

Life as a tourist photo Pro

by Troy Mayne

It is very difficult to make a living as an underwater photographer but a great way to start or to supplement your earnings is to work as an underwater photographer in the tourism field.

It sounds like an easy gig, and it can be, with certain well developed skills. On the Great Barrier Reef in Cairns, there are quite a few dive operations who employ underwater photographers to visually record a passengers underwater experience and then sell it.

There are many different ways that this is done. Various techniques and equipment are used to produce and sell underwater images. Digital photography has propelled digital stills to the fore front, where video once ruled. Nowadays photographs are taken, printed and sold before a passenger steps off the boat.

I work on day cruise vessels. Generally the best money to be made is on the introductory divers but many people also purchase images of themselves snorkeling. It will probably be their first and for many last underwater experience and they buy images on impulse.

As a result the photographs have to be good, and selling techniques honed to grab the attention of the passenger and then convince them to buy the image.

Most underwater imaging companies prefer applicants to have underwater photography experience or at least photography experience. They have to be at least Divemaster qualified, although instructors are preferred as Workplace Health and Safety laws in Australia require a high level of training as photographers generally operate underwater alone.

To be successful, underwater photographers have to be extremely well organized, computer literate, and a good sense of bearings, working as part of team is also very important as the photographer may rely on other team photographers and dive crew to ensure all photographic opportunities are maximized.

The operation I photograph for does not require much navigation compared to other operations, but there are three various types of underwater photographs that have to be taken, snorkelers, divers and seawalkers (platform helmet



D70s, Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 12-24mm lens on 13 mm, Manual, shutter 1/400, F7.1



D70s, Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 12-24mm lens on 13 mm, Manual, shutter 1/250, F/7.1, Ikelite 200 Strobe on manual 1/8 power.

surface supplied diving). These three activities operate concurrently so time management, speed and organization is paramount.

On a busy day of up to 350 passengers, the underwater photographer is required to take up to 600 photographs per day that are printed for sale. The underwater photographer is usually in the water for up to four hours with only enough time to change tanks, batteries and memory cards. Poor organization could cause missed photo opportunities with flat batteries or low on air situations!

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An underwater photographer can be ascending between the surface and 10 metres many times a day trying to capture a days reef activities, even more if they are unorganized.

The ability to take photos is of course paramount. Composing inexperienced divers and snorkelers with marine life is extremely difficult and takes some practice.

At the site I work at we have a resident Napoleon Maori Wrasse and three turtles that are 'trained'. Getting to know how to interact with them to get them to pose is very difficult. Although it is generally the humans,



D70s, Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 12-24mm lens on 13 mm, Manual, shutter 1/160, F/7.1, Ikelite 200 Strobe on manual 1/4 power.

that are far more difficult to get into position than the marine life.

Whilst the underwater photos are being taken there is a photographic team above water on the Pontoon taking photos and printing index sheets, producing slideshows, and selling the photos. It is a finely honed operation with all members working tightly within the team for maximum efficiency. A small error can cause the loss of hundreds of dollars in profits as the whole day is very structured.

All members of the team rotate through the various positions through the weekly roster. So the ability to

take portrait and group photos is also a very important skill.

Equipment can range from housed compact cameras with a strobe to housed DSLRs. I operate with a range of DSLRs including Nikon D70s, D100, and D200. Other operations require a lone photographer to swim around a large divesite chasing snorkelers and divers in an attempt to capture them all, then print and sell photos.

Capturing all passengers can prove a great challenge and many times prioritization must be done in order to photograph the people who

are likely to buy photographs the most. Understanding the dynamics of the passengers is an art.

It's not all just capturing people, interesting photographs of marine life sell as well, particularly if a passenger witnessed the animal.

Pay is normally based on a retainer with some sort of commission structure, so the incentive is there to take good photos and sell them. Most underwater photographers work as casual employees, although on the Great Barrier Reef diving is all year round and lack of work is hardly a problem.

Some may believe that the work may become mundane, but the challenge is to try and photograph passengers in a different way. The worst of my days on the reef is still better than the best day in any office.

Like most of the dive tourism industry, underwater photographers are very transient animals and move regularly, positions are available all the year round. If you think this industry may interest you, give it a try, it sure beats working for a living!

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For further information on employment contact stuart@



D70s, Sea and Sea Housing, Sigma 10-20mm lens on 13mm, Manual mode Shutter 1/2500, F/7.1, Sea and Sea DX 90 strobe on manual half power.

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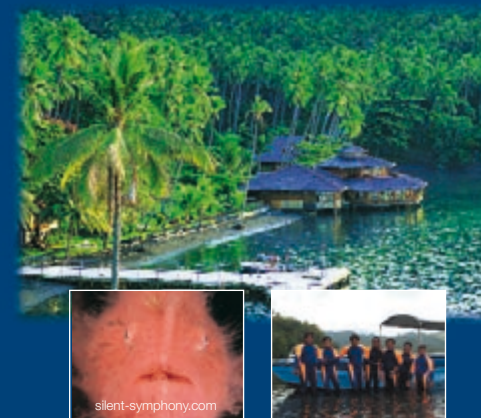
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