Stories of the seas

By Geraldine Tan

To say that 40-year-old underwater photographer Tony Wu (below) is based in Singapore would be taking the term very loosely.

His travel agenda between now and September next year includes Thailand, Japan, Australia, China, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Bahamas and Tonga.

All this travel may be unsettling for some, but the avid travel bug and passionate photographer takes it in his stride.

For the love of freedom

Mr Wu's taste for adventure started well before he embarked on a career in marine photography.

"Early in life, when it was time to decide what to do with myself, I decided to go against all the practical advice thrown at me by my parents and relatives," he recalled.

"I decided to get a liberal arts education and learn for the sake of learning, instead of for the sake of making a living."

While he admitted that his choice proved unpopular with the older folk, he "had a wonderful time in university, taking up subjects as diverse as biology, art, religious studies and Shakespearean tragedies".

Eventually, he graduated — top of the department, no less — with a degree in Asian studies from Brown University in the United States.

"I left school trained for nothing, but equipped for just about anything," he said.

He went on to make a 13-year career in investment banking, taking a break in the middle to develop an independent power plant. He said: "I've also run a mobile telecoms start-up, a cosmetics company and a media company."

Testing the waters

All this time, photography and diving remained hobbies, until he began to marry his interests through underwater photography.

"To be honest, I wasn't very good in the beginning, but I kept working at it until I was able to get articles and images published around the world," he said.

His passions even helped him to discover his flair for writing, which he had never considered as one of his strong points.

"When I started writing about nature, marine life and conservation issues, the importance of these issues to me made writing a pleasant and meaningful endeavour," he explained.

"These days, I truly enjoy writing. Formulating incisive text to accompany beautiful images and deliver a clear message is an art, one that I consider myself highly privileged to be able to pursue."

All this led to the launch of his award-winning first book, Silent Symphony, after which he decided to make photography and writing a full-time job.

More books are in the pipeline, he said. "But I want to make sure they're absolutely top-notch before releasing them."

Off the beaten track

For those who want to build up an unconventional career, here is his advice: "Be very stubborn and never give up. Learn from mistakes and don't be afraid to fail miserably.

"Be highly inquisitive and learn for the sake of learning. Be highly sceptical and question everything, especially yourself."

On his travels, he said: "I don't go for touristy places or package tours. I head out to remote, difficult-to-reach locations.

"I'm not looking to meet famous or well-known people. I'm striving to understand normal people and cultures, as well as the marine environments and animals with which they interact."

Photos: Tony Wu

SAY 'FISH': The characters that Mr Wu meets on his job come in various species, shapes and sizes.
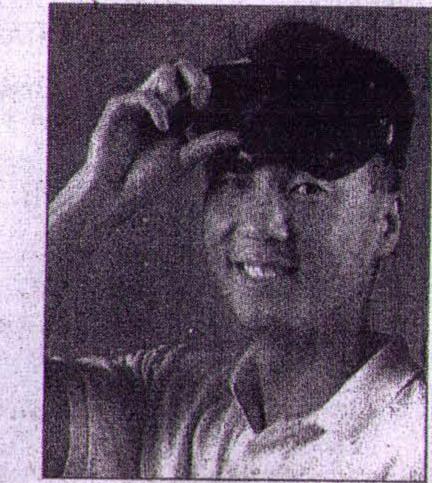
Treasures from the deep

Each stop on Mr Wu's itinerary holds priceless moments and experiences which cannot be put into words, he said.

"There's no such thing as a typical day. It's exhilarating and energising to have the freedom to greet each new day as a challenge — to maximise your own productivity and take on new projects, to think up new ideas and be as creative as you can possibly be."

At one point or another, he has had to grapple with cultural differences and strict travel restrictions.

He has also fallen sick in areas with no proper sanitation or medicine, and encountered negativity and a lack of respect from "urban people".

"The list goes on," he said, "but I wouldn't trade any of it for a 'normal' job."

File photo