How can you be so happy when your photos suck?

by Craig Reynolds

The learning curve for underwater photography has been steep ... and I'm still on the up-slope. Last weekend I took a Dhow up the eastern side of the Musandam peninsula with a semi-regular dive buddy Juraj for a 2 dive day. This is the second outing for my newly purchased Fantasea Remora flash and I was hoping to try out some techniques I'd been reading about.

I used the strobe for the 1st time on our last dives and, frankly, the results were very disappointing, not because the Remora is lacking in any way (from my limited knowledge of these things it seems a good unit) but because I didn't actually know what I was doing.

So, having sifted through the badly exposed, out-of-focus, disappearing-fish-ass dross I produced last time, I realised I needed a serious dose of RTFM and spent the next few weeks with my nose buried in an UW-how-to photo book, combing the net and also time on the marvelous UWP magazine site. All my reading showed just how little I was prepared for this underwater malarky, but it gave me a set of objectives for the day's diving:

1. Manual everything - As far as possible I would use only manual settings, bearing in mind that I don't use an SLR but a compact so some things are auto whether I like it or not. My Nikon P5100 and Fantasea housing allows me to set shutter speed, aperture and white balance manually, but focus is auto-only.

2. Balanced Exposure - I wanted to learn to adjust the shutter, aperture and flash output so that the main subject and background are similarly exposed. There are times when you want the foreground to stand out (or even the background) but I was aiming to understand the interplay between the flash power settings and the aperture, especially where the subject is much closer than the surroundings.

3. More Time - I wanted to take my time on a subject, the temptation to rush about and fire away at everything is great. I would focus my attention on a particular subject and methodically work the scene. As Mies van der Rohe said 'Less is more'.

3. Review and Correct - Previously I didn't take advantage of that big LCD panel to review what I had just shot and then to correct settings accordingly. This was intensely stupid of me as the ability to review your photos on-the-spot underwater, rather than hours later back on land, is probably one of the biggest advantages of the advent of digital cameras (an UW photographer I once met who, at the time, had just taken the digital plunge reckoned the biggest advantage was the ability to "run out of air before running out of 'film'!")

So, after all this mental preparation, how did things turn out?

Well .... erm ... very sucky to be honest!

However, in my defence the water was very dirty, algae green and with a lot of suspended matter and even shooting without the flash produced a snowstorm look, as you can see in the photo right.

But I managed to achieve the things I set out to do, so all in all I'm pleased with the results, even though the pictures are pretty horrible from all the floating crud.

Let's have a look at three images from this trip and what I've learnt from them:

The first image (Above) is a bed of coral:

I'm not really sure what the yellow thingy is, but I liked the splash of yellow amongst the more monochromatic bed of coral, so I placed it in the foreground, used it as the focus point and attempted to illuminate it with the flash while ensuring the

background isn't too dark. I placed the strobe off to one side, but even so the vast amount of floating crud has peppered the image, too slow a shutter speed has resulted in backscatter streaks. Also, to the left of the yellow thingy (sorry, I'll find the correct Latin name and edit this some time) are some anemones that have been totally blown out. Tsk, tsk ... I didn't review it in the LCD as I should have!

Lessons Learnt: Composition is okay, exposure is reasonably balanced but watch the flash position and keep reviewing the images, depth of field could be better and a faster shutter would have help with the surge.

The second images (Above and Centre) are of a dead Red Snapper:

At first glance this dead fish being consumed by hermit crabs is a technically appalling picture, probably on subsequent glances too, but I really liked the gloomy mood. I'd shot a few images before reviewing, when I realised things weren't right, only to discover that the synch-cord had come loose from the housing and so the strobe had not been firing. As I rectified this, some other divers swam by and stirred up even more debris. Generally I'd give up at this point but it was a good opportunity to try the exposure thing again as I was quite deep and the light had faded a lot. A few shots more and all I had to show was a few flash-lit, but technically appalling, shots.

I also discovered that my Fantasea Nano focus light was off, it works by turning the head as if you are unscrewing it and I guess that as I descended the pressure increase caused it to switch off. Combining depth and murky water meant that all the reds had been attenuated, so there is little I could do about the green cast in either shot and as I said before, white balance correction was not a priority at this time.

Lessons Learnt: Check your gear regularly and make sure everything is connected. Make sure your focus light is on, the first image is not sharp at all, the second is a bit better but still way off. Fin carefully to avoid stirring up sediment.

The final image is an interesting sea urchin bedecked with empty shells:

The sea urchin shot is much better. The subject is sharp and the lighting has improved a lot, the urchin stands out but the background isn't obscure black. But the floating bits are still very prevalent and no amount of side-lighting by the flash could hide this. In fact the flash is a bit too far to the left so that side of the urchin is a touch overexposed, while the light falls of quickly to the right. The overexposure was not obvious in the LCD and my camera does not seem to have a histogram (perhaps another RTFM session is called for, it could be I just missed it.)

Lessons learnt: Review your exposure carefully and check the histogram if you have one. Be careful of having the flash at extreme angles, maybe I'll invest in a second unit for more even lighting once I get the hang of things. A smaller aperture would have given a bit more depth-of-field, so the rear of the urchin would be in better focus. Overall I'm quite pleased with this one, ignoring the speckles, it's a passable shot if not a great one.

So, can I be happy even though my photos suck?

Actually, yes ... a definite yes!

I have learnt more about the strobe, aperture and shutter speed interplay in two dives then I thought possible and have seen how applying the techniques I've read about have generally improved my results.

I've got better ones from before the Remora on my website, honest gov!

Now let's hope for some clear water!

Craig Reynolds

Craig Reynolds is generally sunburnt and often in need of a shave and has been diving on and off since the last of the Horse Collar BCs (remember them?) Although having long time passion for photography he has only recently started underwater photography, he considers it the hardest style of photography he's tried. You can see more of his images, both underwater and otherwise, on

www.sunburntandinneedofashave.com

and his blog is

www.sunburntandinneedofashave.blogspot.com

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Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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