

Born Free

by Tim Rock

Free diving and snorkeling are integral parts of underwater photography. In fact, you may be surprised at just how many photos are created without using any SCUBA gear at all. A couple of years ago I was talking with my longtime model Yoko Higashide. Although she is a dive guide and instructor, she told me she prefers free diving and snorkeling. So we planned a year of trips where SCUBA dive gear was not part of the kit we would pack.

Armed with mask, long fins and snorkel and a few cameras, we went to Ogasawara for dolphins and whales, Bimini for spotted dolphins, sharks and stingrays, Mozambique for whale sharks, humpbacks and mantas, Tonga for humpbacks and Palau for dolphins and mantas.

The results of these tankless trips very pleasantly surprised me. I came back not only with some compelling images of big fish and marine mammals, but also an array of varied shots we had taken in the shallows with wrecks, starfish, rippled sand, stingrays and other reefy stuff that those venues had to offer.

I live on Guam very close to one of our marine preserves and



Young humpback and Photographer Mark Strickland come face to face. Nikon D200 in Aquatica AD200 housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. 1/80th @ F5, 100 ISO and natural light in Vava'u, Tonga.

Bottlenose dolphins and model Yoko Higashide in Palau. Nikon D200 with Aquatica AD200 housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. 1/50th @ F6.3, 100 ISO and Ikelite strobes for fill at 1/8 power.

own a business that sits on one of the other Guam preserves. These are in shallow bays and offer lots of fish and coral life. So I am in the water a lot, sans tank, trying to use light and reef elements to make nice images on my lunch break or before I go to work.

It is a great challenge to just use your skills, as limited as mine may be, and the results can be stunning. The good news is that you don't have to be named Herbert Nitsch to do this. If you can dive down to 3-4 meters for 20-30 seconds, you are already on the right track. Here are some situations where snorkel and free dive photography is not only handy, it is preferable.





Saltwater crocodile, Palau Rock Islands. Canon 20D in Aquatica housing with Ikelite DS125 strobes and Canon 10-22 zoom lens. 1/2000th @ F16.

Mr. & Mrs. Big

Using simple equipment with large marine creatures like whale sharks, whales, dolphins and feeding mantas is not only the easy way to go, it is also the most effective and least intrusive. Some creatures just don't like bubbles. So SCUBA is out. In other cases, like trying to keep up with a whale shark or whale, SCUBA gear creates too much drag. You work more and burn up more air with the gear than without and don't get photos that are any better for the effort.

Even when a whale shark is

hardly moving, that big paddle of a tail pushes it along at a knot or so. You have to swim, sometimes swim hard, to get the shots you may want. Fly-bys are also common with whales and dolphins, where the boat drops you in the path of the creature and you have a very limited but excellent encounter that you can shoot as it comes, swims at or by you and allows you to keep up for a few fin kicks before all you see is tail or tails.

Mantas feed a lot on surface plankton. So dipping down past the plankton layer just a bit and shooting



Manta Ray in Guam's Tumon Bay marine preserve. Early morning natural light with manta swimming into light source using Nikon D200 in Aquatica AD200 housing with Tokina 10-17mm lens at 17mm. 1/100th @ F5.6. ISO 100.

them as they feed is also best done on snorkel. When they feed, they don't care about a human so much. Mantas march on their stomachs. Do not hinder them but grab the shot as they swim by, mouths agape.

Snorkeling and finning make all these encounters with large creatures a simpler and more effective affair.

Model and Specialty Shots

There is a good reason to use free diving and snorkeling for model shots.

When I use the term model here, I am not referring to a high fashion model slinking her way down the runway. I mean an underwater model, which requires special skills and knowledge on the part of the model, be the person male or female. Those include knowing the habits of many species of marine life and how to best approach them without scaring them. It requires being an excellent snorkeler and competent free diver. A model must also understand photography and lenses and be able to strike a pose in



Southern stingray and snorkeler Yoko Higashide at Honeymoon Bay, Bimini, Bahamas. Nikon D200 with Aquatica AD200 housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens 1/60th @ F6.3. ISO 100. and Ikelite strobes for fill at 1/8 power.

mid-kick. If you find a good person with most or all of these attributes, treat them well. These people are hard to find.

The reason for using a “model” is pretty simple. It adds a dimension to the image... another element of composition. It helps put the viewer in the model’s place. The person looking at your photo thinks “that could be me” and adds interest to the image.



Cave ballet with Elaine Kwok in Senhanom Cave, Rota, Northern Mariana Islands. Nikon D90 with Aquatica Ad90 housing, Ikelite strobes at 1/2 power and Sigma 8-16mm lens at 8mm 1/60th @ F7. 200 ISO.

Also, the proper interaction between the marine subject and the model again creates viewer interest. It helps to personalize the image.

Using photography in the shallows lessen the loss of the color red, which is pretty much gone after 3 meters due to light refraction. So skin tones remain true and the color of the marine creature, like a dolphin, is also easy to render. A couple of wide angle strobes mounted on a housing at the handles at very low power can help just to provide enough fill to bring out

color in the model and/or the subject.

For our Bimini, Bahamas, shoot I mounted strobes on the camera housing and left them at low power for the entire two weeks we were there. They added just enough color and light to make almost every shot I used acceptable without having to resort to Photoshop fill.

Approaching Wildlife

Do bubbles scare marine life? Yes. Plus, breathing underwater makes a lot of noise. I was talking to

a rebreather user who was at Cocos Island and waiting alone to take video of some hammerhead sharks. He said all was tranquil when all of a sudden he heard what he thought was a herd of buffalo coming. But it was a group of ten divers. SCUBA is noisy and the bubbles do distract some marine life like spinner dolphins, most whales and mantas.

So how to get around it? Well, this isn’t for everyone but I spent some time with champion free diver Ai Futaki in Yap at Manta Fest a couple of months ago. She can easily drop to 15 meters and stay for 2-3 minutes. She was able to interact with gray reef sharks, schooling blackbar barracuda, rainbow runners and other fish with great ease.

Now I had SCUBA and also was able to approach them too, but the free diving skills she used allowed her to move more freely than me, change depths at will and not worry about large exhalations.

Ai is trying to turn her video work into an artform and she has made some pretty nice short clips already of Komodo, a Guam spearo in action and the Yap sharks using just free diving breath hold skills. Most free diving classes boast that they will be able to allow you to reach 18 meters within a couple of days of training. So this approach is readily available through training and brings

another weapon to your underwater photography arsenal. It also helps keep you in shape and you do need to be fit to dive using free diving techniques.

Creative

Shallow water is great for artsy images. Reflections and sun ripples add a lot of a photo. Using the natural light, you can get patterns and shapes across the sea floor and on your subject. It is also great to catch the sun's rays. Early morning and late evening make warm images with the sun streaking through. In fresh water and some of the clear caves, a light source become a beacon, bringing dancing light to the walls or floor of the cave for great still and video.

Half-half shots can be made with a fisheye lens in a half meter of water. A good wide angle and balanced strobe lighting also allows for artsy and compelling half shots.

Conclusion

The use of snorkeling and free diving techniques opens a whole new world with a plethora of critters ranging from massive to tiny. It will put you in places that allow you to use natural elements like the sun and clear water to make special images. Don't overlook this aspect of your photography. It is a great way to see the sea and bring it home.



*Young humpback. Nikon D200 in Aquatica AD200 housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm. 1/80th @ F5, 100 ISO and natural light in Vava'u, Tonga.
(Left) Whale shark in natural light in Thailand with Nikon D200 with Aquatica AD200 housing and Tokina 10-17mm lens.*

What you need

For the photography part:

First, get a potato. Then, assuming you are using a housed DSLR, which is the most functional type of camera for this, use a wide angle lens of at least 20mm or less. I personally like the Tokina 10-17mm zoom lens for photographing humpbacks, dolphins and mantas. The Nikon 14-24 wide angle on a full frame camera is also an excellent

lens. Use a wide dome and keep it free from scratches. You will be shooting on or near the surface and lens flare from the sun is a fact of life with these wide lenses.

Shallower depth, in general, also means a higher f-stop. So scratches and dings on the dome will show up. Go to your local auto body shop and tell them you want your dome polished. The same treatment they give to make headlight lenses like new will give you a shiny new

dome.

Then, when you're out at sea, use the potato. Rub the juice across the dome to keep water from beading and streaking. It works great for surface shots and half-half images.

Also, for models and medium to small subjects, use a pair of wide angle strobes mounted on the handles and pointed outward for fill light to add color and fill in the dark areas. For whales, don't worry about filling the barnacles of a whale!



Bottlenose dolphin and model Yoko Higashide in the dolphin grounds off Bimini, Bahamas. Nikon D200 with Aquatica AD200 housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens at 10mm 1/160th @ F6.3. ISO 100 and Ikelite strobes for fill at 1/8 power.

Shoot at a high shutter speed if you can. Around 250th or better. Your swimming creates a lot of motion and you're moving with the subject, you need some stopping power. This may mean you'll also want to up your ISO to 400 to help out in this area.



Snorkeler near Maap, Yap, Micronesia. Nikon D200 and Tamron 10-24 mm lens at 10mm 1/160th @ F6.3. ISO 100 and circular polarizer

For the free diving and snorkeling part:

It may seem simple but there is a true art to staying streamlined, properly weighted and equipped when trying to photograph marine life using snorkeling and free diving. Get a low volume mask and low profile snorkel. Both should be easy to clear.

Most free divers don't actually keep the snorkel in their mouths while underwater as it tends to put air in the cheeks. It is just used to catch a breath at the surface. So for this kind of up and down photography, a simple

snorkel is best.

But for swimming with dolphins or trying to keep up with a whale shark, you may want something with a purge and a bit of height that keeps the air hole above the waves.

Use long free diving fins. They add more power to your kick and give you speed. You can also keep up with creatures easier. I prefer full foot fins and they seem to create fewer rubbing points and thus less blister and skin rubs.

Wear at little as possible without freezing to death. Keep your

rubber volume down. You will also want to weight yourself so you are a bit negative. This allows you to sink under the surface just by exhaling. As large as they are, whales like humpbacks are extremely skittish. They don't like humans diving down on them very much. But you can calmly slip under the surface so you are a meter or so down. This gives you a better eye-to-eye shots. The weights also help if you have to go down quickly to keep up with dolphins.

On your weight belt, bring a safety sausage of some sort as well. Ocean currents can be tricky and you can find yourself miles out to sea when chasing whales or looking for sailfish and bait balls. Don't take a chance. It can help with floatation as well as alert those that the current is too much for you to get back to the boat.

Keep in shape and try to keep the body fat down. This will also help you move and sink and keep up with your ridiculously fit model. If you don't live near an ocean, keep the fin muscles in shape in a pool.

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