats)."

Adventure, discovery, danger, lifelong bonding experiences, and happy people are all part of this pro underwater photographer/ dive resort manager's job description. Undoubtedly, working in the dive industry can produce an experience-rich, rewarding career path for those willing to live their dream lives.



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