

Happy holidays

The reality of digital underwater photography

By Alexander Mustard

A few issues ago, the editor asked what we would most like to see in UWP and our number one response was

“Photo Tips”. Well, having just spent a week on a liveaboard with 11 other underwater photographers I have a great one: if you don’t want the conversation hijacked by opinion and argument don’t mention the word “digital”! One small slip with the d-word and you can wave small talk goodbye for half an hour. The digital debate is lively one, made worse when a few digital divers get together and the torrent of jargon and acronyms quickly becomes impenetrable to all but a (flash)card carrying, digital enthusiast. “Talking megapixels” is how one photographer summed up this new language.

This article is my contribution to the debate. My thesis is simple: digital is better than film because it is more fun! In the digital debate I don’t care about the pixel count, the numbers of shots per dive, instant image review, highlight vs shadow detail, control, storage etc. I’m not David Duvet. I, like most underwater photographers, take pictures because I enjoy it and

the best camera for me is the one I enjoy using the most! Simple.

There is a serious side to this article. My intention is to tell you about the experience of being a digital photographer. What are the differences between a typical dive vacation on film and on digital? To reduce the bias of my own experiences I asked the members of the wetpixel digital photography forum for their opinions and I’ll include some of their quotes on why digital is more fun than film. These quotes may also go some way to reveal a bit about the psyche of the “average” digital underwater photographer!

My personal favourite advance of the whole digital revolution is the stress relief button. When we shoot film, we have no idea how we are doing. And while experience reassures us that we are OK, we can only remember what it looked like through the viewfinder. We are left comforting ourselves “I am pretty sure my TTL was working, and I think I loaded the film correctly, and I hope that the strobe was aimed at the whale shark and not that massive cloud of sediment that my buddy kicked up,



Digital photography brings a host of new experiences for the underwater photographer, like sitting in a van in a wetsuit full of sand and salt downloading images to a laptop. Photograph by Steve Broadbelt.

and I pray the X-rays at the airport haven’t fogged the film, and I hope that I remembered to take the lens cap off, and my camera strap wasn’t over the lens and the strobes had recharged hadn’t they?” etc; but we can never be 100% sure. On top of this, the better the diving, the more stressful the holiday becomes. Each once in a lifetime opportunity adds to the torture. Soon we’re as tightly coiled as our exposed film wound up in those little green canisters.

This is where digital cameras and that marvellous stress release button come to our rescue. The stress relief button is only small, on the back, next to the LCD screen, but once I press it all my concerns vanish. One little push and I see exactly what I’ve just taken. The worry, the stress, just drifts away with my bubbles. If it’s good, I know I’ve got the shot, and if I haven’t I know to try again. In addition, as one wetpixelite points out, the stress relief button can also keep

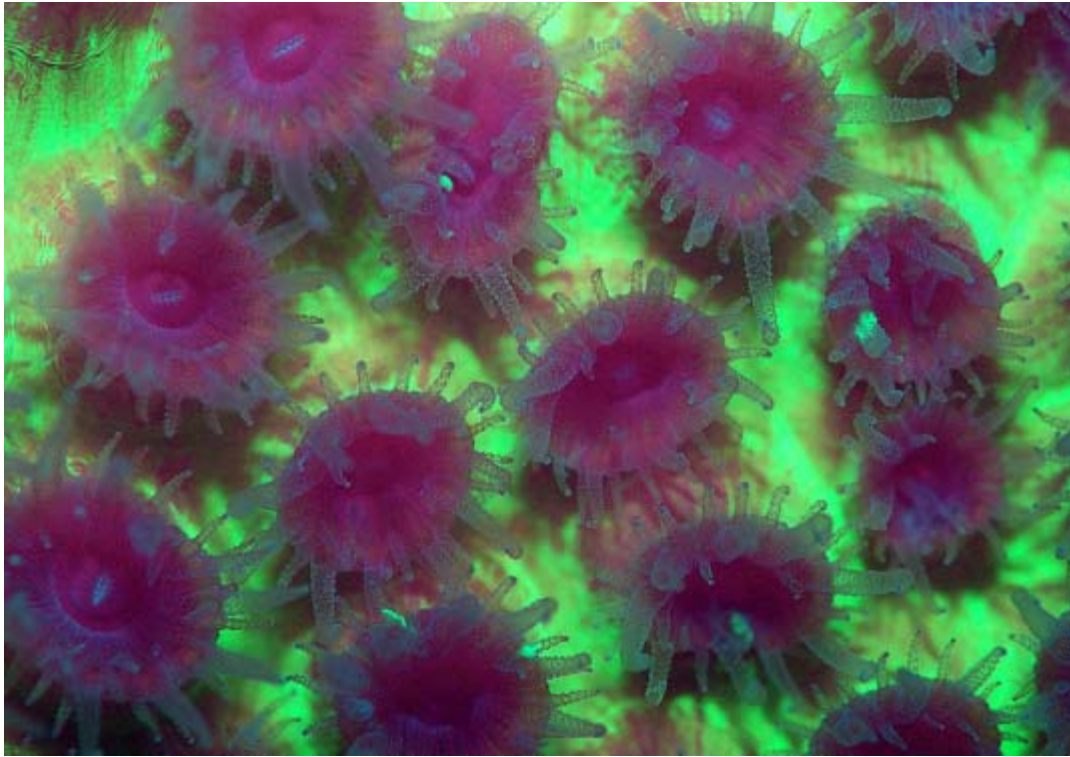


Image review also gives you the confidence to experiment with techniques such as this coral fluorescence image. Nikon D100, Nikkor 60mm, f11 @ 1/180th. SB80DX flash on 1/2 power. Fluorescence filters.

When you see something rare, like this star coral which spawns for only about 20 seconds a year, being able to see you have the shot is very reassuring. Nikon D100, 17-35mm Nikkor at 35mm, f11 at 1/180th. Subal housing. 2 Subtronic Alpha strobes

your boat cred: “I can fix my mistakes while still underwater and then delete the bad ones before anyone else even gets to see them.”

The LCD screen has other bonuses too: “when you are standing on the deck of the boat after the dive explaining how you saw the rare and elusive creature, and the other divers don’t believe you,

you can pull the picture up on the LCD and show them right then and there”. Plus “then they will buy you beers to take them to the spot”. Of course, you can also do this underwater “when after half an hour or so you bump into your buddy again, you can compare critters on your LCDs and decide which you want to show each other”. Also I”have





Instant image review allows you to correct the mistakes, even when they weren't your fault. Nikon D100, Sigma 28-70mm, f16 @ 1/180th. SB80DX flash on DTTL.

never had such pleasant safety stops, these days I pass the time reviewing, editing and enjoying my images!

Being able to get your hands on your images immediately after the dive is another big draw for the digi-snapper: "you can swap pictures with others while still on your trip", and "you can email pictures back to your office co-workers just to torment them"! The more kind hearted also add "you can share your photos with friends all over the world using the 'net, while on vacation." This seems a popular feature. There is a serious

issue too: I have sent images back to a magazine in the UK while I was away in Grand Cayman, although I should point out that the issue didn't come out until several weeks after I returned home! It is also fair to note that all this sharing and caring might not improve your holiday "while everyone else is sleeping you can sit out on the bow of the boat swearing at the satellite phone for dropping your live-webcasting-call every 2 minutes"!

Showing off your images can have unexpected benefits, in addition



All the extra shots mean that you can mix in a few fun shots with more serious photography. Here my friend Rob is grinning through a piece of wreckage. Nikon D100, Nikkor 16mm, f8 @ 1/120th. 2 x Subtronic Alphas at 1/4 power.

to the ego massage. I have found that the customary negotiations with the divemaster go much smoother when they see you are producing some decent shots and your strange requests are not wasting everyone's time. "Little did they know that I had downloaded them off somebody else's website and copied them onto my flash-card!" The same thing goes for your fellow divers, who become a bit more understanding of the photographer's needs.

The toy count has always been a major attraction to underwater

photography, and digital provides an even bigger gadget-endorphin hit: "the adrenaline surge you get every time you back-roll into salt water with \$14K worth of moisture sensitive electronics in your lap". The digital photographer's watchwords are "smaller, faster, cheaper". A perfect sentence would be "I can transfer 1000 images a second onto my laptop with this finger-top card reader, and it only cost me \$5 in Singapore".

A more thoughtful technophile argument is "digital gives you an



You are not the only one to benefit from the LCD replay. This divemaster had never modelled before, but because I was able to show him the results as we went he could immediately understand how to position himself in the shot. Nikon D100, 16mm Nikkor.f13 at 1/30th. Subal housing. 2 Subtronic Alpha strobes.



Sharing images while on vacation is great fun. Plus you can benefit from your friend's critique of your photography and take better pictures.

excuse to bring your laptop on vacation". Obviously a computer is just another gadget to add to the toy count "pulling out the laptop right after the dive is the ultimate kick for any gearhead". But these days a laptop is an ideal travel companion. Laptops have word processing and they have Photoshop, allowing me to work on that unwanted backscatter using that marvellous anti-spot cream that Adobe calls the clone stamp. Computers have space for an extensive MP3 music library, thousands of songs so you have just the right sound track for when you're the only one to see the whale shark, and for when you realise you had a plus 4 dioptre on your 105mm. Laptops can also play DVD movies and computer games; a good way to get popular with the liveaboard crew in the evenings, especially when your DVD's have Arabic subtitles!

The final bonus to about shooting digital is that you are not shooting slides! Digital photographers love this for two reasons: first, RAW digital files

allow exposure (and other) corrections that is more akin to print film, which translates to a higher hit rate per dive, "very important to those who make just one overseas vacation a year". Second you can shoot loads more pictures on one dive or to be more accurate "you can make a hundred mistakes a dive instead of only 36". In addition all the extra shots encourage you to experiment, or even take some fun pictures of "your friends looking silly underwater" and then "blackmail them for beer" later. This is a serious point. How often do we return from a dive trip with beautiful underwater images but no images of the actual holiday or our family and friends because "I didn't want to start a film".

Of course it is not all doom and gloom for the E6 traditionalists. There is a certain magic lost from not having to wait for your slides. It is a part of the hobby that digital photographers certainly miss, though not always for the right reasons: "because I no longer have an excuse to see that girl at the film developing counter"!

Digital cameras may not be the complete replacement for film underwater yet, but remember trips with digital are much more, well like holidays. Wish you were all here!

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with help from wetpixel.com

