

Moment of Truth

by John Belchamber

As an aspiring underwater photographer, I find looking at underwater photographs in magazines and ‘coffee table’ books both a rewarding and depressing leisure pastime. Rewarding because it shows what can be achieved, depressing, as you compare those stunning images with the photograph your diver friends thought was excellent and should be “entered into a competition”, and realise that it comes up short.

It is this striving for the ideal image that powers the desire to keep taking photos in search for a situation when training, equipment, location & luck combine, delivering the “moment of truth” which takes the image to the next stage.

So, to achieve, that publishable image, most underwater photography is about identifying and delivering these “moments of truth” more often and from a wider range of diving environments.

I believe that I’ve just had my first real one and I’d like to share some of the things on my way to its delivery.

I qualified as a PADI Open Water

diver in March 1997 in a very cold Stoney Cove. Shortly afterwards, my wife and I treated ourselves to a trip to the Florida Keys. As someone who has always been a keen photographer, I decided to try underwater photography and bought a second-hand Minolta, which gave basic ‘snapshot’ type results.

It wasn’t, however, until I’d undertaken about 50 dives (mostly in the UK), with my buoyancy in all situations under control, that I could start concentrating on the underwater environment and surroundings.

A trip to St Lucia in the spring of 1998 was the turning point as I knew that the Minolta, even if I hadn’t managed to flood it, wasn’t going to give me the sort of results I wanted and I purchased an MXII. My first dive trip using this set-up was to Ballinskelligs, in South-west Ireland. Out of 6 dives using the camera, I got two shots which gave me the confidence to persevere. There was no doubt about it, not only had I been bitten by the diving bug, but I was now driven by the need to get that perfect photo.

At this stage, I realised that



*Site: Fan Fare, Coral Sea Australia, Fuji Sensia 100ASA
Nikon 90X with 60mm Macro in Sea & Sea Housing, Strobe YS120
TTL @ F22*

although some shots I was taking were beginning to be more than just the classic species type shot, if I was going to try and really encapsulate in the perfect image the amazing environment in which I was privileged to be diving, I would need to modify both my diving practices and my approach to diving with a camera.

Luckily, this change in attitude coincided with a trip to Bonaire where I took the PADI Underwater Photography specialist course. This

taught me the two fundamental principles of underwater photography technique “get close and then closer still” and always try and shoot upwards. With these two mantras always in mind and using a standard lens, I found that I was gradually able to produce consistent in-focus shots which were also lit, for the most part, correctly.

Combining this with the principle of keeping a standard set-up and learning through lots of trial, and even



Site: Challenger Bay - Ribbon Reef Australia, Fuji Provia 100ASA, Nikon 90X with 60mm in Sea & Sea Housing, Strobe YS120 , TTL@F16

more error, what results could be achieved in a variety of underwater situations meant the camera settings became second-nature. This gave me more time to focus on the art of the picture and not the technical detail.

It was only once I'd achieved this level of consistency in macro, and a missed opportunity with some mantas, that I felt confident enough to try using a wide angle lens.

After about 18 months with the MXII, I decided that if I wanted to really improve my results, I needed to

upgrade to a housed system. After advice, I chose an Aquatica housing, a Nikon 90X and YS90 strobe. The benefit being that the only bit I would need (and be able) to adjust underwater was the angle & power of the strobe, meaning I could concentrate on getting the right shot. A club trip to Krabi in Thailand provided the perfect opportunity to try out the new set-up. The availability of a fast processing photo shop meant that I could view and judge the results at the end of each day. This proved a



Scuba Zoo Barrier Reef Australia, Fuji Sensia 100ASA, Nikon 90X with 20mm in Sea & Sea Housing, Strobe YS120, TTL@F8

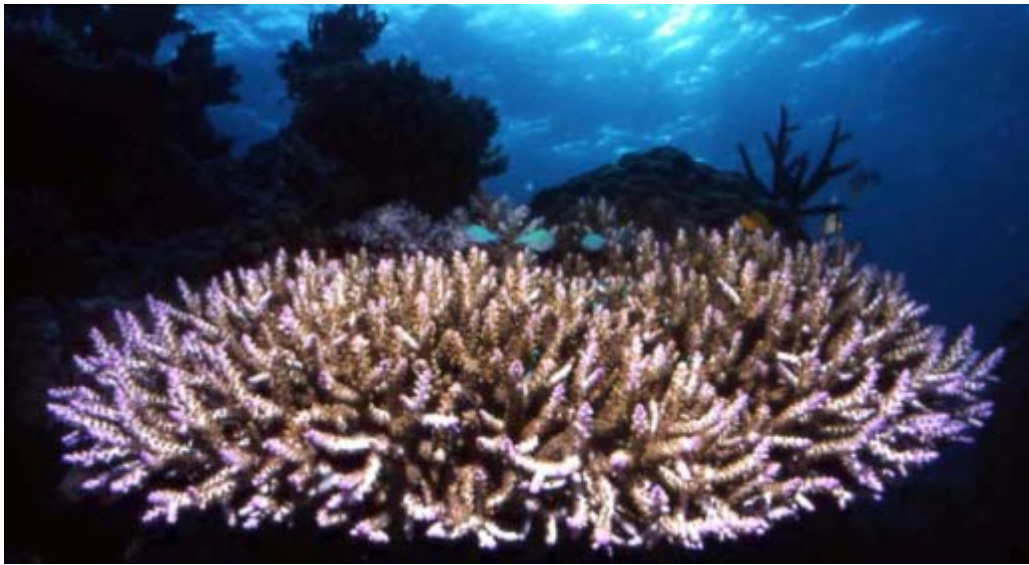
real watershed. At the end of the trip I had a set of photos which resembled those you see in some of the location articles in Sport Diver. I'd begun the next phase of my progression from 'snapper' to 'shooter' chasing that "moment of truth"

The next step change was the switch from print to slide film. This apparently small change was crucial in that it had the effect of making me think more carefully about composition, slide film being the photographer's version of

WYSIWYG. The purchase of a slide scanner for my home computer also enabled me to examine the images in more detail and start to identify the subtle differences between an average and a great image.

After a couple of years with the Aquatica, I felt the time was right to upgrade once again. I chose a Sea & Sea housing but for the same camera and strobe.

For the first time, I was disappointed to find that the upgrade had not led to immediately improved



Site: Challenger Bay - Ribbon Reef Australia, Fuji Provia 100ASA, Nikon 90X with 20mm in Sea & Sea Housing, Strobe YS120 , TTL@F16



Site: Exploration II - Barrier Reef Australia, Fuji Sensia 100ASA, Nikon 90X with 60mm Macro in Sea & Sea Housing, Strobe YS120 , TTL@F16

results.

After much soul searching I realised that, rather than getting to the top of my learning curve, I had just reached another plateau and that with the investment of more time, effort and, of course, money, I could improve further.

So, in 2002, I decided to invest in two weekends in a swimming pool in Bournemouth with Martin Edge, as I felt that whilst I could carry on improving at a steady pace, I needed a 'kick-start' and injection of technique to build a better foundation from which to produce even more polished results.

No article would be long enough to include all the hints, tips and practical advice those two weekends provided, and including time spent with other people with the same passion, I came away from Bournemouth in possession of the advanced toolkit I was going to need to continue to improve.

A trip to Tobago with four friends (one non-diving) in January of this year gave me the first opportunity to try to remember and apply all that I'd learned in those sessions photographing silk flowers in a swimming pool.

It wasn't, however, until April this year when, on an unexpected trip to Australia with Mike Ball, all the pieces came together. Coming around

a coral head at about 15m in the early morning, I spotted a large cuttlefish hanging just on the edge, looking sleepy. Even in my excitement, I managed to remember to set the camera to F22 to darken the sea around the subject as well as get in as close as I could (I had the 60mm set), shoot from below and think about the image I wanted to create. Luckily, it took about 5 shots before the flash annoyed the cuttlefish enough for it to back away, which was when I got my best shot.

Having to wait for the results was hard, but once I saw them I knew that these were the first set of slides that I'd ever taken that combined effective technique with a powerful image. Being in the right place at the right time helped too. That was my 'moment of truth'. I hope you agree.

Where does this leave me? I am still my harshest critic. I still take a large number of photographs that are un-memorable but I now know that I am capable of taking that special picture. The next one may be a long time coming but it will be worth all the effort, after all, it means more diving.

So, I'll keep persevering and hope this has inspired you to do the same.

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