

Documentary "The mysteries of Mont La Pérouse": a spotlight on an expedition supported by Blancpain

Blancpain is thrilled to announce the release of the documentary "The mysteries of Mont La Pérouse". This feature unveils a type of geological formations of vital importance to our ocean's biodiversity: seamounts. There are estimated to be several tens of thousands of these underwater mountains found throughout the world, however, only a few hundred of these formations have been studied. With the support of Blancpain, Laurent Ballesta has made his way around the seabed 160 km northwest of Reunion Island, to discover the secrets of Mont La Pérouse, which were still unknown to oceanographers.

The base of this mountain is found on the seabed, 5000 meters below sea level. As you rise up, the ocean depth dramatically reduces to a point where a summit emerges, just a few dozen meters beneath the surface of the water: this point is Mont La Pérouse. An underwater volcanic structure whose size is comparable to that of Mont Blanc – the highest mountain in the Alps. This geological anomaly is renowned amongst Reunionese longliners, who regularly carry out miraculous fishing operations in this location. However, for oceanographers, the area remains a real enigma.

Like other similar geological formations around the world, Mont La Pérouse – which was an island before being completely immersed – serves as a habitat, due to its individuality in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Acting as a cover and a source of food, it constitutes a hotspot providing refuge; as well as a resting point for many animals during migrations, including endangered species. The fauna and flora of the seamount are particularly diverse and unique, whilst many of the organisms, which develop here, cannot be found anywhere else. Mont La Pérouse plays a crucial role in the balance of the ocean's ecosystem. Thus, it is essential to protect this zone from overexploitation.

In November 2019, Laurent Ballesta, together with local researchers and part of his Gombessa diving team, led an expedition to study, characterise and illustrate the exceptional biodiversity of the La Pérouse seamount. Conducted with the support of Blancpain, founding partner of the Gombessa expeditions and many other oceanographic missions of the French biologist and underwater photographer, the exploration of this monumental site was a great first. Like all Gombessa expeditions, this venture encompassed three key principles: the scientific component, the diving challenge and the promise of unpublished images.

The scientific challenges mainly comprised of habitat inventory and the collection of data on the fauna and flora. Observation and photographic inventory, biological and geological sampling, and the use of cameras and sonars were all further techniques employed by Laurent Ballesta and his team to analyse the biodiversity of Mont La Pérouse.

In order to carry out this study, the divers had to adapt to complex diving conditions. As the site is in the open sea, the marine environment is subject to strong winds and almost permanent currents. Moreover, the dives took place in open water, with no option to return to a reef close to the surface – meaning the ascents occurred without any visual clues or protection against the tides. The longest durations approached an hour in length at depths of 60 meters and up to 30 minutes between 110 and 140 meters. Daily ascents and decompressions lasted, in full, between 3 and 5 hours.

The exploration of Mont La Pérouse resulted in an abundance of rare and splendid images. In addition to the documentary "The mysteries of Mont La Pérouse", these will illustrate an amalgamation of the study, a scientific publication, and will be the subject of photographic exhibitions. Through this project, Laurent Ballesta and Blancpain aim to raise public awareness of the importance of seamounts for the ocean's biodiversity and ecosystems, and thus of the need to preserve them.