

Over/under photography

By Peter Verhoog

I have always been a great fan of this kind of photography. It gives you an opportunity to establish a visual relation between the worlds above and below the surface. And they can also be very funny. When traveling in the Netherlands and abroad, my wife Georgina Wiersma and I are always looking for situations that we can use for a 'new' shot.

During an assignment on Aldabra (Seychelles), it was my task to take pictures of a group of children, who had won a trip to this gigantic atoll in a contest about the environment. They had to explore the Aldabra Atoll and all its creatures, above the surface, but also in the water. As I had visited the island before, I knew the lagoon was often full of young black reef sharks. I decided this was a shot I had to make... the children in the water, surrounded by sharks. My wife was a bit hesitant. As an experience shark diver, she knows sharks are not dangerous, but she was afraid that the children would fall over or make unexpected moves, that could cause the sharks to bite.

It took some persuasion to get the kids into the water, but finally, I could start taking pictures. One of the

pictures I made has been used many times in all kinds of publications, including our own last book: Sharks - Close Encounters.

The Seychelles offered me more exciting photo opportunities, like the circling sharks, the wonderful turtle in a magnificent lagoon and the 'Bijoutier coconut', a very 'staged' shot. After a conversation with some other guests, about the way coconuts are distributed among the Seychelles islands. Many coconut palms grow beside river or the sea, and drop their seeds into the water. The seeds float in the water, often with the new shoot emerging, until they reach soil or a sandy beach where they can take root and grow into a tree. We decided we definitely had to illustrate this process. Our first step was finding the perfect seedling. We roamed the island of Alphonse, looking for our perfect subject.

When we had finally succeeded, we asked our boat driver to make a stop at the lagoon of Bijoutier, a kind of uninhabited 'paradise island'.

(Top) Nikon D70, Sealux housing,
Nikon 10.5 mm f/10 @ 1/250 ISO 200



"The ins and outs of over under"

Clean the dome of the underwater housing thoroughly with a detergent without lemon. Rinse the dome carefully without touching it (and do not touch it at all before you're finished). All drops of water will run off the glass smoothly. Check the dome regularly to see if there are drops and the glass, and shake the housing a bit to remove them.

Before taking a picture, measure the light above and under the surface. Calculate the average of these two f/stops and set the camera to the average f/stop. With a automatic (pocket camera), the camera will determine the f/stop.

As the subject under water is 'closer' to the camera than the subject above the surface, it's a matter of experimenting to get the whole picture sharp. Testing this beforehand, for instance in a swimming pool, is the way to achieve this.

It's best to use a fisheye lens.



(Top left) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f/9 @ 1/500 ISO 200

(Above) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f/10 @ 1/320 ISO 200

(Left) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f/8 @ 1/500 ISO 200

Unfortunately, the tide was extremely low, so we had to walk through the lagoon all the way. We expected this journey to last around 15 minutes, but in reality it took 40 minutes under the blazing midday sun. We were carrying snorkel, mask, fins and water and had our heads covered. When we got close to the island, we heard the cries of the white fairy tern. Still panting, I started taking pics immediately, as the tide was still dropping rapidly. Georgina made a small dam with her fins as there was a nasty current going out

and the coconut was bopping on the water. Walking back to the boat took us another 40 gruesome minutes. We drank all our water, and we started seeing strange black shadows. But at least, we had the shot.

During another assignment on the Seychelles, with a research team of National Geographic, I took the shots of the grouper on a fishing line and the floating piece of bamboo with the barnacles. These shots have totally 'different' subjects, and stand out among all the normal 'underwater



(Top left) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f8 @ 1/500 ISO 200

(Above) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f8 @ 1/320 ISO 200

(Left) Nikon D70, Sealux housing, Nikon 10.5 mm f9 @ 1/320 ISO 200, 2 Nikon SB 800 strobes

shots'. I love making them, they show the subtle beauty on the boundary between water and air.

I met my final over/under challenge when the editor of the Dutch National Geographic Magazine asked me to do a small 'over/under' portfolio. But... he wanted Dutch subjects. The magazine already published the picture of the Egyptian geese previously, as an illustration for an article on non-endemic species in the Netherlands, written by Georgina.

I decided I had to 'go Dutch' all the way and started looking for typically Dutch subjects. The water lilies made a nice picture, but it took a long time in the water before I could finally 'capture' a bee in the shot. The red river lobsters (imported from the United States, that have now colonized many Dutch sweet waters) lived in the same city pond. We do not have clear waters here, and it is difficult to get a clear shot, that shows the world above the surface and the



world under the surface. Thinking of Holland, many people think of windmills. I had to walk many meadows before I found a windmill that overlooked a ditch with water lilies.

My 'piece de resistance' however was a nesting toot. It took me nearly three days in a dirty canal before the bird was used to me, and allowed me to take pictures. Half the fun was waiting for the streetcar to appear in the background, but every time it rode by, the toot would look at it, nearly spoiling the picture.

When I presented the picture to the editor of National Geographic, they asked me how I made it and

how close I could get to the bird. 40 centimeters (16 inches), I told them. They thought it impossible to approach a toot this close and asked me to show the NEF file, which I did.

The picture made it to the final of the Wild Photographer of the Year contest, but was unfortunately not awarded. Next time better!

When the portfolio was finally published, I got countless mails from topside nature photographers. All of a sudden, they were interested in over/under photography....

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