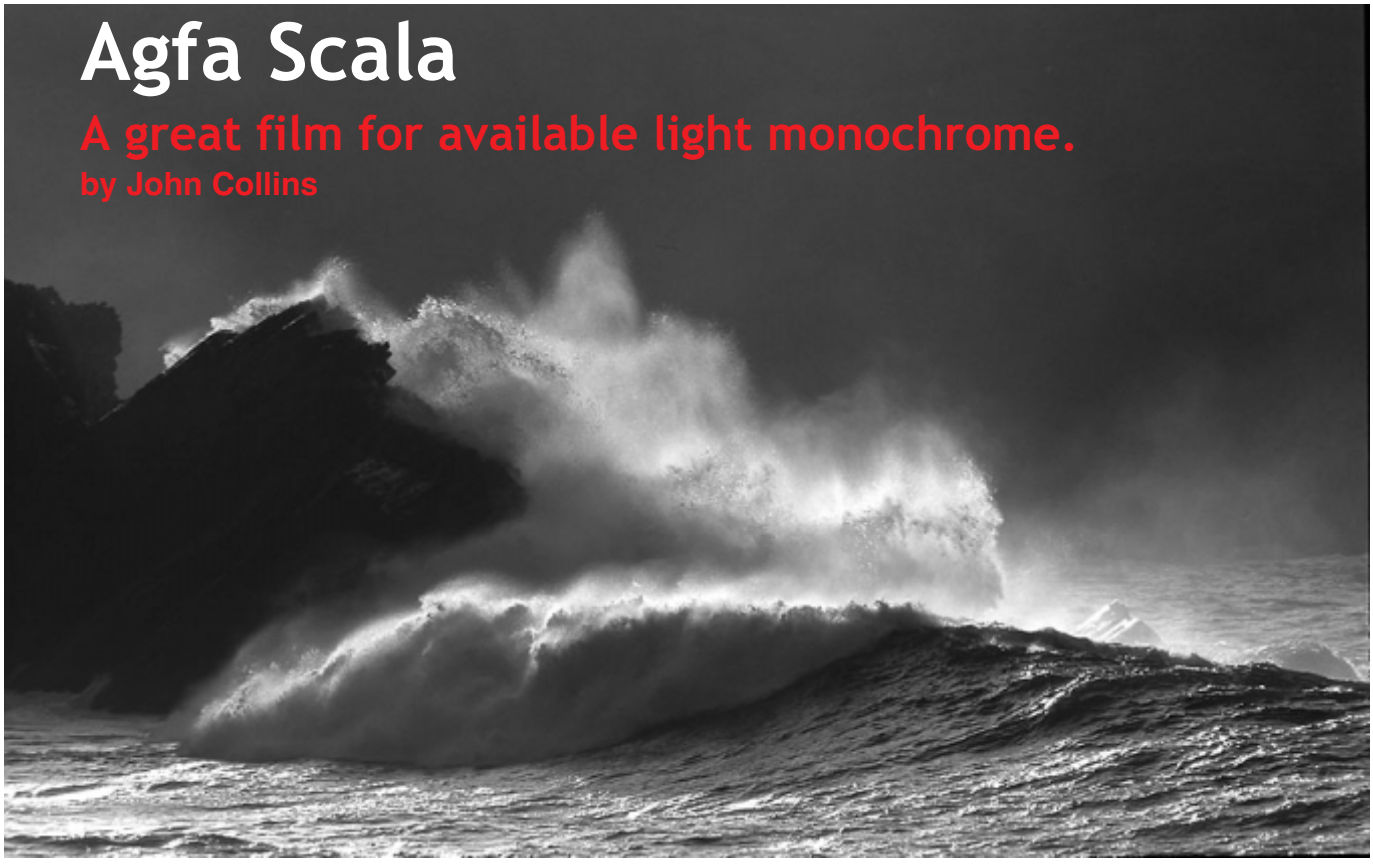
Agfa Scala

A great film for available light monochrome.

by John Collins



Most of us recall the steep climb of learning how to get decent photographs underwater. In my case, the rig was a Nikonos V with a 35mm lens only. Hopelessly inadequate for my home waters of the Irish Sea. Within a couple of rolls of 'studies of divers in pea soup', I was soon back to Ocean Optics, looking for a flash ! Only then could picture taking begin in earnest. As diving photographers, we are much more reliant on flash than our land based counterparts and I think it is fair to say, we are pretty expert in its use. Take a moment to consider how accurately you can estimate distance underwater and manually add just enough flash to give that Cousteau 'kiss' of fill lighting. However, as most of my diving is in home waters, using balanced light techniques, I have found it difficult to overcome the green colour cast that plagues wide angle photography in

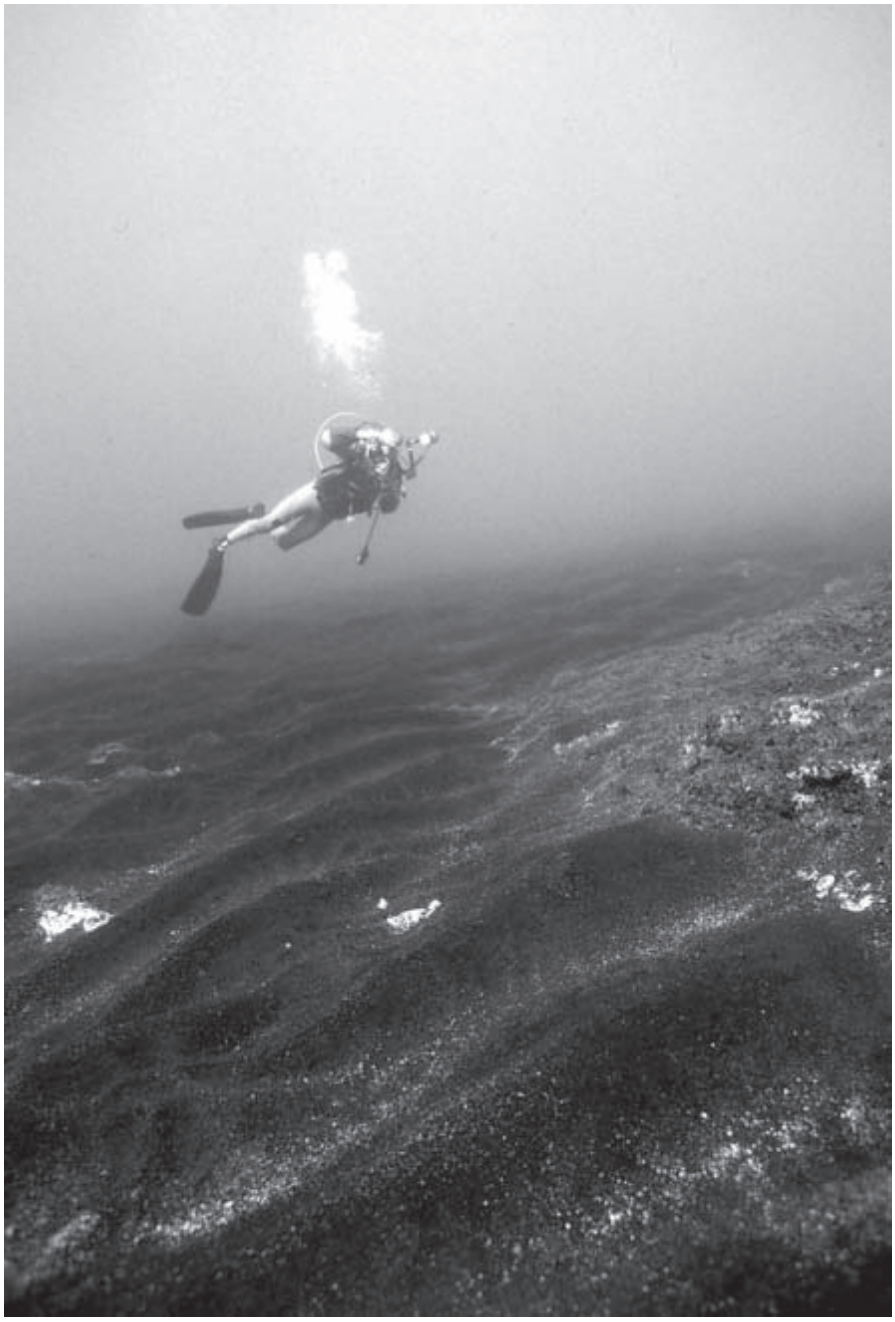
Ocean Fury, Kerry, Ireland. Scala slides project very well, the warm colour of tungsten projector lamp giving the impression of a toned black and white print; grain is excellent at both 200 and 400 speeds. Nikon F90X, 100mm-300mm lens, Agfa Scala rated at 200.

Wreck of the Alondra, west Cork, Ireland. Possibly the best black and white subjects, wrecks in less than ideal visibilty photograph well on Agfa Scala. Using available light only and metering on a shadow detail, the strong shapes of the wreckage make strong graphics, without the distraction of the green water backround. Nikon F100/ Subal N10, 18mm lens, Agfa Scala rated at ISO 800.

(Left) Metridia, Cape Clear island, Cork. Close focus wide angle, using available light. Spotmetering is on stalk shadow, Nikon F100/ Subal N10, 18mm lens, Scala rated at ISO800. (Below) Black Sand, Canary islands. The volcanic scenery of the Canary Islands of Lanzarote, Tenerife and El Hierro photographs well in mono. Nikon F100/Subal N10, 18mm lens, Agfa Scala rated at ISO 400.

temperate waters. So, I decided to put my colour transparency film aside and give black and white a go.

This requires a different approach and re-think on the type of images that would work well. The main reason for this is that by working with black and white film, specifically Agfa Scala 200X, you are attempting to create images that have good contrast and graphic simplicity that exemplifies fine black and white photography. After much experimentation with different black and white materials over a season (much like Morris Gregory, see UwP6, page 36), I have found Scala to be the easiest to use and nicest monochrome material of all. Firstly, it is a black and white slide film - unique in itself - but also, it can be rated at any speed from 100 to 1600 ISO, by pull/ push processing. I know that most underwater photographers don't like to get their fingers wet in a darkroom and this is where Scala really scores. You buy it process paid and simply use the good old slide film mailer. You mark the film cassette with the

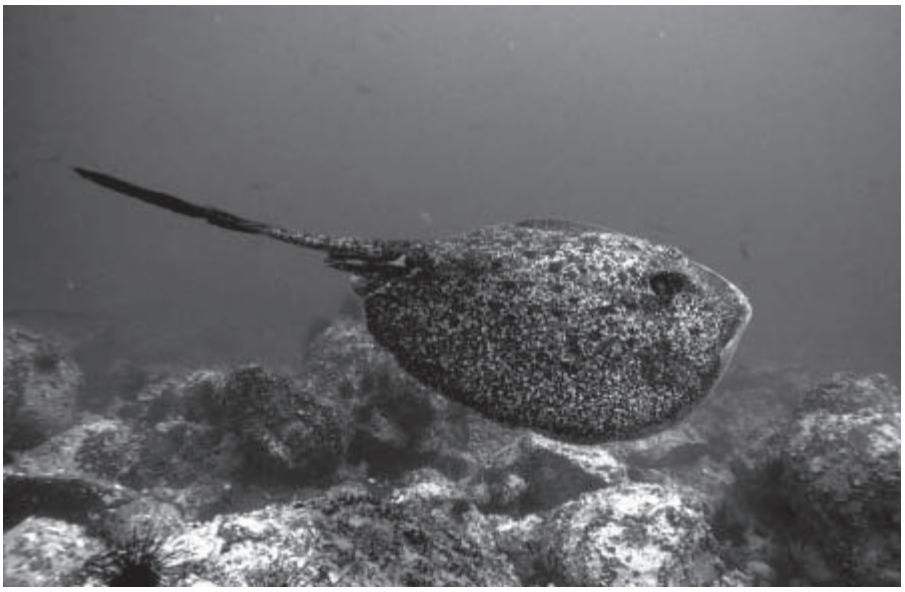


speed chosen, as well as the envelope and that's it ! - slides are back in a few days.

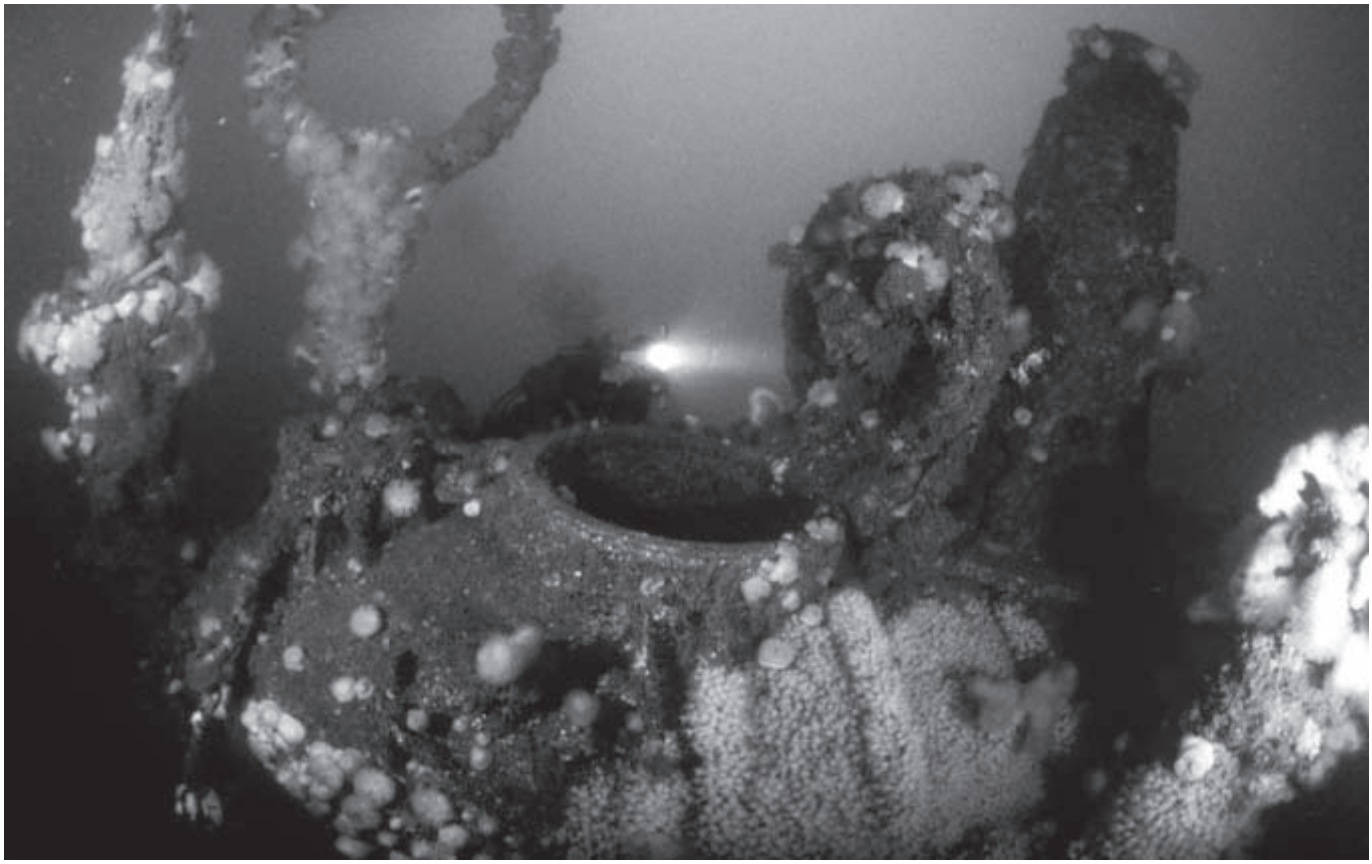
My routine for using this film now is to manually set the ISO on the camera to 200 and once I drop on site, I take a meter reading and decide what speed to rate the film on the bottom. It is digital SLR convenience with film. I have found the film to be excellent up to ISO 800 and now mostly use it at this speed for home waters diving, without flash. In use, the film behaves more like a black and white negative film than colour slide. While we are always at pains not to overexpose the highlights of our colour slides by exposing for a mid-tone, black and white film is a little different. Typically, colour transparency film has an total exposure latitude of about five stops whereas a black and white film is about eight. This sounds like it should be very forgiving of exposure error but in fact requires careful metering of shadow detail. Overexposing the highlights will turn the water backround white rather than grey but blocked up shadows can take significantly from the image. So, the trick is to spotmeter on an important shadow detail and not mid-tone as you do with colour slide. All of this is using available light only of course, flash is not necessary. After years of swimming about with one or two large flashguns,not needing to carry any flash and associated arms and cords underwater is positively liberating. A Subal N10 housing with a Nikon F100 feels pocket sized!

Scala works really well on wrecks; in less than ideal visibility and the strong green colour of home waters' diving, it renders the subject really well.

Grouper, El Hierro, Canary Islands. Larger fish that tend to have less colour can look better in mono. Nikon F100/Subal N10, 24mm lens, Agfa Scala rated at ISO 400.



Marbled Sting Ray, Cocos Island. The volcanic landscape of Cocos is often missed in the pursuit of sharks. Nikon F100/Subal N10, 24mm lens, Agfa Scala rated at ISO 400.



Conning Tower, U-260, west Cork, Ireland. Originally shot on Provia 1600, the original slides dupiclated well on to Agfa Scala, rated at ISO 100. The black and white slides seem to have a more historical 'feel'. Originally shot with Nikon F90X/Subal N9b, 16mm lens, Provia 1600, this deep dark wreck at almost 50m, required an exposure of 1/8 second/f5.6.

In reading up on wrecks, old photographs of the ships in all their glory are, of course, black and white. Duplicating these onto Scala is great for a slide presentation. At ISO 100, Scala is an excellent copy film - the lower speed reduces contrast. It will dupe colour slides very well also. Along with your wreck shots it makes a powerful narrative of a shipwreck story as the black and white images add to the historical 'feel'. When Scala slides are projected the warm light from the tungsten bulb of the projector gives the look of a toned black and white print, enhancing the effect.

But, I hear you ask, if I don't necessarily want to project the images, why not shoot colour slides as normal and convert to black and white in Photoshop and make black and white digitally? This is, of course, a valid approach and will work well - to a point. The colour slides will not have the range of tones of the black and white film, so you will be working with a limited tonal range which may limit the quality of prints you can produce. For me, one aspect of shooting black and white film rather than slide is the committment to that medium and so 'thinking' black and white on the dive. I find it a more enjoyable creative process - but to each their own on this one. It is also fair to say that black and white, underwater, is a wide angle pursuit. It is the feeling of being down there that we are trying to capture, rather than say, natural history documentation. While some larger animals can make great subjects, relatively few macro subjects lend themselves to black and white.

Generally, the Scala slides also scan well in the digital darkroom. I have found they are best scanned as 16 bit greyscale but you might find scanning in RGB and converting to monochrome using the Channel Mixer works better, depending on your set up. This gives the flexibility of altering tone and contrast, much like using black and white filters at the shooting stage. So, give the flash a rest - get the black and white artistic juices flowing and give it a try. Just don't forget those little red flash blanking plugs!

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