

My first 'client'

by Dan Bolt

Earlier this year I was sat in the bar at the annual excuse to drink beer because it's too rough to go diving called 'Dive Fest' in Cornwall, UK, listening to a chap giving an amazing talk about diving into a blow hole in a raging sea and coming out of it relatively unscathed.

The speaker was Andy Torbet, a UK diver who's career I'd been keenly following because I find his approach to finding new dive sites quite inspirational - indeed it was another talk of his a few years ago that prompted me in to diving my local rivers, something that has produced a number of very nice images for me.

The Dive Fest is a very social event, mostly because everyone is in the bar watching the sea getting rougher and rougher, so after his talk I got chatting to Andy and he told me about his summer project called 'Britain by snorkel'. He was planning to spend 4 months travelling the length & breadth of the UK visiting both easy and extreme snorkelling sites. This was all going to feed into a book, magazine articles, more talks and as things have turned out, a possible documentary.

Andy was keen to have me along

on all the adventures in Devon, my home county, because he was after a photographer capable of snorkelling and sea-kayaking with knowledge of the best sites to visit. I jumped at the chance to get back out to some snorkelling areas I'd not been to for a number of years but, at this point, I hadn't quite realised what I'd let myself in for.

As the date for our first outing approached and we chatted about what he wanted, it slowly dawned on me that I was to be 'directing' each shoot and he was relying heavily on me to provide images for his book. This was totally out of my comfort zone and would be the first time I had been put under such an expectation to produce results. Sure I've taken casual images of other divers before, but nothing like this, suddenly I wasn't looking forward to it quite so much.

To be totally honest, the first trip was a bit of a photographic disaster. I really let the pressure get to me and all my normal techniques were forgotten, even the basics of strobe placement and exposure I didn't manage to get right. The pressure I had put upon myself (I say that because as a 'client', Andy was very laid back



The rough seas forced me to shoot into the sun, so I hid it behind the Eddystone light house. 1/160th, f/22, iso200, 8mm fisheye



The first outing; no agreed signals lead to poor model position and my choice of shutter speed & strobe position lead to blurring & backscatter. 1/50th, f/5, iso400, 8mm fisheye



A gloomy, low vis day on HMS Scylla. 1/50th, f/7.1, iso400, 8mm fisheye

and easy to work with) also adversely affected my snorkelling by greatly reducing my breath-hold times.

A couple of days after that outing I took stock of what I had done wrong and tried to remedy them for the next time we went out. In essence I had let myself down by;

- not talking to the client enough about his expectations, nor at an early enough stage in the project
- not agreeing a set of signals between model and photographer
- trying to rush everything & get

it right first & every time

- trying to apply too much control to a fluid situation
- not agreeing a routine to synchronise our breathing so we were both ok to leave the surface at the same time (this would be very important on later trips)

- not relaxing and enjoying my self enough

From then on I tried to apply less control over each shoot, and ended up taking more time to brief Andy about each site we visited. We also



Getting better; Andy's girlfriend under Swanage pier, still have some backscatter but it's a more engaging image. 1/100th, f/8, iso320, 8mm fisheye

spent a few minutes before starting to shoot just to get the feel of the area and especially important for me, to see what the natural light was like at depth so be able to think about my lighting.

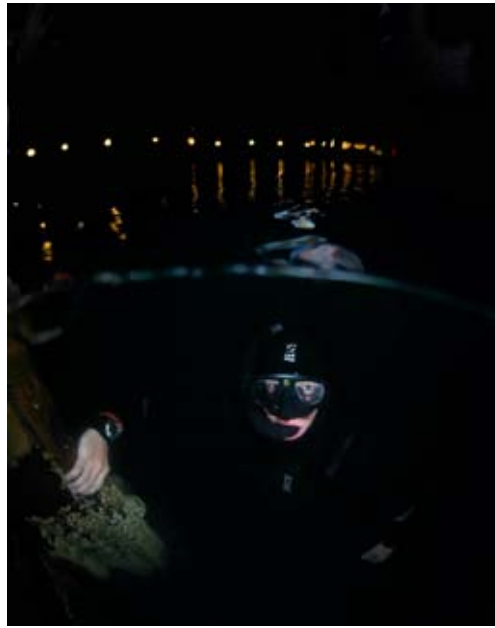
Snorkelling does provide one huge benefit over scuba diving in that every time you surface you can chat to your buddy/model about what was good/bad about the last shot and decide how to change it for the next attempt.

Quite often though, and despite all the planning, the best shots appeared when I'd tell Andy where to swim from/to and then I'd simply say "we'll see what happens when we're down there". These shots tended to be more spontaneous and better reflected the nature of snorkelling with its greater freedom of movement and lack of cumbersome kit.

By the end of our 5th trip things were working well between us and it was now only my lack of imagination



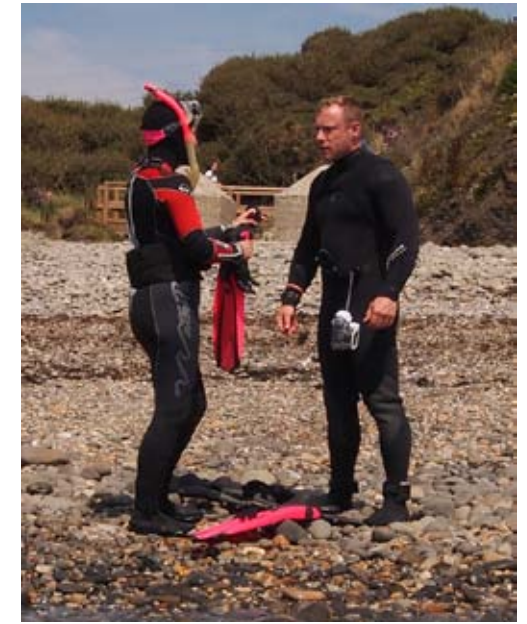
Opportunity knocks; while I was checking out the Eddystone reef I looked up & snapped this image. 1/160th, f/16, iso200, 8mm fisheye



A split-shot of Andy under old Swanage pier, with the new pier in the background. 1/50th, f/3.5, iso1000, 8mm fisheye, manual focus



'Just swim at me' produced this pleasing image, though with some backscatter. 1/160th, f/18, iso320, 8mm fisheye



Andy & girlfriend Becka discuss the Kimmeridge snorkel trail. 1/500th, f/11, iso200, 9-18mm@18mm (36mm equiv)

and photographic technique that was the weak link. The weather and visibility hadn't been very kind to us on any of the outings we made, but I feel like I had settled into the task quite well and had been able to produce reasonable results given the circumstances. By far not my best photos ever, but a whole lot better than that first, stressful outing to the sea cave a few months earlier.

Despite the pressure I had put on myself at first, as things turned out I learned a lot about making use

of a model, managing a 'client' and also how to prepare properly for such events. The Olympus E-PL1 I used worked like a dream and the favoured lenses turned out to be the Panasonic 8mm fisheye with an Athena mini-dome for in-water shots, and the Olympus 9-18mm with Zen dome for surface images. This made for a tiny setup which travelled well on my kayak and was easy to snorkel with. With careful aiming it was also possible to ensure that not all the images had that 'fisheye' look to

them. Both lenses were quick to focus and coupled with reasonable strobe cycle speeds it meant that even on breath-hold dives lasting no more than two minutes (which includes the swim down and up) it was possible to shoot 12 or more frames per dive which raised the 'hit' rate considerably.

I wouldn't hesitate to do something similar again but next time I take a different approach and put a great deal more time into building up the client relationship and fully understanding their expectations a

long time before entering the water. I'm also keenly aware that this was dangerously close to the line between photography as a hobby, and photography as work. It's a good job I had so much fun on the Briatin By Snorkel project.

Dan Bolt

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