

A conversation with...

Martin Edge

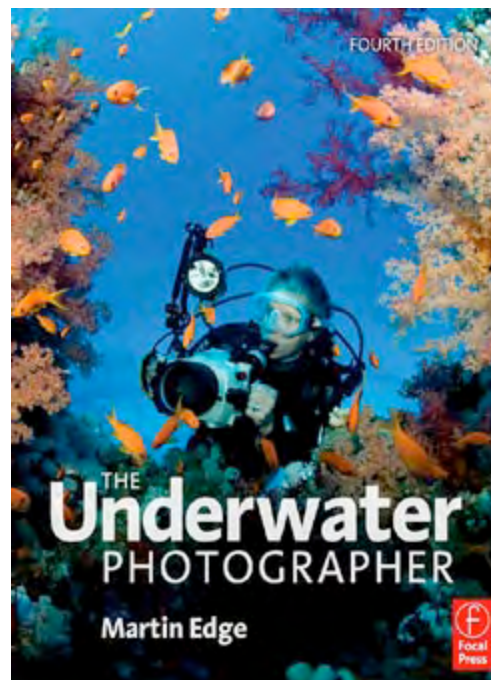
by Alex Mustard

I am fortunate to meet many underwater photographers on my travels and the conversations we have shared continue to help my photography improve. The more views and opinions I am exposed to, the more I learn and the wider my knowledge base. My aim in this series of articles is to share these chats with a wider audience.

My victim this month is Martin Edge. Martin is considered the master of teaching underwater photography who has helped countless photographers not just grasp the basics, but excel all the way to the top. His book, *The Underwater Photographer*, published by Focal Press, is widely regarded as THE reference for underwater photographers combining simple to follow explanations, real world advice and a detailed coverage of the subject. With the brand new, completely re-written 4th Edition being released imminently, I was keen to quiz Martin about the new book, but I was also interested in trying to understand what has made him such a successful

teacher and communicator. I also wanted to chat about his personal underwater photography, which does not always receive the attention it deserves, and his love of innovative techniques.

More than 30 years have passed since Martin Edge could be considered a newbie, but after speaking to him, I believe his ability as a teacher of underwater photography is intrinsically linked with the challenges of his formative photo years. Born in the landlocked English county of Staffordshire, “with no interest in diving” and from a family “devoid of anyone artistic, either musicians or painters”, Martin joined the police force aged 19, in 1974. In 1976, he married Sylvia, and in 1977 they moved, with work, to Dorset on the south coast. It was here he got his first taste of diving, when a fellow police officer suggested he gave it a go. “These were the days before widespread diving certification, we just went in and I loved it. I was hooked and Sylv and I joined a local dive club.”



The cover for the forthcoming 4th Edition of The Underwater Photographer.

One wouldn't normally expect the British police force to be a place to nurture artistic talents, but more than once it played a key role in Martin's photographic development. “My partner, at the time, in the Vice Squad was an avid [land] photographer and he persuaded me to hire a Nikonos III for my first ‘tropical’ trip to the Spanish island of Minorca. I knew nothing of f-stops or shutter speeds,



Martin Edge, at his house where we spoke for this interview, with one of the scrapbooks he kept in his early days, filled with inspirational images cut or copied from the pages of books and magazines.

but he taught me the basics. The day before we left, I called into Peter Rowlands' place, Ocean Optics, which at the time was near Battersea power station in London. He hired me an Oceanic 2000 flashgun.”

“When we got to Minorca the compressor was broken, so we spent the week snorkelling. Peter had suggested settings of F8 at 1/60th. I got my slides developed and they all



An article on balanced light by Martin from the Peter Rowlands' original Underwater Photography Magazine in 1988.

Peter developed the original Underwater Photography Magazine into Sport Diver, the cover here noting its incorporation, and featuring Martin's watershed jellyfish photo.

which he put together with AV expert Jim Eldridge. It was a poignant time because his daughter, Katie, was born with cerebral palsy and Martin recalls how working on the AVs helped pass the evenings between hospital visits. Martin and Jim premiered "Sea Of Dreams" based on photos from the Red Sea at BSoUP, and the BSoUP newsletter recalls that uniquely it received a "spontaneous standing ovation" from the audience of experienced underwater

photographers.

"Sea Of Dreams was followed up with "Imaginations" set in the Maldives, which we launched at Brighton in 1987, following Stan Waterman on the stage. I remember Kurt Amsler being very encouraging. We were the first to do it with underwater pictures, so we got invited to film festivals across Europe. At a Festival in Antwerp, Jim and I turned

up to the Gala Dinner in our dickey bows and found we were completely overdressed. The only other people who were similarly dressed were Hans and Lotte Hass, so the four of us spent a delightful evening together. In fact we were almost inseparable from that moment on at the event."

His awarding winning breakthrough images in 1980s were the result of hard graft, combining his own ideas with the knowledge interrogated from the top shooters of the day. Police detective training has its uses! "Every month Bob [Wrobel, Martin's long time UW photo buddy] and I were asking questions at BSoUP. We'd work out ahead of time a list of questions for different photographers and I used to say to Bob 'Go and ask such and such this, and ask it like this', while I talked to someone else. I got to talk to Doubilet, Howard Hall, Pete Rowlands, Georgette [Douwma], Mike Valentine, Scoonsey [Peter Scoones], Linda Pitkin. I wanted to know how they had got their best shots. The Police Force taught me how to interview people and get them talking! I wasn't bothered about the settings, I was using the same settings as the best photographers, I wanted to know about the motivation and the mind set that brought the really exceptional images."

"I remember asking Pete Scoones in detail about the lighting in one of

his famous shots and his response was 'I've never been asked that question before.' And he answered it. He knew exactly what I wanted to know. Rowlands did too." Martin's approach was a bit like reverse engineering, he figured out recipes on how to create beautiful images. He taught himself and his approach proved perfect for explaining to others how to do it, too.

The watershed in his development came on an early dive club trip to Cornwall. Despite the expense and long journey, Martin chose to skip the organised diving and snorkel to photograph a jellyfish he had spotted in a tide pool. "It was an important decision. It was a photo that I felt I created, made happen, rather than had just taken on a dive. That was the moment the penny really dropped. The photo did well in everything I entered it. It has been in all my books, it was the moment I realised what went into great photos and that underwater photography had nothing to do with diving."

So to the 4th Edition of The Underwater Photographer. There is no doubt that digital underwater photography has matured a great deal in the last few years, but having poured so much into the very popular 3rd Edition, the man himself was less sure. "When I wrote the 3rd Edition, I felt that's it there is nothing else to say. Although the book was pitched to

cover both film and digital, the focus was pretty much all digital. So when I was asked to do a 4th Edition, which was about a year ago, before agreeing I asked myself has enough changed? And after a couple of weeks' research I convinced myself it had. In actual fact, so much new material has come up that my initial writing schedule of 3 months has ballooned to a year. I have even given up my golf for it."

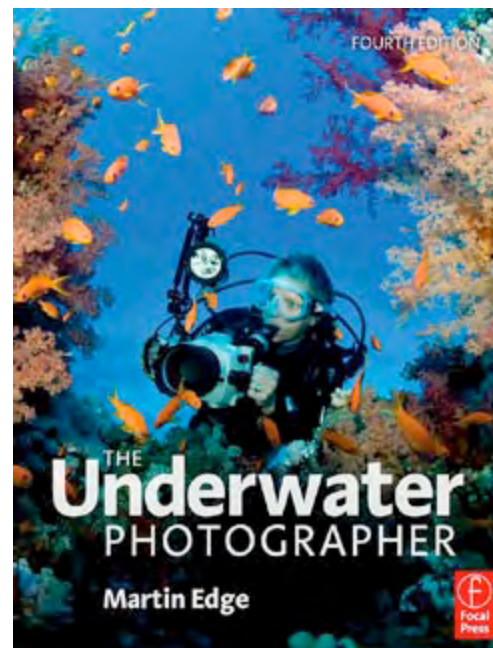
The new book is due out in early November and as he tells me about it, it is clear that Martin is chomping at the bit to see what people make of it. "We cover all the big topics, but it is also packed full of little tips and tricks that I do all the time, almost sub-consciously, that I have never written or seen anyone else mention. I actually carried a pen and piece of paper with me twenty-four-seven for the last year, and every time something came into my head about underwater photography I wrote it down. I am sure that everything I know, can think of and do is in this bloody book! And it is going to be a big book."

The 4th Edition promises to be encyclopaedic in its coverage, but one of the reasons for the popularity of Martin's books is that he tells readers what he thinks. Sometimes endlessly listing all the options available can leave the reader confused. Martin will give you the options and then what

he recommends. "In the introduction I say that my intention is to produce the most comprehensive book on underwater photography. However, I also make the point that this is underwater photography through the eyes, mind and philosophy of Martin Edge. And you've got to make sure you seek out other opinions too, because other people will agree and disagree on all manner of things."

That said, Martin has asked a number of underwater photographers to contribute chapters and the opinions of others are also woven into the main text. He reminds me that I am not the only one with a Dictaphone, "You know when I taped you in the car, when we were chatting? I used all that!"

As a photographer, Martin is driven by innovation, yet his own photography is often overlooked artistically, as his shots are usually dissected for teaching purposes. "When people like us are trying to push the boundaries, you are talking about a chinks of light. You're not going to come up with a whole technique that has never been done. We have to find the little thing, that was perhaps passed over before and exploit it. For example, recently I have been playing with higher ISOs and shooting right at the end of dusk. Technically over exposing, so the water is light instead of dark. I am



The cover for the forthcoming 4th Edition of The Underwater Photographer.



Martin Edge in 2009.

playing with wishy-washy textures in the water, which gives the ocean a unique blurred look. If that makes sense? I'm talking really dark, ISO 1600 at 1/8th second. I think it's exciting. The key to finding images that exploit the high ISO capability of the latest cameras is to think 'where is it dark?' and shoot there. At these exposure my torch has the power of a HMI light."

And his closing advice for innovation, "Go and play, set dives aside to be wild, free and silly. So much of what I have found that works has come from mad ideas!" The underwater photography world awaits the 4th Edition of The Underwater Photographer, by Martin Edge, with baited breath.

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