

Do We Need Depth?

by Mark Webster

The maximum depth of a dive is always an important consideration, normally due to decompression penalties that may be incurred. When we start diving the conversation is often related to how deep we have been and the urge is usually to make your first 100ft/30m dive and to even greater depths in order to join that elite group of 'deep divers'. I was no different in this respect and spent many happy dives fumbling around in the dark cold water at 60m on wrecks. From this I moved into commercial diving where you rarely see much of what is around you due to poor visibility and darkness. I then discovered photography and of course my world was reversed and all I desired was more visibility and more light!

Photography is all about capturing light and although we are often using artificial light to restore colours in our images the contribution of

natural light to the exposure is always an important consideration. In macro photography we frequently expose entirely with flash, but in wide angle photography the preference is often to use the natural light only for the exposure or in balance with your strobe light. So to maintain the maximum intensity and the best quality of light it is logical to stay as shallow as possible and, even though our desire for subject diversity will always

Deeper rock pools enable you to capture some of the marine life whilst viewing through the water surface and perhaps capturing a fellow explorer and Snell's window. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE, ISO 200 f11 1/200.

(Right) Working in sheltered gullies allows you to set up half and half shots with some land features in the background. There are various means for keeping the dome drop water free – I use spit or detergent both of which help the dome shed water as you prepare the shot. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 15mm fish eye, Ektachrome 100ASA f11 1/125.



drive us deeper and we cope with the inevitable compromise, it is worth regularly dedicating entire dives working just below the surface. So to pose the question in the title of this piece.....do we need depth to find interesting subjects or is there enough to keep us busy without the need to clear our ears so often or at all?

Of course we do not need to don SCUBA gear for all our underwater photography. There are a number of spectacular subjects that are active in very shallow water or just below the surface, although they mostly require a visit to specific locations. Whales, whale sharks, basking sharks, great white sharks, sail fish and the infamous sardine run with its diversity of species all fit this category. These are the big ticket targets which often require a dedicated and sometimes expensive trip to capture the desired images. But even if you are still saving for that possibly once in a lifetime long haul trip, there are many other excellent imaging opportunities to be captured with just a snorkel or with SCUBA in very shallow water.

I am sure we all have happy memories from childhood of exploring rock pools armed with a shrimp net, hand reel and bucket searching for what seemed then very exciting and intimidating marine life. Well, most of us have never quite grown up, so why avoid rock pools with your now adult hunting equipment of camera and housing? Wherever there is a significant tidal range and rocky foreshore you will find rock pool opportunities ranging from only a few centimeters depth to those that are deep enough to submerge and swim in. You won't of course find big critters in the pools, but you will find those that live in the intertidal zone, many in the macro range, and opportunities for your wide angle lens in mini sea-scapes and half and half shots.



Rock pools offer excellent opportunities to capture reflections on the surface as they are generally sheltered. Add a variety of soft coloured weeds and mollusks for a slightly different still life study. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

When the tide comes in and conditions are calm it is also worth exploring those rocky foreshore areas that dried out at high tide. There are a number of critters and fish that emerge to feed as soon as there is enough water and my most recent discoveries include a colony of tiny Montagu's blennies at a local beach dive. Not a rare species as such but one that is rarely seen on a normal dive. Working with your camera in very shallow water in these intertidal areas can be hard without a little preparation. Many of the small fish here are skittish and you need to be able to stay fairly still in one position for a while to gain their confidence and capture the image. So adding extra weight, particularly in a dry suit, is a good idea and trimming the buoyancy of your camera system and keeping it as compact as possible for one handed operation is very helpful leaving your other hand to



Montagu's blenny – rock pool and intertidal species are not often photographed in the wild and it can offer a worthwhile and rewarding challenge to hunt for small fish like these in very shallow water. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125

hold on.

Tidal gullies are often also filled with photogenic flotsam and jetsam like leaves, floating sea weeds and the occasional jelly fish which all come in on the rising tide and get trapped. So for a slightly different subject it is sometimes worth getting below with your wide angle lens to

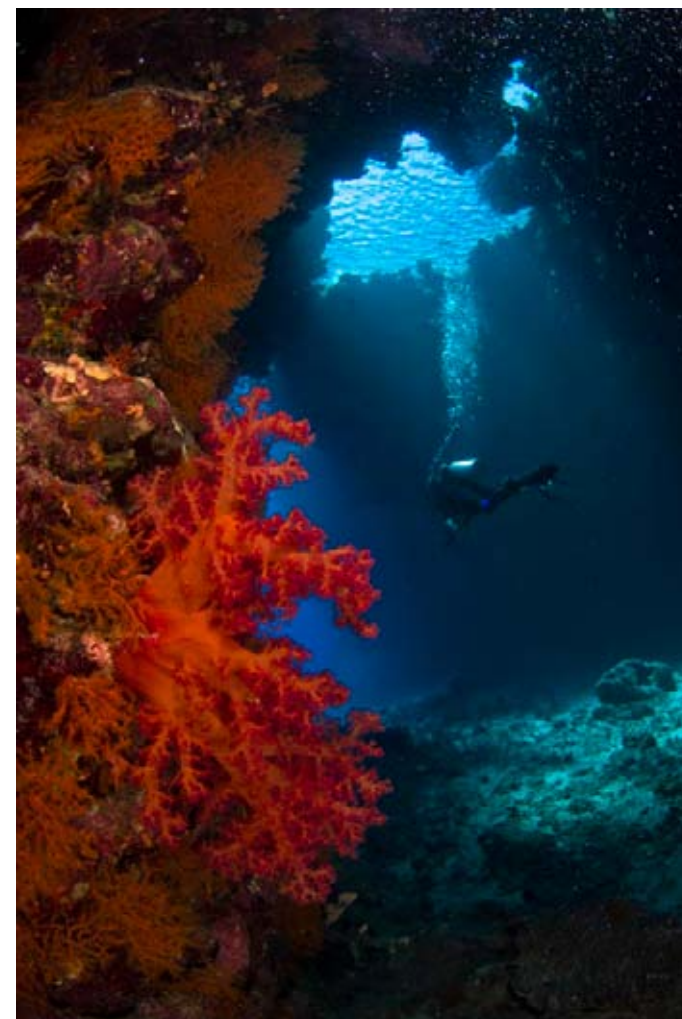
shoot these ‘through the surface’ to include some land features in your image and perhaps a touch of Snell’s window and maybe some reflections. Snorkelling in these areas can also produce some excellent results particularly if you can work with a buddy or model in the shot and may produce opportunities for split shots with the shore in the background.

I have previously waxed lyrically regarding the opportunities in temperate weed beds, but it is worth mentioning again here as depths rarely exceed 3m and there are some stunning and colourful scenic’s to be captured with a wide angle lens. If you have the patience to explore the weeds slowly and carefully you will also find plenty of marine life for your macro lens as well. Many species of nudibranch will be found grazing and laying their egg spirals in the weed and during the spring will be joined by hundreds of sea hares following the same behaviour. Pipe fish, sticklebacks, scorpion fish, flatfish and various crab species all enjoy the cover and camouflage provided by the weed

If you are in tropical waters you will often find some of the most colourful hard corals in the first couple of metres depth and there is always plenty of fish feeding activity on top of the reef table. When the tide is high you will find bigger species like the bump head parrot fish grazing on the coral or waiting to be cleaned, which provides the opportunity for a closer approach. Camouflaged sessile species like scorpion fish and stone fish are also worth looking for as they frequently use the shallows for ambush, which just shows how cautious you should be when wading out for a dive! If you are shooting with natural light in the first couple of metres depth then you can maintain colour balance with manual white balance adjustment



Boat and divers silhouette – silhouettes shot in shallow water make great images especially when the sun is low and there is a chance of Snell’s window to add impact. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, ISO 200 f11 1/125.



Diver in cave – in larger cave systems there are often opportunities to use the natural light to expose a distant area or subject whilst using flash to expose a colourful foreground. In this image I was lucky that a passing diver entered the frame at just the right moment. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30.



There are several 'big ticket' subjects around the globe that can be photographed close to the surface and the basking shark is most certainly one of them. Getting close to them needs a little behavioural knowledge, a good boat man and snorkeling fitness to keep pace with the subject! Nikon D200, Subal ND2, 12-24mm zoom, ISO 200 f8 1/80.

either during the dive or in post processing if you record your images in RAW format. You can continue to do this with increasing depth, perhaps to 5m, but beyond that the camera will perform better with a little help from a correction filter like the Magic Filter which is both efficient and easy to use.

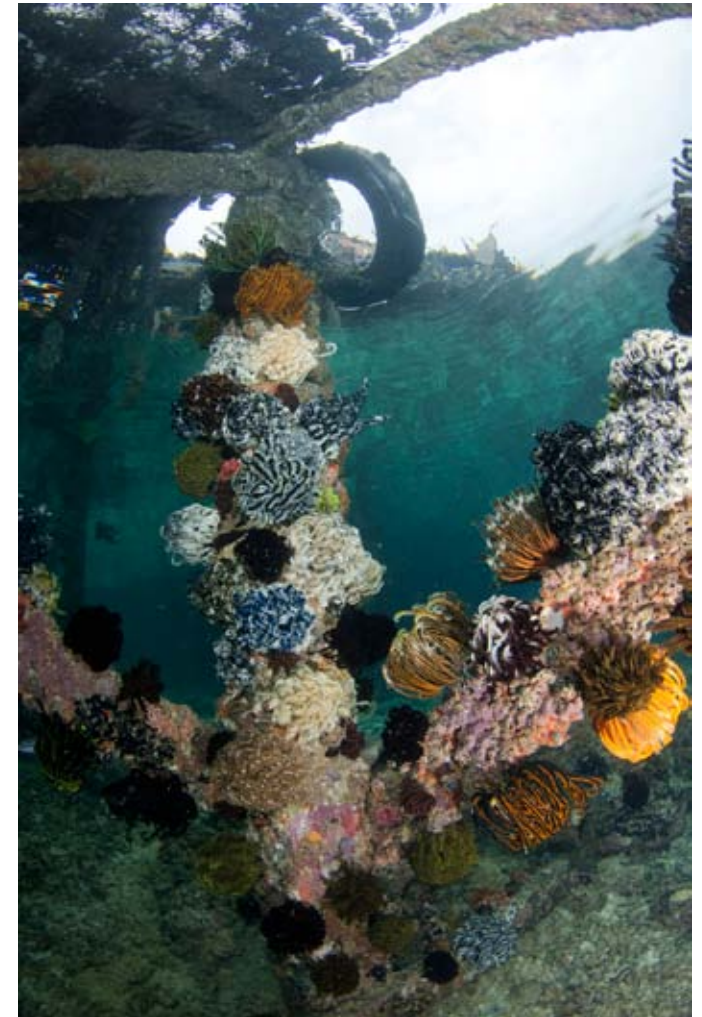
Coral reef tables are often dissected by deep gullies, overhangs and caves with collapsed ceilings which all offer opportunities to work with strong sunlight and shafts of light. It is worth exploring these and playing around with exposures to see how the light behaves at different shutter speeds to produce either a flood of light or tight well defined beams. Water movement on the surface can make these shafts of light dance, which is difficult to capture of course, but it means the quality and



False stone fish – this scorpion fish was sitting in less than 2ft (60cm) of water on the edge of the reef table a stone's throw from the shore. As my flash guns were flat I had to use natural light with manual white balance, but the colours are still bright enough. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

direction of light is constantly changing. Shooting several image sets from the same position over a period of time can produce very different results. A model or passing diver swimming through the shot at the right moment can make the shot.

If you yearn for images of big subjects but lack the big travel budget for whales, whale sharks or great whites then here are a few suggestions which should not break the bank. If you are UK based then there are a number of opportunities around our coastline to meet up with the basking shark which is big enough to provide a substantial buzz. They are regularly seen in late spring and early summer off the south west peninsula between Land's End and Plymouth before they follow the plankton north on the west coast. The Isle of Man in July and August



Jetties are popular dive sites for photographers particularly in tropical waters. They attract all sorts of corals, sponges, invertebrates and numerous species of fish. The pilings themselves can produce colourful and graphic compositions with a variety of shapes and intersections. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/80.



Dugong and diver – all mammals must come to the surface to breath and dugongs do this fairly regularly between feeding sessions. They are generally found in shallow water, so it is easy to follow them toward the surface and then capture the image as they return to the seabed to feed. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/80.

is the next opportunity before they move to the west coast of Scotland around Oban and Mull. The arrival of the sharks is never guaranteed and tracking them down at sea takes some patience and local knowledge, but once you have had your first experience of snorkeling with them you will be hooked.

Another subject to consider in the UK are seals which are found all around the coastline. Not all are

approachable but there are colonies in the Farne Islands, Scilly Isles and Lundy Island (and I am sure many more) which are accustomed to and perhaps entertained by visits from divers in shallow water.

If you visit the Red Sea then perhaps plan your trip to include visits to the dugong colonies close to Marsa Alam. These mammals do not offer a guaranteed encounter but have no fear of divers when found

grazing on the sea grass in shallow water often in the company of large green turtles. The same area offers the opportunity to visit dolphin reef where there are pods of common and spinner dolphins which are very accustomed to visits from snorkelers and divers. Elphinstone Reef is also close by and has become well known for close encounters with oceanic white tip sharks that cruise boldly just below the surface.

So, underwater photography does not always require diving and when you are using your SCUBA

gear don't forget to spend time in just the first few metres of water where the light will be plentiful and there are numerous opportunities to vary your photography and perhaps present a slightly different view of the underwater world.

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