

## Perspectives on Underwater Photography

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### The Challenge of Task-Loading

Underwater photography is not the most straightforward branch of nature photography but it is, undoubtedly, among the most challenging and rewarding. Many writers have rehearsed the technical challenges of underwater photography, such as colour absorption and backscatter; however, there are other challenges directly for the photographer which come from being in the aquatic realm.

Composing and taking an image while hovering motionless (or, "maintaining neutral buoyancy" in diver-speak) requires skill; controlling the camera via the knobs of an external housing, often while wearing thick gloves, does not lend itself to dynamic responses to photographic opportunities; add to that swells, currents, low light, poor visibility and, of course, the need to keep breathing and you will begin to understand why successful underwater photographers have to be successful divers too.

But while diving has to be second nature so that you can concentrate on photography, you still have to be completely aware of your circumstances in the water, particularly how much air you have, how deep you are and how long you have been below the surface. If ever there was a good example of task-loading, underwater photography is it.

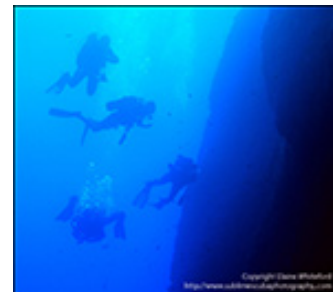
### The Natural Underwater World

For all its challenges, underwater photography is a joy. For me, one of its greatest pleasures is the variety of marine life, from the tiny to the massive, that I can come across in a single shoot. For instance, on a dive in the Indian Ocean off the Kenyan coast, one minute I was photographing a colourful nudibranch no more than half an inch long, the next I was trying to capture a 30 feet whaleshark, the largest fish in the sea.

This potential variety of subjects, however, can lead to difficult equipment choices as you can't change your lens underwater: once you have decided on your lens, you are stuck with it for the duration of the dive. So unless I am intent on photographing a specific subject, I tend to hedge my bets and go with a mid-range zoom rather than a fixed macro or wide angle lens. This may go against convention but it provides me with maximum flexibility for general underwater photography: the prospect of coming across a basking shark in waters off the Scottish west coast when all I have is a fixed 100mm lens doesn't bear thinking about!

Non-divers are always impressed by the colour of the underwater world, whether brightly coloured fish or weird and wonderful crustaceans. But no amount of TV footage of coral reefs can prepare you for actually being immersed in that environment.

Possibly unique among nature photographers, underwater photographers really feel part of the environment they are shooting. Apart from the obvious reason of being able to join nature in a different medium, a great deal of marine life is extremely nonchalant about divers so that it is often possible to get extremely close. Indeed, some marine life will come to the photographer rather than the other way around. Many's the time I have been snuck upon from behind by ballan wrasse and grey seals. However, as with all wildlife photography, the most successful proponents are those who know and understand how animals behave. This comes with experience underwater, as does an eye for spotting critters.



I operate a strictly non-touching policy for all aquatic life and will never harass a creature for the sake of a shot. The most important things for me as an underwater photographer are my safety and the well-being of marine life; if these two things are achieved and I get some great photos, so much the better. If I don't get any great photos - there is always another dive on another day.

## Underwater Landscapes

Underwater photography is not just about marine life, though, for there are also some stunning underwater landscapes. In fact, some of the most memorable dives I have experienced have been in fresh water where marine life has been very limited.

For example, diving in the chilly, crystal-clear waters of Silfra in Iceland offers the photographer rocky vistas and dazzling lagoons. The cenotes of Mexico with their amazing limestone stalactites and stalagmites offer fantastic underwater photographic opportunities, all in under 30 feet of water. Other places, such as Malta, boast blue holes, stunning caves and vertical cliffs.

Scenic underwater photography, however, is not easy because of the inevitable blue (or green in colder waters) which filters any panoramic image. My approach is to make the blue a key feature of the photograph rather than attempt to manipulate it. The sapphire water is amazing and I want to share it with others.

## Local Opportunities

Underwater photography has the advantage that it can be practiced all over the world in cold, temperate, and tropical waters, salt and fresh, coastal and inland. I am very fortunate to live within a couple of hours of both the east and west coasts of Scotland. Scotland offers some world-class cold water diving in places such as St. Abbs, Oban, and the Orkney Islands. So, the great thing for me is that I can practice photography near to home as well as in locations abroad.

Contrary to popular opinion, cold water isn't dark, dim, and lifeless. While visibility and light are usually less than in warmer waters and a photographer might have to look more closely to find marine subjects, colourful subjects most certainly abound. And, I have to confess to a greater sense of achievement in my successful cold water shots than in my warm water shots. Diving and taking photos in cold water is more physically and technically challenging so when I get good results I feel a greater reward. So, am I happier taking a photo in dim, cold, green water than I am in warm, clear, blue water? Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say that! What I would say is that I count myself as extremely privileged to be able to experience the underwater world and doubly privileged that I am able to record it in a way that others can appreciate.

## Getting Started

Although you can get underwater pictures snorkelling or free-diving, scuba diving enables you to stay in the water longer and gives you more freedom. A basic course in scuba is usually done over 4 days and includes classroom and pool sessions, followed by dives in open water. There are many agencies worldwide which offer training, with some of the better-known ones being PADI, NAUI, SSI, CMAS, and BSAC.

Once a certified and competent diver, you will then need to think about equipment. Not that long ago, underwater photography was the expensive province of the few; these days, however, underwater photography is accessible to everyone. Water-proof housings are manufactured for a wide range of cameras from basic compacts to DSLRs. Many manufacturers (such as Canon and Olympus) make reasonably priced housings for their cameras or you can opt for companies like Ikelite, Aquatica, or Sea & Sea which make housings for a variety of cameras. Housings are made-to-measure for individual camera models so if you are taking the plunge, make sure you are happy with your camera before you part with your cash.

The other piece of equipment you will need for underwater photography is a strobe (i.e. flash). While the internal one on your camera may provide light (although not all internal flashes can operate inside a housing), the angle of its beam will illuminate tiny particles in the water which will show up as backscatter in your images, so you need adjustable lighting. Again there are manufacturers which make strobes for all budgets.

You don't need to spend a fortune gearing up for underwater photography to get results. You certainly could, but as with all types of photography, it's the photographer - not the camera - that ultimately makes the shot!



## EW-NPN 3231

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**Elaine Whiteford** is a freelance photographer and writer. She is widely travelled and has dived in a variety of locations around the world. Elaine is a Licentiate of the Royal Photographic Society, a distinction she gained with a portfolio of underwater images. Elaine has had articles published in a range of magazines including DIVER, The Undersea Journal, The Scot's Magazine and Scottish Wildlife. You can see more of Elaine's images at her web site: <http://www.sublimescubaphotography.com>, or on her [Photo Portfolio](#).



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