

Alex Mustard's Controlling Light Workshop

by Massimo Franzese

Why attend a workshop? I have previously attended three of Alex's Red Sea workshops and this was my first in Grand Cayman. I have also run workshops and training sessions myself and I cannot stress how important it is to get some form of tuition during your underwater photography journey even if you are already a good photographer. This was his 140 workshop and 30th in Grand Cayman and ran for a total of 9 days which allowed for black water dive and a trip to Little Cayman that may or not feature on his regular 7 days one. His workshops tend to be frequented by many regulars, some people had already done this one 3 or 4 times and there is a friendly and positive non competitive atmosphere that really contributes to get your best shots as you learn not just from Alex but from your peers.

The conditions in Grand Cayman and the facilities at Ocean Frontiers, an extremely well run operation established in 1996,

allow you to practice in easy diving conditions, excellent visibility with abundance of light so that you can focus entirely on your skills. It is an ideal workshop to establish your wide angle before attempting more challenging destinations. Water is not cold but I took my 5/3 wetsuit and thermocline hood. Nitrox was offered and actually needed as no decompression time was the limit in most cases. The bottom is not really that shallow normally 12-15 meters below the boat dropping to 25-30 and then into the abyss afterwards. Some participants had 15 litres tanks but I managed easily dives in excess of 60 minutes.

There are more than 50 dive sites you can visit and two special attractions: the Kittywake wreck, intentionally sunk with the objective of being a photography subject and Stingray city, a sandbar where

Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes. ISO 500, f/13, 1/400, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye at 15mm



Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes. ISO 500, f/16, 1/250, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye at 15mm

stingrays congregate in mass.

On arrival you are handed over a tentative schedule however this is subject to change depending on conditions. On your first evening Alex runs an introductory session to explain how to get the most of the workshop where you are given the opportunity to introduce yourself and say what gear you use, this allows you to share settings and else with peers. It was interesting to see that except for a few participants the workshop was dominated by full frame mirrorless cameras.

The next day after a two tank dive excursion you have a session in the pool that allows you to really understand how your strobe position has to be to have even illumination of your subject. We also had an inward lighting target that a few of us tested. In the evening we had the first of the four lectures on controlling light. Those move from ambient light all the way to mixed light and other techniques such as cross strobes. During the evening session there is also image sharing and commentary that is extremely useful as Alex also gives you tips and ideas for post processing. In terms of diving this 9 days special had 22 dives plus the



Stingray sandbar. On the last day you could add an unlimited time macro dive on a shallow reef so quite a bit of diving going on. I am not really a fish portrait shooter but I enjoyed both the black water diver and the macro dive.

However being a wide angle shooter I skipped a night dive. I decided to arrive one day later and the comment I want to make is that if you are an experienced photographer you can get plenty of practice experience even

on the day boat. The difference is that while in the workshop you focus on the most photogenic dive sites on a day boat you are more at the mercy of the typical diver schedule and the focus is to dive at different sites



Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes. ISO 500, f/11, 1/400, Sony 24-50 G + WACP-C

and look for fish. This is another differentiator of Alex workshops that is even more evident in other destinations like the Red Sea.

Together with the lectures Alex follows a progression from ambient light to more complex lighting scenarios. Specifically we used some fairly shallow sites with cracks in the reef that allow you to focus on different type of photography without flash. Most of those scenery lend themselves to



Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes. ISO 500, f/16, 1/400, Sony 14mm GM

black and white and with a mirrorless camera you are invited to set black and white in the viewfinder so that you can see how the image will come out. This is a fisheye trip. You can do pretty much everything with one lens but it is worth to take a macro lens in case conditions are rough. I also took a 14mm rectilinear for the Stingrays and for splits where I prefer straight lines.

One of the things that I have learnt shooting

mirrorless since 2014 is that you need to have a complete understanding of the way the evf represents the scene and you can't just trust the light meter if you want to have maximum dynamic range. In my case shooting a Sony A1 I set zebra to show the clipping point of the image so that I never clip highlights when I use live view. The resulting shots appear dark in the review however Sony full frame files have at least 3 stops latitude in the



Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes.ISO 500, f/13, 1/80, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye at 15mm

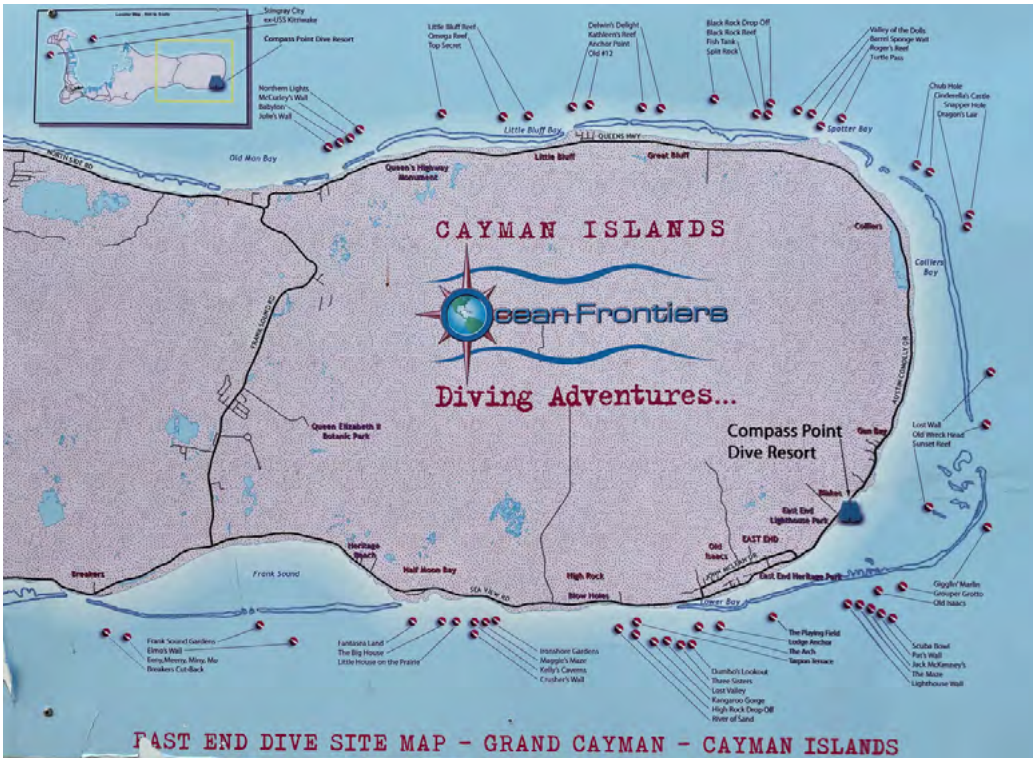
shadows and if noise becomes an issue you can denoise.

The Kittywake wreck is another perfect practice scenario for ambient light shots. The wreck has dropped to deeper water following a hurricane a few years ago and no longer stands upright. If you look at older photos be aware it is now quite tilted. This easy to navigate and not too large shipwreck is ideal for ambient light and filter photography as well as black and white scenes depending on the angle of the sun. Alex explains very well how to make the most of the sunlight and the resulting shots can be indeed dramatic. There are also

set subjects for you to take and of course you can go off the beaten track if you want your unique shots. I spent both dives on the Kittywake outside as I was thinking there would have been a second trip instead, thanks to good conditions we went all the way to Little Cayman for a three dive trip.

Little Cayman presented similar sponge formations to Grand Cayman but more fish and turtles. Apparently turtle numbers have been decreasing in Grand Cayman in the last ten years and there are speculations the locals eat them.

The workshop always offers a trip to Stingray City, this is done earlier



than the day trippers so you have around 90 minutes before the rest of the tourists arrive. The sea conditions are generally not flat so split shots are difficult but one of us managed to get a very good one. I decided to focus on underwater shots using a rectilinear lens as I wanted to have actions close to the dome with burst shooting. There are quite a few people in the line of sight and when the rays are fed it gets really messy. It was somewhat difficult to get ambient shots while the stingrays, if approached and managed with the right behaviour, would swim right up to your camera and even rub on you, which can result in suction

bites.

I took 470 shots due to the burst settings and managed to pull up several that I like really close to the dome. As I used a rectilinear lens the camera focus tracking worked perfectly and using shutter speeds of 1/400 I did not get excessive blur. I would recommend even higher speed if conditions allow.

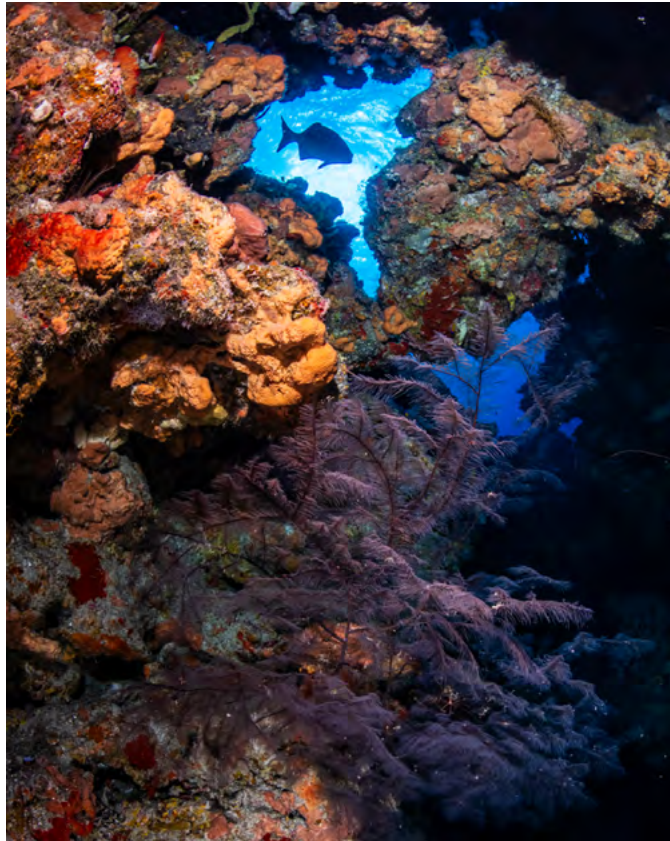
Another highlight of the workshop is the X dive, Ocean Frontiers takes you to a secret spot where there are around 12 resident caribbean sharks so everyone can get some good shark photos. The dive site though is fairly deep and the light is



Sony A1 in Nauticam housing with two Sea and Sea YS-D3 strobes. ISO 500, f/16, 1/125, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye at 15mm

not ideal. As divers sit on the sand the visibility can quickly deteriorate. The good news is that sharks are present anyway on the east end reefs and I got some of my best shark shots while three sharks were circling me and one came right to my dome port. The shark appears to be further away as I was shooting a fisheye but it was literally less than one foot away.

During the workshop we were very lucky with the winds and did not have to resort to a back up



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plan of shooting macro, however the dive site that is used for that purpose has quite a bit to offer and I definitely recommend doing the macro dive on the last day especially after the indigestion of wide angle it can feel quite good to look close.

As mentioned we had the unique opportunity to perform a black water dive at the Don Foster Dive center on the west side of the island. It is relatively new in Grand Cayman but it was extremely well run and all of us got a good selection of subjects. This is

not typically offered during the workshop but if you happen to be in Grand Cayman or arrive before the workshop or leave later I would recommend doing it if you have not done it before.

During the week I could see improvements from all participants that culminated in the end of the show video that Alex built where each participant chose their 10-12 favourite images of the week. I also had the opportunity to connect with fellow photographers, and some of us I have to say also seasoned Margarita drinkers as we even ran a ranking of the few bars we visited. Having said that, there is really not a lot of time for relaxation and at end of each day you feel quite tired and in need of sleep. I opted for a single occupation room that was right on the beach and could get a few hours of sun there and on the boat so that I did not come back totally pasty white however some participants did not look like they had been to the caribbean after the week had gone by. After one week here I came back with what I think are 12-15 very strong images which in general is a good outcome considering my own standards.

To conclude I would recommend this workshop to anyone that wants to improve their wide angle photography, including very experienced shooters that may have developed bad habits. The clear and easy conditions allow you to see what you are doing wrong and course correct during the workshop or even during the dive itself.

Massimo Franzese
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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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