

Behind the shot

with Martin Edge

There is a wonderful quality of natural light present underwater, which I believe is very misunderstood. I and many other photographers refer to it as 'dappled light'. Another popular term is 'crinkles'. The name doesn't really matter, it's how to achieve it that is the most important. Just after sunrise or towards twilight time the sunbeams, which enter the surface of the sea, are at the most acute angle by virtue of the dramatic angle of sun and surface. These sunbeams produce a golden light and this effect is amplified into strong golden shafts of light as the beams pervade the surface.

Underwater photographers have been using this quality of light as a dramatic backdrop to their images for as long as I can remember. Doubilet's wide-angle images from his coffee table books are wonderful examples. The UK godfather of underwater photography – Peter Scoones, patiently explained it to me some twenty-five years ago. Whenever I have the opportunity I enter the water at the time best suited to shoot dappled light. Live-aboard's and shore based dive resort's are ideal. To

catch the light, one can often enter the water at a time to suit you. Day boat underwater photographers often miss out as they have to head back to base long before the afternoon light is at its best.

On my photo workshops I set a number of late afternoon's aside for those photographers who choose to take a guided 'light tour' with me. I have been doing this for some time in order to demonstrate some of the drawbacks. The misunderstandings are mistakes made in finding the light and knowing how to shoot it. You see, the effect is only noticeable in shallow water, in my experience between one and four meters. It's essential to ascertain as soon as you can the best depth that the beams are most dramatic. If the sea is glass calm the effect is heightened. You have to work quickly though to find a subject at the best depth to photograph against the sunlight. Remember, the sun sets rapidly in tropical locations and all too soon the effect of the sunbeams fade. The main reason why underwater photographers fail to recognize the light is because they descend past the optimal depth and the optimal depth is



Butterfly fish in Dappled light Southern Red Sea 17mm-35mm lens. F5.6 at 180th sec. Nikon D200 in Subal housing. Two Inon Z220 flash guns

determined by how low the sun is to the horizon.

Last June (2007) we took a liveaboard photo workshop to the Southern Red Sea to shoot the shallow caves and grotto's in the St John's area. One afternoon I planned a guided 'dappled light' dive. I knew the best time to enter the water and with the help of the dive guide, I chose a reef with good quality hard corals and a steep drop off from 1m of water down to 10m. We had also taken into consideration the direction of the setting sun over the reef flat.

In this way we could stay shallow (the optimal depth) and shoot the light towards the direction of the reef instead of looking out to sea. I was confident that good subject matter would be plentiful and brought the group together to talk specifically about dappled light techniques, depths, subjects and camera settings. The one thing I could not have accounted for was how the dive briefing from the dive guides would influence the logic of the group.

Seduction- is the only word, which comes to mind! With dry wipe

marker board in hand – complete with a sketch of the reef, the boat, the anchor, north, south, east and west points – our dive-guide began to brief my eager and enthusiastic group of photographers. It went something like this (imagine just a slight accent) – Quote

“The boat will drop us here, we’ll descend to 10m and follow the reef clockwise until we come to a sharp right hand turn. There are usually blue spotted rays or the odd turtle on the sand. Take your pictures and then I’ll show you where a large green moray hangs out. If any of you wish to do your own thing then no problem, we’ll see you on the surface after one hour. Any Question? No, okay lets go diving”

Seduced! After experiencing literally thousands of dive briefings over the years I had never before appreciated how a group of keen underwater photographers could so easily be distracted from the task of taking pictures. Don’t get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with following the dive guide, we do it all the time. But, what started as a snorkel – come - 1m to 4m ‘dappled light’ ‘sun close to the horizon’ photo shoot suddenly turned into a dive to at 10m to look for ray’s and turtles on the sand.

For the first time I began to witness and appreciate how a dive briefing could divert the intentions of

a group of avidly keen photographers, just as they were about to jump in and shoot subjects they had planned to shoot, perhaps from the previous afternoon dive or as in this case – a lesson all about shallow water sunlight. I was fascinated with the dynamics of this situation and I chose to let it happen and witness the outcome. I was interested in who would stay shallow and shoot the light as planned and who might momentarily forget the original idea and go diving instead.

I cannot recall how many of us entered the water that late afternoon but I do remember that for the first twenty-five minutes all bar one was at 10m looking out for anything on the sand. Myself and one other photographer were directly above them in the top three meters of water shooting the sunlight as it set towards the horizon. They had fallen for it! They’d been seduced by the briefing and they were missing the reason we had chosen that particular time of day to enter the water. The others joined us after thirty to forty minutes, taking their deco stop at 3m and shooting the light whilst hanging out.

When you go to shoot pictures you go to shoot pictures. Have a dive by all means, once, twice, three times a day but when you have a subject to shoot and you know where to go to shoot it, then think about detaching

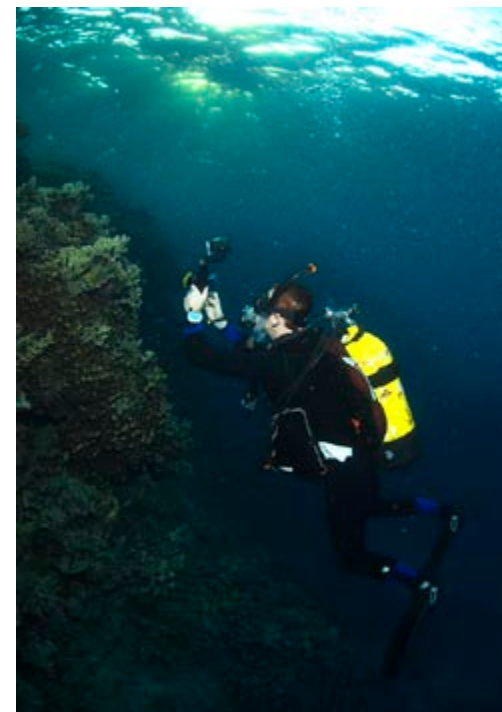


250th sec F8 100 ISO. D200 with Nikon 10.5mm fisheye lens in Subal housing. Two Inon Z220 Flashguns

(Right) Graham Cleminson shooting towards the late afternoon light between 2m and 4m. F4.8 at 90th sec. 100 ISO. 200 Subal housing.

yourself from the concept of a dive and allow your mind-set to think more in terms of your photo goals.

We captured some good shots that afternoon. The sea was flat which accentuated the sunbeams. We had the reef just breaking water and there were plenty of opportunities with both moving and static subjects. We



discussed these circumstances back on the boat and were able to show on laptop our results in the sunlight, at the time most had been on the sand. It made some members of our group realise that they had been 'snapping away whilst diving' for the majority of the time. It was a big lesson learnt.

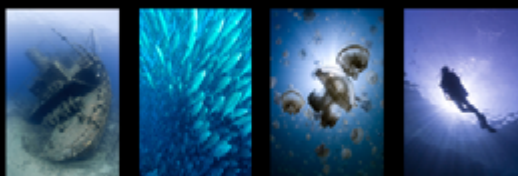
For the remainder of the workshop (and all subsequent one's) I started to conduct my own photo briefings in conjunction with the dive guides so that the group had more of a choice with their dive plan and could choose to follow if they wished. The lesson I learnt as an educator was yet another reminder on how one's mindset can be compromised when diving and why serious photographers, all too often, leave the water frustrated with their results and their ability to concentrate on the task in hand.



Martin Edge

www.edgeunderwaterphotography.co.uk

Photography Holidays & Courses *with Martin Edge*



Martin & Sylvia will share with you all their photo tips and techniques. Their passion is to help others improve and develop their own abilities with a camera. Underwater workshops will ensure that you are provided with the best possible conditions to improve your photography

One to One tuition Days in Bournemouth

*Excorted holiday to Kasai Village, Cebu, 8th March 08
11 nights 10 days diving only £1845*

*Red Sea - Wrecks & Reefs
on the liveaboard Typhoon
26th July 2008
only £1095*



Tony Backhurst Scuba Travel
0800 0728221
www.scuba.co.uk





EDGE
Underwater Photography
www.edgeunderwaterphotography.co.uk



See our websites for more information

www.uwpmag.com

**"It is always a joy to return.
Hard to improve on perfection!"**



Heather & Bud Sellick, USA, September 2007 (4th visit)



Kungkungan Bay Resort

Lembah Strait, North Sulawesi, Indonesia

T. 62-431-817347, divekbr.com



ECO-DIVERS.COM