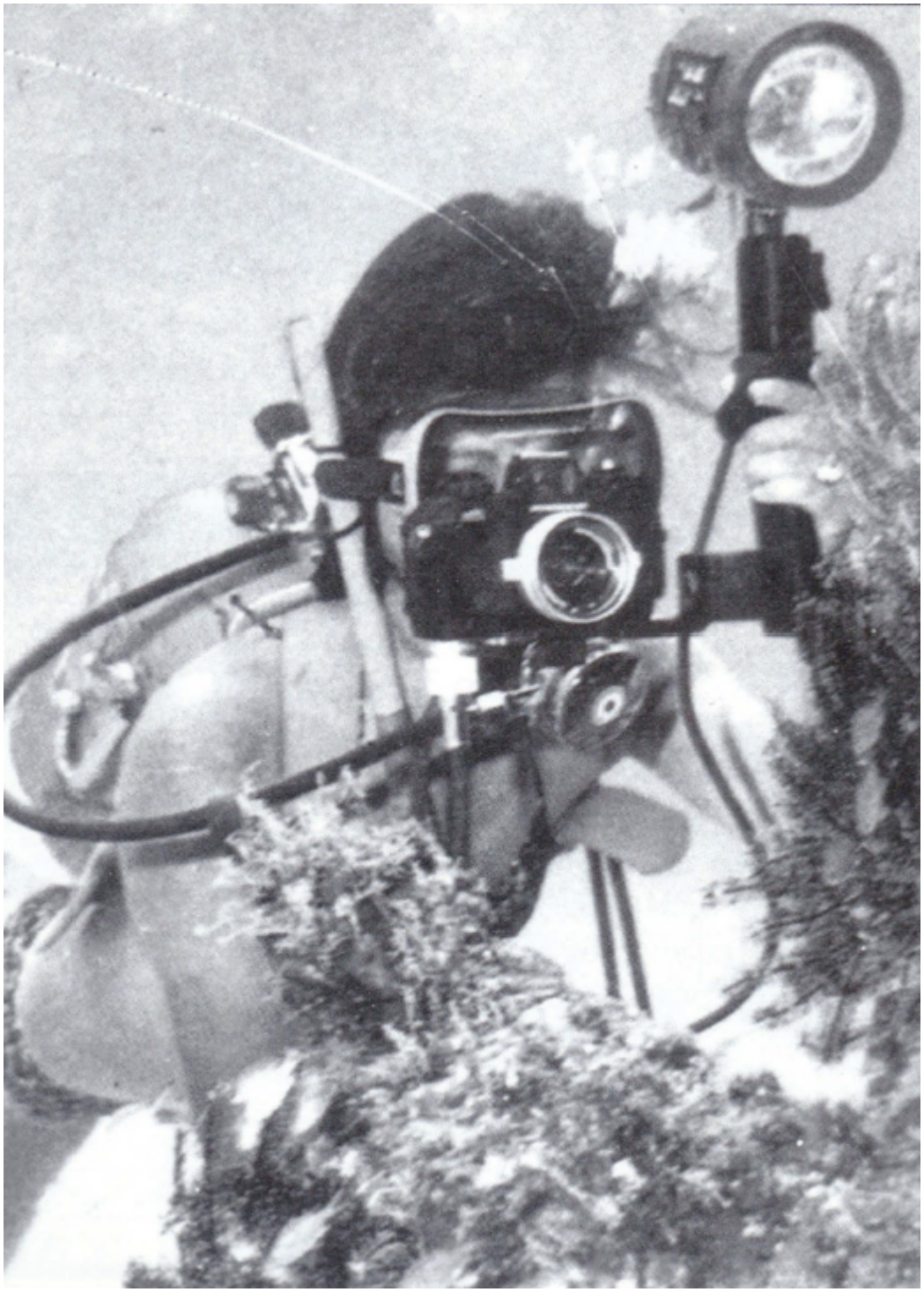
Life Under The Sea

Posted on

Minoli de Soysa goes diving

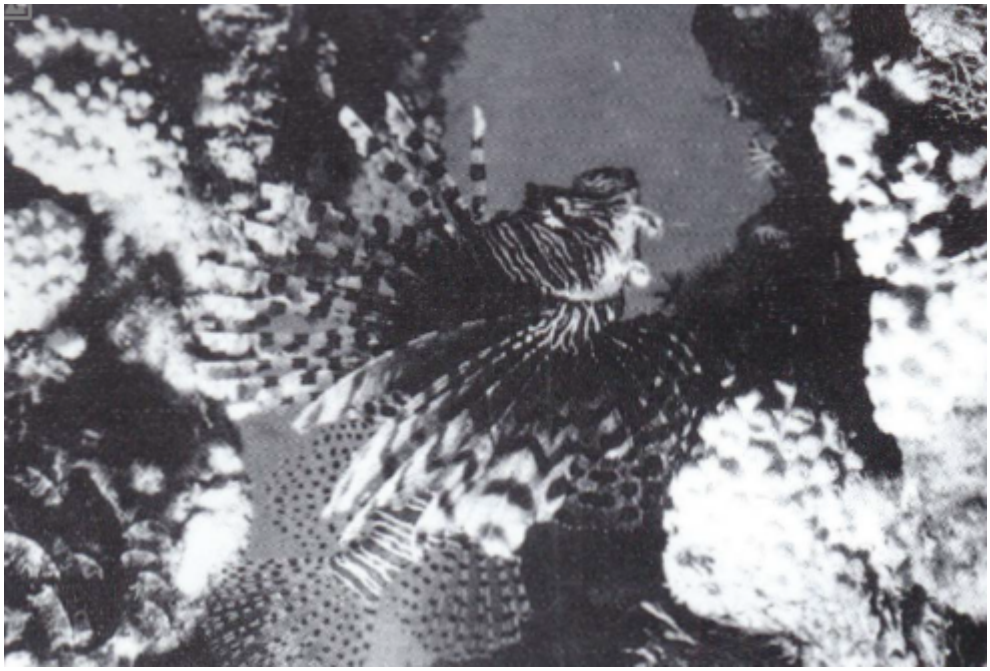


The world 40 feet under the warm tropical sea, just a few miles away from the

Hikkaduwa shore, is a totally fascinating one. Surrounded by reefs and studded with ancient shipwrecks, the seas off the southern coast are ideal for the scuba diving enthusiast, particularly from September to February, when the turquoise water are at their calmest and clearest.

Some two dozen varieties of fish, as well as colourful corals, seaweed and other aquatic life can provide endless hours of unforgettable sights. Diving into the dark mysterious waters is like arriving on another planet, quite alien from solid ground. Under the water, the sun’s red light rays are filtered so that most of the fish, corals and plants appear a bluey green from a distance. The closer you get, the more colourful they become. Clumps of coral grow on stones, and spread like a strange underwater garden in bloom on the coral-spiked ocean floor. The golden rule is not to touch anything without gloves. The most tempting of sights can turn out to be the most dangerous.

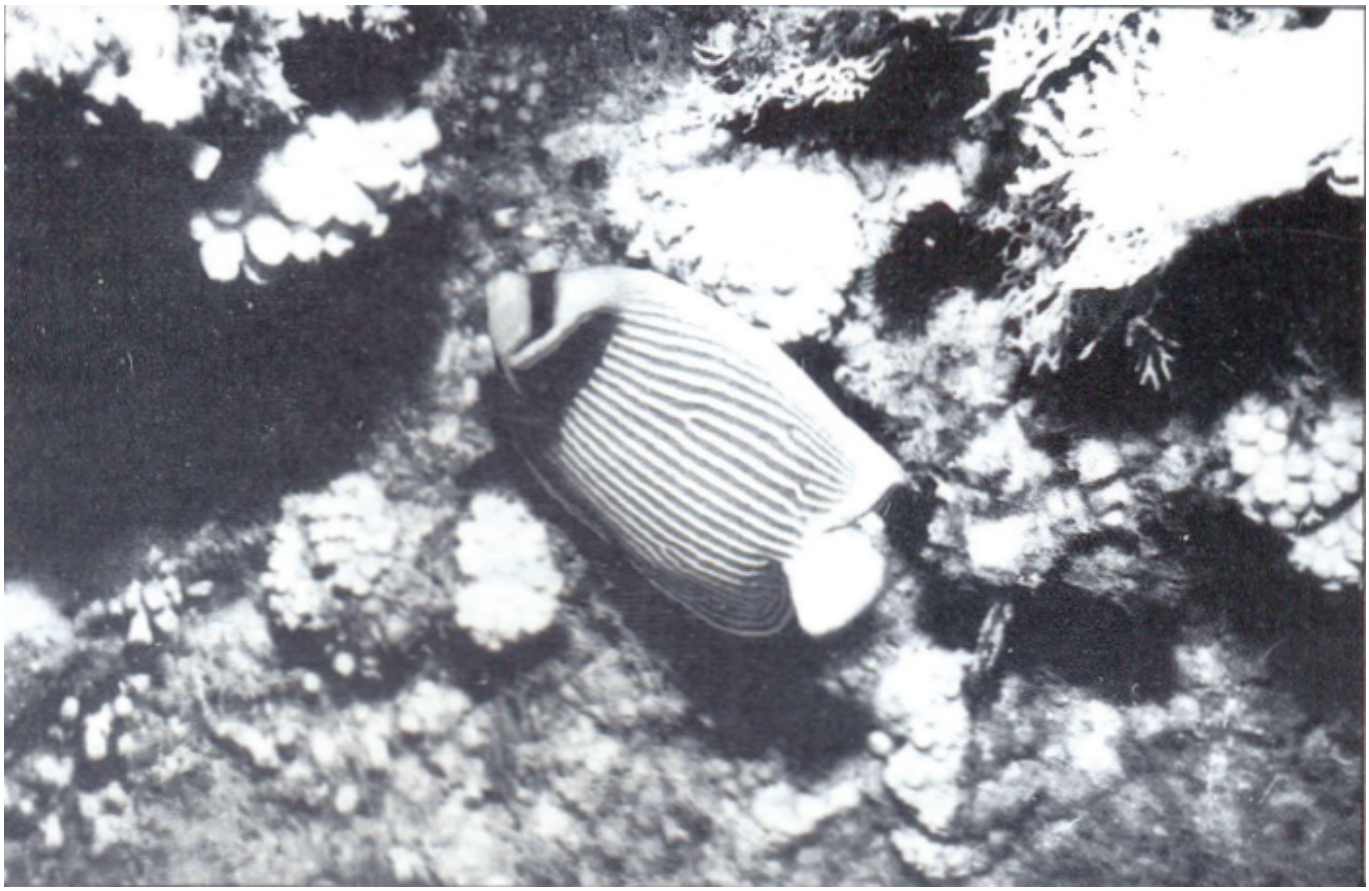
Hikkaduwa was one of the first places in Sri Lanka where scuba diving was popularized. As a result, both the fish and the local inhabitants are quite used to seeing strangers. However, the area was, and still is despite the government declaring it a sanctuary, badly exploited by coral miners and lazy fishermen who use dynamite. Spear fishermen also still menace the underwater inhabitants. As a result, the fish, eel, octopus and other_ animal life are wary of intruders and shy away from strange objects which tend to come too close. Despite this, the Hikkaduwa seas are teeming with vivid and energetic life. Not far from the surface are free swimming or pelagic fish such as jack mackerel, paraw, tuna and seer; popular varieties for human consumption. There are large-eyed, red groupers and graceful, blue-striped angel fish which glide by. The Hikkaduwa waters are also home to two unusually shaped fish. A shoal of goatfish graze, almost like sheep in a meadow, on the grassy bottom of the shallow reef. The goatfish is grey and silver-pink with two whiskers under its chin from where the name was derived.



In the deeper water, a school of trumpet fish stand on their heads feeding off the grassy bottom. The trumpet fish is long and cylindrical with a pipe-like beak and a bell-shaped mouth resembling a trumpet. In the seaweed, which sways and beckons with ghostly fingers, a clown fish darts in and out, playing hide and seek. It is an orange yellow with two blue and white vertical stripes across its body, like the markings of a clown. Amid the coral, a parrotfish, gaudy and rainbow coloured, gnaws at the coral with its teeth which converge into a nose resembling a parrot’s beak. The parrotfish grinds the coral between its teeth, digests polyps and algae and spits out the calcium waste. On a rock lies a stonefish, an ugly and frightening spectacle of rough skin covered in warts and algae. The same colour as the rock and just as motionless, the stonefish waits for the slightest touch to release a strong and often fatal poison from the hollow spines on its dorsal fin. The stonefish swallows its prey hole.

The Hikkaduwa waters also have many varieties of wrasses, including the tiny cleaner wrasse, which, like the boxing shrimp, lives off parasites it cleans from the bodies of other fish. Among the brown, blue-tipped taghorn coral, another member of the wrasse family, the rainbow fish, stands out. The multi-coloured fish is silvery blue, with two red stripes down the length of its body and violet and green lines covering its head. The dynamiters and spear fishermen have made the little purple octopus a rare sight. It has become a shy creature which hides from divers, scurrying away backwards, its transparent tentacles waving. There are a host of

other varieties of fish to be seen in the Hikkaduwa waters, depending on the time of the year. There are several types of butterflyfish, the crown jewels of the coral reef. They come in several colours: the common butterflyfish is silver, crisscrossed with dark lines and its back part orange and yellow; the striped butterflyfish is lemon yellow with dark lines and a black patch, like some masked highwayman, covering its face. In fact, there is no end to the fascinating variety of life, both plant and animal, to be observed under the waters off Sri Lanka’s southern cost. The glass-bottomed boat will take you skimming over the ·waters giving you a clear view of the magnificent garden of corals in the sea bed. Or if you’d rather dive in to have your own private view of the many-hued corals and fish, you would be equally entranced by the captivating spectacle.•



The emperor fish against a background of coral formations.