

The snorkel

a uwp's best friend

By Alexander Mustard

Most people's first experience of the underwater world comes when snorkelling, but, once we have learned to use SCUBA, few of us regularly go back to the humble snorkel. Underwater photography usually follows learning to dive and as a result many of us will have only rarely taken photographs while snorkelling. I think that this is a big mistake. A snorkel is my favourite accessory for UW photography!

My first argument is financial. When most of us travel we pay for our diving, snorkelling on the other hand does not cost a thing. It is not known as free-diving for nothing! Consequently, on SCUBA I take my photography seriously, sticking with well rehearsed techniques, to maximise the number of good shots I can produce on each dive. But when I use a snorkel my attitude to photography changes completely.

No longer is film a precious commodity to be rationed over an hour or so of diving. With a snorkel, I may shoot only a handful of images or blast away an entire roll in a few minutes and rush back to reload.

I'll mess about with black and white, play with rear curtain flash or just snap away at subjects I wouldn't "waste" diving film on. I am free to experiment.

There is another reason why it is called free-diving. No, not because we are free from SCUBA gear but because we are free from other people, be they buddies, divemasters or worst of all, other photographers! When snorkelling we can go or stay where we want for as long as we want. We are also free to take photos in places we can not get to on SCUBA: in rock pools, rivers, sea grass meadows and mangroves, under jetties or on the reef flat. Just about anywhere wet.



A shot inspired by David Doubilet's work. Southern stingray split level, Grand Cayman. Nikon F100 + 16mm FE, Subal housing. F11 on aperture priority.



Bottlenosed dolphins in the Red Sea. Nikonos V + 15mm. f4 on aperture priority.

But, the most persuasive reason I can think of to get my snorkel out of my dive bag and strapped onto my mask is the subject matter. And topping the bill is the water's surface. I am not known to my friends as the most artistic of underwater photographers, but the sinuous reflections in the ocean's surface even bring out my creative streak.

Add to this shafts of sunlight and my film is winding on so fast my camera starts to smoke! Shallow

water and the sun also create beautiful patterns on the seabed, which are an attractive subject their own right or make a great backdrop for models or marine life.

And when snorkelling with a model you don't have to rely on hand signals to direct them. You can stick your head out of the water to tell your model that they are swimming with all the grace of S~ well, a SCUBA diver! And of course, the surface is also THE only place to take half and half, split

level shots!

But that's enough about the artistic side of underwater photography, marine life is much more my thing, and snorkelling is great for this too. First of all areas like rock pools, sea grass meadows and reef flats have a quite distinct flora and fauna to the species we encounter diving in the same locale. So snorkelling is a great way to find species you have never seen before, even in an area you know well. In addition, the lack of time constraints are ideal for capturing the behaviour of subjects, where patience often really pays off. Snorkels are also silent, which greatly reduces the chances of disturbing natural behaviour and also makes it easier to approach timid animals, such as marine mammals.

Standard underwater photographic techniques require a bit of tweaking for snorkelling, however these modifications are usually to simplify them. The shallows have the best light and colour and it is possible to take vibrant images without artificial lighting. My favourite snorkelling combinations are my housing with a fisheye or my Nikonos with the 15mm, both without flash. Shooting without flash not only makes exposure easy because aperture priority copes with just about everything, it also removes the problems of backscatter, flash coverage and TTL failure.

When lighting a picture with available light there are a few things to consider. First, to produce even lighting you must ensure that the sun is behind you (shining over your shoulder) in the same way you would on land. This causes problems when using a wide lens because you must be very careful not to include your own or the camera's shadow in your photos. I am still trying to master this one, despite slide after slide of negative reinforcement!

Macro techniques require very little modification, although with



My brother, Oscar, in Grand Cayman. Nikon F100 + 16mm FE, Subal housing. f11 on aperture priority



My dog, Goldfinger, retrieves a stone from a river on Dartmoor, UK. Nikonos V, 15mm. f5.6 on aperture priority.

the brighter ambient light levels it is possible to take balanced light close-ups at smaller apertures, which can have a pleasing effect. I have managed a few successful natural light macro shots, but on the whole these suffer from harsh shadows and a lack of colour and depth of field. I recommend not changing things much from your standard set-up.

So, to summarise, what if I was to tell you that I had an UW photography accessory that enabled you to experiment with a variety of

techniques, freed you from divemasters and other photographers, let you take pictures in photogenic environments filled with different species, let you shoot without flash and gave you unlimited time with your subjects? Would you want one? Would it be your favourite underwater photography accessory? What if I was to tell you that it is already in your dive bag?

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