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Diving in the Dark, Off Hawaii's Coast

Near Big Island, you can swim in the middle of the world's greatest migration of wildlife—much of it very, very small

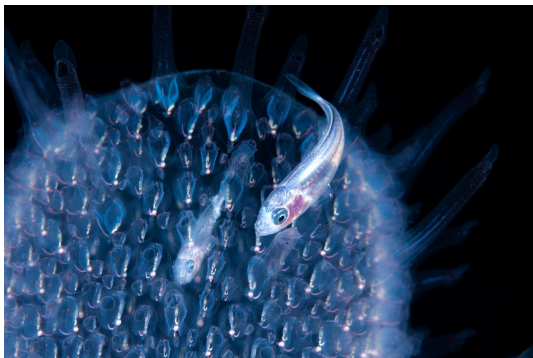
By James Sturz

Updated Oct. 8, 2014 5:38 pm ET

I'M A FEW MILES off the western coast of Hawaii's Big Island and some 40 feet underwater. There is no reef to gaze at, just open sea extending another 3,000 to 6,000 feet down. I'm tethered to a line that keeps me from drifting off into the Pacific Ocean.

Also, it's the dead of night.

The current knocks me around, but I keep my eyes on my flashlight's beam, prepared for the show. Immediately, I see a mass of zooplankton that looks like galactic sprawl—then quickly realize that is only the backdrop. There are jellies all around—delicate, two-inch-long sea nettles throbbing like beating hearts, minuscule box jellies (benign at this size) swelled up like tiny subaquatic blimps. And that's still just the beginning.



LITTLE SWIMMERS | A larval fish hiding in a pyrosome—a colony of tiny organisms that can cluster into massive formations.

JOE WESTON JR.



A half-inch-long Hawaiian bobtail squid

JOE WESTON JR.

When people think of scuba diving, they usually envision coral and colorful fish. But every night, a swirling horde of organisms, including jellies, fire worms, zooplankton, gastropods, mollusks, larval squid and eel, makes its way from the ocean's dark zone to the surface to feed and mate. Forget the African savannas. This is the largest animal migration on the planet, and it occurs around the world.

The Big Island, however, is the only place where you can see it easily on organized dives. The bathypelagic zone, where sea pressures can reach nearly 6,000 pounds per square inch more than a mile down, starts close to Hawaii's coast—about a 15-minute boat ride from shore. Obviously, you can't scuba dive that deep, but you can strap on a tank and wait for the ocean life to float up to you.

Seven years ago, Jack's Diving Locker, an outfitter in Kailua-Kona, started offering this nighttime dive, calling it "Pelagic Magic" ("pelagic" describes something related to the open sea). Over the past 20 years, I've been on night dives around the world, including in Indonesia, the Caribbean and Hawaii (where, on a recent evening, more than a dozen mammoth manta rays swooped around me while I knelt on the ocean's floor, in what felt like a marine stampede). This dive is the most mesmerizing of all. I'll never thumb my nose at a dolphin, turtle or shark—but the Pelagic Magic experience is just so subtle, meditative and jaw-droppingly beautiful.

Four of us are diving this evening. After displaying our certification cards (the company requires scuba experience within the last 12 months and one previous night dive), we receive an onshore briefing, including a 30-minute video of what we'll see. Full of glimmering colors and shooting lights, it looks like a series of outtakes from "Tron." Then our divemaster, Matt Bogdanovitch, explains the plan: Each of us will be tied to a separate line attached to the dive boat. He'll swim around, untangling us if we get our lines crossed, much like taking four big dogs out on a walk.

"How do you avoid the feeling that you're bait on a line?" asks Wyatt Johnson,

an elementary school teacher from Santa Cruz, Calif.

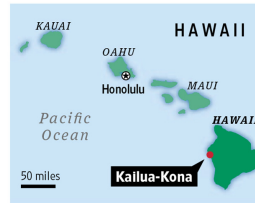
“Avoid strapping on too much weight, so you’re not jiggled up and down,” Mr. Bogdanovitch answers, before adding: “Also, don’t think about it.”

It’s still light when we board the boat at Kailua Pier. We motor out, suiting up while Pink Floyd’s “The Dark Side of the Moon” plays over the ship’s loudspeakers. The crew deploys an open-ocean anchor—an army-surplus parachute billowing out into the sea. Once the sun sets, we double- and triple-check our tethers and enter the water from the stern. The darkness is disorienting. When we submerge, there’s nothing but inky black around us. It doesn’t feel like a dive—we’re on a spacewalk instead.

The small stuff is the spectacle (although there is the possibility of seeing some meandering sharks). It takes me a moment to focus on what’s so startling, abounding and close. The bioluminescent ctenophores, or comb jellies, are diaphanous, like gossamer chiffon caught in a breeze. One variety, the Venus girdle, resembles a swirling, curling and unfurling ribbon, almost 2 feet long. The sea gooseberries are lanterns, with streamers dangling. The beroes, which feed on other jellies, resemble cucumbers but can instantly flatten into disks.

Then there are wriggling worms and snails, creatures that don’t look like they belong in our world—and, in fact, they don’t; the scuba apparatus lets us be in theirs. I gape at their inch-long transparent bodies, see-through shells and twirling, umbrella-shaped feet, and sea angels that look like undulating, disembodied internal organs. I

THE LOWDOWN // NIGHT-DIVING OFF HAWAII’S BIG ISLAND



Diving There: Jack’s Diving Locker in Kailua-Kona runs “Pelagic Magic” night dives every Thursday year-round (*\$175 a person for a 60- to 90-minute dive, jacksdivinglocker.com*). Kona Honu Divers (konahonudivers.com) and Big Island Divers (bigislanddivers.com) run combination manta-ray and open-water night trips.

Getting There: A number of carriers fly between the western continental U.S. and Kona International Airport on Hawaii’s Big Island. The airport is about a 15-minute drive from Kailua-Kona. You can fly nonstop from the rest of the mainland to Honolulu, then connect to Kona on Hawaiian and Mokulele Airlines.

Staying There: On the Big Island’s Kohala Coast, the 252-room Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, opened by Laurance Rockefeller in 1965, overlooks the island’s most striking beach (*from \$550 a night, princesortshawaii.com*). Sheraton Kona Resort & Spa at Keauhou Bay completed a \$20 million renovation in 2012 (*from \$179 a night, sheratonkona.com*). You can see mantas at night from the balconies of its ocean-view accommodations.

Eating There: Mauna Kea Beach Hotel’s Manta & Pavilion Wine Bar spotlights products from local farmers, ranchers and fishermen. The menu includes pan-seared ahi tuna with kukui-nut puff pastries and Hamakua oyster mushrooms. The property’s Manta Ray Point frequently attracts feeding rays, and is close enough to visit between courses. At the Sheraton resort’s outdoor Rays on the Bay restaurant, you can choose pupu platters, burgers, sushi or fresh grilled fish. There’s no better place on the island to see manta rays without getting wet.

can see the salp—gelatinous, barrel-shaped invertebrates that siphon water through their bodies as living valves. No more than an inch or two long themselves, they can link into 15- or 30-foot-long chains. Shrimplike hyperiid amphipods are inside some of the salp, as parasitic and monstrous as Ridley Scott's aliens. Of the larval and juvenile fish, I'll just say that you've never really appreciated flounder until you've seen one that's paper-thin.



A tiny marine snail called Clio cuspidata

JOE WESTON JR.

Mr. Bogdanovitch has promised that he won't "haul us up like a fish"—that we can stay as long as our air lasts. I remain underwater for some 90 minutes. When I resurface, the other divers are already aboard the boat, the music is off and everyone is quiet. Mr. Bogdanovitch points overboard and says, "We call it 'soup.' Sometimes it's thin. Other times, like tonight, it's chowder."

"Or 'abyssque,'" the elementary school teacher quips.

BLACK OPS // Four More Fab Night Dives

Bright Beauty in the Philippines

On the northern shore of Mindoro Island, Puerto Galera is known for its pocket beaches. Its most famous dive site, Sabang Wrecks, teems with venomous stonefish, frogfish with bioluminescent lures, and dragon sea-moth fish, which can change color like chameleons. Various dive shops can take you out, including the scuba center at Atlantis Puerto Galera. *From \$150 a night for two, atlantishotel.com*

A Marine Zoo in the Maldives

Divers flock to the North Ari Atoll in part because 2,000-plus species of fish do, too. The atoll's most renowned site is Maaya Thila, a coral-encrusted mesa that starts 20 feet below the surface. Divers can see turtles and octopi, and watch reef sharks feed at night. *W Retreat & Spa-Maldives, 25 minutes from Maaya Thila by boat, leads dives there. From \$1,120 a night, wretreatmaldives.com*

Smooth Waters in Mexico

There are many reasons to dive Paradise Reef, off the island of Cozumel, but the chance to spot the rare splendid toadfish may top them. Dazzling yellow fins fringe its body and flattened, zebra-striped head. You may also see nurse sharks, stingrays and 6-foot-long sea cucumbers—in calm waters with minimal current. Presidente InterContinental Cozumel Resort & Spa's dive shop can handle

logistics. *From \$242 a night, intercontinentalcozumel.com*

Tiny Treasures in Indonesia

Off the northern tip of North Sulawesi province, Nudi Falls is named for nudibranchs—tiny, shell-less sea snails, nearly all with breathtaking colors. You'll likely spot hundreds on a single dive, as well as ghost pipefish, pygmy sea horses, emperor shrimp, devilfish, pom-pom crabs and perhaps an elusive rhinopias scorpionfish. The tube corals also come out at night to feed, groping the reef with yellow, anemone-like tentacles. NAD-Lembeh Resort offers three- to 14-night packages. *From \$370 a person, including meals and day dives, nad-lembeh.com*

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