Compact course Pt3

with Maria Munn

Welcome back for the last part of getting you up and running with your compact camera. In this chapter we are going to have a brief look at choosing and using a strobe as well as a few tips on shooting video.

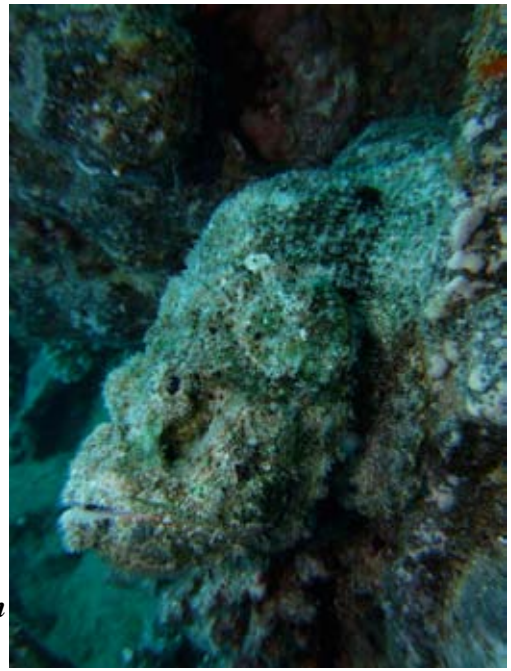
Strobes Using a strobe when a beginner can be the most daunting piece of equipment when starting out in underwater photography, but the difference that it can make to your photos underwater is incredible.

Loss of light is apparent after descending just a few metres and loss of red happens within that same distance and a strobe is an excellent choice of underwater photographic equipment for putting vivid colours and punch back into your subject.

Regardless as to whether you are using your built-in flash with your camera underwater or an external strobe, using the lowest possible Film Speed setting for your subject will ensure richer, punchier colours. Ideally, I would recommend 80-100 (ISO 64 for the Olympus Models) for Macro and Static Subjects, or 200 for faster moving subjects such as Anemonefish. If a higher film speed is used, or indeed the Automatic Underwater Setting, this can result in overexposed subjects.

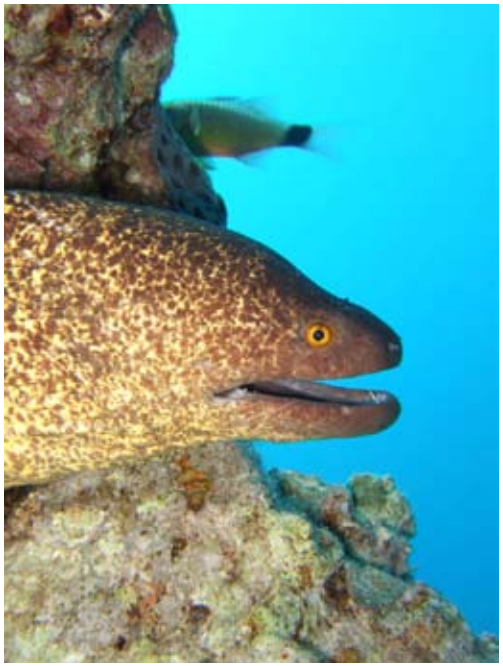
The built-in flash on most compact cameras will work very well underwater as long as you are within a foot of a small subject and as long as the diffuser is attached to the front of the housing to soften the light and make it spread further. Exceptions to this are the latest Canon Powershots and Fui Finepix 200 model where the port of the camera's housing is too large for the built-in flash to cover a close-up subject without causing a shadow. If you are too far away from your subject, you run the risk of the 'blizzard effect' and this applies when using a larger strobe as well. So what do you need to know before investing in one?

Choosing an External Strobe It is always good to ask around for advice on choosing a strobe or have a look on one of the specialist underwater photography forums where users share their experiences with others such as Wetpixel or DivePhotoGuide.



(Above) This photo was taken in the Socorro Islands, Mexico and I was delighted that just one strobe could light up such a large subject as this Pacific Manta Ray. Taken with a Fuji F30, Inon Fisheye Lens and Inon D2000 Strobe with -0.5 diffuser ISO 200, f8, 1/60th sec (Right) Normal Stonefish with Just Flash. Taken with a Fuji F30, Inon Close-Up Lens and D2000 Strobe ISO 200, f5.6, 1/60th sec

Before using any external strobe with your camera, it is very important to cover up the external diffuser of your camera's housing so that the light from the built-in flash which triggers the external strobe to fire does not accidentally light part of your subject. This can cause shadow problems and it is very important to place the fibre optic cable directly onto the diffuser. I always would recommend a fibre-optic cable (don't forget a spare as they are very fragile) to be attached from the strobe and attached to the diffuser with a Velcro Foot to make sure that it will fire. Inon make black diffuser covers for their own fibre optic cables to fit into which replace the white ones on the wide-angle adaptors. (Note that the latest Inon S2000 model is now triggered by a wireless transmitter). If your camera has a Flash Exposure Compensation Setting such as the Canon Powershot series, it is useful to turn the flash setting to low to trigger the external



This photo was taken in Nuweiba with the strobe placed over the middle of the camera. A Number 1 Diffuser was used and the Flash Setting on Number 2. Fuji F31 with Fuji Strobe. ISO 100, f5.6 @ 1/60th sec

Bright sunlight has produced flare in the bottom left part of the photograph. Fuji F30, Inon Fisheye Lens and Inon D2000 Strobe with -0.5 diffuser ISO 100, f5.6, 1/60th sec

Remember when using your built-in flash or a strobe for the White Balance to be set on Auto. If it is accidentally left on Manual/Custom White Balance, subjects can have a very pink tone!

strobe as this will not only stop the compact's housing from heating up, but it will also make the batteries last longer.

The main question you need to ask yourself is what kind of photographs do you like and always check that the beam of light emitted from the strobe will be able to light up the subjects which you like to take photos of. If you are solely interested in capturing macro and close-up critters and their habitats or abstract shots, then a small strobe such as an Intova, Fuji, Nano or Epoque 150 DS Strobe will suffice.

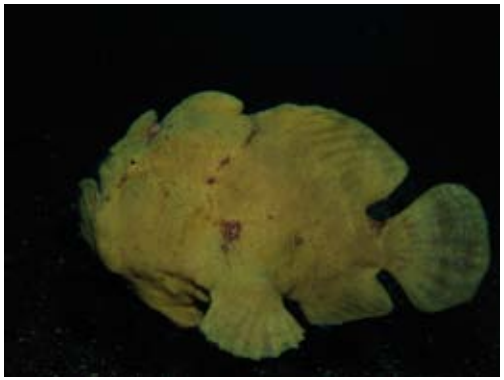
With the Intova, Fuji or Nano models, it is important to synchronise the camera with the flash unit itself by placing them opposite each other. The picture which is overexposed indicates which setting the flash unit should be kept on. These kits come with a set of three different diffusers and normally I find the Number 1 diffuser to be adequate for most situations giving a nice even coverage to macro subjects. In the picture shown here of the Moray Eel which was taken with a Fuji F30 and a Fuji strobe, it has worked extremely well here to light up not just the moray eel but also it's habitat adding extra punch and definition.

Wide Angle Strobes For those looking to capture vibrant reef scenes, turtles, other divers or wanting the flexibility of being able to light up most subjects underwater, a strobe with a larger coverage of light is necessary. For more creative possibilities, it is always better to have a camera with at least control over the aperture settings to be able to control exposure of your chosen subject.

A fantastic entry level strobe for any enthusiast is the Epoque 230 DS or the Sea & Sea's YS 27. They can be used with either the Epoque or Inon wide angle lenses. All you need to do to take beautiful vibrant pictures of such subjects is to get close and staying within a foot works best to bring out rich, punchy colours. These strobe give a coverage of 110 degrees with the diffuser and are triggered by the internal flash of your camera using a fibre optic cable. As mentioned before, always stick the little velcro pad on the diffuser of the camera and cover with duck tape or black velcro to avoid any light escaping and giving backscatter issues.

The only thing you need to remember is if shooting where there is plankton, nutrients or maybe divers in front of you kicking up sand, then a strobe will illuminate all of the particles.

For those who are thinking of progressing to a D-SLR set-up further



Giant Frogfish can be truly enormous subjects to photograph, and here as I didn't have my wide angle lens to be able to get close to the subject and fit the whole subject in, two strobes were really needed to be able to light up the whole of the frogfish as he was swimming past me. However, instead I focused on just the face of the frogfish and my one strobe did a great job in lighting the subject. Canon Ixus 980. ISO 200, f8, 1/500th sec

on, then a strobe such as Sea & Sea's YS 110 or for those using Inon's Fisheye Lens with their compact, the Inon D2000, Z240 or latest model S2000 will bring out the full potential and creativity using both the lens and the strobe together. The photo pictured here from Ras Mohammed was taken using just one Inon D2000 strobe with a Fuji F30 and Inon's 165 Fisheye Lens giving fantastic vibrant colour to the subject. The only thing to watch out for is glare from the sun at the bottom left or right of your photograph.

A modelling light on a strobe can also be a very useful feature, especially on a night dive to help your camera focus on the subject underwater. Simply press the button on the back of your Epoque 230 DS or Inon strobe and either a laser or a light will be emitted for a short period of time. I use the Red Filter with my Inon Strobe when using the modelling light as it helps not to scare the creatures at night. Some guests ask me about torches for modelling lights, but from experience, pointing a torch light in front of a shy subject, especially a sea-horse, not only can the light damage the subject's eyes, but subjects such as puffer fish will be even more determined to look the other way!

One Strobe or Two Course Guests always ask me if it is necessary to shoot with one strobe or two. This again depends on your subject and what you like to take pictures of. One strobe is enough for close-up and larger subjects, but two strobes can really help to give an extra dimension to a photograph as well as being able to photograph even larger subjects. The second strobe will normally be set at a lower power to act as a fill-in light for the subject. Diffusers for both strobes are highly recommended and also that the strobes are placed as far away from the camera as the arms will permit. Two strobes are ideal for giving gorgeous shots of wrecks covered with corals or reefs.

TTL or Slave Some strobes work by a system called TTL which means Through The Lens. This is where the camera reads the amount of light emitted from the camera and lights the subject accordingly. However, in bright, shallow conditions this may not work adequately. It is nice to be able to get used to using the Manual Settings on a strobe and by simply turning the dial either to the left or to the right, the adequate lighting setting can be found very easily. Slave strobes work by the user setting the dial to the appropriate Guide Number found on the strobe's dial which matches your set aperture. Again, this can simply be adjusted by the user and with practice, the correct setting can easily and quickly be found.

Positioning of Strobe Again this is very dependent on your subject and some prefer to shoot with the strobe at a 45 degree angle with the strobe placed on the left-hand side of your camera. However, this can sometimes cause a shadow to the other side of your subject where the light hasn't been able to reach. Placing the strobe over the middle of the camera can give a nice even light over far more of your subject and has been used for all of the pictures shown.

Finally always remember not to get too close to other underwater photographers with strobes as theirs can set yours off underwater and vice-versa. Before you know it all your battery power could disappear. And of course, don't forget to pack spare or rechargeable batteries, especially when shooting in colder waters.

Video Mode The video mode can be one of the most overlooked features on a compact camera, but for me, this is what makes a compact camera

underwater so versatile and a fantastic way to bring home wonderful holiday memories. Some of the newer models such as the newer Canon Ixus 990 or Sea & Sea's 1200 both have High Definition Movie Capability and can be played back on an HD TV. Most of the compacts record in Quicktime Format at 30 fps and simple editing can be done and music easily added.

The beauty of the Canon models is that the Manual White Balance Setting can be used whilst in video mode, as can the ability to record in Black and White and Sepia. This is perfect with a wide-angle lens for wreck scenes, giving them a creative feel. I use the Macro Setting whilst in movie mode to make sure that my subject is as sharp as possible underwater. The Casio Models also have access to the White Balance settings as well as being able to change the exposure as well.

For those compacts which don't have access to the Manual White Balance Mode, then an Auto- Magic or UR Pro Filter is essential to capture the true colours underwater.

Whilst videoing with any camera, but even more so with a compact, it is extremely important to stay as still as possible and to move the camera slowly, panning with the subject and avoiding any extreme jerky movements. The zoom facility cannot be accessed in the movie mode so make sure that you are close to your subject, filling up the frame but without disturbing anything around you. Subjects can look better going from left to right, but naturally this can depend on the subject.

I hope you will now feel as confident as my course guests do to get up and running using your compact and experimenting with the many different controls that you have. It all takes time and lots of practice. Remember that if you are taking one nice picture out of 100 you are doing really well. Think about your subject underwater before you take a photo, check that the background compliments the subject and be aware of the marine environment around you.

If you have any questions, then feel free to drop me an email at maria@oceanvisions.co.uk or why not just drop me a line to let me know how you are getting on.

Wishing you all a wonderful summer full of fantastic underwater photo opportunities.

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Special thanks to Ocean Optics for their help in supplying equipment.

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