

Kurt Amsler photo course

by Andrew Bell

The dream for many aspiring underwater photographers is to make a full time living from underwater photography. So competitive and specialist is this medium that only a small handful of people achieve this status.

After many years of commitment into pushing his own potential Kurt Amsler is one of those people.

Thousands of hours have been spent underwater with camera in tow in pursuit of pushing the envelope to produce awe inspiring images to stay one step ahead of the competition. His vigour and enthusiasm was noted by leaders in the diving industry which directly secured him a contract with the PADI European College in Cannes to teach instructors how to conduct underwater specialty courses.

Kurt finds motivation through competition. To help facilitate this drive he takes time out between assignments to teach people his own hard-earned skills. It would be fair to question the wisdom of giving your trade secrets away, especially when a full-time income is dependant on it but it is this sharing of information that is exactly what pushes him to the next level in his own work. For a few weeks out of the year Mr. Amsler takes time out from his busy schedule to teach advanced underwater photography courses. Our class size consisted of only six students so led to more one on one tuition with Kurt. This ensured that his concepts were hammered across.



*'Group Shot' - Kurt Amsler (both photos taken with a digital camera)
(Below) 'Lecques Aquanaut Center' - Kurt Amsler*



There were only four such courses last year, all held in a small tranquil town called Les Lecques located along the Mediterranean Coast in France. The final course for 2001 was organised by Ocean Optics and was the only one conducted in English.

Over ten years the course has been fine-tuned to become a very efficient itinerary consisting of 6 theory lessons and one dive a day, with 5 boat dives in total. The assumption is that the

photographer is very familiar with the equipment and has had varying degrees of success in capturing images underwater. Building on a pyramid style 'See, Hear and Do' approach to learning we were given examples of specific types of underwater photography and then taught how to avoid pitfalls, learn from them and achieve a higher level of success. The course outline and location was a very efficient way to work as our studio, the sea, was only a few minutes



'P-38 Lockheed Lightning Fighter Plane' - Andrew Bell. Nexus housing, Nikon F90, 16mm lens, f. 2.8 1/30 fuji 100 provia

'Coral backlit' - Andrew Bell. Nexus housing, Nikon F90 60mm lens f. 2.2 1/125 Inon Quad Flash backlit with Sea and Sea ys30 fuji provia
'Blenny' - Andrew Bell. Nexus housing, Nikon F90 60mm lens f. 2.8 , 1/60, Inon quad flash fuji provia



away. The classroom, complete with light boxes for reviewing photos and film lab, was located at 'La Bastide', a old country home rebuilt in to a hotel. This was also our accomodation for next six days of the course. With the beautiful views of the 'Provence' region before us we all agreed this was a very nice part of the world to excel at our underwater photography.

To be taught by one of the best in the business was a unique opportunity and one that my fellow six classmates and I could only gain from. The experience level amongst ourselves as photographers was quite varied, from relatively experienced photographers to professionals. What was certain was that although all the students knew how to shoot a good underwater picture, Kurt was going to take us all to the next level to take excellent ones. This course was to be full on and we all needed to develop the attitude of wanting to apply ourselves to take full advantage.

Kurt's photo workshop does have a few prerequisites. Everyone on the course had to be an seasoned diver with boat diving experience and already have a basic general knowledge in underwater photography. We had to bring all of our

own photo and diving equipment, except for tanks and weights. Among the equipment required for the course we needed to bring our wide angle, mid range and macro lenses.

It was a Sunday afternoon when the course began. Kurt kicked off by welcoming us and then followed with the story of how he got into the business and how he propelled himself to where he is today. With the intensive course outline laid out for us it was quite apparent there would be no time for lazing around soaking up the mediterranean sun!

During the course of the week we were to be given 'assignments' by Kurt. A full lecture accompanied by a slide presentation to help facilitate getting his concepts across. The first lecture was an overview of the underwater camera equipment that is commercially available, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each system. A briefing followed for the ocean dive the



'Viewing and selecting photos from the morning dive for evaluation' - Kurt Amsler

'P-38 fighter plane' Paul Webster Canon EOS 50 in a Subal Housing 14mm sigma, 1/15s, f4, provia.

'Scorpion Fish' - Gearoid Lane Nik V, 35mm lens with Ocean Optics close-up lens F22, 1/90 secs, Sensia.

following morning and we then ended the evening by having dinner with Kurt.

Monday morning, and everyone is enthused to jumping in the water and use our cameras in anger. Before we were unleashed on the diving centre to take us out for our first dive Kurt re-briefed what we were going to shoot. The rule for the first dive was that there were no rules, we could shoot what ever we wanted and any format we desired, whether that be macro, mid-range or wide angle. The AQUANAUT Dive Centre in Les Lecques were to be our diving hosts and a fine facility it was. The "H2O", a fast comfortable dive boat efficiently took us to our photo locations. We didn't need to travel very far to the quality sites which quickly dispelled any notion that the Med was dead. This corner of the Mediterranean was in fact teeming with life. We were certainly spoilt for choice on what to photograph first.

Low on air and annoyingly out of film we returned to the surface where the H2O dive boat was waiting for us. The dive crew took our cameras and gingerly placed them all safely in their designated area and within 15 minutes we were swiftly back at the marina. Back at The AQUANAUT Dive Centre we cracked open our housings and handed our first roll of film exposed back to Kurt. Always the competitor, Kurt chose to cycle uphill a few miles back to La Bastide, as he was training for a cycling race in the next few months. The rest of us were not feeling as energetic after our first and only dive of the day so we went to lunch at one of the many bistros to be



found in Les Lecques. As September was the off season for this small Mediterranean town we felt we had the place to ourselves.

Back in the classroom early afternoon our full day lectures would begin. Usually Kurt would debrief us about the morning dive and talk about things that went well and challenges we found during the dive too. After a break another lecture followed covering varying aspects of underwater photography. Such topics covered were strobe positioning, equipment maintenance, basics of film developing, the marine environment, life



'diver silhouette with camera'
Paul Webster
Canon EOS 50 in a Subal
Housings, 14mm sigma, 1/60s,
f8, Fuji provia

'Tompot Blenny' - Andrew Bell
Nexus Nikon F90 f. 22 1/125
Inon Quad Flash, Fuji provia .

behaviour, wideangle photography, macro photography, fish photography, diver/model pictures, and even wreck photography.

At this point in the day we could not deny that Kurt was really trying to hammer the information across. In effect he was encouraging new budding competition. I got the sense that everyone really wanted to be there and was soaking it all up taking everything that Kurt was freely willing to deliver to us. Over time I could sense confidence building between my classmates, and even myself?!?! Then Kurt would announce that he was now going back up to the photolab to get our processed films for review. You almost virtually see that sense of assurance spontaneously evaporate in the air knowing that Mr. Amsler was going to see where we had screwed up.

Light boards were lit up on the side of the classroom for us to review our films and select the pictures which would be later projected for review by my fellow classmates and Mr. Amsler's expert eye. Kurt would compliment when the shot was successfully achieved and



evaluate why certain shots did not. The point was not just just about achieving good underwater photos but to also understand why certain photos were not successful, and use that knowledge to our advantage later on.

After the final dive of the course Kurt once again peddled off with our exposed roll of film and we wandered over to one of the bistros for lunch. Lunch always seems to taste ten times better after a salt water dive. Since I was acting as a representative of Ocean Optics who had organised the course it dawned on me that it might be a good idea to ask how everyone

felt about the course.

Gearoid Lane, from Ireland said, "I found the course very enjoyable and useful. The classroom sessions were quite intensive, and Kurt was happy to impart all of his tricks and techniques. The diving in Les Lecques was surprisingly good - I would have enjoyed doing more than one dive a day to practice all of the theory a bit more."

Mikayo Langhofer, from the USA enthusiastically said, "Kurt's workshop really can provide you with the practical knowledge to make the camera an extension of your arm and eye".



Aris Speggos, from Greece said, "It was a great learning experience for me, and during a short time I accumulated a great amount of knowledge. He doesn't hold back on his techniques and style. On the contrary, he openly discusses them and analyzes them with his students. I'm very happy I attended."

Paul Webster has had one of his images picked for the 'Big Shot' feature in UK's DIVE magazine. I was particularly curious what this accomplished underwater photographer felt about the course. Paul pointed out, "people not really comfortable with a basic understanding of photography could feel the conversations getting away from them. It would have been nice to include more diving to put into practice what is

covered in the lectures but that's not possible (even underwater photographers have to sleep sometime). It was an enjoyable and instructive course run by a professional."

On the final evening of our course we selected our best five frames to make a portfolio for a competition within our class. The judges comprised of the owners of our dive service AQUANAUT Dive Centre and an accomplished local underwater photographer. All the judges have seen countless of captivating photos of the local area so they were well versed on what could be achieved in these waters. The tension was broken as the prizes were handed out to the top three winners. Alas, I walked away empty handed, but still felt very happy at what we had all achieved as a result of the course.

The following morning was when we all said goodbye. There was a bit of urgency in Kurt's departure as he had to get back to his home Switzerland, where he was to start his next photo assignment for a magazine. This time a photo shoot with the great white sharks in South Africa. A busy man in demand indeed!



Andrew Bell

Define your image



Kurt Amsler is one of the elite few to make a good living out of underwater photography. From natural history photo-essays to imaginative advertising shoots, Amsler's images influence photographers all over the world.



This world class photographer and teacher is now set to share his successful techniques with clients of Ocean Optics. Kurt will host a one week workshop in Southern France this September. Places are strictly limited. For full details call Steve, Andrew or AJ.

Definitive workshops from the definitive underwater photography company.

13 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AQ
Tel 0207 930 8408 Fax 0207 839 6148
<http://www.oceanoptics.co.uk>

Ocean Optics