

Ocean Visions Compact Workshop

by David Kittos

I am addicted to underwater photography. I admit it. Primary symptoms of my addiction include always complaining that dives aren't long enough and my buddy ascending on their own and then never speaking to me again. It's a pity that being enthusiastic about photography and actually taking good pictures are two different things. For a long time, my pictures were fairly mediocre. Naturally, I blamed my little compact camera and thought about upgrading to a DSLR-based system. Unfortunately, the cost of doing this was a show-stopper - the quote I got was about £5000. Now, my kit isn't *that* bad - I use an Olympus SP350 with a PT30 housing, Inon close-up and wide-angle lenses as well as an Inon Z240 strobe. I just had to learn to use it properly. So I decided to invest in an underwater photography training course geared up for compact camera users.

Maria Munn's underwater photography work with compacts is well known in the UK and I had attended some of her presentations at Ocean Optics and LIDS. She

specialises in this subject so I signed up for her September 2008 workshop in Nuweiba, hoping to take my photography to the next level.

The venue was the Coral Hilton, complete with house reef which was to be used for all the dives. Once everyone got to know the reef and where the different fish lived, there was no need to go looking for subjects any more, saving time for practicing composition skills, trying out new techniques and experimenting with our cameras.

At the start of the workshop, Maria went through the basic maintenance process for our housings and explained the use of standard camera controls. During the week, we were assigned objectives such as taking particular types of photographs or using specific composition or technical skills. We had two dives a day, image reviews and presentations.

Learning about composition and exposure were the most interesting parts of the workshop. Maria explained complicated ideas in a very simple way. Here are a few useful tips we got:



Maria Munn (centre) of Ocean Visions reviewing images with some of the workshop guests

Clown fish move in and out of the anemone in a pattern so it pays to observe them before taking pictures
**Olympus SP350,
PT30 housing. f5.0
@ 1/160 EV: -2
ISO: 100
Aperture Priority
Strobe: Inon Z240
(type 3) on TTL**





The lionfish completely blocks the sun to give a dramatic effect to the picture. Joint 1st prize in the workshop's competition.

Olympus SP350, PT30, f8.0 @ 1/500, ISO: 100, Inon Z240 (type 3) on 1/32 power, Inon UFL-165AD Fisheye Conversion Lens. Exposure: Manual

- Get close and slightly below your subject to enable you to shoot at an upward angle.

- Unattractive background can ruin an otherwise good image. If faced with this problem, try taking the picture with the subject against blue water. Other options include shooting from



I couldn't get the diagonal lines I wanted so I made my own!

Olympus SP350, PT30, f5.6 @ 1/250, EV -2, ISO: 100, Inon Z240 (type 3) on 1/32 power, Inon UFL-165AD Fisheye Conversion Lens. Exposure: Aperture priority

a different angle showing less of the distracting background or using a wider aperture with a shallow depth of field. If all else fails, a tight composition that includes head and eyes may produce a good enough result.

- Look for strong diagonal lines (rule of



The private beach at the Nuweiba Coral Hilton

thirds composition rule). Where these don't exist naturally, tilt the camera slightly to create them yourself.

- Before attempting to take a photograph, observe the subject. For example, clownfish seem to have a pattern in their movements in and out of the anemone.

- Try to get the subject between the sun and the camera. This can be a diver or a manta-ray or a school of fish. If this technique is executed successfully it can create a dramatic effect in the picture.

- Exposure compensation (EV): should be negative for very dark and positive for very bright objects

The workshop lectures covered underwater scene modes (macro and wide-angle), when to use them and how they affect the picture. Maria also talked about f-stops/shutter speeds and provided settings (based on compact cameras) for different types of shots such as wide-angle, close-focus wide-angle and macro. For example, f8 was the



*Typical reef scene at Abou Lou Lou
Olympus SP350, PT30, f8 @ 1/500, EV 0, ISO:
100, Inon Z240 (type 3), Inon UFL-165AD Fisheye
Conversion Lens. Exposure: Manual*

recommended initial f-stop for a macro picture: this gives maximum depth of field. Obviously there are no recipes for success in underwater photography and all the guests were encouraged to experiment as much as they can. It doesn't cost anything to shoot ten versions of the same picture and one of them might turn out to be a competition-winner.

We also learned about ambient light shots, how to set custom white balance for cameras that allow it and what to do if it's not available (use Cloudy setting). There was a jetty at the beach in front of the hotel, and at a depth of 2m, it was teeming with marine life with lots of natural light. This provided an ideal environment to try available light shots and the air at this depth never seems to run out.

I was very impressed by a technique discussed by Maria and demonstrated underwater: this was about controlling how light or dark the background



*A superb composition shot with a P&S camera by
Chrisi Neeson. Joint 1st prize in the workshop's
competition. Canon Ixus 90, Housing WPC-24, f2.8
@ 1/200, EV:0, ISO: 200, Exposure: Auto*

is. She shot a picture of a lionfish against blue water using different shutter speeds: 1/30 for light blue, 1/90 for deep blue and 1/500 or 1/1000 for black. When I tried this myself afterwards, my camera was screaming "UNDER-EXPOSURE" when I used a shutter speed of 1/1000. Despite that I was so pleased with the picture that I really didn't care.

During the only night dive we did in the week, we got to practice low light shots. Using high ISO settings with compact cameras should generally be avoided because the sensor is so small and noise starts creeping in. This is where a good strobe comes in very handy. I had serious problems focusing but did manage an impressive (for my standards!) macro shot of a marble silver moray eel sticking its head out of the sand. The Inon Z240 (type 3) is a powerful strobe with TTL as well as

manual controls and I recommend it to anyone with a compatible camera and housing. One thing to note about the house reef of the Nuweiba Coral Hilton: it is home to more than 200 lionfish - they are absolutely everywhere. Since they are attracted to light, it's best to be careful during a night dive at this reef and any other dive site where lionfish can be found.

Our last dive for this trip was at dawn. Visibility had been good all week but during this very early morning dive, it was perfect. Using the Inon UFL-165AD fisheye conversion lens which Maria had lent me, I set about trying to take a close-focus wide-angle picture of a lionfish against blue water and completely blocking the sun. After manoeuvring myself close enough and shooting upwards, I waited for the lionfish to get into position between my camera and the sun. While it was moving I kept shooting, reviewing and adjusting the exposure. Twenty minutes and thirty shots later, everything came together and the resulting image won me the Sport Diver 'Readers Picture of the Month' competition for January 2009. Now, that is *real* progress. Chrisi, a fellow guest, produced a stunning photograph titled 'Domino Fish' using an Ixus 90 compact camera. The image impressed everyone, Maria and dive centre manager included. There was an informal competition at the end of the week with prizes offered by Ocean Visions and Emperor Divers, giving everyone the chance to show off their achievements.

The best feature of the workshop was Maria's determination to help everybody in and out of the water. She would demonstrate *using our cameras* underwater and this went on for the entire week. How much more hands on can you get? The logic of this is I'd like to know the answer about



This little moray eel stuck its head out of the sand during the night dive. Olympus SP350, PT30, f8 @ 1/60, EV 0, ISO: 100, Inon Z240 (type 3), Inon UCL-165AD Close up Lens. Exposure: Manual

something and see it working on my camera, not somebody else's. Maria appears to have encyclopaedic knowledge of most compact digital cameras used for underwater photography. She helped her guests get the best results from their cameras and I even learned how to use my strobe effectively in full manual.

As far as criticisms go, I have none. Maria's teaching style and the workshop content were spot on. Also, the on-site Emperor Divers dive centre, offered excellent service. It would have been nice to be able to photograph some big stuff like wrecks and sharks, but this would have meant going on a live-aboard or perhaps a completely different location.

As a parting note, Maria reminded me on numerous occasions

that I am supposed to look after my buddy. I consider my wrist firmly slapped. Will I remember this advice for my next trip? I will certainly try...

David Kittos



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