

A chat with Raymond Wennekes

by Peter Rowlands

I read about you in Dive Magazine and was particularly struck by how your images stood out from the certainly hundreds, possibly thousands of images I look at for each issue of UwP so I thought I'd get in touch and see if you would be willing to divulge your techniques and tips. But before that let's start with the usual. When, why and where?

I have not had or done any training as a (underwater) photographer. I graduated from the College of Architecture and wanted to become an architect. Unfortunately, that didn't work out because the financial crisis started in 2008 in the Netherlands when I had just left school and the jobs as architectural engineer were not up for grabs. As a result, I ended up in the Sales-sector and had several positions in it. Until I joined Onderwaterhuis.NL in 2012 to work as a sales associate for almost 8 years.

Although I have been diving since 2000, at that time I had no experience with underwater photography. Because of my job at Onderwaterhuis.NL, I had been busy with underwater photography every day all this time.



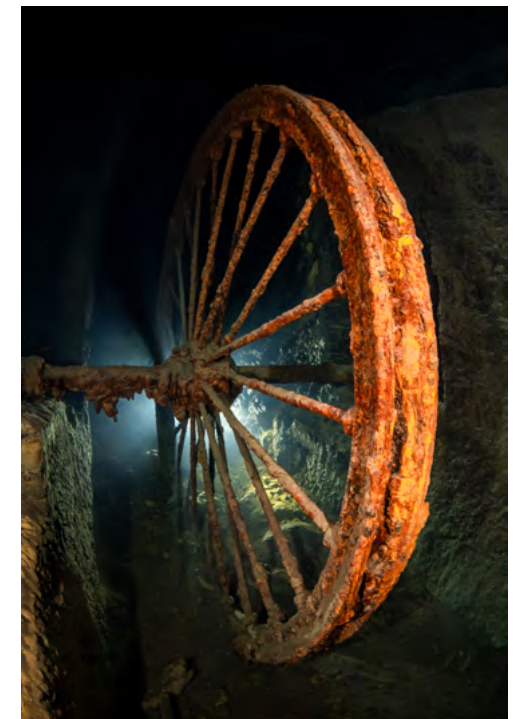
During working hours I learned about underwater photography and talked to clients about underwater photography and in my free time I was underwater a lot.

All beginnings are difficult and especially in the beginning when I came back to the surface with not so nice pictures and then discussed them with colleagues among ourselves. If a picture did not turn out well, but I showed it with an explanation of why

I recently had the unique opportunity to dive in an old quarry in Belgium. This quarry has been submerged over the years, which makes for wonderful diving. The quarry is still filled with old items such as this winch, a rail and trays. Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a SONY FE 28mm F2 lens + Fisheye Converter in Sea&Sea housing and two Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobes; f18 – 1/80 – ISO1250



'Typical Dutch Scenery'
Diving in the murky waters of the Netherlands often means poor visibility. To take great pictures, you have to look creatively for subjects like these lilies and the typical Dutch windmills. Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a SONY FE 28mm F2 lens + Fisheye Converter in Sea&Sea housing and two Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobes; f16 – 1/125 – ISO500





it was not good (e.g. hard currents or bad visibility), they often said, “I don’t need to hear the story behind the bad picture.” This statement has always stayed with me and caused me to set the bar extremely high for myself. Because a picture can be really unique, but if the lighting or composition is not good, it is not a good photo.

In 2015, the CMAS World

Underwater Photography Championship was in the Netherlands and there it was announced that the next CMAS World Championship would be held in Mexico in 2017. I then set myself a goal that I wanted to go there.

To get there, I had to become Dutch Champion in 2016. I then made around 200 dives in one year in the Netherlands. All with a camera and all

The Owl

Only on one particular wreck in the North Sea can the twin fan worm or spiral fan worm (Bispira volutacornis) be found. When diving on this wreck with the ‘Duik de Noordzee Schoon’ Foundation, I was asked to make a creative picture of this critter since only photographs had been taken that were biological in nature. With a special lighting technique, I created this amazing picture, which looks like an owl. Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a Sony 50mm macro lens in Sea&Sea housing and single Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobe with snoot; f16 – 1/250 – ISO100

with a goal to get better at underwater photography so that I would become Dutch Champion. And I succeeded. In 2016 I became NL Champion for the first time and a year later, in 2017, I prolonged this title.

Of course, I gained a lot of knowledge and experience from my job at Onderwaterhuis.NL, but for the most part I learned by doing it myself.

For 3 or 4 years I put everything into underwater photography. Also by talking a lot with other people about it and by going to lectures about underwater photography. I looked at a lot of other people’s pictures in magazines and on social media and asked myself how they were made. Then I would “dissect” a photo; Is the photo taken with e.g. a macro lens or something else? Was the photo taken with one flash or two flashes, etc? And then I tried to recreate the photo in Dutch waters and give it my own twist. That’s also how I created a bit of my own style.

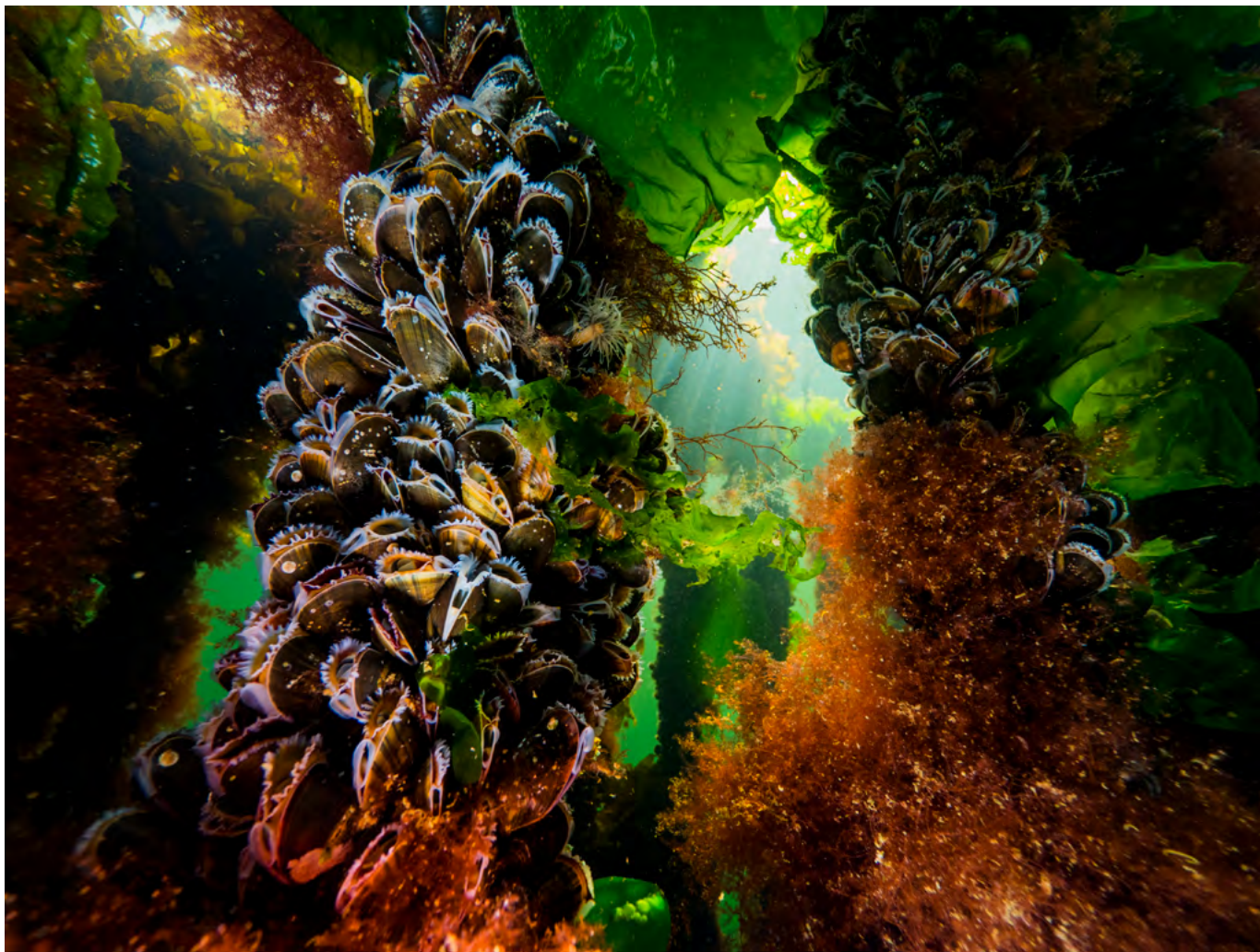
Since I am a perfectionist by nature, I always want to come up with

the best picture. A 2-hour dive for one perfect photo definitely happens to me. And if the conditions are not right, I go back another time to try again.

And still a large part of my life/freetime is dedicated to underwater photography. I make about 100-120 dives in the year now and all with a camera and still trying new techniques and going up my learning curve.

Because I was so focused on competition photography in the beginning, I got my technique super well underwater. At this competition you are also not allowed to post-process and because of that, I now have little to no need to edit my photos.

That is not to say that I never post-process or that I am against it... definitely not! I believe that post-processing is a part of photography and thus also of underwater photography. Only I try to do it underwater as well as possible, so that in post-processing as little as possible is needed.



Mussel farm

One of the most beautiful places in the Netherlands for scuba diving is the mussel farms in the province of Zeeland. It is not always allowed, because they are mainly privately owned plots. But when you have permission and at the right time of the year before they harvest the mussels, you can see the most beautiful colours. Shot with an Olympus OM-D E-M10 MKII with a Panasonic 7-14mm wide angle lens in Nauticam housing and two Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobes; f7,1 – 1/160 – ISO640



Tompot Blenny

One of the permanent residents on a wreck in the North Sea is a Tompot Blenny. When they are guarding a nest with eggs, it is easier to photograph them. Their curiosity keeps them coming back. Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a SONY 50mm macro lens in Sea&Sea housing and single Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobe with snoot; f13 – 1/250 – ISO250

Furthermore, underwater photography is a (out of control) hobby for me and I do not earn my monthly salary from it. I have another full time job as Sales Manager at a shipyard in the Netherlands where I earn my money and do underwater photography on the side as a hobby.

I have always felt that learning to get quality images in temperate waters such as the Netherlands and the UK is a strong foundation for when you go into bluer, warmer, clearer tropical waters. What camera set up did you start out with, do you still use it and do you do most of your dives solo so you can concentrate on your images?

My first underwater camera was the Olympus PEN E-PL3 with Olympus housing with one INON D-2000 strobe. It was only a couple of months later that I bought a second strobe. And due to the often murky waters in the Netherlands the strobe position together with the amount of flash exposure is really important to minimise the backscatter in the images.

For macro shots I quickly started working with snoots. After three years I bought my second set, an Olympus OM-D E-M10 MKII in a Nauticam housing and changed my strobes to the Sea&Sea YS-D2 models. I really liked this set, because it was compact and lightweight and had amazing capabilities for such a small camera. In 2020 I bought my current set, the SONY A7R IV full-frame camera in a Sea&Sea housing. That camera is a pure beast, with 61 megapixel and the dynamic range.

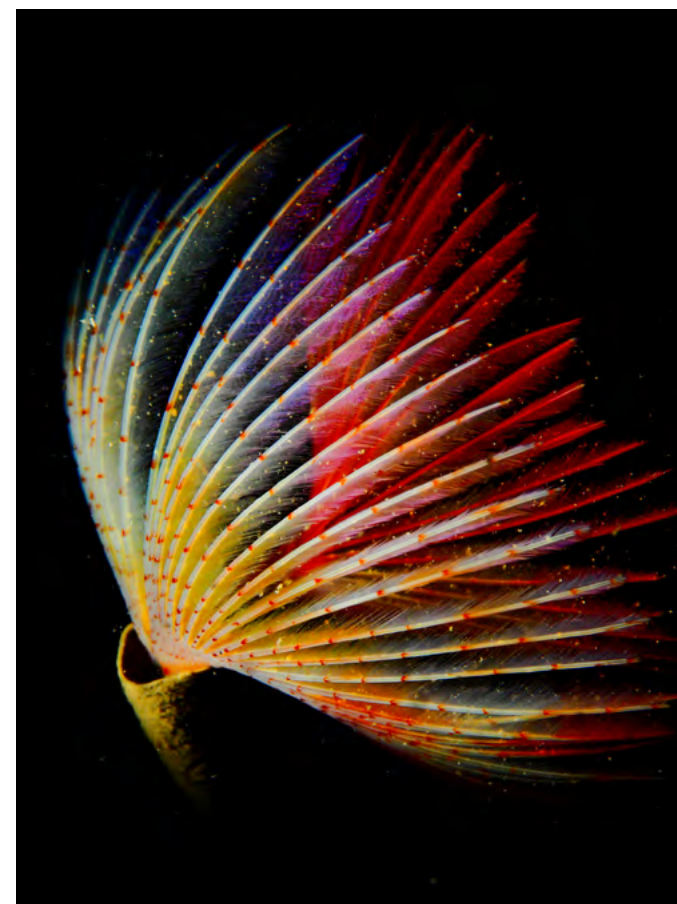
Yes, all my dives are intentionally solo dives. I always meet up with another underwater photographer to go diving, but that's more for fun above water. Underwater, we each go our own way.



Barrel Jellyfish

Summertime is the season of the Barrel Jellyfish (Rhizostoma pulmo) in Dutch coastal waters. Where most underwater photographers try to make beautiful underwater shots of the jellyfish with the sun in the background, I tried a different approach with the famous Dutch dike in the background.

Shot with an Olympus OM-D E-M10 MKII with a Panasonic 8mm fisheye lens in Nauticam housing and two INON D-2000 strobes; f22 – 1/250 – ISO400



Peacock worm

For the Dutch Championship of Underwater Photography I took this photo of a Peacock worm (Sabella pavonina) – and it took me 108 minutes to make it like this. The constant current and the way of lighting made it really difficult. But in the end I succeed. The picture was awarded with a silver medal. Shot with an Olympus OM-D E-M10 MKII with a Panasonic 45mm macro lens in Nauticam housing and single Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobe with snoot; f14 – 1/250 – ISO640

This allows me to concentrate fully on what I want to photograph and I can stay with the subject for as long as I want or need until it's perfect.

For the safety of solo diving, I have obviously taken the necessary training and tuned my equipment accordingly. Aside from the great stability, redundancy is one of the reasons I also dive with a sidemount setup.

Additional lighting obviously plays a great part in helping your images stand out. Even if the subjects are familiar you seem to find a way to show them slightly differently. What additional lighting do you use and do you go down with pre conceived ideas or do you act instinctively and see how it looks on the LCD screen?

I don't use any additional lighting other than one or two underwater strobes. But on those strobes I do use snoots as an accessory to have full control over the light on the subject. And most of the times I have pre conceived ideas of what kind of picture I want to make with a certain subject, especially when I am preparing for a competition. But I also can have dives where I find a subject and then by exposing the subject in a different way, I try to see if something beautiful appears in my viewfinder.

And sometimes the subject also has to cooperate, like when photographing moving subjects like nudibranchs. Then I have an idea in my head, but it may be more luck than wisdom if it actually works out.

Your shots show that you certainly achieved a very high standard in home waters but did you eventually feel restricted by the local conditions and yearn for the photo opportunities of overseas locations? If so, did it/they live up to your expectations?

Diving in the Netherlands can be really beautiful and I still enjoy doing it. But for example to make stunning wide angle photos all elements need to be right. You need to have sun and the visibility needs to be good. And both can change within hours in the Netherlands, so therefore diving in the Dutch waters is mainly macro

'Pure Serenity'

In October 2022 I hosted an underwater photography workshop in the Maldives. One of the highlights was the opportunity to snorkel with a whale shark for hours behind the boat. I wanted to capture this pure serenity of only the rays of ambient light and the whale shark feeding on small fish and krill.

Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a SONY FE 28mm F2 lens + Fisheye Converter in Sea&Sea housing. No strobes, only ambient light; f8 – 1/80 – ISO2500





'The eye is a window to the soul'

I took this picture in Bunaken National Park in North Sulawesi. A place which is also known for its abundance of sea turtles.

Shot with a SONY A7R IV with a SONY 90mm macro lens in Sea&Sea housing and single Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobe with snoot; f14 – 1/250 – ISO500

photography. You can actually do macro photography anytime, even with particularly poor visibility of just a few inches.

So to dive in the clear tropical waters around the world is like a breath of fresh air for me and it absolutely did live up to my expectations. I love to travel around the world, to new or familiar places, and experience the world underwater and capture it with my camera.

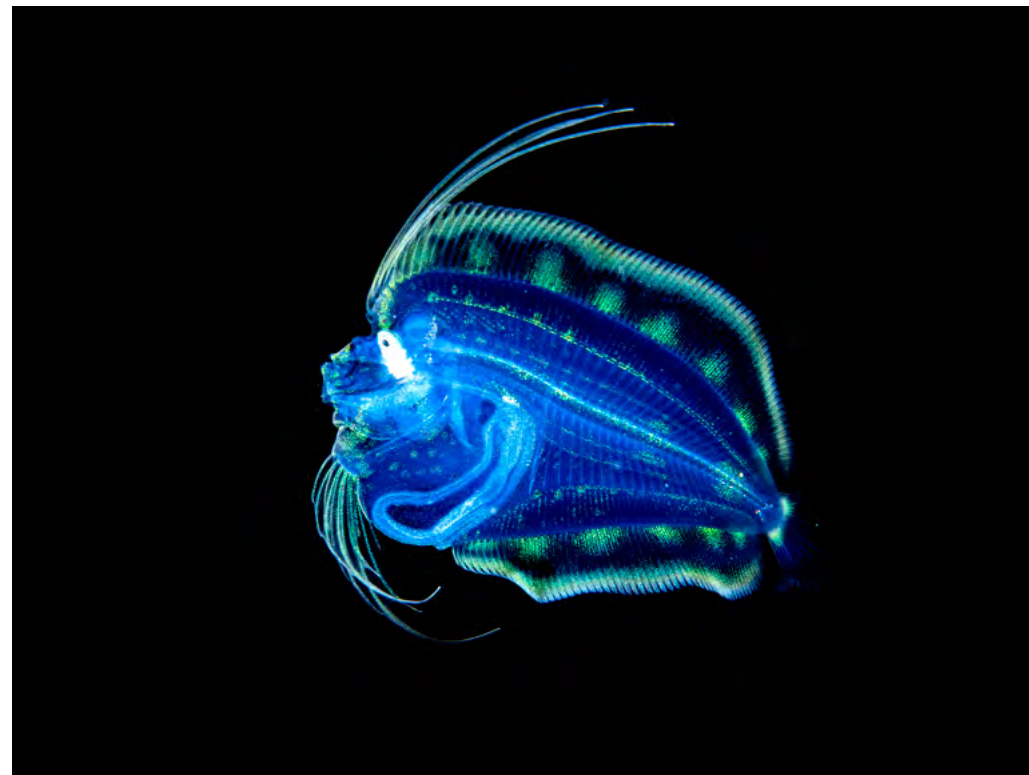
The more I dive in tropical blue

water, the less attractive Dutch waters become.

But then once I do dive back into Dutch waters, it works as therapy and I love being underwater.

Competitions seem to have played a big part in your development and impetus. Are they a prime motivation or just the icing on the cake (if you win them!)?

Competing in competitions such as the Open Dutch Championship has



Juvenile flounder

One of the coolest things to do in underwater photography is a blackwater dive. This is a dive after sunset in at least 200m deep water. After sunset the largest vertical migration in the world happens – and it happens every night. A lot of critters come to the surface to feed, breathe and mate. It is like diving in outer space, with critters like this juvenile wunderpus and juvenile flounder.

Shot with an Olympus OM-D E-M10 MKII with a Panasonic 45mm macro lens in Nauticam housing and two Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobes; f10- 1/250 – ISO500

certainly been my motivation in the beginning.

During the World Underwater Photography Championship held in the Netherlands in 2015, they announced that the next edition was in La Paz Mexico in 2017.

I set myself the goal that I wanted to go there. To get there, I had to become Dutch Champion in 2016. In that year, I made about 200 dives in the Netherlands, all with the camera. That did cause me to have a different approach to underwater photography

instead of just diving and waiting to see what I find.

In addition to competitions, for 8 years I had a job as a sales associate at one of the largest underwater photography stores in Europe, based in the Netherlands. So that too caused my knowledge to grow rapidly. But I always compare it to a cooking store - Working in a cooking store does not automatically make you a good cook. You have to gain experience and find out what works and what doesn't and to develop your own 'signature'.

For at least 3 or 4 years I spent almost all my free time in underwater photography to get to the level where I am now.

I see that you offer underwater photography courses. Do you have a pre arranged itinerary of talks, diving and image reviewing or are they tailor made for each individual or group?

That's right!

I teach different types of courses and workshops. For in Dutch waters, I give 1:1 workshops, which are specifically aimed at what the other underwater photographer wants to learn. For example, specifically taking one specific photo or learning the flash technique to reduce backscatter.

I also organize underwater photography trips abroad. Earlier this year I went to North Sulawesi with 14

other underwater photographers and in October this year I will go with a group on a liveaboard to the Maldives.

An underwater photography trip to Anilao, in the Philippines is planned for November 2024.

During these group trips, I teach courses and workshops centrally as much as possible. But I will also approach everyone individually to give as much personal guidance as possible.

The best thing about these courses and workshops is when you give people the knowledge that makes them take a stunning picture and they say that they would not have succeeded without my guidance.

Finally do you have future plans or a wish list of new subjects or locations?

Of course everybody has a wish list. And mine is getting longer rather than shorter. For example, I really like Blackwater Diving. The kind of critters and juvenile species you see in the water during the blackwater dives are amazing. I will always recommend anyone who gets the opportunity to make such dives to do it.

But on top of my wish list is the opportunity to snorkel with orcas or with whales one day. Or to dive in the cold water of the arctic. With all the ice structures and animals. That seems fantastic.



Underwaterdog

After every summer season the local swimming pool opens its doors for the dogs to play in the pools. After I saw the pictures of Seth Casteel of the underwaterdogs, I wanted to try it myself. It's not easy but it's worth the effort to see the enthusiastic response of the dogs and jumping into the water.

Shot with a SONY A7R IV with Sony FE 28mm F2 lens + Fisheye Converter in Sea&Sea housing and two Sea&Sea YS-D3II strobes; f16 – 1/200 – ISO640.

But besides the underwater photography trip planned for November 2024 to Anilao, I have no other concrete plans for trips in the near future.

Most enlightening, Raymond, and many thanks for your time.

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