

Meet David Fleetham

by Peter Rowlands

Did diving and underwater photography start together?

I was certified in Ontario, Canada in 1976 during my last year of High School. Once out I met my best friend in Carriacou a small island off Grenada. Before I left I knew I had to record what was underwater so I ordered an Ikelite housing for a Minolta SLR and shot what I could in the Caribbean for the next three months.

Was there a lightbulb moment when you thought 'This is for me'?

The moment I first breathed underwater I knew this was for me. And that was just in a pool!

Have you always worked or been associated with the dive business?

I moved out to the West Coast of Canada to look into becoming a marine biologist (as do all teenagers bitten by the scuba bug) and had to drive by two dive shops in Vancouver on my way to the University of British Columbia. I knocked on both doors and was hired by Gary Mallendar who now owns Oceaner Wetsuits, a



manufacturer of wetsuits and drysuits in Vancouver. Just this last month I returned to Vancouver and Gary got me out on his dive boat, The Oceaner, to jump back into the chilly waters of the Pacific Northwest. I crewed on this same vessel 45 years ago and it took me from the San Juan Islands in Washington all the way up past Vancouver Island to the Queen Charlotte Islands. It was a fantastic decade for me.

What cameras have you gone through over the years?

I have stuck with Canon cameras and Ikelite housings and strobes since I started in 1976. In the film days, I



Canon EOS 5D MkIII, Ikelite housing, 15mm lens, Ikelite strobes, 1/125th sec @ F11 ISO 320

had Canon F-1's and I am currently shooting Canon R5 mirrorless in Ikelite's Dry Lock housings with their DS161 strobes that utilize TTL exposure.

Was the transition to digital a no brainer or did you put it off for a while?

I was good friends with the late Jim Watt, still a well known name in our industry. I dove with him often over in Kona where he lived and also on many trips all over the world. Jim jumped right in early on

and convinced me and many other photographers that this was the future. I skipped Canon's first camera and then jumped on their next model, an EOS D60 back in 2002. Eric Cheng joined us on a few excursions and so that just sealed the deal. The toughest mindset to break was going from 36 exposures to nearly unlimited. For a year I would still look at a composition and wonder if this was worth a pull on the shutter or not. Now, for the most part, I simply pull the trigger and sort through the pile at a later time.



The market for stock images must be a shadow of its former self but do you still shoot with 'stock' in mind?

I still send images out to my agents, but, as you say, that business model sinks further down as each year passes by. I have never really "shot with stock in mind". I go underwater with the idea of capturing what I can find with the system I happen to have in my clutches at the time.

Maui must be a great backyard. Are the subjects limitless and the water always clear and warm? Is that why you settled there?

Maui is a wonderful backyard. It is not always perfect. Storms come through and land lock me in my office for a week or so, but for the most part it has crystal clear blue water and a fantastic cast of characters to chase with a viewfinder. As for warm water, some may divers may have varying opinions. Water temp here is between 74 and 80F. Many dive guides wear 5mm and even 7mm suits. I find a 3mm comfortable and will put a hood on for night dives in the winter time.



*(Top left) Underwater encounters with Hawaiian monk seals, *Monachus schauinslandi*, (endemic and endangered) are few and far between. Canon EOS 5D MkII, Ikelite housing, 15mm lens, Ikelite strobes, 1/80th sec @ F11 ISO 320*

*(Above) A tufted spiny lobster, *Panulirus penicillatus*, walking in the open on a reef in Hawaii. Canon EOS 5D MkII, Ikelite housing, 8-15mm lens at 15mm, Ikelite strobes, 1/60th sec @ F11 ISO 320*

*(Right) The endemic Hawaiian pom-pom crab or boxer crab, *Lybia edmondsoni*. Canon EOS 5D, Ikelite housing, 60mm macro lens, Ikelite strobes, 1/80th sec @ F11 ISO 320*





Do you have a go-to dive buddy?

For the last few years it has been my son, Sean. He is now 20 years old and in college in New Zealand. I loved to share the underwater world with him. He is interested in shooting video rather than stills and has opened

up my eyes to new possibilities. Perhaps we will dive together again in NZ.

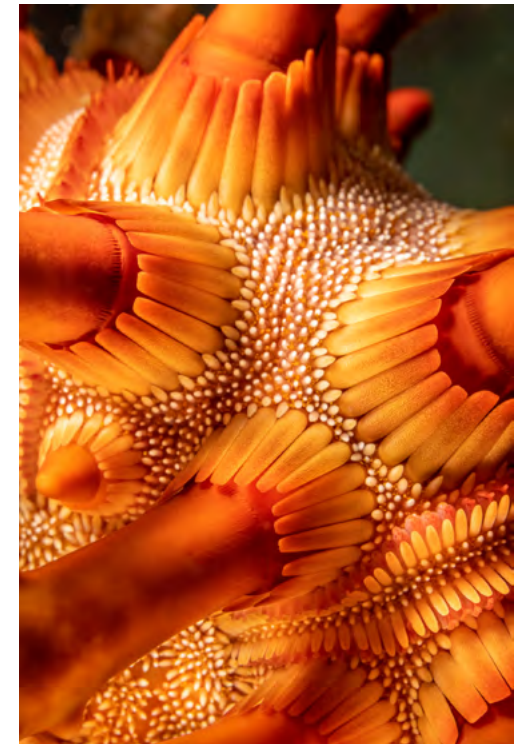
Corny, I know, but do you have a favourite diving movie?

The Big Blue from 1988. It had me take up freediving seriously for a

few years.

Your image on the 1991 cover on Life Magazine must have been gratifying. Have you ever topped it? (also do you have a pic of it to include?)

I have done a couple of assignments for National Geographic



(Above) A close look in past the long thorny algae covered spines of the rough-spined urchin, Chondrocidaris gigantea, Hawaii. New Caladonia is the only other place in the world that this species is found. Canon EOS 5D Mk11, Ikelite housing, 70mm macro lens, Ikelite strobes, 1/125th sec @ F20 ISO 60

(Left) Humpback whale, Megaptera novaeangliae, underwater, Hawaii. Canon EOS 5D Mk11, Ikelite housing, 16-35 F4 mm lens at 16mm, Ikelite strobes, 1/125th sec @ F11 ISO 640



The Carthaginian, a Lahaina landmark, was sunk as an artificial reef off Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii in December 2005. Canon EOS 5D Mk11, Ikelite housing, 15mm lens, Ikelite strobes, 1/80th sec @ F11 ISO 320



who have used my images over the last 30 years, but I've never nailed that elusive cover shot for them. That said, I'm still very enthusiastically pleased with my LIFE cover, it has been all downhill ever since....LOL.

Do you have any underwater subjects or techniques that are still on your list?

That is a long list. There is such a cast of subjects under our seas that it will take much more than one lifetime to be satisfied. As cameras improve I feel the need to go back and reshoot some of what I already have as well. The files coming out of my new Canon mirrorless R5 are amazing and have me rethinking what I have

already captured.

I've only dabbled with blackwater diving and intend to spend much more time out in open water with what I can find drifting by.

With top end digital cameras now so capable in terms of image quality and processing speed, will you still want to upgrade to those extra megapixel new model cameras or do you think the quality/speed requirement has plateaued?

There are so few physical print sales compared to digital that megapixel size exceeds most clients needs. What I see in the new files though is an increase in dynamic range



A diver (MR) and schooling orangespine unicornfish, Naso lituratus, which have long streamers coming off the tail fin, Hawaii. Canon EOS 5D Mk11, Ikelite housing, 8-15mm lens at 15mm, Ikelite strobes, 1/60th sec @ F11 ISO 320

and much less noise in the darker areas of an image. The increased range also means less loss in the highlights.

The number of frames per second is also beyond belief. My Canon R5 can capture 20 frames per second in full RAW files. It is amazing for breaching whales and leaping dolphins. I'm always surprised how much a photo can change in a split second. I can't see another camera exceeding my needs beyond my current system....but I say that each time and look what happens. Never say never.

Many thanks for your inciteful responses and your images over the years.

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com

David Fleetham
www.davidfleetham.com
www.ikelite.com