

Another Day at The Office!

by Paul Ives

Almost 20 years as a freelance advertising and commercial photographer has taken me to some interesting places and never ceases to offer endless challenges and job satisfaction. None more so than my recent visit to the sharks in Elsmere Port – the Blue Planet Aquarium in Elsmere Port that is! This promised to be a particularly tough assignment.

This was to be my second visit to the Aquarium. I had been commissioned by Blue Planet's advertising agency to shoot some new underwater images for a large 48 sheet promotional poster and to go into a revamp of the Aquarium's guidebooks and promotional literature.

On my first shoot, I had encountered many problems, largely from the low light levels in and around the tanks. Although to the visitor in the viewing tunnel, the lighting seemed bright, the tank lights themselves were deceptively low-powered. Without the right technique, I would end up with either very blurred sharks, or dark backgrounds once the flash started to fall off behind the subject. I had my work cut out!

In my first attempts, I'd had to use 400 ASA film push processed to at least a stop to be able to use a shutter speed of around a 15th to an 8th of a second at f5.6, and that was in the well lit part of the tank.

The results had been good, but I knew that what the agency really wanted was dramatic shark pictures with blue water background, just like in the



Sand Tiger 16mm nikkor 8th sec F8

All Shot On Fujifilm S2 pro set on manual exp mode & rear curtain Sync in Sea&Sea Housing with twin YS 120 strobes on manual setting for wide angle shots and ttl for 60mm shots. All shots set on 400 equivalent ISO setting auto White balance.

To get the best results out of the S2 I normally shoot raw files then once on the laptop convert to 16 bit RGB Tiffs . Then do any exposure or colour adjustments in levels or curves in Photoshop then convert back to 8 bit before any final tweaks retouching, sharpening if necessary and saving to disk. On this occasion however due to the time factor involved in making four dives, and downloading backing up and checking all images in the surface intervals I shot jpegs at fine setting. Then once back at the office images were uploaded from the Laptop to my G4 opened edited and the chosen images converted immediately to Tiffs before any adjustments were made to avoid any lossy compression deteriorating images.



Wilmer the Sand Tiger! 16mm nikkor 8th sec 5.6

sea! To achieve that, I would need some further creativity.

I had two potential allies the second time around. Firstly, a video crew were shooting some footage in the tanks on the same day, and the lighting crew had a couple of 500k spotlights. These powerful lights would be placed into the areas of the tank to be filmed. I knew we wouldn't be able to shoot in the same areas of the tank at the same time, but this extra lighting could be a real help.

Secondly, I'd managed to get hold of some new underwater camera equipment. I had been shooting

digital for my commercial work since Nikon first brought out the D1. Underwater however, I had remained faithful to my film cameras. This was largely because I shoot a lot of fisheye and wide angle, and I was concerned that the digital camera wouldn't stand up to highlight clipping with bright lighting and sunbursts due to its reduced dynamic range. However, for this shoot I had managed to borrow a housing for my Fujifilm S2 Pro.

I was excited about trying out the system underwater for two reasons; firstly, the benefit of immediate preview to check that my exposures



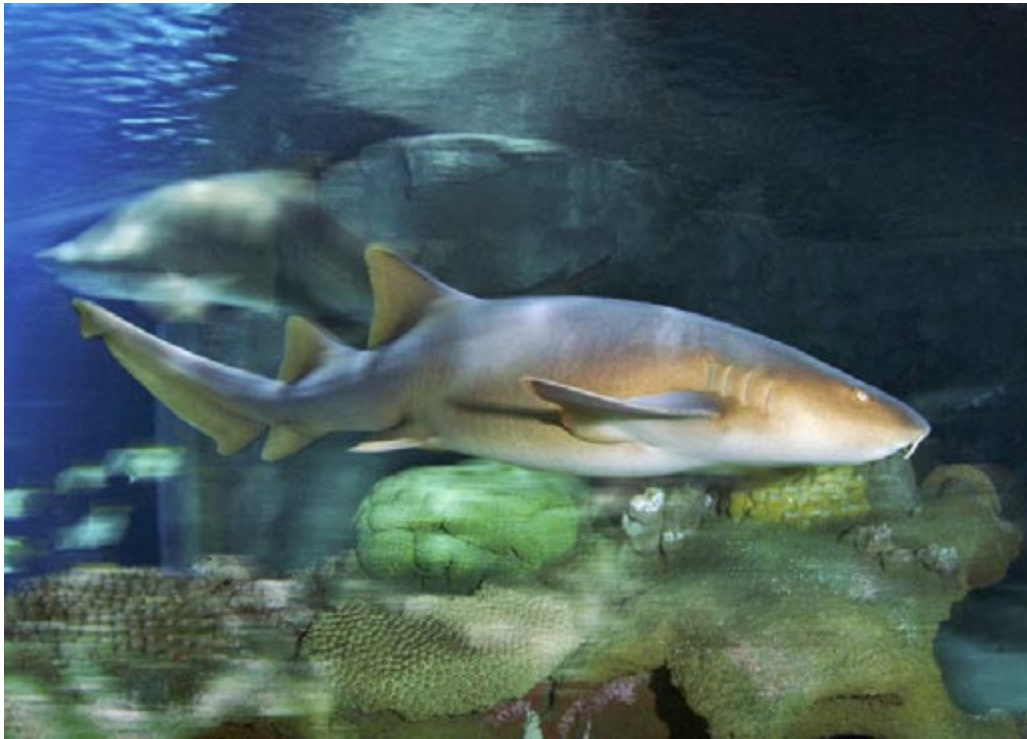
Speeding trevallies... 60mm micro nikkor 8th sec F8

were working. This would save a huge amount of time in having to shoot a test roll and get it processed. Secondly, I have found that working commercially with digital capture on location can deliver exceptional results in low light interior situations and can require much less lighting to fill in shadow areas than working with film. I was hoping that this would also apply underwater and help me to produce the blue water look that the agency was after.

With a budget for just one day's shooting and a maximum time allowed in the water by the HSE of 4

hours, I knew that I needed everything possible on my side to achieve the right results. With all the preparation complete, I started to load my two film camera housings, put fresh rechargeables into the S2 and get suited up for the first dive.

I had planned for three to four dives depending on the material I managed to shoot and had been allocated a safety diver, Rob, for the day. He had to make sure I understood the signals used by the resident divers. This included an instruction to stop immediately what I was doing and sink to the bottom,



Nurse Shark 16mm nikkor 8th sec F8

if they felt that one of the sharks was getting a little feisty. A task that was made a little easier by the fact that I was not allowed to wear fins and was over-weighted to “walk” on the bottom. Something that feels very strange after spending years as a diver aiming for inch perfect buoyancy!

For anyone who has never had the opportunity to dive in the shark tanks at the Blue Planet, I can assure you that the quantity and diversity of the life in the tanks never ceases to amaze you. Huge sand tiger sharks swim within feet of your head and after a

while you can almost forget you’re in an aquarium!

The main objective for the day was the dramatic shark pictures, so I planned to spend the first two dives concentrating on trying to achieve that. If they were achieved quickly, then I would start to shoot close-ups of the variety of smaller inhabitants of the tanks. So I picked up the S2 housing which I had fitted with my 16mm fisheye lens and went in search of some sharks, leaving the two film housings safely on the bottom at the tanks entrance point. And that’s



Barracuda.. 60mm Micro nikkor 8th sec. F8

where they stayed!

Once I started shooting I found the immediate feedback from the S2 invaluable. I would position myself in front of the sharks’ habitual swim path and shoot each time they came past that point. Within a few test exposures I had what appeared on the screen (and Histogram) to be well balanced exposures with much more depth and detail in the water behind the sharks than I had ever achieved on film.

Light levels remained very low and even shooting at an equivalent ISO400 my exposures were around an

8th to a 15th second at f8. Even where the film crew had blasted its 500 k spotlights, only made about a stop’s difference. I knew I had to try and use this to my advantage and there was no way the sharks were going to keep still for me!

Fortunately, I always have my cameras set on the rear curtain sync flash setting, so I started to experiment with slowly panning the camera alongside the sharks as they swam by, hoping that any blur in the shot would create a sense of drama and movement in the faster moving fish while keeping



Jacks .. 60mm micro nikkor 8th sec f8

the sharks' eyes and head acceptably sharp with any flash firing at the end of the shutter cycle.

After around 70 minutes dive time the previews were looking great and I couldn't wait to download the first images onto the laptop. The downloads confirmed my instincts - the shots did look great! Obviously, there were a few rejects where I had mistimed the shutter release or not panned at the right pace, but the balance of the available lighting with the flash was not bad at all. I had initially set the white balance to auto, and this seemed to be giving me a

fairly true water colour so I felt I didn't need to chance this and was eager to get in for another dive and try out some more positions in the tank.

It's a pretty eerie feeling watching the 9ft long sharks swim towards you; their piercing eyes seem to be locked on to you! With Rob watching my back I was able to get very close to them. I had my eyes stuck into the back of the camera housing which even with the increase of the focal length of the lens due to the S2's smaller than 35mm chip size using the 16mm fisheye, I felt I was almost touching the sharks. I swear I could

even feel the sharks brushing through my hair as they passed overhead!

Looking at the results on the laptop, the second dive was also a success. I was sure I now had enough shots of the sharks, so decided to reset the housing to take the 60mm micro nikkor and shoot some of the smaller fish in the tanks

This in itself was not easy. A few of the fish were cooperative, but most were very fast moving and, strangely enough, never seemed want to pose for a portrait. Once again I had to employ the panning and rear curtain sync technique. The schools of Jacks, in particular, gave me some real problems as they were buzzing around the tanks like harassed bees. Once again the feedback from the S2's screen was invaluable and although I couldn't be 100 percent sure that the shots were going to be acceptably sharp it gave me a good idea. And of course I could always delete the ones that didn't work before anyone saw them!

Once again the film housings stayed where I had put them. A valuable back up on the bottom of the tank! The Sea & Sea housing performed faultlessly, I had access to all of the camera's controls and was able to switch seamlessly between shooting with the TTL setting or manual flash with my twin YS120 flashguns. I also had immediate access

to check my exposures and of course could shoot a lot more frames on a one gig card than on a roll of 35mm film.

Commercially I have been shooting less and less film as more clients become confident in supplied digital files. My experience in the shark tanks has convinced me to buy my own digital housing. I guess my wish list for this Christmas will be a full frame Nikon lens based digital camera system with a much wider dynamic range!

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Fifty Fathoms Below

Taking You and Your Camera to Their Limits

By Joseph C Dovala

The sound was unmistakable...

S-N-A-P! We had just reached 300 feet and my breathing rate skyrocketed beyond even the ten-fold increase from being thirty stories underwater. I took a quick look and test fired my camera. Luckily everything seemed to work and the ocean was still outside the housing. My camera in one piece, I calmed myself down and began to peer into the darkness. The dusky blue faded to black below my fins, but brilliant reds and yellows darted across the wall as our canister lights unleashed the true colors of the sponges and corals living in this twilight zone. Soon a very large barracuda curious as to what all the commotion was about joined us during our sojourn through his world. The amount of life at this depth is quite astonishing. Far below the surface, storm surges and large numbers of reckless humans have far less impact on sessile critters so they get lots of time to grow big and stay healthy.

Unfortunately, time was definitely not on our side. Despite carrying nearly three hundred cubic feet of breathing gas, our visit here is measured in just a few minutes. There is little or no opportunity to

setup a shot, and deviating from the very rigid dive plan is not an option except in an emergency. After nine minutes we passed through a coral chute and began our slow ascent back to sunlight. Settling in at our first deep stop of 195 feet I glanced down at the number “94” remaining on my one gig CF card. I now had some seventy minutes of decompression to ponder this observation. Eight images! Two hours of dive planning and more than a few dollars in helium – if I’m lucky one will be acceptable. To be sure, I can keep shooting until I’m clambering up the ladder with a hundred and eighty pounds of gear, but the dive objective and the bottom time were over in less than ten minutes.

Was it worth it? In the final analysis I’d say yes - have to justify the \$180.00 gas bill some how! Beyond the task of surviving, the challenge of capturing the image you want at these depths requires

The long voyage back to the comparatively bright shallow reef waters via a steep sand chute. Grand Cayman Island. L&M Titan, Nik D100, 16mm, available light, ISO 200, f5.6, 125sec.

