

Fish portraits from Belize

by Gearóid Lane

As an avid reader of UwP, I'm always amazed by the high standard of photography achieved by the regular contributors, and left embarrassed by my own totally amateur efforts. Busy with a day-job and a non-diving family, I usually get one chance a year to dust off the camera, with fingers and toes crossed for good visibility and photogenic beasties. So it was that, a few weeks ago, I hit the road for the annual pilgrimage with a group of friends.

This year's destination was Belize, for a week's liveaboard on board Peter Hughes' luxurious Sun Dancer II. Belize (formerly British Honduras until it was given its independence in 1964) is located on the Yucatan Peninsula with Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south, not forgetting the all-important Caribbean Sea to the East. With the land area of Wales and the population of Nottingham, it's not a number one must visit destination for the land-based traveller. Offshore it's a different story with the world's second largest barrier reef at about 185 miles long.

The expedition to Belize had an added source of excitement – a new

camera! Having worked for many years with my trusted Nikonos V, I'd been waiting for the right moment to go digital – looking for the camera with a low enough price tag and high enough quality for the infrequent perfectionist. For me, the launch of the Nikon D200 signalled that the moment had come. I've housed it inside a Sea & Sea DXD200 and re-used my Sea & Sea strobes. On a few test dives in Dorset, I found the kit really comfortable to work with – but how would it bear up on the real deal, five dives a day in the big blue?

Arriving at the Sun Dancer II after an overnight in Houston (where in true Texan style they serve fajitas by the pound!) we were truly ready for action. She's a 138-foot aluminium vessel, built for pleasure (with ten really comfortable cabins) rather than speed (cruising at 12 knots). Catering for a largely US and Canadian clientele, the ten-strong crew are very attentive, and the food was certainly the best I've had on a liveaboard. It caters well for photographers, with spacious camera tables on the dive deck, a good big dedicated rinse tank, lots of power points for charging, and a large screen

Sun Dancer II caters well for photographers, with spacious camera tables on the dive deck, a good big dedicated rinse tank and lots of power points for charging.



Sun Dancer II's impressive aluminium hull from below Lighthouse Reef, The Cathedral, Belize, 10.5mm F/2.8G Fisheye Lens, 1/100s, F/8, ISO100





Steve is clearly impressed by the Blue Hole stalactites Lighthouse Reef, Blue Hole, Belize, 10.5mm F/2.8G Fisheye Lens, 1/100s, F/4.5, ISO100



Sarah hitches a ride on the deco bar. Turneffe Islands, Amber Point, Belize, 10.5mm F/2.8G Fisheye Lens, 1/60s, F/8, ISO100



Horse-eye jacks under the Sun Dancer II Lighthouse Reef, Uno Coco, Belize, 10.5mm F/2.8G Fisheye Lens, 1/100s, F/10, ISO100

TV for viewing your efforts.

And the diving? We had specifically timed the trip to give the best chance of whale shark sightings, but no such luck. It seems from exchanges at the airport that all the whale sharks were holed up at Silk Cayes Marine Reserve to the south. But, whale sharks aside, this trip delivered a truly amazing diversity of marine life. Above all, there was a startling variety of fish, with many species such as the very photogenic saucereye porgy that I'd never encountered before.

Sun Dancer II concentrates on the two big offshore coral atolls, Turneffe Islands and Lighthouse Reef, which boast the best diving in Belize. The former is the biggest at about 30 miles long. The latter is the best, and the farthest from the mainland. Yes, it's got the famous Blue Hole right at its centre. I've seen it described as "one of the best dive sites on earth" but it's decidedly not that. More

than 100m deep and largely devoid of life inside, this site is more impressive from an aerial photo. A former sunken cave whose roof collapsed to form the circular hole, it is definitely worth a dive to see the impressive stalactites at about 40 metres, but once you've seen them you're itching to get back to the many drop-offs and swim-throughs for the real action!

Sun Dancer II has a diving schedule that is ideally suited to the underwater SLR photographer. It moors at its first site before the first dive (or overnight) and stays there for the first two dives of the day, then moves off over lunch to a different site for the next two dives and the night dive. Speaking from experience, this helps minimise regrets for the photographer who descends on the first dive with a 10.5mm fisheye lens only to find an amazing macro subject! Never mind, there's always another dive on the same site to come.

Inspired by David Doubilet's lovely book "Fish Face", I decided to take the opportunity to shoot as many fish face portraits as possible. I had planned this in advance and done some thinking about lenses and techniques to get the best results. Advance planning of your photography is definitely a good idea for the once-a-year amateur, not least because if you get it wrong you've got a long time to regret it before the next opportunity arises! But I must admit as a previous digital-sceptic that the instant feedback during and after the dive is an even better aid to getting the right results.

Getting a good face portrait can be frustrating: the damn fish won't sit still; the strobes can give a nasty glare off the fish scales; the background can clutter up the shot – to name but a few of the amateur portrait photographer's woes. From the lessons I've learned, here are my ten commandments of fish face portraits, intended for



A juvenile spotted trunkfish is separated from its habitat. Lighthouse Reef, Uno Coco, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/100s, F/6.3, ISO100



This Nassau grouper becomes inquisitive about the camera. Turneffe Islands, Sayonara, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/60s, F/5.6,



Patience finally pays off as a roughhead blenny poses for the camera Lighthouse Reef, Aquarium, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/80s, F/20,

my fellow amateur rather than the seasoned professional who knows all of this stuff already:

1. Don't chase the fish. It can swim faster than you. Play around with the fish or look disinterested, and it just might pose for you.

2. Be patient. If you see a subject that will make a good shot, hang around for as long as your buddy allows you. Don't forget, one really good photo is better than ten mediocre

ones. I spent 75 minutes lying on one piece of sand beside a small patch of reef, trying to get a good shot of a roughhead blenny, and was pleased as punch with the result.

3. Never mind the tail – pay attention to the eyes. Just photographing the detail of the face can make a great shot – don't be afraid to chop off the tail. Or shoot head-on so that the tail is hidden or soft focussed. Most of all, pay attention to the eye. Take a few shots

from slightly different angles and with different settings. Sometimes the eye throws out a lovely colour, which transforms the photograph.

4. Study the behaviour of the fish to optimise the photo opportunity. It's amazing how much easier it gets if you can guess what the fish will do next. Some fish display repeated patterns of movement. Others frequent a particular cleaning station and become calm (and often open their mouths) when they're being

cleaned. Others, like parrotfish, sleep at night and give a great opportunity for a face portrait (but be careful not to disturb it too much).

5. Use a fast shutter speed for a moving fish. Remember, a photograph of a jittery fish is an action shot. Note of course that this will blacken out the background and make a day dive look like a night dive. This can be attractive for a portrait, but see the sixth commandment if you want your blue background.



This yellowhead jawfish eventually poses for the camera. Lighthouse Reef, The Cathedral, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/100s, F/10, ISO100



A head-on shot captures the comic look of the pygmy filefish. Lighthouse Reef, Uno Coco, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/100s, F/6.3, ISO100



The Caribbean spiny lobster makes a dramatic close-up shot. Lighthouse Reef, Long Caye Wall, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/80s, F/13, ISO100

6. Don't be afraid to open the aperture ring right up. You usually don't need depth of field, and sharp primary focus is no longer a problem (now that my Nikonos is back on the shelf). The blurring out of foreground and background can reduce any distraction from the main subject, and the extra light can restore the natural light of the background to compensate for a fast shutter speed.

7. Try to separate the fish from its background. Many fish are camouflaged to look like their habitat. Shooting one against its habitat as background makes for a busy photo, which distracts the eye from the main subject. Stick around long enough to

get it against a different background, maybe the open water. Or open up the aperture ring (see the sixth commandment above).

8. Think about strobe configuration. For a close-up fish portrait, you don't need twin strobes, and the less cumbersome rig makes you more nimble and may look a bit less daunting to the fish.

Some creatures become much more photogenic at night such as this flamingo tongue. Lighthouse Reef, Quebrada, Belize, 60mm F/2.8D Macro Lens, 1/100s, F/13, ISO100





A hawksbill turtle will always stick around for a photoshoot if you don't chase it. Lighthouse Reef, Long Caye Wall, Belize, 10.5mm F/2.8G Fisheye Lens, 1/80s, F/9, ISO100

9. Turn the strobe right down for close up portraits. The flash of the strobe can give a nasty glare off the scales of some fish, and a big blast of flash will probably scare it off (or blind it) before the second shot. Don't forget, Photoshop is always awaiting your return!

10. For a different shot, try to get sunlight into the background of the frame. A glint of sunlight can make all the difference. There are a two

ways to do this. Use a wider angle lens and shoot wide angle close up (remember the Nikon 10.5mm fisheye can focus on a subject almost touching the dome port!) Or get low and shoot upwards (this is always a great general rule of underwater photography.)

So how did the D200 in its Sea & Sea housing bear up? Absolutely fantastic – by the end of the week I felt like I was really in tune with the camera and housing and could easily

access every feature I find useful. I'd give it my highest recommendation. The true test of whether or not you enjoy the diving is how many times you're willing to don the damp suit for the repetitive dives on each day of the trip. My 26 dives and 29 hours underwater in five and a half days are testament both to the quality of the diving and to the care of the excellent crew of Sun Dancer II. And what about that day's de-gassing at the end of the trip? Sun Dancer II offers several interesting shore trips both to the jungle and to ancient Mayan ruins. But Steve, Nick and I had different plans. A taxi driver was secured for the day, with the express instruction

to take us to every bar in Belize City. So was this trip a complete success? Well almost – there are a lot of bars in Belize City!

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A photograph of a diver underwater, holding a large, inflatable object with a pattern of orange and white circles. The diver is wearing a white mask and a white tank. The background is dark blue.

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