

Where next?

A beginners tale

By Gilbert Park

Land based photography has been a hobby for many years and when I took up diving four years ago it was natural that I started taking underwater photographs. I bought a Nikonos V and on my next trip to the Philippines clicked away merrily. When the prints came back I found out about the loss of red light at depth they all had a blue tinge! I bought a Sea and Sea YS50 strobe, to experiment with.

My next diving holiday was in the Dutch Caribbean. A PADI underwater photography course went a great way to helping understand the difficulties of underwater photography and even to get a few decent photographs. I realised that the standard 35 mm lens needed to be wider so I bought a Sea and Sea wideangle supplementary lens and viewfinder. The following years holiday showed some improvement, but the pictures were still not great.

Over a year passed until the next holiday, in Sharm el Sheik. The camera was serviced, an Ocean Optics close up kit bought, lots of film ordered and all the books reread. I was going to seriously get some good photographs this time.

One of the many good things about Sharm el Shaik is the one hour E6 processing in the centre of town, although I'm sure my buddies (all of whom were non photographers) weren't too amused about every evening having to drop them off and collect them later. But it let me take my photographs and see my mistakes, of which there were many and triumphs, of which there were few on the same day. The first day was a disaster. Trying to get back into diving and underwater photography at the same time was ambitious!

As the week progressed the diving and the photography got



better. The photography was still not right though. The first thing I noticed, I thought, was the lack of power of the strobe. Other pictures such as my friends being taught on the sandy bottom at a shallow depth seemed better.

When I got home I was puzzling over this problem and realised that the YS50 is not a very powerful strobe, the diffuser needed for the wide angle lens reduced the output and the wide angle converter. I decided I needed a new, more powerful strobe. Should I get one that I could use as part of a pair (and the connecting cable) or one that was powerful enough to use by itself? Whatever I did was going to cost about £500 - 1000. Then I discovered if I went double that I would need at least one new arm. Cost per arm £ 100 - 200.

The other problem was the framing. Trying to balance available light by looking through the viewfinder at the exposure information and framing through the optical viewfinder was not the easiest thing in the world for me, an occasional underwater photographer. Was it time to invest in a housed single lens reflex camera? My current land cameras include a Nikon F100 and an F801. Housings for both of these are available from Ikelite, Sea and Sea and Subal. The cost with port, gears etc ranged from £1200 to £2000 new!



Serious money was being discussed here. I visited many sites on the web to try and make the best decision. This added to the confusion.

Both Ocean Optics and Cameras Underwater both were very helpful but clearly wanted me to buy their products. The other thing I realised was that trading in my Nikonos V was not going to go far in paying for the new system. What to do? I am not a professional photographer and my Scottish upbringing made me feel nervous about spending thousands of pounds for something I may only use two or three weeks a year without being sure what I wanted. Second hand gear was one option, but even that was going to be expensive.



I decided that I would buy a new strobe. Whatever happened that was going to be useful. Then I contacted Regal Holidays and found they had a photographic holiday with Steve Smithson from the New Horizons Dive Centre I spoke with him at length. In the end I arranged to hire a housed F90x SLR and a prime 15 mm lens for the Nikonos V for that week. Now I could make my decision based on knowledge.

So it was I came to be in Hurgada with Steve Smithson and his “assistant” Richard Whiteley courtesy of Regal Holidays and Emperor Divers to spend six days improving my underwater photographic skills and deciding what to do next.

I had spoken to Steve on several occasions about what I wanted from the week. His first suggestion was that I tried using the Sea and Sea 15mm prime lens and matching viewfinder on my Nikonos. First dives on that day I did just that. One of the advantages of this course is that at the end of each day Steve processes the films and later that night we all met to constructively review our successes and failure.

At the end of the first day I learnt the need to get close to the subject and the importance of metering for the background. At the beginning of the second day I learnt the importance of reading instruction books. Two flashes into the first dive then nothing. Underwater I realised what the position “Accu” was for on my new strobe. Although I had religiously plugged it in every night not turning the switch to that position meant it didn’t charge. On the second dive it was ambient light

photography.

I continued with the 15mm lens using it for reef and wreck photography until the afternoon of day 5. For this dive I used all my own gear. For the night dive I used the 35mm lens and the Ocean Optics close up lens. The 35mm lens was crisp (see the octopus from the night dive). I just could not get to grips with the close-up attachment. The prongs were visible in every picture. The 15mm supplementary lens gave sharp results but only from about one meter away despite stopping the lens down. The first thing I had learnt on this trip was the need to be close and this stopped me.

During the week I also learnt how little I knew about the use of strobes underwater despite hours spent on the web. Power is not that important. As you dive red light starts to disappear noticeably at 8 - 10 metres. This is despite the hugely powerful strobe called the Sun being just above. The same will happen with a strobe, except the distance the light has to travel is double the strobe to subject distance. Anything more than two to three metres away is going to have a significant reduction in red. Buying the most powerful strobe may not be the answer after all.

At this point I knew why and what I was going to do. I was not going to buy a housing. They are not cheap, difficult to pack and terrifyingly expensive if they flood. I was going to buy a 15mm lens, viewfinder and the focusing aid that has two torches showing where the correct focusing spot was for the close-up lens. Relatively inexpensive and easy to pack.

I had booked a housing to hire for the last day so I tried a Sea and Sea 90x housing with a Nikon 90x body. The first dive I used a 20mm wideangle and the second a 60mm macro lens. What a mistake! I was hooked. Despite spending almost all of a week working hard with my Nikonos the pictures from these two dives were the best of the week and none of them were a struggle. Suddenly photography had become fun again.

Any one want to buy a Nikonous V? I have just bought a Subal housing for my F100 - fabulous!

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