

Go Big in the Red Sea

by Mark Webster

The Red Sea is a very popular destination for underwater photographers particularly from Europe due to its proximity and often bargain prices compared to other longer haul destinations. There is a well established diving infrastructure and large fleets of day boats and liveaboards which will cater for the needs of the occasional snap-shooter to the fully dedicated photographers and professionals. The number of boats operating does of course lead to some over crowding at popular or 'classic' dive sites but it is still possible to find some levels of solitude if you are prepared to forgo the big names.

Although some of the strange and exotic creatures found elsewhere around the globe are harder to find in the Red Sea, there is still a mind boggling variety of species here and numerous spectacular coral reefs. If you have dived here many times it is tempting to become blasé about the quality of the diving and as photographers it is often necessary to consciously focus our minds on particular techniques or images to get the best from your visit. Although there are an abundance of excellent

macro subjects here, many of the sites feature so much colour, spectacular topography, activity and excellent blue water visibility that they are crying out for your wide angle lens. Hopefully this short article will provide a few pointers and fire your enthusiasm for the next visit.

Lens choice

The old adage in underwater photography is of course get close and then get closer still – reducing the water column is important no matter how clear it appears to be. Wide angle and super wide lenses allow us to do this and with so few straight lines on a coral reef you might be tempted to think that the widest possible lens (i.e. a fish eye) will be the best

Oceanic white tip shark. Nikon D200, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Magic Filter, f8 @ 1/60, ISO 200

Coral bommie and diver. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Magic Filter, f11 @ 1/30, ISO 200





There are a host of wide angle lenses to choose from – clockwise from left Sigma 15mm FE (an aged manual lens that the editor may have fond memories of); Tokina 12-24mm zoom; Nikkor 18-35mm zoom; Tokina 10-17mm zoom; Nikkor 10.5mm.



Masked butterfly and banner angel fish. Nikon D200, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60, ISO 100

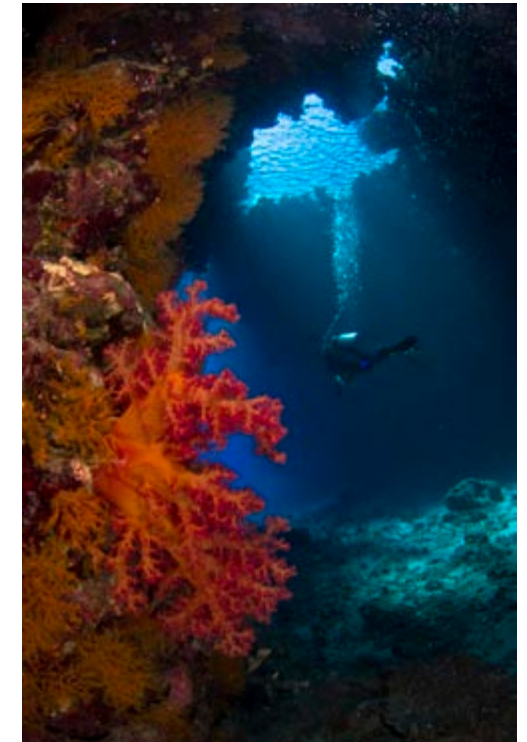
The Tokina 10-17mm zoom requires a small extension ring. Shown here is the Subal 15mm ring. The lens will work behind a standard FE dome without an extension, but the ring will give optimal positioning.



choice. This will be true in many circumstances but a fish eye (defined as 165° to 180 ° diagonal view regardless of sensor/film size) can be just a little too wide on occasions and even on an irregular shaped reef can produce obvious distortions. If it is the only wide angle lens you have then of course in this digital age we can crop a picture easily, but you must remember to compose for this.

I personally love using the fish eye on my D200 and a recent lens to hit the market seems to have resolved

the dilemma of whether to choose a full frame fish eye or super wide angle lens for a particular dive. The new Tokina 10-17mm zoom (for DX format sensors) seems to have been especially designed for UW photographers and gives us a full frame fish eye at one end and super wide of approximately 100 ° at the other, which is roughly the equivalent of an 18mm lens on a 35mm film format. This lens also focuses extremely closely which makes it ideal for classic ‘close focus wide



Soft corals and diver. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/30, ISO 100

angle’ and ‘wide macro’ compositions. The maximum aperture is variable between f3.5-4.5 compared to the Nikon 10.5mm of f2.8, but frankly you won’t notice the difference through the viewfinder and we rarely need full aperture underwater. Laboratory test comparisons might pick a few holes in the Tokina’s performance but you would be hard pushed to find them – if you are in



Some photographers favour long arms for wide angle photography. In most circumstances I find these unwieldy and prefer a pair of 8" arms with my Subtronic Minis.

Diver photographing reef. Nikon D200, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/100, ISO 100

Green turtle. Nikon D200, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f14 @ 1/30, ISO 100

Schooling banner fish. Nikon D100, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Light and Motion Titan housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/80, ISO 200

the market for a DX fish eye lens this is the one to go for. It is barely longer than the Nikkor 10.5mm and can be used behind the standard fish eye ports, although optically the best set up will be achieved with a short extension ring of between 15-20mm. The exact length will be dependant on your housing and the FE port design. Subal recommend a 20mm extension ring, but I use the 15mm with my home engineered ports as the base plate design is different. As this lens has such a good minimum focus setting, you can use it with small diameter domes without compromising quality. Nexus in fact

offer a 4" diameter dome for this lens and the Nikkor 10.5mm FE.

For the super wide end you can look at the short range zooms from Nikon (12-24mm), Tokina (12-24mm) and Sigma (10-20mm) or choose a fixed focal length. The zoom lenses need a combination of extension ring and dome dependant on your housing and choice of lens and will most likely need a close up diopter for optimum performance, unless you are using a large diameter dome. If you have a DX sized sensor then you can try a 'film' full frame fish eye (15/16mm) which will be cropped down to around 100°. For a full frame sensor or if are

using film then there are a host of lenses between 14mm (rectilinear) and 20mm plus fish eyes to choose from – most of these will work well behind a standard fish eye dome port.

Lighting

In the Red Sea we normally have plenty of natural light, so we are rarely trying to light the whole of a wide angle image entirely and are usually aiming for a good balance between the available light and the light from the flash guns. So high powered flash guns are not essential but a beam angle of 100 ° or more

Soft corals. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f16 @ 1/100, ISO 100

is desirable, although you can work successfully with narrower beam strobes.

Strobe positioning and arm length are mostly dictated by the size of the main subject, distance and composition. For twin strobes a popular technique is to position the strobes for 'flat lighting' and use the point at which the beams converge to light the subject, thereby avoiding potential backscatter from illuminated particles between the dome and the subject. This technique works well, but needs some thought and practice particularly when working very close to the subject. Some photographers prefer very long arms for this technique, which is fine when working at greater distances from the subject, but I find unwieldy in most circumstances. My preference is for medium length arms which are easier to position when working close – but you have to experiment with a variety of combinations to determine which suits your own style best.

Strobe positioning with fish eye lenses is particularly important as it is very easy for them to creep into the picture. They need to be well behind the dome and 'film or sensor plane' to avoid this and only practice and



experimentation will help you get this right. Try to avoid positioning them at the corners of the frame where the angle of view is widest. The zoom lenses, particularly the 10-17mm fish eye, present another problem. I find I am repositioning my strobes more often as I use the zoom and it is all too easy to forget to pull the strobes back again after a close shot at the long end of the lens. It can sometimes be difficult to see the resulting 'flare' from the strobes at the edge of the picture in the camera LCD and you only discover this after the dive. So try and develop a mental procedure for each time you change focal



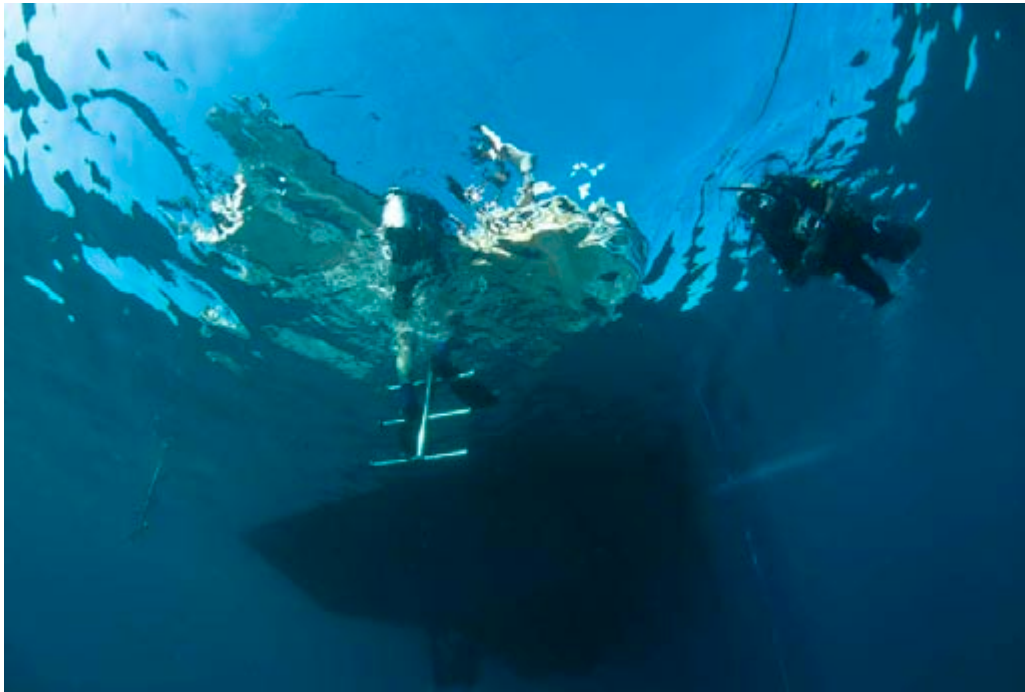
Diver over reef. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Magic Filter, f8 @ 1/60, ISO 200

length or subject distance to check to position of the strobes.

Filters

Using filters was a rare event when shooting with film, but now in the digital age we have the 'Magic Filter' which has changed our approach to natural light photography. The secret to success is the ability to adjust the white balance during the dive to optimize the colour correction provided by the filter and

we can make further fine adjustment after the dive if you shoot in RAW format. In fact, if you don't have a filter or perhaps your strobe fails then it is worth pre-setting the white balance and shooting with available light as you might be surprised at the results. Filters don't replace flash photography, but they are certainly complimentary, and in an environment like the Red Sea they are superb for the wide reef vistas and perfect for wrecks. Using them will teach you more about managing available light,



Divers return to boat. Nikon D200, Tokina 10-17mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, f11 @ 1/80, ISO 100

the best time of day to shoot and reading the way light and shadows will impact the image.

Timing

You can shoot wide angle at almost any time of the day, although classically the 'best time' is between say 10am and 2pm when the sun is at its highest. In the Red Sea the visibility often seems to deteriorate in the afternoon as the sun gets lower, so morning dives are often the best. You must also consider the topography of

the dive site. It is no good planning to shoot on a west facing wall early in the morning when the sun rises in the east! Fortunately many of the offshore reefs offer more than one face, although one side is sometimes 'best' for life due to current direction, so your timing may be dictated by a variety of factors.

Diving early and late in the day can also bring the benefits of striking lighting conditions and effects. When the sun is low you can often catch the dance of shafts of sunlight from the surface by using a faster shutter speed,



Soft corals. Nikon D100, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Light and Motion Titan housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60, ISO 200

whilst shooting straight towards the surface with a fish eye lens can capture the attractive effect of Snell's Window on the surface.

Reef Subjects

The reefs here are truly spectacular in some locations and the Red Sea is renowned for its soft corals which add dazzling colour to an image in multiple hues ranging through deep red, purples, delicate pinks and yellows and pure whites. These soft corals are most abundant on reef

walls exposed to the current which can be quite strong in some locations dependant on tidal conditions.

Hard corals are abundant in differing colours. In the southern Red Sea the reefs are dominated by massive and amazing coral formations particularly in the Fury Shoal and St. John's reef areas, and even a fish eye lens can be challenged when trying to capture the scene. These topographies present an ideal opportunity to use filters and natural light exposures.

The reef fish are equally striking and your first impression is one of



Diver on Atlas half wreck. Nikon D100, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Light and Motion Titan housing, manual white balance, f8 @ 1/60, ISO 200

constant movement and activity, particularly from the Red Sea trade mark orange anthias which swathe over the reefs and react to every movement and sound. Framing these fish against the deep blue water background with the reef below creates a classic image which you will be tempted to shoot time and again in search of the perfect composition. There are numerous other colourful fish in small and large schools which make perfect foreground subjects on the reef, but don't forget to keep an eye on the blue water as well as

almost anything can turn up which may pass by only for a moment.

Wrecks

The Red Sea has been a busy seaway since the time of the Pharaohs and consequently there are numerous wrecks here. The most popular and best known are those sunk within the last 150 years or so with steel hulls which have survived more intact and can be carpeted in coral to almost merge with the reef. Big name wrecks like the Thistlegorm have suffered



Tien Sien tug boat wreck. Nikon D100, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Light and Motion Titan housing, manual white balance with Magic Filter, f8 @ 1/60, ISO 200

from their popularity and much of the coral growth has been knocked off by the large numbers of divers visiting and indiscriminate mooring practices. However they are all worth a visit as seeing semi intact wrecks in good visibility is not to be missed and there are many imaging opportunities.

To capture large sections of a wreck, or perhaps even the whole of a small one, a fish eye lens is essential but you need to be cautious with your composition to avoid distortion of straight lines at the edge of the image. Sometimes this distortion is

unavoidable and we will just accept it if the image is strong enough. Illustrating exploration by including a diver in the shot adds extra impact to a wreck shot (some may say this is a cliché of course) but it is also a good idea to look for marine life on the wreck to fill the foreground and show how the sea is taking over.

Big Subjects

Big subjects like whale sharks, mantas, turtles and even dugongs are often found in the Red Sea, but



Dugong with photographer. Nikon D200, Tokina 12-24mm zoom, Subal ND20 housing, Subtronic Minis, f11 @ 1/60, ISO 100

are perhaps a little less predictable than in other destinations. Djibouti in the far south is gaining a reputation for reliable encounters with whale sharks and mantas at the right time of year, but elsewhere meeting these creatures is more of a game of chance. In the Egyptian Red Sea, where more of the diving activity is centred, you can increase your chances by planning your trip for spring time when the plankton blooms occur, but this is no guarantee. However, the unpredictability does not detract from the adrenalin rush of an unexpected meeting which can occur almost

anywhere. Sometimes these meetings are fleeting and grabbing the moment can be a challenge, although if you are shooting RAW then there is more chance of recovering a usable shot. Don't forget that you can shoot these larger subjects in silhouette and this can often be the quickest setting to make as you target passes by overhead.

Even if your ideal subject does not turn up almost every dive site in the Red Sea will offer some opportunity for wide angle images. If it is not one of the big sites then there are many shallow coral gardens and



Hawksbill turtle. Nikon D200, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Subal ND20 housing, Magic Filter, f11 @ 1/80, ISO 200

pinnacles or 'ergs' which can produce punchy compositions particularly if you concentrate on getting close to a colourful foreground subject. I recently visited Sharm El Sheikh for the first time in six years to give my youngest daughter the opportunity to try scuba diving. My initial impression of the (once lush) beach dives was not inspiring, but I found that by careful isolation of the main subject on small coral heads it was still possible to produce some pleasing wide angle images.

Avoiding the crowds

If you are serious about your photography then the best option for a trip to the Red Sea will be a liveaboard boat. Joining a group of photographers who all have the same goal will also give you some control over the dive sites chosen. Unless you yearn for the big name sites, and some like Ras Mohammed are still stunning, you can avoid the large crowds of boats and divers by heading for reefs off the usual route or reversing the route of the boat – if most boats head

north at the beginning of the week then persuade your skipper to go south.

The southern reefs are still far less crowded than the north generally, but south of Fury Shoal is really only accessible by liveaboard.

However, whichever you choose, be it liveaboard or day boat you will always be spoilt for choice on most reefs. Get to know your equipment, think about your composition and lighting and enjoy capturing the magic of the Red Sea.

Mark Webster
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Ten Wide Angle Hotspots in the Egyptian Red Sea

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, just a few of my favourites:

Ras Mohammed – the wall is still a classic dive, but the shallows are a shadow of what was once there.

Abhu Nuhas Reef – Classic wrecks all in a row – Giannis D, Carnatic, Krisoula K (tile wreck), Kimon M (lentil wreck) and Seastar (rarely dived due to depth). There are also some excellent pinnacles in the lagoon to the south of the reef.

Big Brother and Little Brother islands – Fantastic walls, the chance to see some big pelagics and sharks and the wrecks of Aida and Numidia on Big Brother. Conditions can be challenging here – large swells and strong currents.

Daedalus Reef – another offshore classic with spectacular walls and soft corals.

Marsa Abbu Dabab – sea grass beds which are home to dugongs and green turtles. Recently closed to divers but hopefully only temporarily.

Tug Boat Tien Sien, Fury Shoal – A beautiful little wreck covered in coral and much loved by photographers. Normally quiet as most dive groups just pass by after a quick look on a guided dive.

Um Halhalla (Witches Hat), Sataya Reef, Fury Shoal – this is a very large reef area which has some spectacular hard coral formations. However, my favourite part of the dive is a series of pinnacles to the north of the main reef which are smothered with all the usual Red Sea suspects.

Erg Sataya – also known as the Elphinstone of the south – a spectacular wall dive with plateaus and shallow coral gardens.

Atlas 'half wreck', Ras Banas – although only the stern section of this wreck remains (sunk under tow for salvage) it is still very intact and full of life. The visibility can be disappointing here after rough weather as the wreck lies on the fringing reef protecting the lagoon close to shore.

St John's Wood, St John's Reef – a forest of coral pillars rising from a bright sandy bottom – each one offering something a little different. A great place for filter photography.

The Nursery (aka Dangerous Reef), St. John's Reef – an anemone city, some impressive coral covered pinnacles, passing mantas and oceanic white tip sharks and the chance to see bumphead parrot fish.

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