

Getting Wrecked with Mark Webster

Wrecks in both temperate and tropical waters are exciting to dive and will produce many picture opportunities. Most photographers will yearn for that “big” shot, of all or part of a shipwreck in clear water and under the right conditions these shot are attainable. But all too often these ideal circumstances elude us and so you must first learn to recognise and accept the limitations which present themselves on each dive.

Unless you have exceptional luck, visibility in British waters is rarely good enough to show large sections of a wreck so you must be prepared to tune your techniques to suit whilst perhaps saving your panoramic shots for those wrecks in the tropics. In the UK it may be best to limit your efforts to illustrating particular details of a wreck or close focus images of a diver examining wreckage. Wrecks are often a magnet to marine life and can make fantastic macro dives when the conditions are bad.

However if you are determined to produce the big picture then an ultra wide angle or fish eye lens is essential for successful wreck photography.

All extreme wide angle lenses will display some distortion and this is most obvious when photographing subjects where straight lines dominate. So you need to be aware of this problem when photographing wrecks and either accept some curvature or compose accordingly. Another problem that can arise with a foreground subject close to the camera is that of “forced perspective” which can make a feature look unnaturally large or distorted.

Flash is not always essential, especially if you aim to try to illustrate a large portion of a wreck in clear waters, but more often than not some artificial light will be required for lighting foreground detail or perhaps a diver. A powerful



This is perhaps the classic wreck image. The viewer immediately gets the impression of the ship lying on the seabed and the apparent discovery by the diver. However, to get this type of shot you need to plan your dive to avoid other explorers. Try and persuade other divers in your group to give you ten minutes on your own! Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.



Sometimes the best picture may be off the wreck. Remember to look for alternative views for your shots, especially if the site is popular and possibly crowded. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.

wide angle flash gun is the best tool for lighting ultra wide images, although you will rarely use it on full power when balancing natural and flash light. Narrower beam flash guns can also be used to good effect when only the foreground detail requires additional lighting,

or you can consider using two narrow beam guns either both fired by the camera or one slaving from the other.

When using the camera's TTL light meter bear in mind that these ultra wide lenses collect an awful lot of light especially if the sun is in



Above: The marine life which engulfs wrecks is often the most interesting feature. You can use the wreckage as a background to support the composition. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F16 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.



Above: The temptation is often to go for the big picture, in this case the stern of the wreck. These make effective shots, but having taken it get in closer and look for the more unusual views. Nikon F801, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , 100ASA.

Right: This is the same wreck, but this time much closer and using the structure of the ship to create a very graphic image in silhouette. Nikon F801, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F11 @ 125th , 100ASA.



use spot or centre weighted metering to scan the scene and ensure that you are exposing the target area correctly. Using your flash on manual may also produce best results if you have a foreground subject close to the lens and off centre. Background wreckage is often too distant for TTL to operate successfully causing the flash to fire at full power, which will result in over exposure of the foreground.

Exploring wrecks in tropical waters will undoubtedly make the photographer's task a lot simpler. Visibility is normally far superior and the wrecks are generally in a more intact condition due to the mostly calmer sea conditions. However, the same basic principles of underwater photography still apply and you should still be aiming to get as close as possible to your main subject to maintain clarity and sharpness. Sedentary marine life is generally more colourful which can enhance the duller piece of wreckage, so it is worth

seeking out interesting shapes covered in marine life as foreground subjects. Don't forget the power of silhouette shots against the sun, either a subject on its own or as a backdrop to your colourful foreground. Having a diver in the shot will add scale and a sense of exploration and, although clichéd, a powerful torch or slave flash will also add impact.

Even if the visibility appears limited to the photographer's eye, the camera and film can often resolve much more than is apparent, particularly when shooting with natural light. Don't be afraid to brace yourself and camera against some wreckage and try a small aperture, letting the camera's automatic exposure take over for longer exposure, and you may be pleasantly surprised. If the visibility is extremely poor then perhaps you should abandon the wide picture altogether and concentrate on detail and maybe try to emphasise the way marine life is colonising a wreck



Above: ntroducing a diver to your wreck photographs provides that sense of exploration. The best results come from using a dedicated model rather than hoping for a passing diver. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.



Left: This shot is taken on the wreck of a small yacht. The obvious picture might be outside the wreck, but don't forget to explore the inside and look for opportunities to frame a diver entering to explore. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.



Even if the wreck is not intact, you can use the shape of wreckage to frame a diver or some marine life which can create dramatic compositions. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.

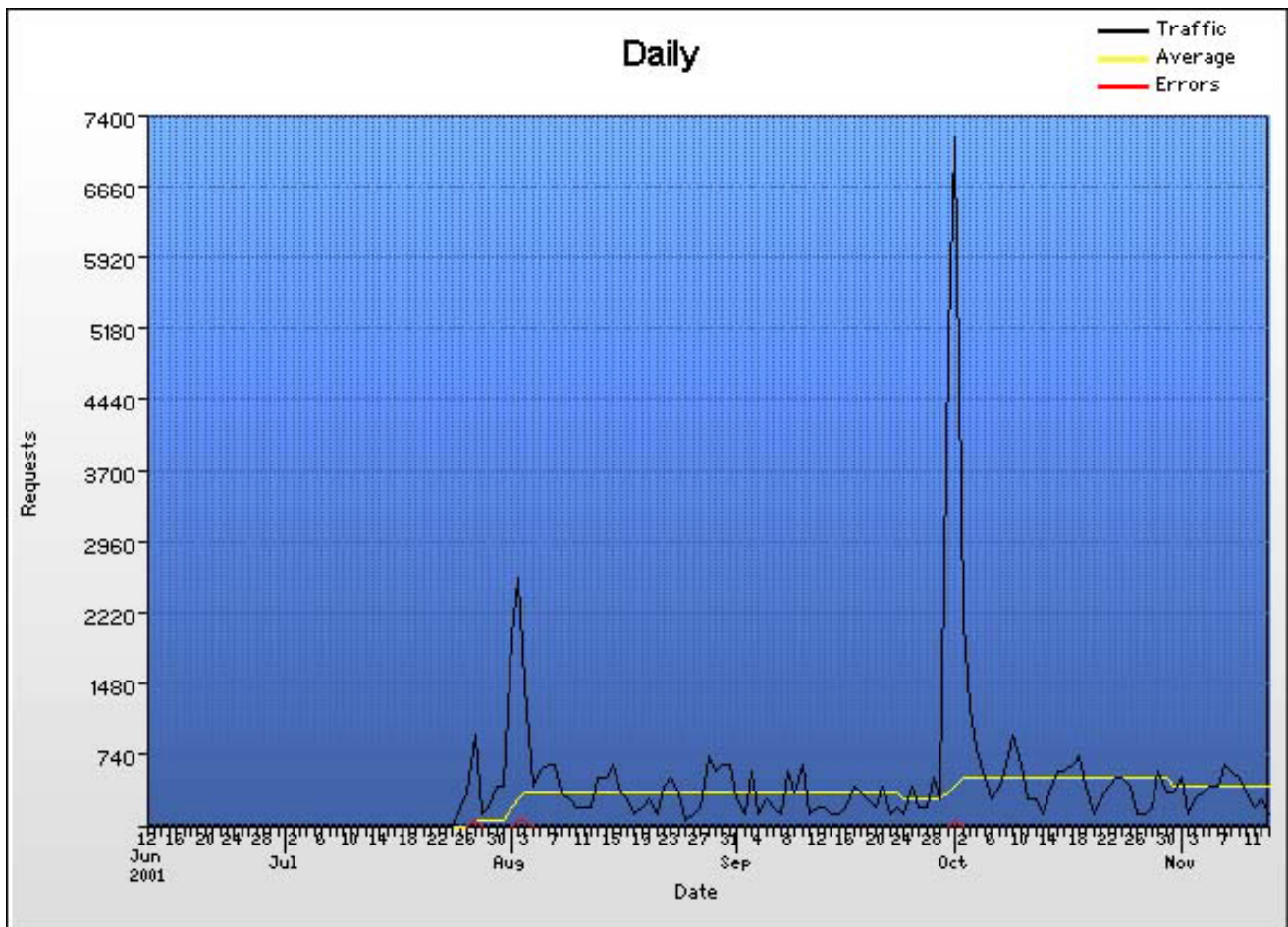
Photography inside wrecks can also produce stunning results. Obviously you must take the obvious precautions when entering a wreck, although most photographers will want to stay close to openings to include some natural light in the shot. Your biggest worry will be disturbing the visibility either yourself or by your model. In addition to stirring up silt with your fins, your exhaust bubbles will also disturb rust and other debris above you. It is best to have investigated the wreck first before you plan this type of shot so that you can work quickly and carefully.

Film choice is largely a personal one although if your aim is to photograph large sections of wreck using natural light in clear water then a faster film is preferred to enable the use of a smaller aperture. Using a film speed of 200-400ASA is normally sufficient, but you can go as high as 1000ASA or 1600ASA if you are happy to accept some grain in the pictures, or maybe try

high speed black and white. Many photographers aim to keep just the foreground sharp, with the background wreckage as secondary interest or perhaps framing the main subject, and are happy to work with 100ASA in order to minimise the grain in the picture. Whatever you choose initially, don't be afraid to experiment and compare the results from differing techniques and film stock.

Mark Webster

Author of "The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography" . Hosts regular workshops both overseas and in the UK. For further details visit Mark's website at <http://www.photec.co.uk> or see details at Oonasdivers site <http://www.oonasdivers.com>



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