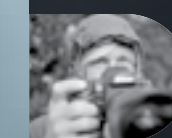


George Karbus has become one of Europe's best-known photographers of underwater wildlife. He tells Keith Wilson about the joys of surfing, freediving and making a film about a very special dolphin...

All images: George Karbus

George Karbus



George Karbus Profile

- George Karbus is an experienced surfer, freediver and a Nikon Europe Ambassador.
- After moving to Ireland 18 years ago from the Czech Republic, George raised the funds for his first pro camera by working as a porter in a Galway hotel.
- Since then he has devoted his life to photographing the natural wonders of Ireland's emerald coastline, winning numerous awards in the process.
- In 2013, George was named the overall winner in the British Wildlife Photography Awards. His images have also been awarded in Nature's Best, Wildlife Photographer of the Year, and the Outdoor Photographer of the Year title in 2010.
- George's photos have featured in many international titles, including *BBC Wildlife*, *Nature's Best*, *Birdwatch*, *Ocean*, *The Times*, *Irish Independent* and *The Telegraph*.

www.georgekarbusphotography.com

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George Karbus is in a hurry. He is attempting to get his campervan ready and roadworthy so he and his partner Kate and their two children, Joshua and Natalie, can set off on a two-month trip away from the wild winter of Ireland's west coast. There can be no prizes for guessing that Karbus is not an Irish name – George was born and raised in the Czech Republic before moving to a small coastal village in County Clare 18 years ago. Today, he is one of Europe's most awarded underwater photographers and cameramen. He may love Ireland's natural beauty but, even after two decades, the Atlantic winters remain difficult to tolerate. "I would love to live away in winter," he declares. "I love Ireland in spring. April, May, June are the three months that I would never change for anything else, because Ireland is just amazing those three months. It's a magical place, but in winter it's quite brutal where we live." Not that he has been always tied to the Emerald Isle; George and Kate are both freedivers, and together

they have travelled to all points of the globe, from the frozen shores of the Russian Arctic to the warm Pacific waters of Hawaii and California. Indeed, George is living his dream, one that began in the land of his birth where the only sea to be found was on the pages of travel brochures...

The Czech Republic is a landlocked country, so how did you end up on the west coast of Ireland?

I was obsessed about living by the ocean since I was a teenager. When I saw the classic movie with Patrick Swayze called *Point Break*, I felt this is what I want to do; I want to surf in waves and live this kind of lifestyle. So, I decided to go for it. I finished my schooling when I was 19 and was ready to emigrate to America, but it was a time when it wasn't that easy for a Czech guy to move to the US, so I ended up living in Majorca for five years.

“**When I saw the classic movie with Patrick Swayze called *Point Break*, I felt this is what I want to do**

Previous page: A magical moment of friendship and trust between George's freediving partner, Kate, and a wild solitary bottlenose dolphin off Ireland's west coast.

Below: A giant humpback whale diving to feed on herring off the coast of northern Norway in winter.



Not such a bad alternative for a young man...

It was cool. I was living on a beautiful island, but I was still dreaming of surfing and living by the ocean. Then one day I saw an article in a magazine about Ireland. The pictures touched me, the fresh green grass, it was refreshing after living for five years in dry Majorca! I told my girlfriend, "Look, this place Ireland looks beautiful and they have waves and it's green, it's amazing." So, we finished summer in Majorca, bought a car and drove to Ireland. When we came to Ireland we fell in love instantly. Fell in love with the landscape, the people, everybody was so nice, we got hooked. Eighteen years later we are still here.

In that time, you have developed a fantastic affinity with dolphins...

Yeah, dolphins are my subject because we have a friendly dolphin here. We've known her for more than 18 years and she has taught me a lot of things about how to approach animals, so I can confidently say I know how to approach animals to photograph them. How to read their body language is important.

Does the dolphin have a name?

People call her Dusty, but we think Dusty is too rough for such a sweetheart, so we call her a Czech name, Malinka, it means 'little girl.'

Is she old for a dolphin?

When we came here she was at →

Above: Atlantic edge. This stunning view of the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare in the late afternoon sunshine is a fine example of the importance of a 'big sky' to a dramatic landscape composition.

*** LANDSCAPE LENSES**

WHEN HE'S OUT OF THE WATER, GEORGE HAS A WIDER CHOICE OF LENSES FOR HIS LANDSCAPES...

The fisheye is your preferred lens when shooting underneath the waves, but what do you use topside for your landscapes?

I was for many years living without a 24-70mm. I didn't have a 24-70mm until about four years ago! So, I was living as a pro photographer with no 24-70mm. I had 16-35mm, I had 14-24mm and I had a 70-200mm. When I needed something in between I went for a 50mm. I was living like that for so many years, but for landscapes these days my go-to lens is the 24-70mm. I think the framing and composition is what makes pictures special. There's lots of people who shoot landscapes at 14mm, 'let's go 14-24mm', but if you don't have a big sky or a foreground you're never going to get an amazing shot on 14-24mm. You need a special foreground and an epic sky.

least five years old, so she must be 23 now. That's kind of middle-aged for a dolphin. Some bottlenose dolphins in the northern hemisphere live up to 50 years.

When you're going underwater specifically to photograph Malinka, what lens are you using?

If I know visibility is going to be limited, I use a fisheye. That is my go-to, so I go with fisheye and whatever camera. I am getting the Z 9 soon, so I am excited to try that.

What housing do you use?

I use Nauticam housings. They are pretty awesome. I have a housing arriving for the Z 9 tomorrow, which is amazing. I'm blown away how quickly they bring out new housings. They are an amazing company, Nauticam.

Visibility underwater varies quite a bit, so how important is the time of day to the quality of the light?

I like to work with natural light. The good thing about underwater photography is that you can do it even in the middle of the day when you have this strong summer overhead sunlight coming straight down, but I enjoy evening light as well, especially when the water is calm and the wind is down. It provides some amazing sunlight penetration through the water, it can be very magical.

You've also photographed whales. Were those photographs off the Irish coast too?

No. I've photographed whales everywhere. To be honest, I haven't taken a decent underwater photo of a whale in Ireland yet, but I have photographed orcas and humpbacks in the Arctic for five or six years in the north. I put a lot of time into it. We also went to Tonga and the Bahamas many times, Hawaii too.

Well, the water is warmer there, that must make it easier?

Yeah, absolutely. If you learn in Ireland, anywhere else you go is easy! Learning underwater photography in Ireland is the toughest school.

You have also photographed beluga whales. Where was that?

That was in Russia, in the White Sea.



Above: A fisheye is George's preferred lens for underwater images of marine animals, such as this portrait of a curious seal playing among the sea grass.

Above right: A bottlenose dolphin beneath the blue glaze of a flat calm ocean off the Canary Islands.

Right: The emerald sea. Local legend Fergal Smith surfing the famous Riley's Wave, off the west coast of Ireland.

I went specifically to photograph belugas. That was in the winter time, a frozen sea. They live in the White Sea and they often come to the ice holes to breathe, and we just slip into the holes. They take advantage of that as they have to come up to breathe, and they are curious as well. They are stunning, very beautiful whales. I was there only once, but the last decade I have dedicated to orcas in the Norwegian Arctic.

Are these shoots self-financed?

Yes, it's totally self-financed – 98 per cent of the time I'm going there because I love it. I finance it, I take all my family with me, and we just go, having fun, having an experience. Our two kids are with us so they can see those things they experience with us.

Was your partner, Kate, already a freediver when you met her?

Yeah, she still is. She has an amazing relationship with Malinka, which

“The good thing about underwater photography is that you can do it even in the middle of the day

I document. We are making a movie, hopefully it will be out soon. We are just figuring out who is going to produce the movie for us. I think it is going to be quite an interesting story.

Will the story be about the relationship between Kate and Malinka?

It's about the whole family. It's us, how we came here, about our lifestyle, about our approach to educate our kids, they are so connected with nature. Joshua is an amazing surfer. He has represented Ireland, he's probably the best talent to have come from Ireland, so he loves his surfing. Natalie loves surfing and horses, she's such a sweetheart with animals. A very gentle spirit.

What's your verdict on the Z 9?

I have only had it for one test, the weather has been pretty bad. I had it for one test day and that was when I was filming Joshua surfing. I'm very excited about the video features of the Z 9, so I was filming him for one evening, in slow motion, 4K, 120 frames per second. It looks pretty sick. I love my slow motion, and 4K at 120fps, it looks fantastic. I'm so glad that Nikon finally nailed a camera that can do both stills and video amazingly. I do lots of filming for video productions, documentaries, for all these different companies →





making nature documentaries, so with the Z 9 I have one camera that does both amazingly well. In one flick, I'm switching between stills and video. I love it.

A lot of photographers say they don't find it easy to constantly switch from one to the other, but you can do that without issue?

Yeah, but I have one big problem because you have to prioritize what is more important: stills or video? If something epic is happening you have to judge the situation and say, 'maybe this will look better in video', and do video instead, but I'm a photographer by nature and I know the value of one epic shot. I know that a really epic shot, like one of those that you nail once in three years, they will sell forever.

And that's not the same for video?

When you take a video, it's a clip, and the clip itself doesn't have big value. It can contribute something amazing for a documentary, it can make a documentary more epic, but the clip itself doesn't really have value and it won't make money forever for you. So, I think a good, epic still photograph has more value than anything you can shoot for video.



You can't beat anybody who lives locally and knows the place inside out and captures the most amazing moments

Above: Kate points to a jellyfish while freediving with Malinka, a wild bottlenose dolphin that the couple have befriended for the past 18 years.

Okay then, what have been your best-selling images, the ones that keep selling, year in year out?

I have lots of images that are unique and special. I like to capture magic. Those images that you know you can't repeat them, they're incredible and they make your portfolio special. I like to look up photographers who have at least 10 to 15 major images when I check their portfolio, or their top shots, so I can say, 'wow, this guy can supply some magic.' In my case, I have the surfing dolphin underwater. I think nobody has ever captured that properly. I have orcas, probably one of the best images of hunting orcas because I had an epic time with them and I used every single bit of my experience and ability to capture amazing shots of them.

What about your landscapes?

Some of the landscapes too, I hunt for light and amazing clouds. For years, I was obsessed with that. I think some of my seascape images here in Ireland are special because this kind of light is hard to get and is unique, so some of these shots are earned by patience and dedication.

Yes, and being familiar with the location and seasons...

And those images of Malinka; they are special because we have this relationship. We have spent so much time with her that I was able to capture some very special moments in amazing lighting situations.

Another picture that caught my eye was Emerald Surfer. That's not your son Joshua by any chance?

*** FREEDIVING**

AS AN EXPERIENCED FREEDIVER, GEORGE BELIEVES THIS SKILL HELPS HIM TO GET PICTURES THAT OTHER DIVERS CAN'T REACH...

How difficult is freediving to learn?

There are people who can hold their breath for more than three minutes without too much effort, so holding your breath if you're healthy is not difficult. What's harder is to move around smoothly underwater, to have an ability to glide towards the animals instead of kicking fins and using jerky movements. I've found a big difference, whether photographing sharks or whales or dolphins, when I just glide towards them without making bubbles. I get better shots than people who are kicking around. It's something that you learn by spending lots of time in the sea. You can't be an accomplished underwater photographer if you're not an accomplished diver.

No, no, that's a local legendary surfer, Fergal Smith, who is a big eco warrior. He is an organic gardener. I just captured him inside the barrel. It's quite a unique picture for Ireland, because you need really good water visibility for that, which is hard to get when the waves are big. That's a special shot too, certainly.

Are you using Nikon cameras to shoot the film you're making about Malinka?

Absolutely. I can't wait for when the spring comes here and when I start recording stuff with the Z 9, because I know that camera can do some amazing videos. I can shoot 8K and 60 frames, so I'm really excited and I know the autofocus works as well.

And what cameras have you been using up to now?

I've been using all brands of Nikon cameras, lately the Z 7II, Z 6II. They do pretty good videos, good stills, they're good cameras overall. I think the autofocus had some issues, but I was happy. I think the Z 7II is one of the best mirrorless cameras out there and we all know that Nikon has amazing files, amazing colours of the original images, and I value that a lot.

What's the biggest lesson you've learnt that's helped your photography, that you always follow whenever you go out?

There's so many. I think one is that if

you chase pictures you will get them, but it's more important to connect with your subject. You can chase light, you can chase landscapes, you can chase animals, but you need to connect with the subject, you need to connect with the landscapes you photograph, you need to connect with the animals you're photographing. If you're not connecting...

Can you give me an example?

Let's say I'm photographing a whale, which is beside the boat, and I jump off the boat in front of the whale, which is on the move and I just snap a picture of the whale swimming away, I am just stealing the shot. I have a picture of a whale swimming away but what was the situation? I scared the whale, I chased it down, I scared her and I steal that photo. I prefer much more to earn those photos, to get animals used to me, to spend lots of time with them. After a while I earn their trust and then you can connect with those animals, and those pictures will look totally different because once they accept you they will start behaving naturally and it will be visible in the final photo. Anybody who has a feeling will feel it. That might be something that makes my work different from other photographers because I like to earn those photos. But I have to say that earlier in my life I have a few photos which were stolen, which were chased, but they are not the photos that I am proud about.

And does the same go when it comes to your landscapes?

The same with landscape. I know how these Instagram photographers work; they just travel the world, they find good pictures, they find out where they were taken, they go to Google Maps, then go to the locations, snap the pictures, and 'Yeah, I got it. I was there.' Tick. And they go away. But you can't beat anybody who lives locally and knows the place inside out and captures the most amazing moments by knowing about different times of year, different light conditions, how things move. I'm definitely that person who spends more time on that location and has much more connection with the landscape. That person will definitely get the better photo. ■

Next Month

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