

## **"Mission Cap Corse": the sixth Gombessa expedition supported by Blancpain**

**As founding partner of the Gombessa expeditions, Blancpain has supported the sixth odyssey of diver, biologist and underwater photographer Laurent Ballesta. Entitled "Mission Cap Corse", Gombessa VI aims to unravel the mystery of the "coral rings" that cover the Mediterranean off the coast of Cap Corse, at a depth of 100 metres. On Tuesday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, the expedition team resurfaced after 20 days in the waters of the Ligurian Sea. The divers disembarked in Monaco, where they were given an emotional welcome by Marc A. Hayek, President & CEO of Blancpain.**

In 2011, during a mapping campaign conducted off the coast of Cap Corse by IFREMER (French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea), a thousand strange and perfectly circular formations, regularly outlined on the seabed between 115 and 140 m, appeared on the monitoring screens. Never explored, these immense coralligenous atolls (each one 30 m in diameter) are a great mystery. What is their origin? What are the reasons for their presence in the Mediterranean?

To provide answers to these questions – and many more – Laurent Ballesta and three divers from the Gombessa team boarded the now famous *Bathyle Station*, set up on the barge of the INPP (National Institute of Professional Diving) on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. During Gombessa V in 2019, for the first time it enabled them to associate saturation diving with recreational deep diving using closed circuit rebreathers. Thanks to this technique, this year the aquanauts were able to explore the great depths of the Cap Corse and Agriate Marine Natural Park during very long dives over a 20-day period, punctuated by numerous research protocols. Over and above the scientific aspect, this expedition came with a major physiological challenge, as the four comrades stayed in a five square-metre pressurised chamber – an extreme environment for humans. Laurent Ballesta brought back unprecedented images from his journey to discover the "coral rings" of the Mediterranean. The mission will eventually confirm or refute the hypothesis that the formation of these curious aggregates is linked to gas emissions or freshwater springs.

Blancpain is delighted to have contributed to the achievement of this project, which is part of an ongoing process. Laurent Ballesta had already travelled to Corsica in May 2021 to study the angel shark, a species that seemed to have disappeared from the French Mediterranean. It was back in 2020, during an extraordinary mission with the aim of studying the impact of the cessation of human activities on vertebrate and marine invertebrate populations following the Covid-19 pandemic, that Laurent Ballesta had found signs of this animal which is halfway between shark and ray.

### **Blancpain and the Gombessa expeditions**

Gombessa VI follows five other major expeditions led by Laurent Ballesta with Blancpain's support with the aim of studying some of the rarest and most inaccessible marine ecosystems on the planet. Dedicated to the coelacanth – a prehistoric fish known as "Gombessa" in the Comores and thought by historians to have become extinct 70 million years ago – the mission first took place in 2013 in the Indian Ocean. The second occurred in 2014 in Fakarava, French Polynesia. The aim was to shed light on the enigmatic aggregation of the marbled groupers. For his third Gombessa expedition, Laurent Ballesta went to Antarctica in 2015 to conduct the first ever measurement of the riches harboured by this marine ecosystem threatened by global warming. In 2017, the fourth Gombessa expedition was once again conducted in Fakarava and focused on studying the hunting behaviour of the estimated 700 grey reef sharks that inhabit the southern pass of the atoll. In addition to Blancpain's regular support, this fourth mission benefited from a special donation stemming from the sale of the first BOC limited-edition model and was a natural follow-on from the study relating to marbled groupers.

For his fifth expedition, Laurent Ballesta travelled to the Mediterranean off the French coast in order to study, photograph and reveal the still well-kept underwater secrets of this sea that remains full of mysteries. During this mission, the Gombessa team, in part thanks to an additional donation resulting from the sale of the limited-edition series of BOC II watches, achieved a world first: the association between saturation diving – initially dedicated to offshore operations – and electronically managed rebreather diving techniques. This unusual method – which was improved in the framework of Gombessa VI – enabled the divers to rack up a total 400 hours of diving time in the course of 28 days, at depths of 60 to 145 metres.

Blancpain's support of Laurent Ballesta's projects followed a meeting between the diver and Marc A. Hayek, President & CEO of the Brand. Passionate about the oceans from an early age and himself a certified professional diver, he immediately had faith in Laurent's talent and potential as a communicator capable of inspiring change. The partnership was therefore self-evident.

"Over the years, the project has expanded, and we have clearly seen that it has a positive effect on public understanding of inaccessible marine ecosystems", said Marc A. Hayek, adding: "In light of this, we have actively accompanied Laurent on each of his projects."

For his part, Laurent Ballesta stated that he is "very proud to work with Blancpain, whose partnerships are based on the relevance and credibility of projects", further sharing that: "Blancpain is committed to making an effective contribution to knowledge of marine life and to the development of diving techniques. I think this is why the Brand values the Gombessa projects."

For further information on the Gombessa expeditions: [www.gombessa-expeditions.com](http://www.gombessa-expeditions.com)

### **About Blancpain Ocean Commitment (BOC)**

Exploring and preserving the world's oceans is core to Blancpain. Throughout the nearly 70-year history of the Fifty Fathoms – the world's first modern diving watch – Blancpain has woven close ties with the explorers, photographers, scientists, and environmentalists who treasure these precious resources. These affinities have inspired the Manufacture to support important activities and initiatives dedicated to the oceans.

In recent years, the Blancpain Ocean Commitment (BOC) has invested in oceanographic initiatives and partnerships with leading institutions, such as the Pristine Seas expeditions, Laurent Ballesta's Gombessa project, the World Ocean Initiative organised by The Economist, and World Oceans Day, which takes place every year at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

To date, all these activities in support of exploring and preserving the oceans, undertaken with great passion by Blancpain, have led to tangible results, and made a significant contribution in extending the surface of marine protected areas around the world, with the addition of more than four million square kilometres.