Photographed by Allen D. Walker

SONY A6400

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

TEXT & IMAGES: **NICHOLAS CARROLL & ALLEN D. WALKER**

The aroma of percolated coffee and neoprene fills the early morning air in the restaurant at Coffee Bay's Ocean View Hotel. Already bundled into their wetsuits, divers scoop up the traditional South African buffet breakfast that will energise them for a day on the sea.

Most of the divers are Japanese nationals who have flown in to witness one of nature's most awe-inspiring events - the annual winter sardine run. The sardine run occurs from May to July when billions of sardines spawn in the cool waters off the southern tip of Africa. They then move northwards along the east coast, traveling through the Eastern Cape to KZN.

Coffee Bay in the Eastern Cape is one of the key viewing sites for the sardine run. Coffee beans from a wrecked ship washed up on the shore in 1893, and so the name stuck. Whilst there isn't a coffee tree in sight, the surrounding coastline is breathtakingly beautiful and includes the famous 'Hole in the wall'. One folklore story explains how a giant fish bashed its head against the rock until the hole appeared, rescuing the mermaid-like creature stranded in the lagoon behind.

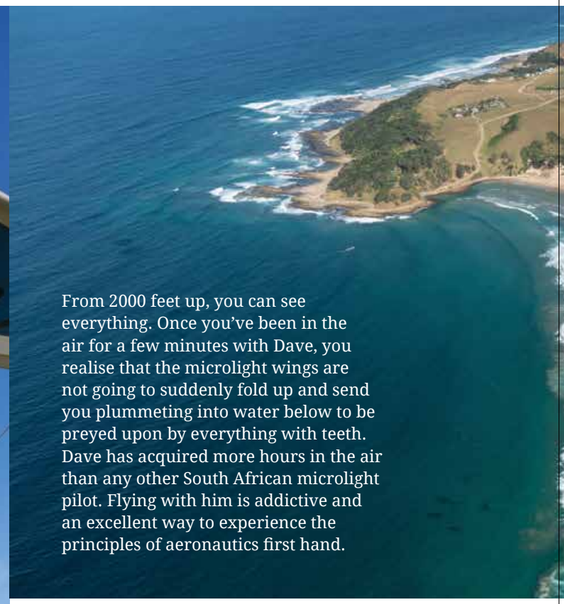
The road down to the dive boat launch site was bumpy, the sun just starting to appear on the horizon. The road becomes a track and winds through the sparse arrangement of traditional Xhosa huts. Fires are lit outside most huts and small herds of cattle are guided along the track to who knows where. In the chilly air, the overseas guests stare in disbelief at barefooted children seemingly immune to the cold stony ground. None of us in the Chronicle team dive - yet, so we went along to watch the boats launch.

When our friends at Premium Brands (Sony camera agents for SA), offered the Sony A6400 for us to review, we knew

that the sardine run was the best place to test it. Our chosen vantage point was from 2000 feet up in the back seat of one of Dave Jackson's microlights. Dave owns Ballito Microlight School, and provides the air support via radio to the dive-boat skippers, guiding them to as close as possible to the shoals.

The 'bait ball' is the big prize. A tight, orbital vortex of thousands of sardines being bombarded and devoured by dolphins, sharks, whales and game fish. The bait balls are hard to identify from the boat, it's only when you see the white feathered Cape Gannets breaking the water surface Kamikaze style -that you know you are close to a shoal.

A special thank you to Dave Jackson who invited us to fly with him. Dave is a qualified flight instructor in both microlight and fixed-wing aircraft. Call him on 082 659 5550 for further enquiries.



From 2000 feet up, you can see everything. Once you've been in the air for a few minutes with Dave, you realise that the microlight wings are not going to suddenly fold up and send you plummeting into water below to be preyed upon by everything with teeth. Dave has acquired more hours in the air than any other South African microlight pilot. Flying with him is addictive and an excellent way to experience the principles of aeronautics first hand.

With the boat crew and divers occupied by sardine activity, Dave spots a family group enjoying themselves on a quiet beach. “Let’s go down and say hello”, he says confidently. The microlight descends and Dave makes a perfect landing on the hard sand near the water. He taxis towards the group, cutting the power to the propeller. The adults, kids and dogs stare in amazement at this seemingly normal act of landing a plane on the beach. After exchanging pleasantries and a good laugh, we are back in the air in no time at all. A brief, but memorable interlude. The look on the kids’ faces was priceless, Mom’s appreciation - unforgettable.

Our focus returns to the ocean surface once again for signs of sardines. No one is here for the ‘kill’. Getting close to the action is about making great pictures and to be ‘one with nature’. There is no ‘mad divers’ party’ at the end of the day, just peace and reflection. The slightly overweight hotel dogs cosy up to the overseas guests as if sensing their growing connection to nature and all things living.

SONY WOULD BLUSH WITH PRIDE IF THEY KNEW THAT INSIDE MOST OF THE OVERSIZED UNDERWATER CAMERA HOUSINGS, SITS A SONY ALPHA SERIES CAMERA.

A sudden commotion on the radio snaps our focus away from the distant horizon. A dive-boat skipper has found his way into the path of a huge bait ball. Chaos erupts as he can be heard chasing divers into the water. Go, go, go! From the high above we could see the boat and the divers’ colourful fins against the dark water. Each diver carries an underwater camera.

We reviewed the A6300 in the 2018 edition of The Chronicle and were so impressed that we bought one and now use it for everything. Except for the images on these pages, where we reviewed the A6400.

All shots on this spread by award winning photographer – Allen D. Walker – visit www.awphotosa.com

The most recent addition to the Sony Alpha Range, this camera looks and feels very similar to the others in the range. In terms of quality, it measures up very well to the high-end full frame sensor cameras that cost a lot more. What made reviewing the A6400 attractive, was the promise of faster auto-focus. Especially as we were going to be doing the majority of work from the air, it made sense to ‘get the best’. The system performed brilliantly.

Shooting from a microlight is completely different to any other kind of photography. It travels in excess of 80km p/h and there is no windshield to protect you. Therefore a fast shutter speed is essential - aim to use a 2000th of second in good light. If camera says ‘no can do’, the only way to achieve this speed is through a higher ISO.

We are not fond of high ISO’s because they cause ‘noise’ or digital ‘grain’ in images. Professional level camera sensors can handle higher ISO’s to the point where the effects are not too noticeable to the naked eye. ISO - International Organization of Standardization, is the main governing body that standardises sensitivity ratings for camera sensors (among many other things).

The optimal ISO setting on a camera is 100. That will get you sharp clear pictures with little visible noise (when you zoom in). We dialled the A6400’s ISO to 1600 for many of the images you see on these pages. We got the shutter speed we wanted and challenge you to point out any digital ‘noise’ in them.

ISO can be explained as follows: by increasing the ISO you are increasing the normal sensitivity of the camera’s sensor. This comes at a price - image degradation. Not too easy to spot in small size images, image degradation is mostly visible in large sized prints and very evident when you zoom in on an image on your computer screen.

The camera reviews we undertake at The Chronicle are to give you insight into new technology and the incredible opportunities for picture taking. In doing so, we also inch our knowledge forward. A journey with a camera has no final destination. Don't be overwhelmed by what is inside the camera -it is simply a box with a hole and the means to 'burn in' what is outside. Nothing mysterious happens when you switch from A to AE, or P to M.

All you are doing is telling the camera how much light to let in, and for how long. ISO choice is extra. And like most things in life, you sacrifice a little to get a bit more. In the case of high ISO's, you are trading some picture quality to get sharper pictures on the move. Either in the air or below the ocean surface to freeze frame those little silvery fish.