

Compose yourself

by Mark Webster

How often have you seen a competition winning picture and thought to yourself 'I've got one just like that!', but then realised that whilst the subject may be the same yours maybe hasn't got quite the same impact? What is it that makes one shot a picture of a fish and another a competition winner? The answer is almost certainly in the composition of the image and if you are prepared to concentrate some of your efforts in this direction you can easily make a seemingly dull subject look much more striking.

Most of us will have imitated the images of other photographers and perhaps without realising it applied some of the rules of composition. There are many books available on land photography which contain detailed descriptions of the rules of composition and how they need to be followed to produce a technically perfect and pleasing photograph. To begin with you may wish to apply these rules rigidly until they become familiar. Eventually you will instinctively follow the rules of composition and automatically apply a horizontal or vertical format to a subject and arrange the elements of picture without a conscious effort. So first we need to examine a few of these basic conventions, but remember they are only guides and we should not become obsessed with composing according to the rules as very often an image which breaks them all can be your most successful !

The most basic tool is the rule of thirds, which has been used by all the great classical photographers. Essentially it divides the image into nine equal sections by drawing three imaginary horizontal and three vertical lines through the frame. This enables the photographer to position key elements of the image within, or at the intersection of these areas to create a flow and a



The centre of interest in this picture is obviously the fish. The remaining picture area is filled by moderate diagonals which support the fish placed in the centre 'third'. Nikon F90X, 60mm micro, Subal housing, F11 @ 60th , YS50/30 flash. 100ASA.

Wide angle pictures often present a variety of options when composing the picture. Avoid the temptation to shoot the first location, be patient and look for the most striking composition. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th , YS120 flash. 100ASA.





Although fish may not pose obligingly on a diagonal, you can remedy this by simply twisting your camera until the correct composition appears. Nikon F90X, 105mm micro, Subal housing, F11 @ 60th, YS50/30 flash. 100ASA.



Even the simplest of compositions can be improved by observing the rule of thirds and diagonal composition. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, F8 @ 60th, YS120 flash. 100ASA.

central focal point in the composition. For example, the most important feature of a fish will be its face or eye and mouth and these would be composed perhaps in the lower third of the frame to lead the viewer's eye over the subject. By using the rule of thirds you can achieve a better sense of balance in an image before you release the shutter.

A well composed image will lead the viewer's eye to the focal point of the image. This may be the face of a fish or marine animal, an anemone or coral or a diver examining or searching for marine life. Whatever it is, the viewer must be able to immediately realise where the focal point is and what the photograph is trying to

convey.

Perhaps the most popular method is to compose the main subject along a diagonal line running through the image which pulls the viewer's eye towards the focal point. Using the example of the fish once again, you might position the fish diagonally in the image, passing through two or more of the "rule of third zones" which leads the viewer's attention towards the head or eye of the fish. If the image were a close up of the head of the same fish then perhaps you would position the eye and mouth on an imaginary diagonal line to balance the photograph. This method is used time and time again in all types of photography, sometimes in a striking and obvious

manner, whilst others are more subtle but none the less powerful.

Staying with our fish, now consider the perspective of the image. A side on shot, even composed diagonally will look flat and lack depth. But if the animal is positioned diagonally moving towards the camera instead then an impression of depth or length is achieved with perhaps the added impression of movement towards the camera. Look for backgrounds that contrast well with the main subject so that it stands out against it. Look also for opportunities to get below your subject to gain an upward view against open water towards the surface, which creates good contrast and that impression of distance behind it.



Even in macro photography the opportunity to frame the subject will arise regularly. Wait for the right moment or change the orientation of the camera to achieve the most balanced composition. Nikon F90X, 105mm micro, Subal housing, F11 @ 60th, YS50/30 flash. 100ASA.

Perspective is a particularly important consideration in wide-angle photography. You can use the diagonal line of the reef or a wreck to lead the eye away into the distance, perhaps towards the sun bursting through on the surface, to create a feeling of depth. This can be further enhanced by introducing an element of scale perhaps by having a small subject in the foreground, which is dwarfed by the background, or by including something larger in the distant background such as a diver or a dive boat on the surface. You can see that sometimes these elements are doing more than one job and it is often the subtle combination of techniques which is most successful in transmitting that feeling of "being there" to the viewer.

With experience you will learn to dissect the image you are viewing through the viewfinder and examine its compositional elements. By changing your position and twisting or moving the camera or just changing the format from horizontal to vertical, you can vary the composition until it is arranged in a pleasing or striking manner before you release the shutter. However, don't be afraid to break these conventions if they don't appear to work. Many of the most memorable images ignore them completely, so you must not become a slave to the rules of composition. Practice and develop your own style which uses the elements which suit your photographs, but above all don't lose sight of the fact that you are meant to enjoy it!

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