

# Henley Spiers

with Peter Rowlands

*Like so many in our industry, your career started as a dive instructor. Did that put you in contact with serious underwater photographers or did you have a lightbulb moment when underwater photography became an obvious choice for you to progress your career and communicate with the wider world?*

Until my mid to late twenties, I had shown practically zero interest in photography, either on land or underwater. In my time as a diving instructor, most of my customers were either trainee divers, Divemasters-in-the-making, or tourist divers. Almost none carried a camera or had a focus on photography. I think that was probably the last of an era in a way because almost everyone carries some form of camera down these days, mostly of the action cam variety. I guess it's an extension of the smartphones we all now carry - everyone is a photographer.

I have a clear memory of a 'serious' underwater photographer visiting our dive centre in Bali and spending several days with his guide purely on one site in search of an octopus...it seemed comical at the time, and yet today I have the utmost empathy for that kind of behaviour!

At some point when working as a dive pro in Indonesia, I started using a compact camera to document dives and divers. I was the internship manager at a PADI Career Development Centre and in charge of anywhere between 10 and 30 interns at a time. It was a dream job and I would bring the camera along to occasionally take some pictures when professional responsibilities allowed for it.

I was (and am) dive mad so would spend any holidays or time off underwater...On one occasion, I visited Lembeh, with my little compact set-up (no strobes or anything on it), and was suddenly surrounded by a different breed of diver: 90% of the Lembeh divers carried big underwater camera housings with lights and flashes mounted to arms. I grew increasingly intrigued and ended up renting a housed Olympus EM5 with one strobe from the dive centre. I received a quick orientation and off I went...

The buzz from those first images was immense. The colour!

*Diver observes great white shark from cage. Guadalupe Island, Mexico. Nikon D850, Nikon 28-70mm @28mm, Nauticam WACP-1, Nauticam housing. F/8, 1/400, ISO 500*





*Marine iguana in the surge. Galapagos Islands, Ecuador. Nikon D850, Nikonos 13mm, Nauticam housing, Retra Pro X strobes. F/22, 1/15, ISO 64*

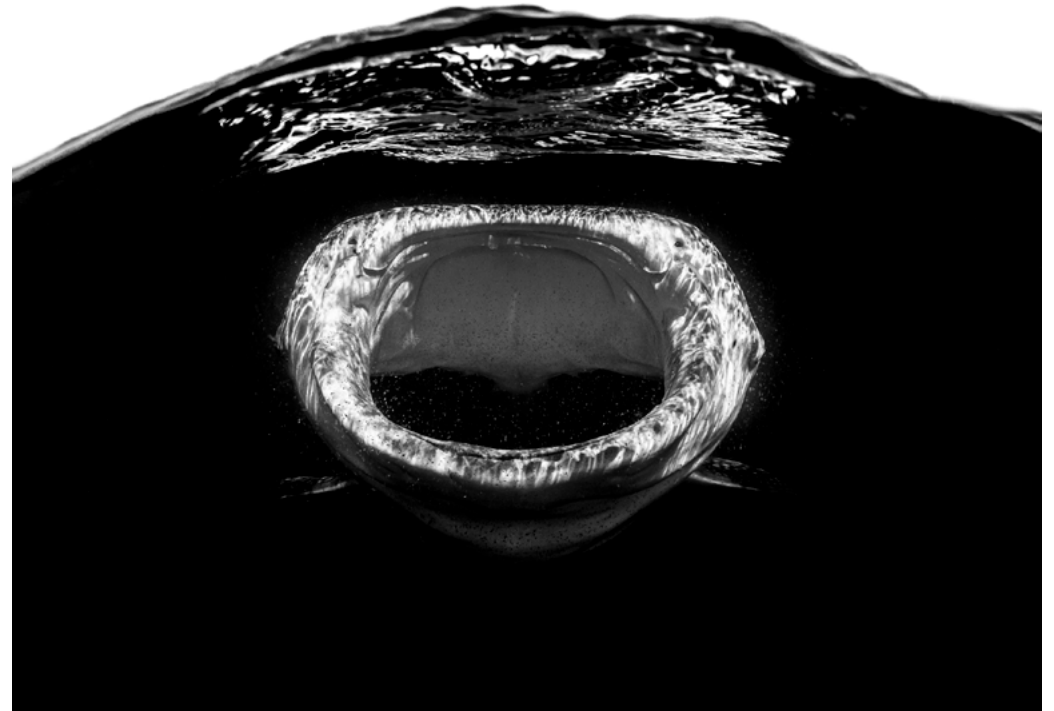
The sharpness! The thrill of the photographic hunt! That was the first big seed for what would later grow into a full-time career...but that was still a few years away.

I explored a few different professional routes which would keep me in the ocean: working towards certification as a technical diving instructor (before a typhoon laid waste to that plan) and gaining my Yachtmaster Offshore license with a view to combining dive instruction

with skippering.

In the end, I ended up taking a new post in Saint Lucia as the dive manager for an exciting, start-up dive centre being opened by a friend and former student. Before travelling to the new gig, I invested in my first 'proper' camera rig: the same Olympus EM5 with a single strobe I had used in Lembeh. I had an 8mm fisheye lens and a 60mm macro.

Whilst we mapped dive sites for the new dive centre, I started



*Whale shark split level as it feeds. Sea of Cortez, Baja California Sur, Mexico. Nikon D850, Nikon 8-15mm @15mm, Nauticam housing. F/14, 1/500, ISO 640*

to practice with that underwater camera set-up. The initial results were mediocre, but I was relishing the experience...

I think at that time I might have been the only underwater photographer on Saint Lucia...so there was no peer group or mentors to learn from. I absorbed as much as I could from Martin Edge and Alex Mustard's photography books, and kept learning through painful trial and error.

After about two years of working in Saint Lucia, the photo bug had bitten very hard. I no longer dreamed of being a dive pro, I wanted to be a professional underwater photographer. It was an ambition which would raise even more eyebrows than when I quit a promising corporate career to become a dive instructor!

*Your early years as a dive instructor were in the Philippines, Indonesia and Saint Lucia. Is that where you started to get serious to learn about your underwater photography and how did your early forays into British waters go? Also is there a different mindset shooting in the differing environments? Do your artistic horizons get limited by the vizibility?*

Whilst my first scuba dive occurred at 12 years old, my first dive in British waters came when I was 31 years old. I'd spent my whole life until then enjoying tropical waters and putting off that cold, brown water back home! The funny thing was, I'd been shooting avidly underwater in Saint Lucia, Grand Cayman, Egypt, Indonesia, Philippines but no one else seemed to be as excited as me about the pictures created...the public response was tepid.

On my first ever snorkel trip in British waters, I witnessed a baitball with bluefin tuna hunting down sand eels - a once in a lifetime kind of moment from a species which had

once disappeared entirely from our seas. Then on my first scuba dive in the UK, at Swanage Pier, I witnessed two tompot blennies fighting and captured what was by far my strongest and most celebrated picture to date. That shot won a category in UPY and was printed in the Sunday Times. It remains one of my favourite ever shots. I guess the universe was trying to tell me something, and ever since I have looked at British waters as being a place with great creative possibilities (despite the iffy visibility).

As photographers and people, we crave comfort, and there is nothing more appealing than jumping with minimal gear into a warm ocean which is brimming with life. The problem is, everyone feels the same and we now have several decades of underwater photographers focussing on those places. I love coral reefs but I think it is very difficult to create an original underwater photograph on them today. The image library is saturated. Because of the inherent difficulties with temperate



*Duelling tompot blennies. Dorset, UK. Nikon D850, Nikon 60mm, Nauticam housing, Inon Z240 strobes. F/4.5, 1/125, ISO 100*

*Yellowhead jawfish with mouth full of eggs. Saint Lucia. Nikon D7200, Nikon 105mm, Nauticam housing, Sea & Sea YS-D2. F/13, 1/320, ISO 100*



water exploration, there is more opportunity for new pictures.

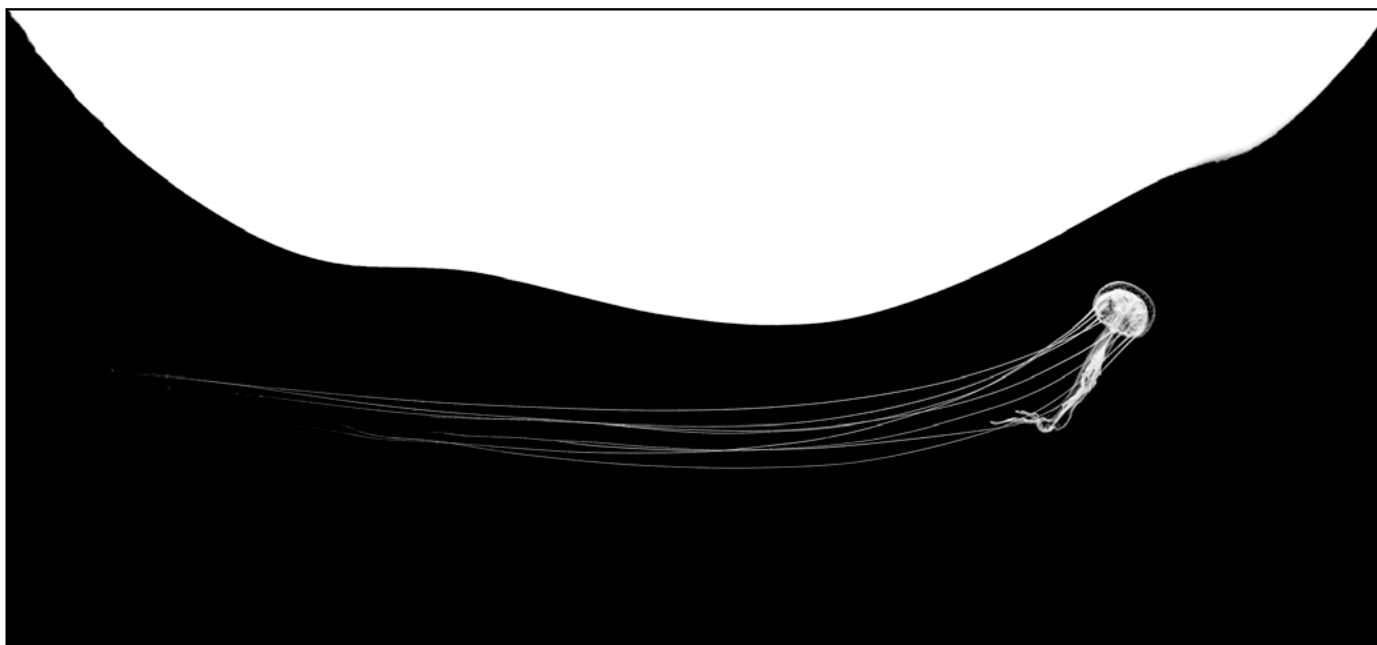
*In your formative years were you drawn to wide angle or close ups? Is the percentage still the same now or does it depend on the job in hand?*

In the early days I think people would have described me as more of a macro shooter, whereas today a far greater percentage of my images are wide-angle. I think in part that was because of the places I was shooting. Saint Lucia is not blessed with many big marine animals so focussing on things like brooding jawfish was more rewarding.

In the Philippines and Indonesia, I spent a lot of time at muck diving sites. I think as well as locations, I also found the results of macro photography more rewarding. I felt more in control of the frame and exposure, and was getting more inspiration from it then wide angle.

Over time, I spent more time in different locations, places with a whole different type of marine ecosystem and animals. They inspired more wide angle imagery and I learnt to love the craft behind it. The challenge of crafting a compelling composition from a wide scene, with a balance of natural and artificial light, really drives these days. I've realised that even when it comes to my macro these days, I prefer to capture it within a wider scene if possible.

*Competitions seem more popular than ever and you achieved a high degree of success almost immediately. Did you shoot specifically for them and treat them as a stepping stone in your career? If so did your successes lead to commissions and a change of your career*



*Jellyfish trails beneath the surface. Cebu, Philippines. Nikon D850, Nikon 28-70mm @28mm, Nauticam WACP-1, Nauticam housing, Inon Z330 strobes. F/14, 1/100, ISO 100*

*direction and finally what is your attitude to them nowadays?*

I grew up in a highly competitive household and played a lot of sports. As such, the idea of performance measurement had become pretty normalised and I tend to enjoy that competitive challenge. Even if it is deeply and fundamentally flawed to bring score-keeping to an artistic field such as photography, I was still drawn to competitions from an early stage (and let me reassure you, the success was certainly not immediate!). I also recognised that with no formal qualifications or established career path in underwater photography, competitions could help to establish a reputation which would enable this most unconventional of careers.

Whilst they are an emotional rollercoaster, and should be taken with a heavy pinch of salt, I have found photographic competitions to be an essential part of my career. I think the drive to create pictures which wow continues to inspire and motivate me. That doesn't mean they will all be awarded images...but if the goal is to create pictures with such power that they can stop people in their tracks (and maybe win a competition) then I think it's a very worthy mindset to have.

Beyond reputation, competitions have also sustained me financially. I was on my knees professionally during the pandemic, but winning the HIPA Grand Title and the \$120,000 USD prize was the financial injection which got my career back on track.





*To me personally, your competition images have a distinctive degree of graphic simplicity combined with peak of the action timing and unambiguous composition. Is this intuitive, premeditated, planned and hard fought and/or just good use of a high frame rate, being in the right place and sensing that the opportunity is right?*

That's a very gratifying description - thank you! I would say there is enormous planning which goes into being on-site and in the

water at a particular location. The truth is I spend the majority of my time in the office, so much time goes into planning and organising those brief but magical moments in the ocean.

However, once in the sea, I am a very instinctive shooter. I like to react to the moment. I will pursue what inspires me most, whether it be a cooperative animal, wonderful light, or unusual behaviour (or ideally all 3 of those things). The compositions are instinctive, I read and react to



*Small spotted cat shark over horse mussel beds. Shetland, UK. Nikon D850, Nikon 28-70mm @28mm, Nauticam WACP-1, Nauticam housing, Retra Pro X strobes. F/16, 1/15, ISO 800*

*Constellation of eagle rays. South Male Atoll, Maldives. Nikon D850, Nikon 28-70mm @28mm, Nauticam WACP-1, Nauticam housing, Inon Z330 strobes. F/6.3, 1/60, ISO 800*

the moment and what I see on the camera playback. I am certainly not in the mould of someone like Thomas Peschak, who I hear will sketch out specific pictures ahead of time.

*I particularly enjoy your Black and White images. Do you think about it when you shoot and shoot accordingly or are the decisions to convert made on 'the lightbox'? Whichever, do you have any tips you are prepared to divulge about the techniques used processing to black and white?*

Thank you! There was a moment in time, soon after meeting Christian Vizl and starting to explore Mexico underwater, that I was extremely driven by the pursuit of black and white imagery. Today, more of my work remains in colour, and I will only release an image in black and white when I really believe that the monochrome elevates it to a new level.

I wouldn't say that I shoot for b&w whilst in the water, but there will be certain scenes where a lightbulb





*Split level view of northern gannets. Shetland, UK. Nikon D850, Nikon 8-15mm @15mm, Nauticam housing, Inon Z240 strobes. F/22, 1/250, ISO 800*

goes off and I think to myself that this is especially promising in terms of monochrome processing. That lightbulb is informed by my preference for graphic, minimalist b&w compositions, and the editing style I use. There certainly is a skillset to editing for black and white which goes beyond merely clicking the conversion button. It would be a bit too long to go into here but is the kind of topic I might cover in my underwater photography column for Oceanographic Magazine or when conducting coaching on my trips.

***Being chosen as the first ever for Story Teller in Residence Oceanographic Magazine in 2023 must have been a huge opportunity. How did this come about and what was the remit?***

It was a total game-changer to be selected as the first ever storyteller in residence for Oceanographic Magazine. For the first time, with the £45,000 grant provided, I could pursue stories more purely with fewer worries of how to finance the fieldwork.

There was an intensive



*Bull shark surrounded by bigeye trevally. Cabo Pulmo, Baja California, Mexico. Nikon D850, Nikon 8-15mm @15mm, Nauticam housing, Inon Z240 strobes. F/11, 1/125, ISO 400*

application form to be filled, in which you needed to describe in detail both the stories you wished to pursue and why you had the skillset to do so. I was over the moon when selected and would spend the next 12 months pursuing five feature stories, three of which ended up as cover stories.

I started in Scotland, covering three different locations and modes of marine protection. Next up was a story on the wonder and threats face by Mexico's sea lions. Then it was off to the Galapagos to share more about its extraordinary marine life

and conservation success story. From there it was back to Mexico, working side-by-side with cetacean scientists to attach the first ever CATS tags to humpback whales in the Baja Sur region. That would form part of a wider story on cetaceans in Mexico.

Finally, I shared a story on the elusive marine life of the open ocean, and the first ever chance we have to protect international waters effectively through the High Seas Treaty.



*Invasive red-eared slider turtle amongst lily pads. Yucatan, Mexico. Nikon D850, Nikon 8-15mm @15mm, Nauticam housing, Inon Z240 strobes. F/10, 1/160, ISO 640*

*What lasting effect did the Story Teller in Residence experience have upon you? Did big stories and extended trips on your own bring pressure or did it inspire the workload?*

It was transformational. It totally shifted my outlook from single images to creating sets of pictures to tell a story. It is a different, and higher pressure environment to pursue that kind of photo-journalism, but I loved it...The picture and story rights remain with me, so I can also continue to leverage that content. Some of those stories and images have recently been published in the likes of Terre Sauvage and BBC Wildlife Magazine.

The role is designed to be temporary with a new storyteller appointed each year, but I miss it and would highly recommend applying! The problem for me now is how to continue storytelling. There are very few grants out there and most magazines do not have the budget to fund fieldwork. How can you build a business model designed around ocean storytelling in today's market?

*You combine engaging text with great images. Do you think there is a market for an up and coming underwater photographer to go the illustrated articles route which quality circulation magazines would pay sensible money for and which might lead to commissioned work?*

Thanks again! Being able to write and photograph is a much more valuable skillset than only having pictures to offer. In fact, you should really strive to be able to deliver a full package in today's market: stills both above and below the water, drone work, words, social media clips, video...the more you have, the more work you can access.

I have not had the honour of working for National Geographic Magazine, who may be the exception.. but in my experience, it is not feasible to build a full-time career around writing / shooting stories for magazines related to diving or nature.

Commissions are few and far between, there are some but they are unpredictable. I think it is worthwhile as an income stream (with added benefits in terms of self publicity) but let's be honest: don't quit your day job in the hope of becoming a



full-time assignment underwater photographer.

*Your wife Jade Hoksbergen, and you don't have to answer this, is an accomplished underwater photographer in her own right. Is there collaboration, competition or inspirational camaraderie?*

My start in photography perfectly coincides with the start of our relationship and I give Jade a lot of the credit in terms of reawakening my artistic sensibility. She is the first person I show a picture to and I think she has an extraordinary, instinctive sense of what works and what doesn't in an image. I think we have really helped each other in this journey through underwater photography, first as a passion, then as a profession. It doesn't feel competitive to me, in fact, I think I might be even happier for her success than my own.

With two young daughters, we don't get to work together as much as we'd like to these days, but it is a beautiful thing to share this love of the ocean and photography.

*You lead Expeditions and offer Bespoke Diving & Photography Trips. Are they aimed at those of a high level wishing to get even better or will anyone benefit, regardless of their level?*

My expeditions welcome all levels of photographer, from newbies to the highly experienced. Coaching someone from scratch can be really rewarding as I feel like they can have this steep learning curve within one expedition and walk away from it with powerful pictures.

With experienced shooters, I am happy to offer as much or as little coaching as they wish. At the very least, I would aim to put them in the best position to succeed in terms of place, time and advice on how to enter the water. I'm an open book on the expeditions, happy to discuss the story behind any one of my shots or experiences, and also happy to conduct portfolio reviews, even for images shot elsewhere.

I think half of the battle with photography is this art of selecting the right images after capture, and then editing them to ensure they reach their full potential. Every evening on my expeditions is spent side-by-side with participants, suggesting which frames are worth working on, and then refining their post-processing. I only realised how much I enjoy teaching when I became a dive



*Reef covered by an enormous ghost net. Cebu, Philippines. Nikon D850, Nikon 28-70mm @28mm, Nauticam WACP-1, Nauticam housing, Inon Z330 strobes. F/11, 1/60, ISO 800*

instructor, and that's something I've been able to continue now with photography.

*It would be remiss of me not to ask about the equipment you use. How and why did your camera choice develop from the early days until now and are you a slave to them or are they just tools of the trade?*

I do care about the gear, and try to stay abreast of developments in that world, but it's important to tread the line between the technical and the artistry.

I started with that Olympus EM5, then changed it for a Nikon D7200. I then invested in a Nikon D850 in 2018 which I still love and shoot with today. At present, and in shared ownership with Jade, we have two housed Nikon D850s and a Sony A7RV. I am not yet convinced that the Nikon D850 has been bettered by mirrorless cameras for underwater stills.

I'm a big fan of water contact optics and am very fond of my Nauticam WACP-1 and Nikonos 13mm.

*Finally you work on and produce a lot of images with a conservation theme. Do you think underwater photographs are used to enough effect or are there ways to shoot which could increase their effectiveness? Are we, as underwater photographers, guilty of only showing the good side rather than the real one?*

I think, and it's only natural, that most underwater images are captured in the pursuit of beauty. Most of the underwater photographers out there have invested precious time and money to go and see something wonderful. As such, it's normal that the results mostly convey the wonder of aquatic life. Even within conservation themes, many of the pictures we see come through (including many of my own) are incidental. We went looking for something beautiful, then happened to find something troubling, so we captured an image of it.

The truth is, the worst side of human impact and behaviour in the ocean is not happening around beauty spots with regular tourism. We are blind to it. We are not on commercial fishing vessels when they harvest egregiously from the sea. We are not there when vessels use the sea as a dumping ground. We are not there when fishing observers disappear or when fishing crews are abused.

It is hard to access and it is hard to see these things. And it is not fun. In that sense, I have utmost respect for the likes of Ian Urbina, Aaron Gekoski, Britta Jaschinski and Shin Sirachai Arunrugstichai who consciously turn their back on the quest for beauty and seek out the darkness instead.

*Are you a focussed planner or go with the flow? Either way would you reveal your up and coming projects?*

A mix really, I try to have some concrete plans in place for the sake of stability whilst also leaving room for an unpredictable assignment call.

In August, Jade and I will undertake a photographic residency at Six Senses Kanahura in the Maldives. In October, I will be in Mexico for an epic expedition with clients, covering everything from sea lions, to mobula rays and marlin.

For anyone interested in joining one of my expeditions, please do reach out.

**Henley Spiers**  
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Henley, thank you for taking the time to provide such open and informative answers and I wish you continued success.

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