

Creating pleasing images with inexperienced uw models

by Quico Abadal Ramon

COVID-19 kicked in, and so all diving activities on the island got completely knocked out. Dive shops closed, boats remained at the pier and the impossibility of renting a tank and have a shore dive made it even more frustrating for those who dream day and night of photographing the ocean, like me. Luckily we did not have any virus case on our little precious paradise, Koh Tao.

The island, a teeny-tiny spot on the map, it's located on the Gulf of Thailand. Very well known among divers and backpackers, it receives a crazy amount of people every year, from which most of them end up as certified divers. The scene changed completely: the streets and reefs of Koh Tao were empty, you could not hear the music from the nightclubs nor the diving boats going out at 6am. Dive sites untouched by human kind for weeks, letting the sea breath for a while. Nothing better for Mother Nature I must say.

So scubadiving was completely out of the picture, and snorkelling passed on to be my number 1 activity. I'm one of those who with a camera in

their hands prefers to have a tank on their backs; however my freediving skills are not that bad, and so I still enjoy like a kiddo. My friends and I were going from beach to beach –sorry for those indoor “quaratiners”– and I'd always take the gear with me. My friends are NOT professional free divers; some even recreational recently certified scuba divers. However we managed to shoot very pretty images together. These are few tips that I consider most important when shooting with someone who is NOT an experienced freediver:

Be nice

First of all and most important, the vibe you set on the shooting is crucial. Being on front of camera is not easy and it can make people very uncomfortable. Working with an upset model will most definitely be reflected on your final work. So smile, make jokes, be polite, help in any possible way, be patient. Creating a nice atmosphere and motivating the model will be obvious on your images, especially when the models have no



clue of what they're doing. Make it fun!

Lighting

The time of the day is very important indeed. I normally like to meet around 15:00 o'clock, so I have enough margin to chat with the model and make everything clear before we jump into the water. Over here at Koh Tao at this time of the year, the sun starts hiding at around 18.30, so that leaves us around 3 hours of shooting. You may think 3 hours is too much, however remember that we need to





rest between dive and dive. Also, I rather have extra time to take things easy and look at the scene properly, trying to get the best angles, instead of shooting pictures randomly hoping some will be ok. The model might also think 3 hours might be exaggerated, but if again you are having a good time, it will go quick!

I chose the afternoon because I love how the warm light beams go through surface, lighting up the subject in the softest way. Shooting underwater during midday is no mistake either, however if you take a portrait on surface during that time, then the light will be too harsh on your subject's face,



creating ugly shadows all around. Morning also works fantastically; I'm just not an early bird.

The camera setup I've been using for these shots don't include strobes, and so the ambient light is everything. The image look will vary depending on how you play with the direction of the sunbeams. Typically we want the sun behind us, so it lights up the subject from its front, showing detail in shape and colour. On the contrary, shooting against the sun is another very much used technique. Back lighting your subject creates silhouettes, which can be very appealing to the eye if done correctly. It's important that the viewer distinguishes with no doubt the



silhouette of the diver, rather than just a black thing that might be a diver or might be a potato. Easy way is making sure the body is well positioned, extremities well separated and no other dark factors on front nor behind our subject. Last but not least diagonal light shooting, playing with the angle in between front light and back light. The more you point at the sun with your lens, the stronger shadows will appear. I like to use this technique a lot when I want to add some drama on the picture. I'm also very keen on having the sun beams coming in the shot, making it so much more special and giving depth to the image. I might began the

shooting with front light technique, looking for details on the subject and location, and as time goes by and the sun gets lower, I start shooting more towards back light, looking for a more dramatic image.

Model tips

So we must remember that our models are NO experts either at modelling or at freediving, so it won't be easy for them to dive down even 10 meters on one breath and remain photogenic along the way. Stay shallow and try to play with other factors. Also, if you are shooting with no strobes, it's definitely convenient to stay close to surface, especially during the last hours of sunlight, when the light is very pretty but not too strong.

I strongly recommend training yourself just a little bit on freediving, and so then you 'll be able to give some easy tips to your model on breathing and diving techniques. In my case, these models could already easily be underwater for over 30 seconds, which was more than enough to take the shots. On the pictures where the model is standing on the ground we used a different technique, blowing out air to descend, so we could both sink quickly. This feels a bit uncomfortable for everybody, since we run out of oxygen much

faster, however it's very useful when shooting at very shallow depths. Having an extra weight can help too; although sometimes might not look too good... it really depends on what you are looking for.

Location

The underwater that surrounds the model can definitely be an extra value to our image. Choosing a place is fairly easy; when people look at your photo they got to go: "wow I so wanna go there!". In some of these images I chose a very shallow wreck that creates that kind of feeling. Otherwise, sometimes it's just good to have your model on the sand, in the blue, on top of the reef... It really depends on what reactions you are looking for. Play around with all the possibilities.

Composition

I believe the art of composition definitely plays a big factor on the viewer's opinion of the image. Bad composition may distract the viewer from what's really important. It's easy to forget to compose the picture if we don't pay enough attention or if we are in a rush. My way of working is the following: I swim slowly along the location and looking at every corner. If I think some place has



potential, I then take a picture of the spot thinking how I'd like to model to appear on it. I show the model the image from my viewfinder along with an exact explanation of what I want. Many times I'd even simulate what I want them to do.

Here are some rules of basic composition that I use:

1. Amputations: never leave out of the frame part of your subject's body. Cutting off legs (and fins) or arms really ruins the composition of photography.

2. Subject position: depending on the shot, I sometimes leave the model on the centre of the image, other times I use the rule of thirds. Choose whatever looks more beautiful to you. I also think it's important that the model faces the right direction, which usually is towards the negative space.

3. Lines: when photographing an image that includes lines, I tend to make them start at the corner of the frame. This gives a pleasant look, while also directs the viewer to our main subject. This technique is very much used on land photography, so why not apply it to underwater photography?

Equipment

For these type of pictures any sort of camera works: DSLRs, mirrorless and compacts. I'm always keen to think, "it's the Indian, not the arrow". In my case I use an Olympus OMD EM-1 markII inside an Olympus housing (PT-EP14), along with the 8mm PRO f1.8 fish eye. Having a wide angle or a fish eye changes your game completely, so for those who use a compact camera



I highly recommend looking for a wet lens that opens your range of view.

One of the advantages of my set up is size. Using a small housing and domeport gives me the ability of getting into tiny places whereas with a DSLR would have been very tricky. However, split shots are way easier when having a larger dome port. I'm using the PPO-EP02 from Olympus, which is pretty small, and so sometimes split shots are challenging, especially when the sea is not completely flat. Setting up the camera to shoot as fast as possible helps a lot, although you'll have to go through hundreds of pictures. Another thing that will make it easier is setting the focus on continuous single point and putting it over your model.

When shooting wide angle, specifically split shots, we need to close our aperture. This results in sharper corners and both under and over subjects on focus. If I shoot with f1.8, I get a lot of light coming in, which is nice, however on split shots I will have the under part on focus and the over completely blurry. Sometimes that works, but usually it doesn't. In my personal case, I've got my camera sensor a



bit scratched and so when I shoot with higher than f6.3, spots appear on my pictures, which later I delete on post processing, but it's honestly a pain in the ass so unless it's very necessary, I try not to cross the limit. I recommend you to shoot f.8 or higher and slightly push up ISO. This will result on better quality pictures, so one less thing you need to worry about.

And by the way, you don't necessarily need a wide angle. During my first year underwater I used a Sony a6000 and kit lens. Of course I shot with a different style, but I was very happy with the results. Adapt to your equipment and realise what advantages you have. If I had a compact I'd go a lot more for cool and closed up portraits, something I cannot easily do with my fish eye. So there is always a way to push up your game.

Post processing

This is a very personal matter. Some photographers believe that too much post processing takes out the magic of pure photography.



Others will happily use the digital tools available to enhance their images, like me. That doesn't mean you have to use all of the tools and make it look like Mars, although if you want to make it look like Mars then go ahead. I think there shouldn't be any limits. Do what looks good to you.

These are some basic steps I follow when editing with Lightroom. One of the most important factors to me is colour. To give the appropriate colours to the image you need to set up the correct white balance, so it doesn't look too green or too blue. Sometimes I manage to adjust colouring properly on most of the image, but still have some parts that



are too green. I will then use the brush for those specific areas, and so once they are selected, I then again use the white balance slider. When the colour is nice through the entire picture, I like to give a little extra contrast and clarity to enhance the image. I also use the brush tool on the model and give even more clarity and contrast. Cropping the photo and perhaps changing angles a bit, is something I also do to present a stronger composition. If you crop too much and have a low-resolution camera, noise might appear. To counter that and give a smoother touch, use the noise reduction slider.

Post processing is again very personal. I sometimes spend more time on the laptop VS underwater, but I genuinely enjoy it. Play around with all the possibilities, check how it'd look on black&white, rotate the picture upside down, push contrast higher – don't like it? – Then just pull it back, change the hue, add saturation... There are so many things you can do! One single picture can be presented in so many ways and express so many different feelings. There's never one only way, so enjoy the process.

Conclusion

The key to create pleasing images is to take it slow, always think before shooting, enjoy the process, get along with the model and make it fun. Be conscious of what you are doing; otherwise you are wasting everybody's time. It doesn't necessarily mean you need to exactly know what you want to end up with, but focus and pay attention to details. Don't be afraid of trying new things, but the opposite! Try everything new, get inspired by other photographers and add your spicy touch.

I hope these few tips make it easier for you. If something is not clear, feel free to contact me; I'd be very much happy to have a chat on any photography subject.

I'd like to finish by thanking my beautiful main models: Norman, Natalia and Cynthia, who always pushed stronger to stay longer.

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Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter No
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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