



An American crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) is ready for its close-up at the Gardens of the Queen (*Jardines de la Reina*), Cuba, 2015.

A large crocodile is swimming in green water, with its head and front legs visible above the surface. The sky is blue with white clouds. The crocodile's head is on the left, showing its mouth with sharp teeth. Its front legs are extended forward. The water is a deep green color.

Matty Smith: As Above, So Below

Story by Craig Baker, Photography by Matty Smith

Award-winning underwater-wildlife photographer Matty Smith says he's "always had an attraction to the water and the tricks it plays on light." His journey to artistic acclaim, however, did not follow a traditional path.

Smith has no formal training in photography (he studied mechanical engineering in school) and is "entirely self-taught" as a photographer. In his late teens or very early twenties, he was given a used single-lens reflex film camera as a birthday gift, and he began using it to document surfing trips around Europe and the United Kingdom (where he was born), taking mostly black-and-white photographs of surfers, from the beach, with the help of a telephoto lens.

Within about five years, Smith purchased his first waterproof housing for his camera, enabling him to paddle out into the water and take more intimate shots of the surfers. In the early 2000s, he took his hobby international with a trip to Sri Lanka “just purely to shoot surfers from the water,” he says.

By 2006 Smith had developed an interest in scuba diving and at that time bought his first underwater housing for his camera. That acquisition naturally led him to point his lens to-

ward subjects that were more suited for a photo genre that Smith calls “underwater natural history.”

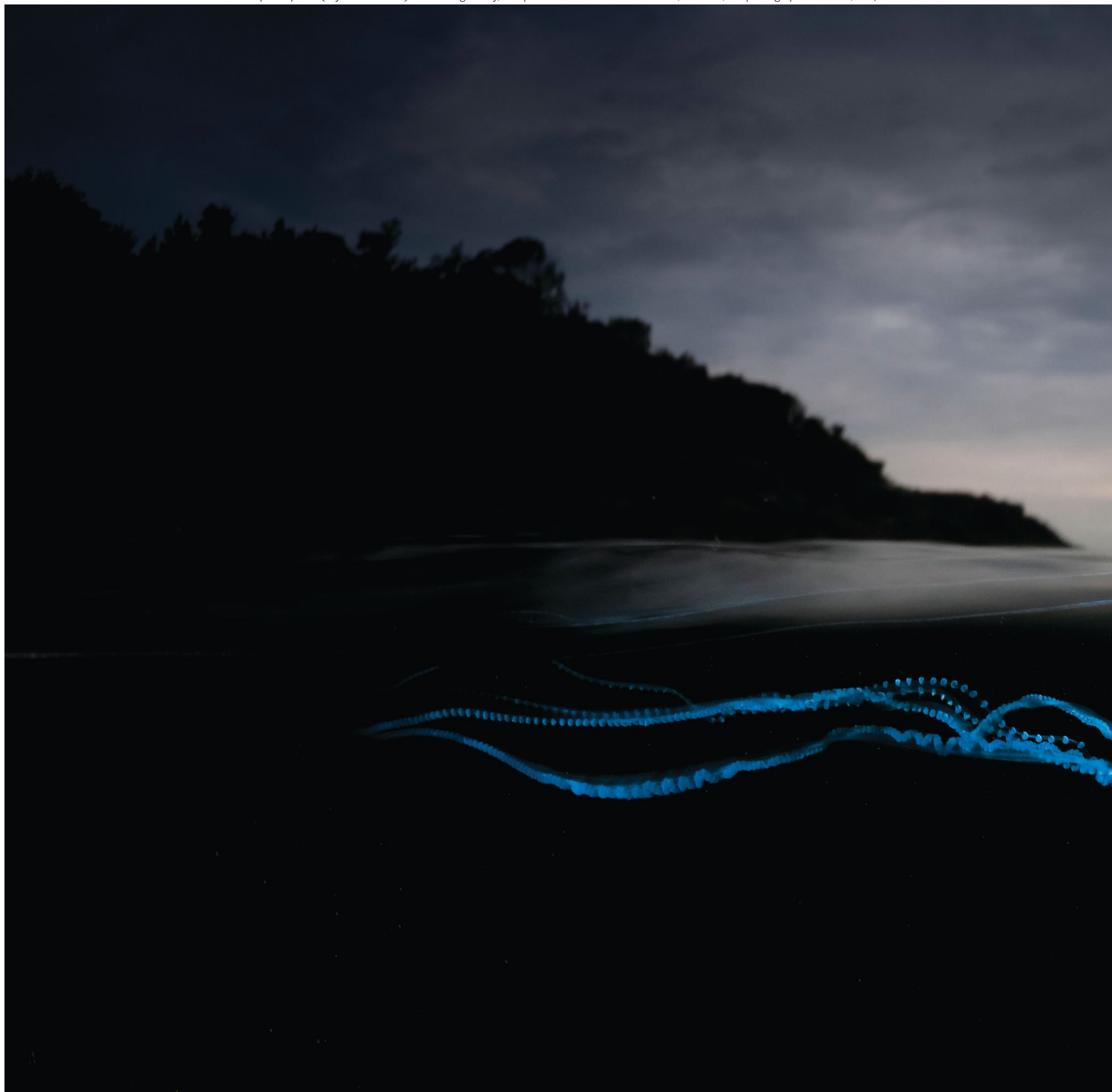
Smith emigrated from the UK to Stanwell Park, Australia (about an hour’s drive south of Sydney, on the eastern coast of the continent), in 2007, and that, he says, is when he “really got more into the scuba diving.” As he honed his skills and became increasingly interested in natural and environmental subject matter, Smith sustained himself working as a me-

chanical engineer on contracts that came primarily from a Chinese engineering company.

He says that working as an international contractor results in his traveling to China multiple times a year, but he’s afforded the freedom to travel on his own to pursue his photography between work trips. It was not until 2012 that Smith says he felt that he’d spent enough time doing scuba photography to begin thinking about “trying to make something of it.”

Two years later, he had something of a professional windfall, though he refers to it simply as a “really lucky year.” In 2014, he won three big recognitions: he was a finalist in the BBC/Natural History Museum Wildlife Photographer of the Year Contest, which won him a trip to London for an awards ceremony at the museum; he was *Australian Geographic*’s Nature Photographer of the Year; and he won first-, second-, and third-place prizes in the *Ocean Geographic* Nature Pho-

This bluebottle siphonophore (*Physalia utriculus*) at Bushrangers Bay, an aquatic reserve in New South Wales, Australia, was photographed at dawn, 2014.



tographer of the Year Contest. Smith won an additional award from UnderwaterPhotography.com in 2014. Then, he went on to win a second *Australian Geographic* Award, in 2016, and a *National Geographic* Photographer of the Year People's Choice Award for the "Underwater" category, in 2018.

Thus, Smith was catapulted almost instantly from relative obscurity as an amateur underwater nature photographer into a role as one of the most acclaimed modern photogra-

phers in his genre.

Smith's images are carefully curated, and he says that he has spent months planning for a single shot. "The sun, at different times of year, rises on different parts of the horizon," explains Smith, "and sometimes you might want the sun at a certain part [of the horizon] so that it's just rising between a couple of rocks, to make the shot look fantastic, ... so there's a lot of long-term planning that goes into shots like that." He says that this was

the case when planning for the shots he took of a Portuguese man o' war. The photos earned him recognition in the BBC contest.

The results of his process are photographs that can capture the vastness of the underwater environment or, perhaps, illustrate a moment of life in an "alien" ecosystem that feels, somehow, intimate. His work is at its best when his photos convey these seemingly contradictory messages simultaneously, as in his photographs of under-

water predators, and his portfolio/series titled *Over/Under*, in which the waterline splits the frame, resulting in an image that is half a portrait of the underwater environment and half one of the land and air above. The images produce a surreal effect, offering a glimpse of a world hidden beneath the waves while communicating the proximity of that world to our own, despite the former's apparent otherworldliness.

Smith's over/under photographs



are what he considers his specialty, and they are also the body of work that has garnered him the most attention, including invitations to travel to Cuba to photograph American saltwater crocodiles for *Ocean Geographic* and to photograph endangered hawksbill sea turtle hatchlings on a private island near Papua New Guinea, for the nonprofit Lissenung Island Hawksbill Turtle Project.

Smith uses a clear half-dome port, which he constructed, secured on top

of his camera lens to capture the over/under shots. The port is 18 inches in diameter—much larger than most photographic dome ports on the market, which tend to be 6 to 8 inches in diameter. Using the port results in a slightly warped perspective of the subjects, owing to the refraction of light through the port's domed surface. The port also makes Smith's images appear much closer than the 9-inch distance between the surface of the dome and the camera lens itself, though he still

has to get up close and personal with creatures, including crocodiles and silky sharks, to achieve the evocative visuals that dominate his portfolio.

Despite his rather recent and widespread success in the world of underwater photography, Smith has yet to transition out of his job as a mechanical engineer into life as a full-time photographer. He says he feels conflict between designing machinery designed to tunnel into the earth and photographing environmental subject



Matty Smith

Lauren Thomas

matter. But he is hoping to make the transition, eventually. To that end, Smith says he is working to begin offering photography courses to interested pupils and also hosting private guided underwater photography tours and trips.

Though relatively new to professional wildlife photography, Smith is already making waves on the underwater photography scene. His images are so captivating and surreal that their fidelity to his subjects has been questioned. Some viewers have even asked if it is possible to capture some of those shots without resorting to camera tricks or staging. Smith insists that his images are indeed real and that they are almost completely untouched in postprocessing.

Smith says his “greatest pleasure” comes not from the photography awards or the professional assignments but from “sharing these images with people that maybe don’t live near the ocean, and don’t dive, and maybe aren’t familiar with these animals; ... that’s the greatest realization,” he says, “when you see someone’s face light up with [the knowledge of] what’s out there.”

For more about Matty Smith and his photography, visit mattysmithphoto.com.

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Left, top: Sargassum seaweed offers a splash of yellow in the waters of Bushrangers Bay, Shellharbour, New South Wales, Australia, 2014.

Left: Even at sunset, a cabbage coral reef is visible both above and below the surface of the water near Lissenung Island, Papua New Guinea, 2016.

Right, top: A hawksbill turtle hatchling swims in the waters near Lissenung Island, Papua New Guinea, 2016.

Right: Waratah anemones (*Actinia tenebrosa*) brighten a rock pool in Port Kembla, New South Wales, Australia, 2014.