

Take 3 Workshops

by Alan Larsen

Being serious about underwater photography can be frustrating. The technical aspects of getting exposure and lighting right can be challenging enough but if you have to follow a dive guide on a whirlwind tour of the reef, it can be hard to find a suitable subject to shoot, let alone spend sufficient time with it to get a decent image. Even when you don't have to follow a guide it doesn't get much better. Other divers are reluctant to buddy with a photographer – even on a club trip with your mates (although they all want a copy of your photos afterwards...).

The answer is to dive with other underwater photographers. But how? – especially if there are none in your club or among your usual dive buddies. One way is book onto an underwater photo workshop. But 'workshop' sounds worryingly serious and raises a number of questions: Does it mean a 'photography course' with lots of teaching and learning? Or is it just a dive trip with a group of photographers? Are workshops only for accomplished photographers with housed dSLR systems? Or are they for photographers with all levels of experience and ability including those

who use compact cameras? And of course, it probably means travelling alone, and taking the risk that you might not get on with the other participants.

In 2008 I went on three photo workshops. I found that the range of experience went from beginner to those who had started in the days of film; and the equipment ranged from compact camera to housed dSLR. And as for not getting on with the others: at last I was among a group of divers as obsessed as me about underwater photography and wanting to talk f-stops, lenses, Lightroom and critters all day long!

It didn't mean compromising on dive destinations either. Each was to a different part of the world with excellent diving.

And each was with a different photographer, who had a different style and approach. But they all provided a similar experience for the underwater photographer who wants to do more than just take a few 'snapshot' memories of the dive.

The first workshop was with Mauricio Handler and took place on St Eustatius (known as Statia) in the Caribbean. It was advertised in UWP



*RedSea: Giannis D at Sha'ab Abu Nuhas, Red Sea
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20. Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm. 1/30 @ f8 Manual, ISO 100. No strobes. Auto White Balance plus post processing. Depth 16 metres*



*Gorgonian at Hangover, Statia.
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 12-24mm at 12mm. 1/60 @ f11 Manual, ISO 100*



Soft corals at Alternatives 4, Ras Mohammed, Red Sea
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm. 1/80 @ f13 Manual, ISO 100.



Whip coral shrimp at Coral Garden, Tulamben, Bali
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 105 VR micro. 1/200 @ f16 Manual, ISO 100

mag and although I hadn't heard of Mauricio, a google search told me that, as well as being known in his own right, he worked for many years with David Doubilet. So I guessed that he might know a bit about underwater photography!

This workshop was the most 'full on' in terms of learning – although that also reflects the stage of

development I was at with underwater photography at the start of the year. There was a lot I needed to learn, so I had to think a lot more about it.

Mauricio gave a daily session covering all the basic techniques: starting with wide angle using only natural light, adding flash, and moving on to macro photography. He also covered composition, creative

techniques, workflow, post processing, equipment maintenance, and tips for packing and travelling with photographic kit.

As with the others, this was a workshop for all levels of experience, although it did assume a basic knowledge of photography. I had upgraded a year earlier to a housed dSLR system that I had already taken on three trips. There were others at my level, as well as some who had been at it for years. We did three dives a day (with Golden Rock Divers); two before lunch and one after. Each day we went to a dive site suitable for practising the techniques we had covered in Mauricio's presentation that day.

Statia has several wrecks as well as the usual barrel sponges and gorgonians that cover Caribbean reefs: perfect for wide angle photography, both natural light and with a touch of strobe. And there were plenty of critters for macro: Sailfin blennies, Pike blennies, Yellow headed jawfish (stuff I'd never seen) and more.

A new experience for me was that we repeatedly dived the same few dive sites. Not because there weren't any others. But because it gives a better opportunity to get a good image. Even without a camera I've never quite understood divers who think that diving a site once is enough. For me it's like seeing an opera again:

different production, different mood, different experience. All adding to my understanding and enjoyment of the work.

For a photographer, diving a site again means that you already know what to expect and look for. You can head straight for something you spotted earlier. Or you can go back to improve on a shot that didn't quite work out. And there's no reason not to spend a lot of time with one subject to get the 'killer' shot.

Every evening after dinner we had an open critique session. We all provided five images from the previous day and Mauricio openly critiqued them. As the week drew on, we all joined in – and the critique became more 'open and honest'! For this session, we were allowed to post process the images, but absolutely forbidden to crop them. This was hard at first; but I began to appreciate the discipline of framing the image correctly in the camera. As a result, I now usually reject an image if I have to do more than 'trim' the edges when processing it. It was also useful to see everyone else's images. As well as learning from the critique, it was a great source of ideas and inspiration and different ways of looking at subjects. Much of the learning on a workshop comes from interaction with the other participants.

By the end of the week I was



Anemone fish at Anemone City, Ras Mohammed, Red Sea
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/125 @ f22 Manual, ISO 100

exhilarated and exhausted. In six days I had moved on in skills and experience to an extent that would have taken several years and much frustration on ‘ordinary’ dive trips.

The second workshop was with Martin Edge on a liveaboard (MY Typhoon) in the Northern Red Sea at the end of July. I heard about this trip from Martin when I had a day’s tuition with him at the end of 2007. (You can read about my day with Martin on my website.)

This was no ordinary ‘wrecks

and reefs’ Red Sea tour. We moored in two places over the six days – at the Alternatives near Ras Mohammed for reefs, and at Sha’ab Abu Nuhas for wrecks – and again made multiple visits to the same dive sites.

At Abu Nuhas, we devoted a day each to the Giannis D and Chrisoula K (Tile wreck) with three dives on each; plus two dives on Carnatic before crossing back to Ras Mohammed.

This provided plenty of opportunity to take full advantage of the changing light on the wrecks,



Harlequin shrimp at Seraya Secret, Bali
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 105 VR micro. 1/125 @ f22 Manual, ISO 100

especially on Chrisoula K where the light streams into the hold onto its cargo of tiles. We were also able to get the classic shots of Giannis D with both the midday and the late afternoon sun.

On each of our two dives at Anemone City I spent fifty minutes with one anemone. Heaven! And we timed our dives on Alternatives to coincide with the late afternoon ‘dappled light’ on the shallow reef.

Martin gave a photo briefing before each dive, suggesting where

and how to get the best shots on that particular dive site. He didn’t give any formal talks on this trip – although I have since been on another trip when he did.

He was also available throughout the day to answer questions and give advice. And he made sure that he had seen everyone’s images regularly during the week.

Being on a liveaboard gave even more time to chat and learn from each other. Downloading and reviewing images took place in the lounge,



Sailfin blenny at Blue Bead Hole, Statia
Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 105 VR micro.
1/125 @ f22 Manual, ISO 100

dive sites on the doorstep. The diving in that area is great; the Liberty Wreck is covered with so much coral that it's a wide angle wreck and reef dive, as well as being full of macro life. And there's plenty more dive sites in the area, including muck diving at Seraya Secrets a short boat ride away.

Bali is located in that area of Indonesia that has the greatest marine diversity in the oceans. Great subjects were not hard to find: from reef scenes with barrel sponges, gorgonian fans, colourful soft corals and schooling fish, to pygmy seahorses, ghost pipefish, harlequin shrimps, triplefin blennies, whip coral shrimps and gobies, a variety of nudibranchs – and much else besides.

Mark gave a presentation every day on a different aspect of underwater photography. He also encouraged us to bring a couple of images for discussion and critique, especially images that hadn't worked in some way. As with the other workshops, Mark was available throughout to answer questions and give advice on technique, settings etc.

This workshop also ended with

a competition, voted this time by the staff from the dive centre and with the winner getting a trophy from Mark to take home.

Overall this felt like the most informal of the three workshops, the location adding to the relaxed atmosphere. Apart from a couple of mornings when boat excursions had been arranged, we were diving at our own pace from the shore.

Despite their differences, all three workshops afforded similar opportunities to learn and to take photos in a photographer-friendly environment.

In my initial exchange of emails with Mauricio Handler, he described his workshop as 'an intense week of learning and camaraderie'. It is a good description that could be applied to all three trips.

Over the three workshops I made sixty dives exclusively with other photographers. The workshops were all in 'high yield' destinations – those that offer maximum opportunity to get great images. And the opportunity was maximised by being able to go back to the same dive site again and again, as well as being able to spend as much time as I wanted to with each subject. I learned lots too; and made new friends.

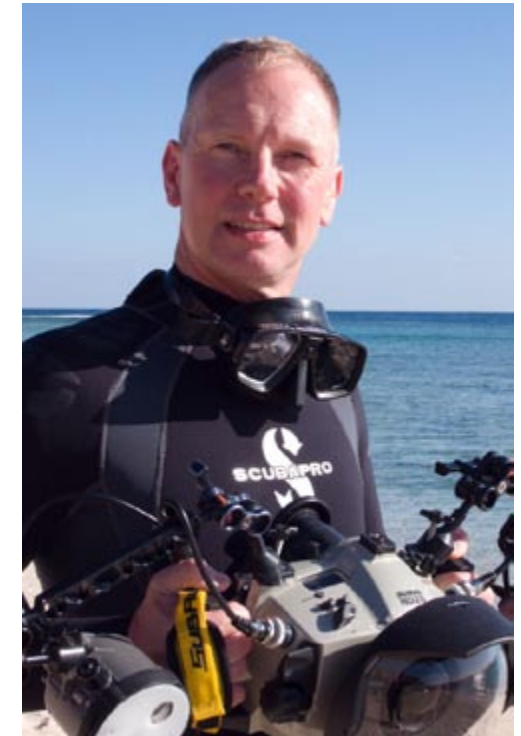
In short, the environment and atmosphere on each was tailored entirely to the needs of underwater

photographers.

I'm hooked. In 2009 I've already been on a workshop to the Maldives and I'm planning at least one more this year.

I have also booked a trip with my old club this year. I will take my camera, even though I know that I won't have the same photographic opportunities that I'm now used to. But at least I now know that there's an alternative. I might even let them have some of my photos if they ask...

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