

An Alternate View

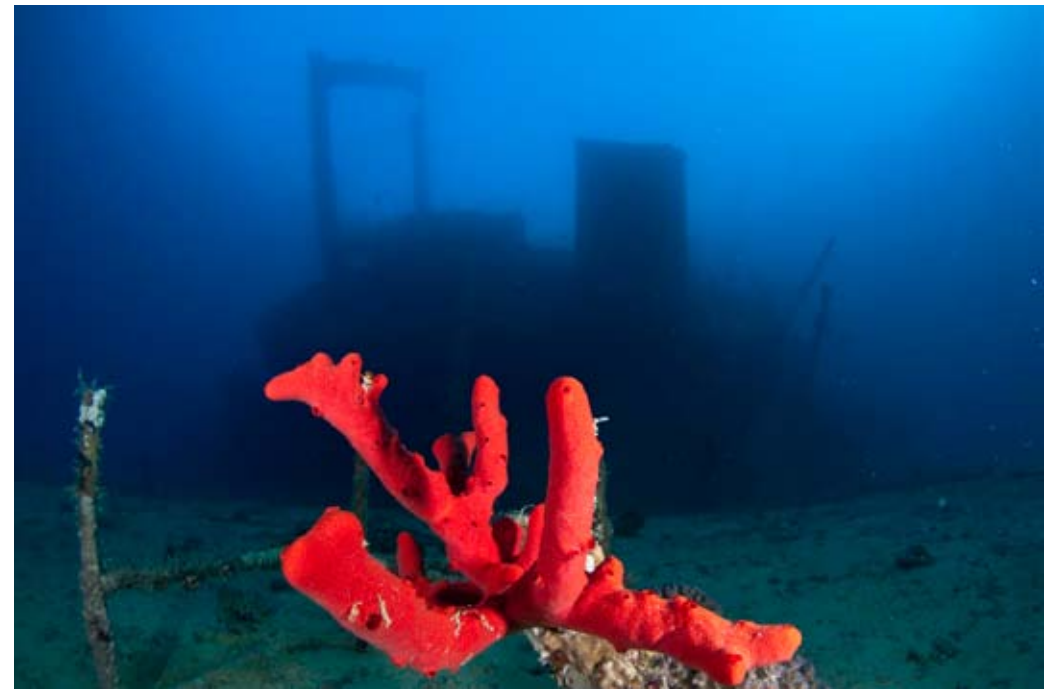
By Mark Webster

I am sure that most of us are familiar with the old adage that familiarity can breed contempt. Whilst this may be a generalisation in life fortunately it does not usually apply to underwater photography. Repetitive diving of a particular site is normally a benefit as it allows us to get very familiar with the topography and habitats, the inhabitants of the site and any changes that may occur during the seasons as they come and go. All this helps you plan what to do with a dive perhaps targeting a particular subject or trying a new technique.

Even when travelling many of us will visit the same sites many times and often the temptation is to stick with what we know works in terms of subjects and techniques. After all, you will have spent a good deal of money getting to your destination and you don't want to come back disappointed. This attitude can be a hangover from the days of film for some of us (remember them?!) as often you did not get to see your results for a week or more after the return home and if you had not tested a new technique before departure then disasters often occurred. Having upgraded to a new digital camera presents another

temptation to shoot the same subjects in the same way as you may want to have images of these with increased resolution in your stock library. Obviously the biggest advantage of the digital age is the immediate review and assessment of success or failure, so now we are really not left with many excuses to experiment, but if you are like me you will know that it is still difficult to break free from the familiar.

A good example of this is wreck diving particularly in clear water. The wrecks at Abhu Nuhas in the Red Sea are very well known and photographed by hundreds of divers every month. When the conditions are good the temptation is normally to go for the big shot which shows the whole wreck or a large part of it and often produces stunning results, but of course very much the same as many other photographers produce. The advent of colour correction filters like the Magic Filter have done much to make these natural light images much more powerful, but we are all in danger of producing the same shot, which once in the bag may leave you feeling a little unfulfilled when you compare images on the surface after



Finger sponges with wreck of Giannis D in background, Abu Nuhas, Red Sea. Swim off the wreck and look for colourful foreground subjects to place in front of the wreck in near silhouette. This works well if the visibility is less than perfect and it is not possible to get a clear shot of a large section of the wreck. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/30.

the dive.

Having got the classic wreck shot in the bag it is maybe time to start a little lateral thinking and look for alternative or unconventional views of the wreck which might convey a slightly different message to the viewer. One approach is to look for less usual views of the wreck perhaps concentrating on a specific feature in the foreground and using other elements of the wreck as a backdrop

to add atmosphere and a sense of exploration. Having a diver in the picture may be a clichéd approach but can complete the image in many cases. In others it is sometimes preferable to just include the wreck and marine life which may convey a subliminal message of abandonment on the seabed.

There are numerous recognisable features and graphic shapes on wrecks which are often decorated or



5. Bow sprit supporting rings on the SS Carnatic, Abu Nuhas, Red Sea. Everybody shoots the graceful bow of the Carnatic, but entering the wreck can give an unusual view of this feature. Wait long enough and perhaps a fish will get inquisitive enough to pose in the circular frame of the rings. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/30.

covered by marine growth which can make very strong subjects. You can use strong diagonals and receding perspective to good effect to punch up the composition and add depth to the image, but you need to be cautious with straight lines if you are using a fish eye lens as the distortion may spoil a shot. But do consider also using the fish eye distortion creatively as well as some features may produce an interesting image when in CWFA

with a fish eye.

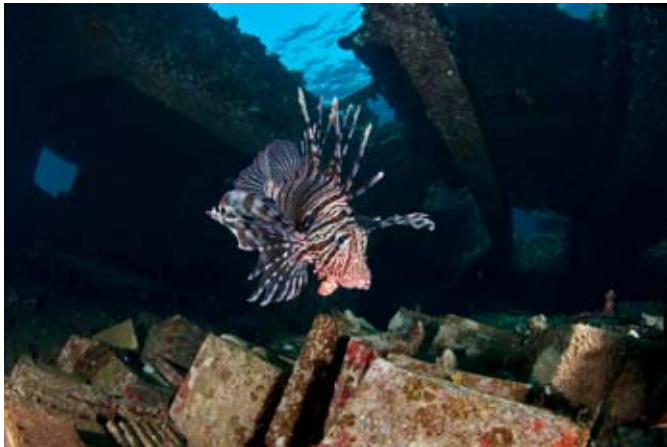
Penetrating the wreck is of course another option, but one that should not be taken lightly particularly if you have little experience of this. On some wrecks access and egress to the accommodation and holds is quite open and so penetrating presents no real hazards. Other wrecks are much more challenging and unless you know them well you should make sure that you have an experienced



Winch gear wheel on Giannis D bow, Abu Nuhas, Red Sea. The Giannis D bow has a number of winches and other rotating equipment which is now decorated with soft and hard corals which can make interesting graphic subjects. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f16 1/200.

guide to lead you. Inside you can capture images of the cargo, engine room, diver's exploring the interior or perhaps just the light penetrating from outside the wreck. One thing to remember is that silt and rust deposits collect inside a wreck and generally are not disturbed until a pair of fins does so. There is also the disturbance of rust and corrosion products by our exhaust bubbles and both these combined will spoil

internal visibility quite quickly for successful photography and of course present additional hazards for finding your way out again. So you need to pre-plan your shots if you can and work quickly once inside before the visibility degrades. A compromise is to look for areas like walkways and stairways that offer partial penetration but still retain some natural light and minimize the hazards and difficulties. Where ever the location in the



Lion fish in main hold of the Marcus, Abu Nuhas, Red Sea. When exploring inside a wreck look for opportunities to include marine life in the image using the shape of the wreck structure and external penetrating light as powerful negative space. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/30.

wreck there is always the possibility that you may encounter some marine life which can become a central or supporting element of the image.

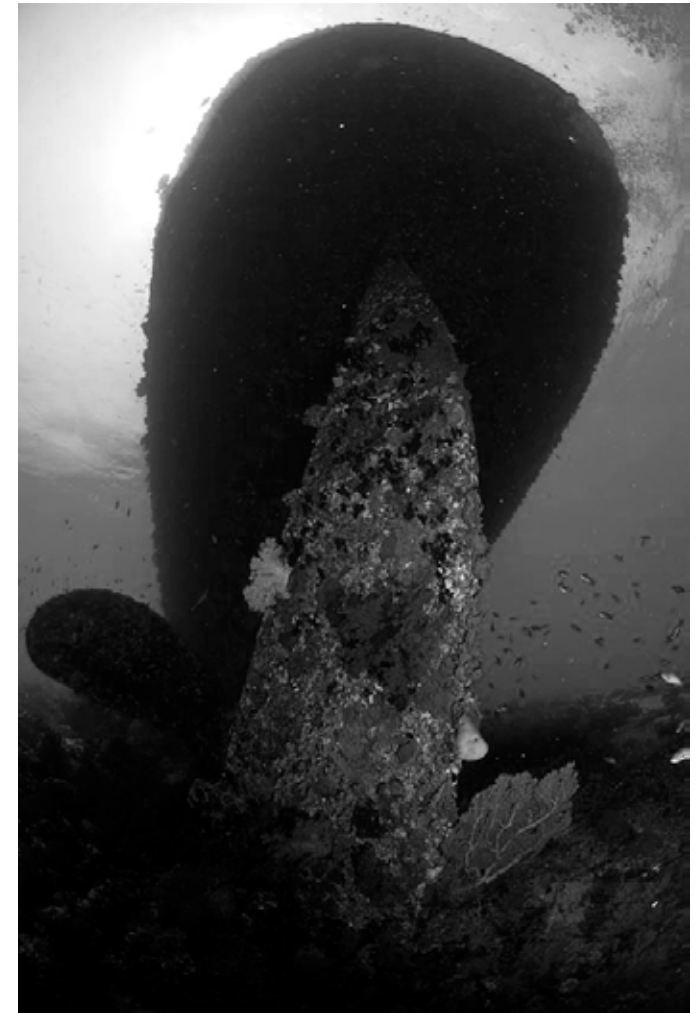
Sometimes we can become so focussed (no pun intended!) on photographing on or in the wreck itself that we might miss image opportunities remote from the wreck. There are often recognisable elements of the wreck that have broken away lying on the seabed close by or there may be a marine life feature that presents a good foreground image. Using these as a main subject with the wreck in the background, maybe in partial or total silhouette, presents a different view perhaps of the destruction of the ship or the notion that marine life will eventually engulf the wreck. This also gives the opportunity to move away from a group



Soft coral in fairlead on the stern of Marcus, Abu Nuhas, Red Sea. Sometimes man and nature combine to provide the perfect frame, in this case a solitary soft coral growing in a fairlead. Shoot a wide and tight view to vary the composition. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/200.

of divers that may be exploring the wreck with you, even if they are other (hopefully considerate!) photographers masses of bubbles and fins in the wrong place can obstruct your shot. So scout around the seabed a few metres away to see what is there – I once found the compass binnacle lying on the sand close to a well known wreck in the southern Red Sea which made an interesting foreground subject, however it was too great a temptation for someone else as it was not there a few months later! Moving off the wreck also may encourage fish to come and investigate you which again presents an opportunity for a different image with the wreck in the background.

Silhouettes are another option to consider and often ignored in our desire to record the



SS Kingston stern, Shag Rock, Gulf of Suez, Red Sea. A monochrome conversion can sometimes improve on a natural light shot that lacks colour and contrast, so it is worth experimenting before you finally reject an image as a failure. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, ISO 200 f8 1/60, converted to monochrome.



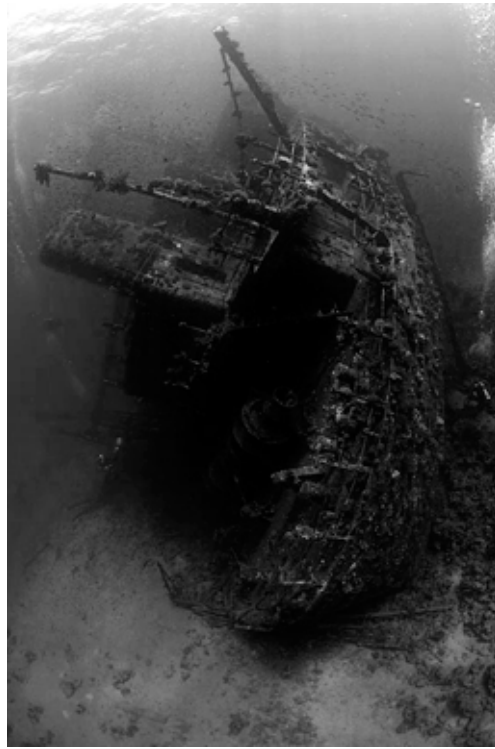
RIB, divers and Snell's Window. Snell's window appears most reliably early and late in the day when the sun is low and can provide a striking frame even for a simple subject like this. There may also be other opportunities on a shallow wreck to use this lighting feature as a background, but you will only see the window when looking through the viewfinder and a fish eye or extreme wide lens. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, ISO200 f16 1/125.



Soft coral with Giannis D funnel and accommodation and diver silhouette in background. This splash of colourful soft coral subtly implies that the remainder of the wreck is drab and monochromatic. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200 f16 1/200.

technicolour underwater world. They are fairly simple to execute once you have got the hang of how to meter the scene for the correct exposure. The temptation is to expose for the sunlight but this will lead to a mostly black image with a well exposed sun burst. The trick is to meter the surface some way off the sun itself so that the detail in the object to be silhouetted will be retained. If the sun is not directly behind your subject then you must accept that it will be largely over exposed and burnt out, but this should not matter too much as long as the main subject retains detail. Every subject is a little different so a little trial and error may be required to get the effect you are looking for. Using a faster shutter speed, say a minimum of 1/125, will ensure that you freeze the sun's rays and optimise the sun burst effect. You can target the whole wreck or large parts of it for silhouettes or seek out smaller details and shapes that can be positioned against the sun. Experiment, decide what works and use the delete button when it doesn't!

Another alternative to consider when using natural light only is black and white images. When film was our only choice we had to select colour or monochrome film before the dive. Now most digital cameras offer the option of shooting monochrome through the menu system (which depending on your camera/housing may allow you to switch underwater) or you can convert your colour images after the dive with a variety of methods dependant on your choice of software for post processing. If you are shooting in monochrome mode then the scene will need good contrast and tonal range to produce a strong image. Converting images after the event will naturally take some trial and error to find those that respond best to the change from colour to monochrome but it is worth persevering with



(Left) This is the now classic shot of the Giannis D shot with natural light and a Magic filter. You can change the mood and feel of this shot and others simply by converting it to a monochrome image or perhaps shooting in black and white during the dive. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Magic filter, ISO 200 f8 1/60.

(Right) This is the same image converted to monochrome in Photoshop. There are a variety of ways to convert to black and white dependant on which software package you use to post process your images. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Magic filter, ISO 200 f8 1/60, converted to monochrome.

as the results can be quite different the images that you may produce normally.

This alternate approach does not apply only to wreck sites of course, but to almost any familiar site or subject. So when you prepare for a dive at a favourite site, even if you are equipped with the usual lens and lighting configuration, try to apply a little lateral thinking and you will come back with a broader range of images for you portfolio and perhaps generate some additional ideas for the next dive there.

When you finish your dive it

does not necessarily mean the end of photo opportunities. As you leave bottom look directly up and consider the position of the sun and the effect it is having on the surface. When the sun is not directly overhead, the lighting effect known as Snell's window often appears when conditions are calm. This manifests itself as a partial or complete circle of light which can be captured with a fish eye or super wide lens, although you may need to move around a little and observe the surface through your viewfinder to get the best effect. Add schooling fish, a boat or a diver or all three if you are

lucky and you have some attractive compositions to record as you ascend or make your safety stop.

So the message is once you have shot the wreck itself in the usual way try scouting round for some more unusual views or subjects which might convey more about the

loss of the ship and will certainly expand your portfolio and provide extra material for a slide show or presentation to your dive club or friends and family.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk

UW Photo Workshops with Mark Webster in 2011
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