

How do I get started?

by Ollie Clarke

The two questions I get asked most frequently are 'do you have any advice for people starting out in underwater photography?' And 'how did you get to where you are today?' So in this article I thought I'd share some insights on both of these questions with a bit of my journey in photography and some tips along the way.

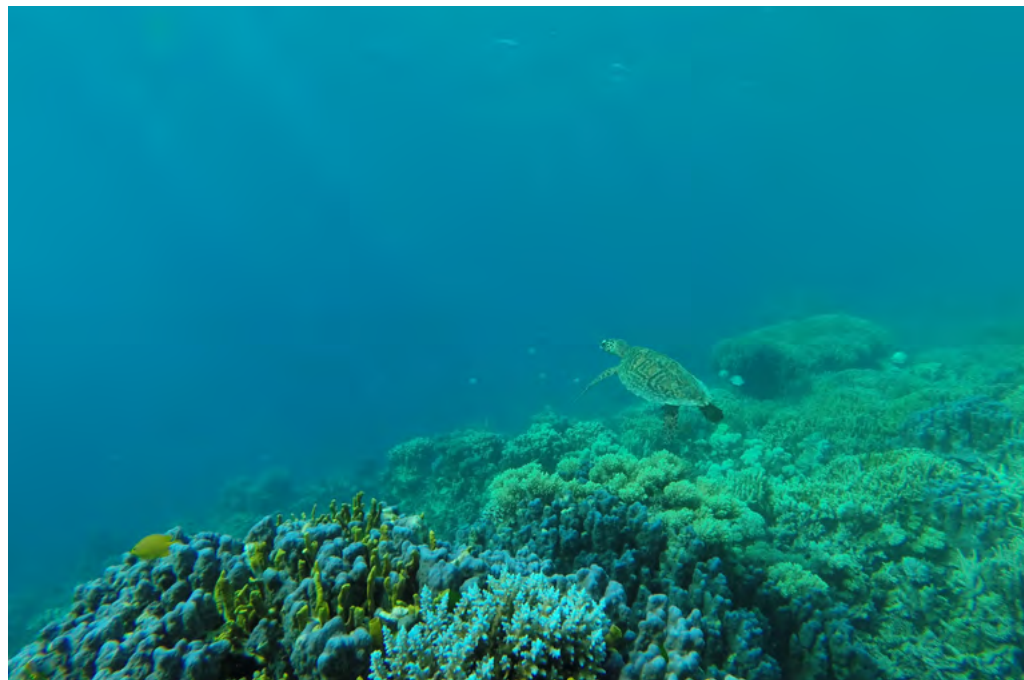
The Hawksbill shot (right) is one of the first photos I took underwater, at least that I have access too. The first was with a disposable camera on a family holiday to Florida when I was about 11, although those priceless shots have probably been disposed of... Anyway, this photo is probably when I thought to myself 'this whole underwater photography thing is pretty cool'. I took it during my Divemaster course in Vanuatu, with a GoPro 3+ Silver and it isn't really in focus, it's badly composed and I lost my red filter during dive one so all the colour's are blue.

This is when I started spending more and more time in the water, playing around with my GoPro and taking lots of shit photos, which brings my to my first bit of advice - To take good photos in the water, you need to

be good in the water. Take a freediving course, master your buoyancy control and take lots of photos, even if they are shit. Being confident and comfortable in the water is one of the most important steps in underwater photography, if you have a \$15000 camera but you've been snorkelling twice, your images might not be that good...

Not too long after that trip I decided to invest in a better camera and ended up with a Sealife Micro cam, which I hated, may as well have stuck with the GoPro. (I don't want to bash Sealife too much I'm sure they're good now but that one was basically an off brand GoPro). So a little further down the line I was working as a diving instructor in Oman and got my hands on a 2nd hand Canon G16 with a Fantasea housing. The moral of this story - if you have a GoPro 9 but want to take better photos, you might need to invest in something a little bigger than the GoPro 10.

I first got to really use my new (old) camera on a trip to Malapascua in the Philippines, I was going to take amazing photos of the famous Thresher Sharks. Well it turns out the thresher dive is at daybreak and



My first significant shot - A little Hawksbill in Vanuatu, shot on my GoPro 3+ Silver. I took it during my Divemaster course in Vanuatu, with a GoPro 3+ Silver and it isn't really in focus, it's badly composed and I lost my red filter during dive one so all the colour's are blue.

On my last attempt I did get this OK one of a Thresher Shark, Malapascua Island, Philippines. At daybreak and usually at least 30m down, it's deep and dark with very little light. Canon G16 with Fantasea housing 1/30s f2.8 ISO 500





A Nudibranch in Padang Bai, Bali, Philippines, one of my first shots with the G16 and probably the first time I was really excited about one of my photos. Canon G16 with Seadragon 1500 lumen light. 1/200s f5.6 ISO 200

usually at least 30m down, it's deep and dark with very little light. Perfect when you don't really know how to use your camera.

I had read an article somewhere suggesting I use aperture priority mode, the problem being the camera was setting my shutter for me and in that lighting it was struggling to expose the images with the shutter speed at 1/30 so all my shark shots were very blurry and dark. And at 4am at 35m I didn't manage to figure out

how to change anything, probably the lack of coffee combined with a little nitrogen narcosis.

Now for moving subjects, I like to keep my shutter at at least 1/200s to avoid motion blur. So another top tip - learn to control your camera, ideally before your first dive with it. Learn all the settings and buttons on dry land, but with the camera in the housing. Things can happen quickly underwater and if you're fiddling with the controls there's a good chance



A hawksbill turtle, posing on a reef in the Daymaniat Islands, Oman. Canon G16, natural light.

your thresher shark has swum off whilst you're scrolling through menus. During this trip I did discover a love of macro critters and photography, on one of my first dives there I encountered my first pygmy seahorse and it blew my mind - I spent about half an hour getting one shot in focus.

Next up, lighting. I was given a Sealife 1500 lumen video light as a present which I used to greatly improve macro shots, but for anything wide angle if you want video lights

they need to be much more powerful 2x 10k lumen for example. However this little light did really help with my macro game, it meant I could use a much quicker shutter speed and sharpen up those little nudi's. I don't think I had really figured out aperture control by this point - I decided fast shutters were the way to go.

For some shots in Indonesia using my G16 and video light, something I wish I had for this trip was a wide angle port.

I decided the next thing I needed was a pair of strobes, so I invested in two Sea & Sea YS D2's. If you've never used them, the first time you take a photo with them it will probably blow your mind a little. The difference in sharpness, colour and exposure is amazing - the important thing is learning to control them properly, there's plenty of articles on this subject out there so I won't go into too much detail. But having them well positioned and the correct settings in camera can be the difference between nice clean shots and a half blind shark with a face full of backscatter.

It is also important to note they don't work if the subject is far away, on numerous occasions I've seen divers photographing something 10 - 15 metres away firing off their strobes and it's probably doing nothing but annoying all the other divers.

One last thing on strobing, with great power comes great responsibility - lots of marine life have sensitive eyes and don't need to be strobed over and over

again for your enjoyment.

After a trip to Lembah in Indonesia I decided it was time I invested in a full frame setup. I decided I wanted to try and follow a career in underwater photography and I had mastered my Canon G16, which was also leaking a fair bit as I didn't really take care of it - shoutout to Canon for making a non waterproof camera seemingly waterproof (it broke eventually).

I got a Sony A7Riii with a 16-35mm the 90mm macro and a Nauticam housing. It was a huge step up for me and quite the learning curve. At the time I was living in Timor-Leste, with some of the best reefs in the world, plenty of marine life and amazing macro dives it was the perfect place to get started.

Quite often people ask about my setup and think they need something similar to get good shots underwater. Before you invest your life savings consider what you will use it for and if you are ready for it.

My recommendations for beginner cameras are: the Olympus TG-6/7, Canon G7X series and the Sony RX100



Another little Hawksbill, 8 years and thousands of dollars later. Sony A1, 28-60mm, Nauticam housing and WACP-1. One more top tip - get to know your subjects and don't chase them - you don't see wildlife photographers running through the Serengati after Giraffes.

series cameras. All of them have their pro's and con's so I'll try to be fairly brief, there's other articles out there with a lot more information. The

TG-6/7 is a great starter, it is easy to learn and you can start taking great photos quickly, especially macro. The downside is you may master it quickly and feel like

you want something better. That is where the Sony RX100 series cameras come in, if I wasn't using a pro setup, this is what I would use. You have full manual control, an excellent 1" sensor, 20.1mp images and 4K video options.

Fantasea also make very good plastic housings if you don't want to spend

a fortune on an aluminium one like Nauticam. They also have decent optics like wide angle converters and macro lenses which will make a huge difference to your images - especially wide angle. I don't like to bash brands too much, but I would avoid Sea Frogs housings, they are cheap for a reason and the optics are



The difference a good edit makes. This one was tricky as my shadow was falling right on the shark. RAW file, left. Lightroom adjusted, right.

crap.

I don't want to go too much into editing, but it is an important step in the photography journey. For a long time - even after getting my A7Riii I would just shoot JPEG and edit on my phone for instagram, and that's fine if its all you are going to do with your photos.

People always told me to shoot RAW and it took me a while to make the change, even when I did, I didn't really appreciate the difference right away. When you take a RAW photo,

the camera collects a LOT more information giving you a lot more control when it comes to the edit - especially with colour, which is crucial underwater, I only shoot in RAW now.

I started out editing using an old version of Photoshop CS2 as it was available free and was still a powerful tool and it was a great way to learn. Eventually I made the switch to Lightroom, which simply put, is the best editing software available - it is the industry standard. I do also use Photoshop for some backscatter



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The whale sharks on the Ningaloo are often accompanied by bait-balls like this one, where the small fish use the shark as a floating shelter. However this one was huge, much denser and with a lot more fish than usual, so I was really excited to photograph it. The shark almost looked as if it was getting fed up with the small fish and it was attempting to shake off the swarm. It would make steep dives and then ascend again right away thrashing its tail, but the fish would just swirl even more densely around the poor shark, who would have barely been able to see through the bait-ball! I was hoping to spend a bit of time photographing this shark, but after some ups and downs, he dissappeared into the depths of the Indian Ocean, an encounter I'll never forget.

Ningaloo Reef, Australia

Sony, A7Riii, Nauticam NA-A7Riii, Sony 28-60 with Nauticam WACP-1 , iso 400, f/8, 1/250, Natural light



Leopard/Zebra shark on the Ningaloo Reef, Australia. Sony A7R3 Sony 28-60, Nauticam housing and WACP-1 1/320s f8 ISO320

removal.

After more than 4 years shooting with the A7Riii, I decided again it was time for an upgrade and I'm now using the Sony A1 with Nauticam housing which is amazing, the autofocus is so good it feels like you're cheating. During my 4 years with the A7Riii I changed wide angle lenses a couple of times, I liked the 16-35 but I just found it wasn't



A whale shark on the Ningaloo Reef, Australia. Sony A7R3 Sony 28-60, Nauticam housing and WACP-1. 1/250s f9 ISO250

quite wide enough, especially for photographing the Ningaloo. For a while I used the Canon 8-15mm fisheye but found the autofocus painfully slow - I did have it on the wrong setting for over a year (face palm). So I am now using a Sony 28-60 with the Nauticam WACP-1 (wide angle conversion port), it converts a 28mm lens to a 130 degree field of view. This gives you something in between a typical



wide lens and a fisheye which I like, although I do sometimes miss the superwide images you can create with a fisheye.

Anyway, if you've made it this far, congratulations! I hope it's been useful and or interesting. Any questions, send them my way, I'm usually happy to help :)

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