

# Labour of love

**Guy and Anita Chaumette** spend years making their award-winning films. How do they do it? Well, when you manage one of the best dive resorts in the world, you have plenty of opportunity to dive great reefs again and again to get the perfect shots. **John Boyle** meets the managers of Wakatobi resort and the owners of Liquid Motion Film



**A** girl from Harrogate falls in love with a French dive instructor in the Maldives. For the next 20 years they work together, managing small, island resorts in some of the most remote paradises on earth: diving, filming, making movies and becoming one of the most successful husband-and-wife teams in the business. Sounds like fantasy? Meet the Chaumettes...

'My first love is photography,' says Guy Chaumette. 'I developed my first photograph when I was eight years old. As a child I spent all my summer holidays by the beach and was skin diving virtually before I could swim. Taking a camera underwater came naturally to me. As to where we met, well, basically underwater, in the Maldives.'

'Mine is a more conventional background,' says his wife Anita. 'I'm from Harrogate, in Yorkshire. I had a solid university education, I speak four languages and worked in international

marketing. I travelled a lot when I was little and always had a passion for foreign places and making photos and film, so after uni I traded chilly British shores for tropical ones. I moved to Jamaica to work when I was 21 and took up diving there, for fun. Later I was living, working and diving on a small island in the Maldives when I met Guy, who was working on the same tiny island.'

Both qualified instructors sharing a passion for travel and diving, they've managed remote island resorts and dive operations in some of the most far-flung corners of the planet: Mexico, Seychelles, Maldives, Kenya, UAE, Belize, Honduras, Bonaire, Turks and Caicos, Dominican Republic, Bermuda and Fiji. But it was while working on Little Cayman that their first break in filming came.

'Our first really successful film was *Jawfish Nursery*, about the life cycle of the yellowhead jawfish,' explains Guy. 'This amazing little fish is an oral brooder and yet very little was known about him. We wanted to film the hatching of the eggs right from the

mouth and I remember going back evening after evening, from the shore on Bloody Bay wall, to try to witness and film this event.'

'After months of observing these tiny fish and filming their entire life story – building a nest, relationships, the courting dance – I finally managed to film the hatching. I got back to the surface with no air in my tank but some really great footage. This little film won a string of top awards all around the world. A five minute film, but the footage took almost two years to shoot!'

The ability to get to know their subjects by observing them over long periods has come to distinguish Guy and Anita from other film-makers who, working on tight budgets, don't have this luxury of time.

'Some of my most inspiring moments have been filming Guy,' says Anita. 'Such as when he creates one of the love stories only he can create with a fish. When we made an earlier film, *Talking With Fishes*, he really formed a bond with some Nassau groupers, a couple of nurse sharks, a moray eel and a scorpionfish. We went back to the same place, day in, day out, for more than a year and I would swear the animals knew him. They came to him, sought him out, looked for him and asked him to gently caress them, as if he were a cleaner fish. It was fascinating. He does the same thing with many animals – frogfish, rays, cuttlefish and octopus... really becomes one of them. Becoming one with your subject is the only way to really film unique and natural marine life behavior. Guy goes all the way, he gets them to come to him. He's really the Fish Whisperer!'

Operating under the name Liquid Motion Films, Guy and Anita fund all their projects themselves.



'We like making movies so much that we want to do them on our own terms and therefore need to finance them ourselves, which means we have to have two jobs,' says Guy. 'We spend a long time on location on tropical coral islands and for this we have a job that we run in parallel, such as managing dive resorts.'

'This allows us to live the film,' says Anita. 'We spend months, sometimes years, returning again and again to the same spot, spending long hours studying the behaviour of marine creatures. This gives us an invaluable working knowledge of marine biology and we get the best stuff on film - not only the animals' image, but their personalities, their lifestyle, their story.'

It's difficult as a film-maker to find something new as a subject, but as Guy and Anita become intimately involved with a reef, they see things many others have missed. This has resulted in their *Water Colours* series.

'We thought that there had to be a reason why the coral reef was so colourful,' says Anita. 'When making *Water Colours* one discovery led to another. We re-wrote the films a few times as we expanded our work with scientists, researched, documented and learnt more about the way that marine animals see, display and talk to each other.'

'Essentially, fish's language is built entirely on colour, talking and displaying in colours us humans can't even see. Imagine - we only have three colour channels, but some shrimp have 12. Even the octopus, who in human terms is 'colour blind', uses UV and polarization displays, and sees a whole other spectrum invisible to our human eyes. In their world, we're blind! We found ways to 'see' the colour channels that we essentially can't see, such as UV, and started to

learn the fishes language! It makes you realize, even on the coral reef, there is still so much to learn.'

This led to discoveries about fluorescence, and the challenge of bringing this to the screen in *Beyond the Blue*.

'Doing enough night dives to capture behaviour for *Beyond the Blue* was a feat in itself,' says Anita. 'All the time of shooting, we were discovering brand new science, witnessing behaviour that had never even been seen before, never mind filmed. It's almost impossible these days to truly be at the forefront of marine science, to discover something completely new, but with fluorescence, we were real pioneers.'

'We were researching and working directly with the world's leading scientists to try to understand the phenomena. We knew that fish communicated by colour, but nobody knew that fluorescence could be involved. And then one night we were shooting a goatfish and he started adapting his fluorescing colours and patterns right in front of our eyes. The same happened with a mantis shrimp, using his fluorescence to enhance a threat display. And slowly we started to scientifically link fluorescence to animal communication and really enter a new dimension.'

'Back then, there weren't any fluo lights available and we made the whole film using massive prototype lights put together by Dr Charles Mazel. They were stuffed with toilet paper and heavy as bricks. Doing enough time underwater and getting all the gear to work was a feat in itself. After *Beyond the Blue* wiped the boards at film festivals worldwide, we made a feature for National Geographic about the same subject and treated ourselves to having some fluo lights made!' >>

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For the last four years Anita and Guy have been managing Wakatobi Resort – a tiny, island resort in the remotest area of Sulawesi.

'The greatest aspect of Wakatobi is the beautiful house reef,' says Guy. 'It allows me to get in the water at any time and get the best use of diving with a close circuit rebreather. I achieve dives of three to five hours routinely, which gives me incredible flexibility filming the behaviour of creatures.'

'The downside is that I don't dive as much as I'd like, as running such a high-end, luxury resort is time consuming.'

'We have access 24/7 to the world's most bio-diverse and healthiest reefs and we can return day in, day out to the same marine creatures and really capture some unique behavior,' says Anita. 'This gives us our edge, as even the biggest broadcast productions can't afford to spend months or years on location filming a tiny shrimp.'

'Making our films takes us longer than if we were solely working in film-making, but at the same time, we retain our creativity and passion. If we film something unique and unexpected, we have the freedom to re-script. People often ask why we don't make films full-time – maybe one day we will, but for now we love what we do and how we do it.'

So what are their respective roles in Liquid Motion?

'We both film underwater,' explains Guy. 'We both participate in scripting, researching and selecting footage and while I'm concentrating on editing, Anita looks after the huge job of production.'

'We complement each other,' say Anita. 'I'm structured, Guy is poetic. Guy does the editing, I narrate. Guy does the sound, I do the production

work. We work with a composer in Los Angeles who turns our feelings into music, and of course a distributor who shares the final product with the world – otherwise, it's just the two of us.'

Dive, film, write, produce, direct, edit, make movies, manage planes, boats, liveboards, resort, guests and staff – if that isn't enough, Guy and Anita now have a one-year-old daughter too.

'Crystelle Mia is already a little mermaid,' says Anita. 'She loves swimming in the ocean and watches obsessively when Guy is editing, trying to take over and interact with the images on the screen. Guy plans to have her diving by four years old, so we may have an extra pair of hands before we know it!'

After so long in the business, the Chaumettes have plenty stories to tell.

'I remember once in Little Cayman hearing over the radio that a bunch of sperm whales had been spotted,' says Guy. 'After a 40-minute ride we got to the spot. I jumped in the water five times before I was actually in range to film them. It was just so beautiful to see these majestic creatures – the first time I saw them close up. After a while they really started to interact. And guess what? My camera set-up was for macro.'

'Another great encounter was in Beqa Lagoon, Fiji,' he continues. 'I was diving on the shark feed. Due to my status as film-maker they let me do just about what I wanted. I wasn't interested in filming the circus that goes on with the feed, so decided to go deeper to get the real behaviour. Being surrounded by 12 big bull sharks that get closer and closer to you in 40m of water is just fantastic... until you notice their speed is increasing, that they're moving ever closer to you and

becoming erratic. That's when I realised I was in the way of their path to the feed and presented an obstacle to the juicy hand-over happening 20m behind me.'

'I was a little higher up, filming a different angle,' says Anita. 'I saw this tiny, tiny man surrounded by the hugest sharks, all circling him, looking highly interested in him and also a bit agitated, and all Guy tells me, gesticulating madly, is "If anything happens, FILM!"'

'While living on the east side of Roatan, we would see dolphins passing by,' says Guy. 'Every diver, photographer and film-maker knows that wild dolphins are hard to get on film because if the visibility is 30m they will stay 31m from you. One day, we followed them with the boat, riding ahead of them and then entering the water and waiting for them to get to us. After five unsuccessful drops, I decided to start emitting a high pitched noise. And guess what? Two dolphins came to investigate, came super-close, left... and then came back with the entire pod to give us a half-hour show. Anita slipped in and they were looping through our legs, swirling round our heads, really playing and teasing us, with constant eye contact. A great moment in life and just telling the story, I can feel this uplifting feeling as strong as it was some 15 years ago.'

'What's really amazing is when you learn your work has spread widely and really touched people's hearts – an email from across the world, a fan letter... that's special,' says Anita.

'Another great thing is using our filming and marine biology backgrounds to educate and make a difference. Wakatobi's coral reefs are actually getting healthier each year, because we work directly with the local villages in a large-scale community-based conservation project, educating, employing, and sponsoring the villagers and leasing their reefs. They in return protect their reefs from fishermen and outsiders with a vengeance, earn a great living from it and put on a mask and snorkel instead of lighting a stick of dynamite.'

So what's next for the Chaumettes? 'We're always working on something,' say Guy. 'We have some great ideas to do some films for children. Hopefully Crystelle will help on those...' ●

**Guy and Anita are currently using SONY NXCAMS in Amphibico housings with Light and Motion housings and a Panasonic POV with AmphibicoFlexcam POV housing.**