

Khao Sok caverns

by Ayesha Cantrell

As a dive instructor it's amazing to show your students a cuttlefish with its dinner tightly lodged in its beak dancing in your torch light. They surface amazed, something they will never forget yet while the scene is captured in my mind it wasn't captured by my Nikon! There are many such images I have mentally stored, what a photographic library I would have now if only I'd been out with my camera instead. So when one of my good friends asked me to come and photograph a largely unexplored underwater world, I jumped at the chance.

Khao Sok National Park in Thailand is an area usually visited for the ancient rain forest, jungle trekking and wildlife spotting opportunities. This lush area is dominated by 165kmsq lake which was created by a damming project, limestone pinnacles tower out of the water creating a stunning vista all around. Transport is by traditional Thai longtail boat only and the area is peaceful and serene. The damming heightened the water, flooding some amazing formations that have all but passed into history. Careful exploration and research is beginning to locate some of these

submerged sites and this is what I was here to document.

Over the years as my diving has progressed I have taken my camera along, adding it cautiously to new environments and skills. I'd logged many technical dives before taking my camera to depth and still survey a new wreck or site before getting the camera wet, this trip was no exception. For salty sea dogs, fresh water can be an interesting and somewhat wobbly experience, so our first dive was to be a short orientation, leaving the camera on the boat.

The experience was mesmerising but clearly the photographic challenge was to be an interesting one. The first few meters of water are misty, before giving way to crystal clear water but the top layer is certainly going to obscure the available light. Jungle debris means swimming around large fallen trees giving you the impression of diving through an enchanted forest. Entering the grotto is like swimming into a huge bowl shaped room with

Subal Nikon D200, 10.5mm lens, Inon strobes, 1/8th sec @ F5.6 ISO 500



home to very little life, only curious catfish. It was abundantly clear that they were very confused by these noisy bubble blowing creatures who seem to be carrying slices of the sun in their hands. They seemed to pop out, swim around and then rest on the exact spot I was eyeing up as a possible platform to steady the camera. Evidently they were going to be as constructive to photography as a kitten with a ball of wool.

Having surveyed the area, and got comfortable with fresh water buoyancy we surfaced to debrief and plan the next dives mission. I briefed my buddies on what I wanted to achieve on the next dive. I opted for what I perceived to be the simpler shots first and testing my set up with the available light by photographing the entrance structures and formations in silhouette. I wanted to do this without divers in the frame first, partly so that they could enjoy their dive without posing, but mainly so I had the shots to brief them on positioning within the frame when I needed them. I always find this easier particularly when your models are not underwater photographers as it can be difficult for them to visualise the shot you are aiming for.

Submerging and getting into position, I found that the sites I have located to stabilise the camera are not the best, but I managed to reposition

myself accordingly. Due to using such a wide angle lens, the camera shake is minimal and the results look good. I decide to try and light up a stalactite in the foreground with my strobe and this seems to be quite effective too. The one good thing about working in such low light conditions is that the playback screen is easier to review than in the bright light of shallow reefs. This allows me to more easily adjust my exposure. In addition, in bright light I often experience more difficulty in aiming the strobe light just right but these conditions make it much easier to train the focus light exactly where it is required. You don't get good without bad though and I soon realise that in much darker conditions that camera functionality is going to be difficult to see. The camera system is still new enough that not all the functionality is committed to memory by feel.

My buddies have explored the grotto on either side of the entrance, keeping well in sight but ensuring their torch beams do not enter my frame. For the majority of this dive I move very little and this gives many of the catfish the opportunity for a closer look at this strange creature. They seem emboldened by my immobility and one practically sits on my shoulder as if viewing the results of my images too. Catching something out of the corner of my eye



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I turned and was mask to whisker with my would-be critique. It certainly made me jump. While the fish only stared back quizzically, my heart was racing and my hands shaking which is plainly no good for slow shutter speeds. As we head out of the grotto my buddy signals for me to come and have a closer look at what seems to be a small cave. Shining my torch beam in here I see one monstrous catfish filling the space. This colossal

fish is the size of a Labrador but without the happy-to-see-you waggy tail and certainly gives me pause for thought; what if he suddenly becomes interested in photography too?

Surfacing and getting onto the boat before my imagination runs wild with catfish nightmares, I'm pleased that we are heading off to another site for an orientation dive there. This site is a little different in terms of structure and following the guide lines around

is a little like taking a fairground ghost train. Sculptures materialise like would-be ghosts in flowing white sheets and are brilliant in their majesty. Focussing is clearly going to be frustrating and stabilising would be out of the question. That's tomorrow's challenge to sleep on but for now we head to our accommodation. Simple huts float on rafts on the lake and the sunset is captivating. The electric supply here is by generator only, hence no laptop to review the images on a larger scale. Given the availability of water from both above and below, I didn't fancy chancing my luck bring my baby with me anyway. However the images look good and are enough to brief tomorrow's modelling assignment.

Rising with the dawn, I'm eager to get in the water again, the nights ruminating over today's challenge has offered little other than to treat the whole dive as if night diving and not get frustrated. Relax, enjoy the dive and do my best was the attitude I submerged with and it proved to be the right one. When I couldn't get the camera to focus, I let it be and enjoyed what I was seeing. I surfaced with some interesting results but it's obvious that my next trip here will involve two strobes and a little more buddy participation. I believe disconnecting one strobe from its arm would give some fantastic results but



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this is certainly better co-ordinated with my photography buddy after a few more dives to survey the site and set some realistic objectives.

Our final dive was back to catfish cave, as I was beginning to refer to it in my mind. I sank beneath the surface with some trepidation for the fishy fiend that lurked beneath and immediately checked out his lair.

Not finding him there did nothing to allay my angst, like the spider in the bathroom that becomes more fearsome when he's no longer there. Slightly spooked, I carefully surveyed my surroundings for him or his minions before giving myself a good talking to. I turned my attention to my models, who were clearly amused at my developing phobia,



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and directed them into position. Whilst it was noticeably their first modelling assignment, we all had fun, we all learnt something and certainly achieved some passable results.

I think it's easy to get discouraged when taking photographs underwater and my early days saw a few tantrums due to disappointment at not being able to capture what I saw.

I think every underwater photographer should remember that the reason they took it up was because it was fun and they enjoyed it. Whether you have a simple point and shoot or a more advanced system, it's key to keep in mind to enjoy the experience and go easy on yourself. The more you dive and shoot, the more you will learn. Recognise the times when you should just leave the camera alone and enjoy what you are seeing. Remember unless you are quite lucky, very few of us have the opportunity to dedicate the dive to just achieving one perfect shot and measuring ourselves against those that do is hardly fair. If you have the correct approach you should

be able to look back at your favourite shots and smile both at the memory of both the dive and process of capturing the image.

Ayesha Cantrell



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