

# *Behind the lens*



## PIER NIRANDARA

**Behind the lens** places a spotlight on the world's foremost ocean conservation photographers. Each edition focusses on the work of an individual who continues to shape global public opinion through powerful imagery and compelling storytelling.

# Q&A

## PIER NIRANDARA

Pier Nirandara is an award-winning author, travel writer, film producer, and underwater photographer.

Nirandara began her career as Thailand's youngest English-writing author of three #1 national bestselling novels, with over 200,000 copies sold. She has written for BBC, AFAR, Conde Nast Traveler, and Lonely Planet, amongst other publications, and has shot conservation stories for Rolex, PADI, and the Save Our Seas Foundation. As founder of Immersiv Expeditions, she splits her time between Los Angeles, Cape Town, and Thailand.

### OCEANOGRAPHIC (OM): WHEN DID YOU FIRST CONNECT WITH THE OCEAN? HOW DID YOUR PASSION WITH THE MARINE WORLD DEVELOP?

Pier Nirandara (PN): "I was incredibly fortunate to grow up around the ocean in Thailand – it was a beautiful place to spend my childhood. I have this vivid memory of my mom doing a Discover Scuba Dive and being too young to join her. So, I waited impatiently on the beach, and she came out of the water saying, 'That was the most incredible experience I've ever had in my life!' I had never felt that level of jealousy before. From that day on, I vowed to get underwater."

### OM: AT THE AGE OF 15, YOU WROTE A BESTSELLING INTERSPECIES TRILOGY WITH THE FIRST BOOK, THE MERMAID APPRENTICES, WHICH GAVE YOU THE TITLE OF THAILAND'S YOUNGEST ENGLISH WRITING AUTHOR. HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR THE BOOK?

PN: "The *Interspecies Trilogy* is set in a parallel universe inhabited by mythical creatures, and is about two teenagers who get chosen to become ambassadors between the merfolk and the human race. In essence, it's an allegory for international relations and xenophobia – a reflection of current issues going on in the world, probably inspired by my time doing Model UN as a kid. Of course, being 15 years old at the time, I didn't really recognise the global implications back then. I grew up in Bangkok and the city is not really a place that you can just walk down the street and see your friends down the road. I was alone with my books and my imagination for a lot of time. You know that feeling that you get when you read something so incredible, it really speaks to you, and it transports you into another world? I really wanted to give that feeling to someone else as well. At that time there were no books about mermaids, let alone any written by Thai kids, so I thought, 'Why not?'"

### OM: AND IT CERTAINLY WAS A HUGE SUCCESS! HOW HAVE THESE BOOKS SHAPED YOUR LIFE AND YOUR CAREER UP UNTIL TODAY?

PN: "Being an author was my first real job, and looking back, I was incredibly lucky. The books were written in English because even though I'm fluent in Thai – I can read and write – I wasn't particularly great at writing literary Thai. We wound up landing the translator for the *Harry Potter* series – which was huge in of itself, and kind catapulted me into the space as a storyteller. I spent my high school years touring other schools, speaking at events, discussing the importance of storytelling. I think it was really this love for stories that's permeated my entire life. It's about evoking emotion and hopefully using that to catalyse some kind of change."

### OM: HOW HAS YOUR CHILDHOOD IN BANGKOK INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER AND YOUR WRITING?

PN: "It definitely made me a very curious person. Bangkok is a huge metropolis where people of all walks of life filter through, sometimes as a destination, often on journeys to elsewhere. I also went to an international school – which exposed me to different nationalities and ways of life growing up. Many of us call ourselves third culture kids, where we grew up in cultures different to our parents. It really opened up the world in terms of exposing me to what was out there, and informed who I am today."

## OM: GROWING UP IN THAILAND. WHAT CONSERVATION CONCERN HAVE YOU WITNESSED?

PN: "There are massive conservation issues in the region – from plastic pollution to coral bleaching, poaching and Indigenous rights. The longer I've spent away from Thailand, the more I'm actually feeling drawn back to it. I think sometimes it takes leaving your home for you to see it with different eyes and from a different perspective. I'd love to tell more stories about Thai coastal communities, and our relationship to the water. A couple years ago, I tried to become the first Thai person to photograph one of Thailand's elusive dugongs – a species that is going extinct – underwater. We only got drone shots back then so that's still a project I would like to go back and complete. Another story I want to explore is the shark fin trade – but from a Thai-Chinese perspective. Historically, the narrative has largely been told from a Western, Euro-centric perspective. Think people from the global north saying, 'don't eat shark fin soup, it's bad.' But what about the perspectives of the people that grew up eating it, consuming it, and selling it? What are their stories? How do we understand where they're coming from so that we can see a way forward and through? There's so much Sinophobia and anti-Asian sentiment in conservation, it's an area I'm very passionate about exploring."

## OM: HOW HAS YOUR WRITING STYLE EVOLVED THROUGHOUT YOUR LIFE?

PN: "It's always a little embarrassing to read your old writing, especially in my case – as it's a 15-year-old Pier speaking! But I think the clearest change in my writing has been a shift from fiction towards nonfiction. Even though fiction will always be my first love, I'm finding myself gravitating more towards journalism and narrative non-fiction."

## OM: AFTER YOUR BOOK SUCCESS, YOU WORKED AS A MOVIE EXECUTIVE IN LOS ANGELES. YOU THEN DECIDED TO QUIT AND WENT TO TRAVEL SOLO WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT YOUR TRAVEL BRAND 'PIER'S GREAT PERHAPS'. HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THAT NAME?

PN: "The name is actually a reference to the dying words of a French poet. On his deathbed, he said, 'I go to seek a Great Perhaps'. That always stuck with me. After working as a children's novelist in teens, I transitioned to Hollywood to work as an executive and producer at a number of film companies – ICM Partners, Sony Columbia Pictures, etc. it was really where I cut my teeth as a working adult. And it was an incredible way to operate at the highest level of storytelling – the projects we got to work on were pretty crazy! Then a diving trip to South Africa changed everything. I came back, questioning a lot in life and how I was spending all my time in the office, trying to tell these stories that I'd rather be living. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to leave and went full freelance."

## OM: HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS NOW AFTER LEAVING YOUR PREVIOUS CAREER BEHIND?

PN: "Different people can define success differently, right? For some, it might mean a house with a white picket fence, two kids and a dog. For others, it might be the freedom to go into the bush and disappear for months at a time to go be the next great explorer. It's definitely changed throughout my life. My idea of success used to be a career telling stories as a Hollywood producer, but over the years, it's changed to wanting to be the person living those actual stories. I think as long as the stories I'm telling are reaching the audience and creating some sort of impact or change, or evoking an emotional response somehow, that's success in my eyes."

## OM: HOW DID YOU GET INTO UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY?

PN: "I've been fortunate to shoot on land for quite some time, and to grow up diving from a very young age. Combining the two was really what changed things. When I started out, there weren't a lot of underwater photographers – let alone women of colour. Social media wasn't diluted yet, so it was somewhat easier to get your work in front of an audience. I realised that maybe there was an opportunity to make a difference through these images and words. It's not a linear trajectory nor career path, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

## OM: DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST FEW UNDERWATER IMAGES YOU TOOK THAT YOU REALLY LIKED?

PN: "You know what's crazy is that there's some of my oldest underwater images – some I took in 2018 – still win at photo competitions to this day! There's one image I shot at Swallows Cave in Tonga that placed in two different competitions within the past year alone. It's one of my favourite shots, mostly because I could see how new I was to it all – the final edited image is barely any different from the original RAW. I was still trying to figure things out. But I always wanted to evoke the feeling of the moment, the emotion – to be very realistic in my work. And there's a rawness, a purity to that image that I love."

*Continued on p. 80...*













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## Q&amp;A

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**OM: IN TODAY'S SOCIETY WHERE EVERYTHING IS IMAGE- AND VIDEO-LED AND MORE AND MORE PEOPLE RELY ON SOCIAL MEDIA TO CONSUME THEIR NEWS, HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF WRITING AND LONG-FORM JOURNALISM IN GENERAL?**

PN: "I wish I had better news! I'm not particularly optimistic about it, but I do think that, at the end of the day, the story dictates the medium, and there will always be a market for people who want to read long-form. There's a reason why I'll carry a Kindle around when I travel, but I will always have a paperback at home because I still love a physical book and still love reading on paper. At the end of the day, I am sceptical that TikTok will ever truly take over long-form storytelling or journalism. I think the world is just evolving and changing. And maybe we have to keep up with that a little bit."

**OM: WHAT CONSTITUTES A GREAT STORYTELLER AND WRITER TODAY? DO THEY NEED TO BE PROFICIENT AT CREATING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT TO STAND OUT?**

PN: "I don't think it ever hurts if you can do both – if you can write AND create video, or are a bit of a multi-hyphenate. I know it has personally helped my career being able to communicate what I'm trying to say across different forms of media. But on that note, there are also incredible writers who are complete ghosts on social media. I often lament that it's a little frustrating that my photography gets a lot more attention than my writing sometimes, just because of the nature of the medium. A picture paints a thousand words; someone sees it and is immediately moved. Writing takes a little bit more time for the consumer to digest that content. I like to think that an image draws people in and is the initial thing that sparks your curiosity, then makes you read the story behind it. That's why a lot of the work I do tends to blend both writing and photography."

**OM: IS THAT YOUR APPROACH TO EXTEND BEYOND THE OCEAN BUBBLE AS WELL?**

PN: "Yes, it's extremely important that we reach people outside the ocean silo as well. To make a difference, it's vital we can communicate with people who may not have the same initial viewpoint as us – we don't want to just be preaching to the choir. Maybe someone has never had the privilege of growing up around or near ocean spaces to ever ask those questions, or been exposed to the issues. If we're going to truly make a difference, we need an all-hands-on-deck approach. We need the scientists and the storytellers; we need the people who are not just marine biologists but also those working in other industries. I think photography and storytelling and writing are all wonderful ways to do that – to reach outside the bubble, the way we see with films, music, and art. Ultimately, storytelling is a human experience that transcends boundaries."

**OM: YOU ALSO RECENTLY STARTED YOUR OWN EXPEDITION TOUR COMPANY 'IMMERSIV EXPEDITIONS'. WHAT DOES SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM ENTAIL TODAY?**

PN: "Immersiv Expeditions is a company that encourages people to venture outward while exploring within. We take people to swim with big animals in the wild, with the hopes of using awe to catalyse some form of social change. I remember my first sardine run and how much that trip changed my life. Now, I get to pass along some of that magic for others too. It has been a really exciting and fulfilling new part of my career to be able to facilitate that for others. One day, I'd love to create a scholarship programme where clients from the global north could maybe help pay a small fee to subsidise a spot reserved for a scientist or local who wouldn't otherwise be able to access their own backyard. There's a huge barrier to entry to diving in general – and some of our concerns are how to address the privilege and accessibility issues within the space."

**OM: MORE AND MORE TRAVEL INFLUENCERS AND TOURISTS SEEM TO OVEREXPLOIT PRISTINE MARINE PLACES. HOW CAN TOURISM BECOME MORE SUSTAINABLE AND ADVANCE CONSERVATION?**

PN: "It's such a complicated, complex issue. I don't believe that the solution is to dump 10,000 tourists onto a place. That's not sustainable. Thailand, my home country, is renowned for overtourism. I've seen first-hand the degradation of the places I grew up around. That can't be

the future. But, conversely, who are we to say who's allowed access to certain places or not? If you impose a tax or something similar, it also builds walls around such spaces and makes it more difficult for certain people to access them. Whatever the approach, education is key. So, whoever does visit the place is aware of the costs and implications of tourism. For example, if you dive a coral reef, knowing not to touch or step on the coral. If you swim with whales, make sure to choose an ethical operator that doesn't harass animals. Government regulation is also paramount in making sure these spaces develop sustainably."

#### OM: WHAT'S THE WILDEST PLACE YOU'VE BEEN TO?

PN: "As its name suggests, probably the Wild Coast in South Africa. I call it the Pacific Coast Highway on steroids. It's basically this completely rugged stretch of coastline along the eastern seaboard of South Africa where we do the sardine run every year. Interestingly, it's also known as the Black homeland, because it's a region where Black people were forcibly moved during the apartheid area. So, imagine one of the biggest marine migrations in the world set against the backdrop of geopolitics, social history, class and division. It's really unlike anywhere else I've been, and probably why I keep going back year after year."

#### OM: HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ANY STRESSFUL SITUATIONS IN THE OCEAN?

PN: "Believe it or not, I'm actually quite a fearful person! But there's something extremely intoxicating about conquering that fear. Growth happens at the edge of your comfort zone – whatever that comfort zone might be, if you just step over the edge, oftentimes that's where you grow. That being said, I've been pretty terrified a few times during the sardine run where there are sharks feeding right in front of me, but the scariest thing about being in the water for me is the water itself. There's an unpredictability to the ocean, a sense of pure and raw power. It's extremely humbling, and a space that really demands respect."

#### OM: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY NOW THAT IT HAS EVOLVED FOR A FEW YEARS?

PN: "Hopefully I'll have grown! I'd love to get better with using lights, playing with various artistic styles, though still maintaining my ethos of capturing reality. I use Lightroom, but would never create a composite of an image or add something that's not there. I really want to portray the magic of the world and what it actually looks, or maybe the feeling of that moment. I can also sense a slow shift away from just shooting underwater pictures to focusing more on photojournalism. It's one thing to take a pretty picture, another to tell a story behind it and to use photography to evoke an emotion, whether it's awe, horror, fear or something else. Thomas Peschak has this amazing thing that he says – about a three-pronged approach to conservation photography. First, you have to take the pretty picture to get people to care about the animal or the place. Then you have to show them the horror of what's happening right now. But then, the third part is about giving the audience a way forward and tell them what needs to be done. So, it needs to end on a hopeful note and your story can't all be doom and gloom."

#### OM: HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR STORY AND BOOK IDEAS? DO YOU HAVE A CREATIVE PROCESS THAT HELPS WITH THAT?

PN: "I've been told that I have quite an obsessive mind when something sparks an interest! I'm an extremely curious person, and I think a lot of people in this space suffer from the same thing. You just hear a story, a fact, some piece of information – and it stops you in your tracks and pulls at your gut. Oftentimes for me, it's a question that I don't know the answer to. And for whatever reason – whether it was a childhood growing up surrounded by books, or my mom being an extremely curious traveller herself – I've always had that instinct of knowing 'that's a story right there.' Then I tend to go down this mental rabbit hole and search and search and search until I find the answer, and that usually winds up painting the story."

#### OM: ANY ADVICE FOR ASPIRING OCEAN WRITERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS?

PN: "It's not always about the kit! Of course, it's important to have a camera, but it's more important to know how to use it. I started on a Sony RX100 compact camera in an underwater housing and shot some crazy images in Mexican cenotes. Just knowing how to use your gear is fundamental – there are so many ways to self-teach nowadays with YouTube and the online world. Finding a good mentor has also been extremely helpful in pushing me to grow. I'm constantly looking to develop my work. Also, be curious! Go down those rabbit holes, find a story that sparks your interest. Try to think outside the box and do something that hasn't been done before – and try to have a little fun along the way!"

**Pacific Ocean**

A blue whale appears far offshore in the Pacific. "It was an inspiring reminder of the magic beneath the waves," remembers Nirandara.

**Mexico**

An endless stream of mobula rays during their annual aggregation in Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

**Thailand**

A freediver poses in dreamlike stillness in a freshwater spring.

**Thailand**

A crab hitches a ride on a plastic water bottle.

**Dominica**

"Dominica recently established a marine protected area to safeguard its resident sperm whales – a model for how conservation and tourism can thrive together," says Nirandara.

**Tonga**

In Swallows Cave, a diver breaks through a shimmering shoal of sardines.

**Thailand**

Fish hide beneath the bell of a jellyfish. "This dive was a reminder that sometimes awe and wonder exist in the most unexpected of places," says Nirandara.

**Dominica**

A sperm whale swims just below the surface.

**Indonesia**

Seaweed farmers in Indonesia. "Cultivating and harvesting seaweed is tough work, but offers a source of income, along with a chance to regenerate the diverse ecosystems within the area," explains Nirandara.

**French Polynesia**

Hundreds of grey reef sharks drift through a narrow pass known as Shark Alley. Part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve, this sanctuary is proof that with protection, the ocean can thrive.

**South Africa**

A local diver emerges from the rusted belly of a Cape Town shipwreck.

**Pacific Ocean**

Orcas in the Pacific – apex predators whose power and intelligence command reverence in any ocean they roam.

**South Africa**

"While learning to dive in a dry suit in Cape Town's kelp forests, I spotted an elusive shyshark," remembers Nirandara.

**South Africa**

An elusive sardine bait ball. "Within moments, chaos erupted. Birds plunged like missiles. Sharks surged from below. Dolphins and tuna joined the frenzy, each strike sending scales flashing like stardust. The Blue Serengeti, in full, breathtaking motion," Nirandara says.

Pier Nirandara is an award-winning author, travel writer, film producer, and underwater photographer. She began her career as Thailand's youngest English-writing author, publishing three #1 national bestselling novels. She later represented literary clients at ICM Partners, served as Director of Development at Sony Pictures, and as VP of Film & TV at A-Major Media before returning to storytelling full-time. From the BBC, Condé Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, AFAR, Lonely Planet, Off Assignment, and more, Pier's work often explores the intersection of travel, adventure, culture, and conservation. It has been recognised by the Lowell Thomas Awards from the Society of American Travel Writers, the Solas Awards for Best Travel Writing of the Year, Ocean Photographer of the Year, UN World Oceans Day, Photographers Without Borders, Ocean Conservancy, and the Save Our Seas Ocean Storytelling Photography Grant. She is a PADI AmbassaDiver™, a multi-TEDx speaker and also founded Immersiv Expeditions, where she leads trips to swim with marine wildlife.

## Behind the lens

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