“Look Mum! No bubbles”

by Sascha Schulz

All photos were taken using an Olympus C5050Z with PT-015 housing, no external strobes.

Most people learn to snorkel before they take up Scuba diving, yet relatively few explore the full potential of breath-hold diving. Freediving is exactly that, a diving experience free from constrictive harnesses, tanks and decompression tables. There is of course the small problem of having to holds one’s breath in order to get down to play with the fish.

Perhaps the biggest difference between photography carried out on scuba, and that done whilst freediving, is the time constraint imposed upon the photographer by his own physical limits. It simply isn’t possible to wait for 15 minutes to get that perfect shot. The freediver must take the first shot offered, regardless of his body position or picture composition. Even with 1-2 minutes bottom time it is

extremely unusual for myself to take more than 3-4 photos on a single dive. Yet over a 3-4 hour period that can equate to well over a hundred photos. What is lost to time constraint can be regained by the sheer volume of photos possible. In the scuba community the common saying is “plan the dive, and dive the plan”. In sharp contrast, a freediver can wander from the shallows to the deep walls and back again without worrying about surface intervals or decompression. The degree of freedom that entails means the photographer can chose his locations, and quickly abandon an area that proves unfavorable to photography.

Buoyancy is another issue of importance to the freediver. At best the neutral buoyancy region is about 2m worth of the water column, yet photo opportunities commonly range from 1m down to 20m. In the shallows a steady shot becomes particularly challenging, as waves and swell conspire against the diver. At depth the problem lessens, but lying on a coral reef, for example, creates other problems. A good portion of the dive can be spent figuring out how to get into position for a shot. I like to stay away from the subject and plan the approach, shot framing and lighting before descending. This equates

to a more focused dive and ultimately a better quality photo in the bag. Yet even the best planned dive can go horribly awry when the subject refuses to co-operate. The Blotched Hawkfish photo was taken whilst I was upside down, with my legs firmly wrapped around a pylon to counter the surging swell. Whilst this may seem extreme, a scuba diver would have had no chance of staying in the position required for the shot due to the extra weight of the scuba equipment.

At greater depths, from 10m downwards, the ambient light is low enough that a strobe is almost mandatory. But a strobe arm and strobe both adds weight and reduces the hydrodynamics of a diver, two things certain to make a smooth ascent a lot harder for a freediver. The extra weight issue can be resolved by adjusting one's weightbelt, but the cumbersome strobe arms are another matter. I prefer to dive without strobes, instead using slower shutter speeds and paying more attention to the natural lighting opportunities to make up for the handicap.

Many times I have dived the same sites as a group of scuba divers, and ended up with vastly different photographic opportunities. Missing out on some of the more difficult to approach subject is quickly compensated for by the opportunity to photograph inquisitive pelagic species. Many species of fish, particularly pelagics, will approach divers floating on the surface, whilst those below never even see them.

The advent of cheaper digital cameras has made freedive photography more attractive. Having started my photographic career using a Nikonos 4A I was often disappointed in the quality of shots and usually kept one or two shots per roll of film. The relative expense of each photo made the experience less enjoyable too. I now shoot an Olympus C5050 digital camera and have watched my skills improve in leaps and bounds. The ability to judge each shots merits the instance it is taken, and the seemingly endless memory capacity of my 1Gb mini drive, means that I can take photos of a subject until satisfied with the quality. This also means that experimenting with different shutter speeds, apertures and shooting modes is inexpensive and rewarding. Any freediver wanting to take his photography to the next level should consider a digital camera first, a film camera second.

A note of warning to finish upon: Freediving is a dangerous sport. Anyone wishing to undertake photography, whilst freediving, should be aware of hazards such as Shallow Water Blackout. No photo is worth your life, so take the time to inform yourself and always dive with a buddy.

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