

Behind the Bathtub

by Henley Spiers, Shot Chat

The Underbathwater Photographer of the Year competition was conceived by Fourth Element as a way of creatively keeping camera rigs wet during the pandemic lockdowns.

Returning for its second edition in 2021, the winning images prove that this has not just been a fun exercise, but one which has given birth to some truly astounding photographic feats, even in a bath!

Barry McGill won the Underbathwater Photographer of the year Amateur category with an image that defies everything you thought you knew about bath environments. Shot Chat caught up with him to find out just how he captured such a compelling composition in the tub.

When he's not in the bath, Barry is most likely to be found over a 100m deep, exploring shipwrecks off the Irish coast.

Bringing passion, creativity, and rigorous attention to detail to all his endeavours, Barry founded In Depth Technical in 2008. An open-circuit and CCR technical dive instructor, he teaches a full range of courses, with the theoretical backed up by his wealth of experience in the harshest of underwater environments.

Amongst a litany of notable accomplishments, Barry organised and led the expeditions to the RMS Empress of Britain in 162m, and SS Transylvania in 130m.

Barry also works as a cameraman, specialising in stills and video of deep wrecks, with footage used in several documentaries and books.

Conception

The idea for the shot came from my own background in diving. Firstly, I am a very keen shipwreck diver and have spent the majority of my time since I was a teenager diving shipwrecks here in Ireland. I have also worked as a commercial diver and on various underwater archaeology projects over the years here in Ireland.

The idea of the saturation diving bell, submersible and ROV in the picture came from my commercial diving background. I wanted to capture the mood and excitement of finding something underwater that no one had seen for thousands of years, so the idea of a picture of Lego archaeologist deep diving using saturation diving equipment really got me excited about the project.



Trying to bring it to reality took a little bit of time than I really expected at the outset.

Getting the Shot

Equipment: Camera: Nikon D700 Lens: AF Fisheye-Nikkor 16mm f/2.8D, Underwater Housing: Aquatica AD700 Video Lights: Big Blue 15,000 Lumen Video Light.

Location: My Bath

Help: A big thanks must go to my two sons Cillian & Fionn as it was all their LEGO that I used for the project. Also, my wife Ciara for helping me build all the LEGO and for allowing me to wreck our bathroom... She also put up with me waking her up



multiple times during the night when I was working on the final capturing the final image.

Settings: f/5.6, 1/320, ISO: 800, Manual focus



The Story

A few days before I setup to do the shot, I played around with a few different camera setups in the bath with some LEGO toys. I normally take ambient photographs of giant shipwrecks off the coast of Ireland, and I have never done any type of micro type photography so I was a little out of my own comfort zone when it came to taking photographs in the bath and I wasn't sure my normal camera setup would work very well.

I started off with a few LEGO toys in the bottom of an empty bath and used both my Nikon D700 with my normal 16mm lens and a small Fujifilm XP140 waterproof compact camera. I wasn't really sure that the 16mm lens that I normally use for all

my normal underwater photography would work in the confines of a bath.

I also had a go with a 50mm lens to see if that would work any better with my D700. In the end I figured that my Nikon D700 with the 16mm lens was the best of what I had available. My main issue was trying to get all my LEGO figures sharp in the image, so I had to play around with the focal length till I got a feeling for what would work best once I had the bath filled with water and had my camera in an underwater housing.

We were getting our two boys some more LEGO to their upcoming birthdays, so the attic was raided and the LEGO submersible / ROV were unboxed and assembled under the

cover of darkness, so they didn't see them before their birthdays."

Once I had an idea of the camera setup would work, I spent the next night putting together the Lego models for the scene. Firstly, I had to make the LEGO diving bell that divers would be diving from. I am very lucky both my sons Cillian (5) and Fionn (2) are mad about LEGO so I had lots of bit and pieces to work with. They also had way more LEGO divers than I had even realised!

I used some left-over electrical wires from our recent house build to make the main diving bell umbilical and also for the divers umbilical's. Stripping the outer plastic sleeve of the electrical cable allowed me to have

nice colourful wires that worked great for the umbilicals. The copper wires were also really stiff so make setting up the divers on the umbilical's easier.

Once all the different LEGO elements were sorted, I had to get some time to setup the whole scene in the bath... The deadline for the competition was coming up that weekend and we had the boys' cousins coming over to our house for a sleep over which meant it was a bit of a mad house with 3 to 6 year olds running around. I had to wait till they were all in bed before I could start taking over the bathroom to avoid any chaos! As they kids were up all night talking with excitement, it was nearly 10pm before I got a chance to start.



It took many trips up and down the stairs to the bathroom to setup all the equipment for the shot. The first issue I found once I got started setting up the shot was that LEGO floats! I had hoped to hang the various part of the scene from some fishing line suspended across the bath using some pieces of wood. But all that happened was the LEGO floated on the surface. I had to rethink my approach slightly so had to run back to my dive shed and get some small 2kg diving leads to help keep the main LEGO elements of my shot in the right position.

I had to attach some fishing line to the lead blocks and then to the LEGO diving bell, submersible and ROV. By securing the LEGO from both top and bottom using the fishing line, I could keep them midwater to achieve the look I was hoping for. I was able to hide the lead blocks underneath the towels which I had placed in the bottom of the bath.

The main reason for adding

the towels was to stop most of the sand which I was going to add going down the plug hole and blocking my pipework when I was finished. I then started to add some cups of sand to cover the bottom of the bath/towel. At this point, I thought I had destroyed my chances of getting a photograph at all... All I had to hand was some builders sand and when I added it to the bath the visibility within the bath when to nearly zero. All I could do was add enough sand for my shot as carefully as possible, and then go downstairs, watch a few episodes of Suits on Netflix and wait for the water to clear.

After an hour, it had cleared a bit, but it still wasn't good enough

to capture a shot. After another hour, the water was just starting to clear up enough and I was able to start my final setup. At this stage it was nearly 2am.

The final part of my setup was to add a few divers to the bottom of the bath. Again, they floated, so I had to add some Blu Tack to the bottom of the LEGO divers to help them stand on the bottom of the bath. I also added in a manta ray onto the mound of sand and a swimming hammerhead shark (attached to the lead weight and timber strips) from the boys LEGO collection. Even the hammerhead

didn't float right, so I had to trim him out with some Blu Tack.

Once I started taking some shots, I realised I needed to add some more lighting to help with the poor visibility from the sand. I had to set up a way of hanging my 15k lumen Big Blue video lights above the bathwater to help do some top lighting on my scene. Once I added the top lighting things started to come together with the shot and I was able to get the atmosphere I was looking for in my image.

I moved the camera around within the scene and play with

different angles and moved some of the LEGO divers around to see what worked best. This part of the project was one of the most fun... As it was very similar to my own wreck diving photography where I spend lots of time figuring out the best angles to shoot a particular wreck scene and where to position the divers and lights etc.

“Once I had the photographs that I wanted, it was time to get the bathroom returned to normal before any of the kids in the room next door woke up! It was after 3 am before I had the place back to normal again and I had to park the camera until the next day to have a look at my images on my laptop.”

The next day was the final day of the entry into the competition. Once I opened the 100 + images I had taken I had to sort through all of them to find the 5 or 6 that worked best to capture my idea.

After the Shot

I played around a little in Adobe Photoshop to do some minor adjustments to the white balance / exposure and a few other sliders in Camera Raw. I then sharpened the final image in Photoshop.

To add a little more life to the image, I wanted to add some lights to the divers etc. to lift the gloom of the overall image. I didn't know how

to do this in Photoshop, so I used my trusty friend Google to find out the best way to add a light to an image. Using a filter, I was able to add some lighting effects and by playing around with a settings / sliders I was able to get the effect I was looking for.

I was happy with the overall shot in the end. But I still think it looked much better in my own mind. I think I would like to have used a coarser type of the sand which would have made the shot a little easier to capture.

I would also like to have been able to make the towel look more like rocks/seabed. I didn't really have time in the end to make the towels look more realistic. I was very lucky to have my 16 mm lens, but as the visibility was so poor in the bath, I had my housings dome port right up against the LEGO divers to get the image to work. Ideally, I think if I had been able to wait until the next day and the sand had settle a little more, I could have got a better image, but I couldn't really take over the bathroom for the entire weekend so that wasn't going to be a popular option.

Starting out, I didn't think it would take me very long to capture the image, so I added cold water to the bath... that was a big mistake.... My arms were blue by the time it was over a couple of hours later. I was nearly tempted to stick my drysuit on at one stage to make it more comfortable...



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I was nearly as cold as a 3 hour dive here in Ireland too. I think playing around with the angles of the shot and positioning of the figures really reminded me of my own diving. I had more time / control over the scene than I am normally used to in a real world environment, but I still found it took ages to get it anywhere near what I was picturing in my own head.

However, not having 3 to 4 hours of decompression to do after taking the images helped make it an enjoyable process. I was nearly as excited looking at the images in the back of the camera after the shoot as I would have been after a dive capturing images on a shipwreck. Just don't tell

my wife that... I'll never get away shipwreck diving again if she thinks I can be kept happy in a bathtub!

Thank you for sharing your story with the Shot Chat!

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