

A Shot In The Dark

by Mark Webster

I think we have all been there.... you are on a live aboard or in a resort and have enjoyed three or perhaps four good dives during the day. Now the sun is setting as you reach for your first beer when the dive guide asks you if you are night diving and you are torn between two strong desires. If you decline you will most certainly enjoy your beer, but you might also suffer some mocking disapproval from the dive guide and fellow guests and of course you might well miss some killer shots. I am the first to admit that I am not the most avid night diver, but there are occasions when you should resist the demon drink and get underwater after dark to capture some of the unique critters and behaviours.

Some don't enjoy their night dives simply because they have not prepared well enough before the dive and the whole experience becomes a struggle, particularly with a large and unwieldy camera system. So thinking about preparing your camera system for ease of use in the dark is very worthwhile and you can of course experiment with the configuration during the day. Neutral buoyancy or close to it is very desirable, so that

you are not struggling with any weight in the dark, and it is wise to ensure that you have your system secured to you with a lanyard just in case you drop it!

I always prefer to night dive a site that I have previously seen during the day, so that you at least have some sense of direction. Also plan to explore a much smaller area than you would do during the day to avoid getting lost and make sure you know the direction you need to return. If you are diving from a live aboard in the

(Top) Scorpion fish – night dives are a good time to practice your snoot photography as you can see more easily the direction of the light beam if you attach a small torch to the snoot.

Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE and 2x teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash gun with fibre optic snoot, ISO200 f11 1/125.

(Right) Saron shrimp – the Saron shrimp is perhaps the most spectacular of the shrimp species which is rarely seen during the day. At night they come out to join the party and scavenge for a meal. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia 50 f11 1/125.



Red Sea then night dive locations are often busy with other boats so it helps to have a means of identifying your boat both from below the surface and above if you surface a distance from the boat. Dive guides are increasingly reluctant to hang a strobe below the boat on busy sites as they are often stolen, so you might want to pack a handful of light sticks.

If you are making a beach dive from a resort then you may have a reef slope that is easy to follow back to the shore. But if the topography is more complicated make sure you have a compass with you and know the return bearing and perhaps leave some lighting on the shore or note a landmark with lights to guide you back on the surface. The easiest end to a night dive is of course being picked up by a tender, but this can only work if you can be seen on the surface and have not moved out of the dive site area. Having a strobe on your BC (some flash guns have a strobe function) or carrying a signalling torch will ensure your boat cover can see you! It is also wise to agree a maximum duration for the dive so that the surface cover can begin looking immediately if you don't appear.

Regardless of your choice of camera system the most important equipment will be your torches. Some divers work on the principle of "the more light the better" at night in order

to light as large an area as possible during their dive. However, this is not the best choice for photographers, as the larger light will often disturb potential subjects before you get to them and I find it is better to use the small powerful narrow beam torches and focus lights which are available from several manufacturers.

Where you choose to mount your torches is also an important consideration as it is essential to keep your hands free for operating the camera. Some photographers prefer to mount the torch directly over the lens either on the accessory shoe or on the port itself on an adjustable bracket so that any subject directly in front of the camera will be lit. You can improve the flexibility of this by including a short arm, extra ball joint or a short LocLine arm. You might prefer to attach one of the torches to the flash gun, so that you know that when you see your subject is lit through the viewfinder your flash gun is also pointing in the right direction. This is also handy for shots which require you to hand hold the flash and also allows you to direct the torch at the camera controls and displays. There are a number of torches which will attach to the side of your mask, which can be used when searching for subjects or looking at the camera settings and then extinguished for the photography - it is important to try



Parrot fish beak – parrot fish are a classic night time subject as once they have settle in for the night they will not move so you can concentrate on the composition. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/125.

various combinations to discover what is most comfortable for your own equipment and techniques.

Some flash guns do have focus lights built in and can be effective at night, although the beam may be too broad and spook your subject before you capture the image. The other consideration is that the focus light



Stargazers are a classic night time subject, but can be quite large so you may need to dedicate a dive to finding them with a 60mm or wider lens. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/125.

will drain the batteries in the flash, so use it sparingly.

Some subjects are certainly spooked by white light, so you may consider having a red filter on one or more torches which is less intrusive to night critters and still allows the camera to focus. There is at least one focus light on the market that is able

to switch between white and red light during the dive. This is an expensive option but if you are keen on your night diving then worth the investment. For occasional use just buy a sheet of stage lighting filter and make your own.

The final thought on lights is that batteries do expire and torches do flood so always use fresh batteries and carry a spare in you BC pocket to find your way home!

Most of us rarely shoot wide angle at night unless you are chasing a particular subject. Most of the critters are in the macro range and so we can dispense with long arms and big wide angle guns, if you have a choice. You will want to focus on finding subjects and composing them so position your guns on short arms and plan to minimise the number of movements you make with your flash guns particularly if your light source is on them. Specialist lighting tools like ring flash work very well with night diving, but you can mimic this set up if you have a pair of small flash guns that can be mounted directly on the port or adjacent to it.

Those photographers who use a housed DSLR or EVIL system will normally choose to use either a macro lens in the 50mm to 105mm range or perhaps a zoom lens in the 24-100mm range which often have a close up or macro setting at their “long” end. Auto focus will work well provided there is enough light and it is directed at the main subject. Shadows cast by the edges of rocks and crevices can upset the system and it is often useful to either use auto focus lock or be able to switch to manual focusing if the lens persists in hunting. You might need to pre-focus on an object of a similar size, lock the focus and then move back to your target subject and capture the image.

Flash exposure control can be either TTL or



My preference is for small narrow beam torches. This economical example is from Ikelite but there are numerous others to choose from costing from a few pounds/dollars to many hundreds if you must have the best!

manual. TTL works well at night as the subjects are often bright with good contrast, generally fill the frame and there is no natural light to upset the exposure - your torches will have no effect. Manual guns with multiple powers are well suited to macro or close up images and with the flash in a fixed position it is easy to determine an average exposure for the dive. Remember you can also reduce or increase the ISO setting as well as flash power if over or under exposure is a problem.

Many night active fish and crustaceans are mesmerised by the torch light and will freeze when caught in the beam. Species which hide from you during the day will often pose happily at night,



Decorator crab with hydroids – decorator crabs with all sorts of adornments will be found out foraging during the dark hours. Look for examples with contrasting negative space to enhance the subject. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f16 1/125.



Mandarin fish are mostly seen at dusk and are a good subject to start with whilst you wait for full darkness. If you look amongst shallow rubble areas when night falls you will often find them resting. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/125.

such as squat lobsters in the UK and decorator crabs, coral or porcelain crabs in the tropics. As you play your torch across the reef watch out for those tell tale specks of light reflected from the eyes of prawns, lobsters, crabs and even octopuses. Once locked into the torch beam they will normally happily pose for several photographs, but will be quickly gone if the beam leaves them. Sleeping fish are another good subject - wrasse for instance in our home waters and

parrot fish in the tropics - but are often well protected by the crevice they have chosen and so need careful lighting to avoid casting strong shadows.

Many species that hunt at night will be attracted to your torch beam particularly when you find a subject. Lion fish and tarpon are a good example and you will often be surprised by one darting into shot to consume your subject, particularly if it is a tasty prawn or crab! On a recent



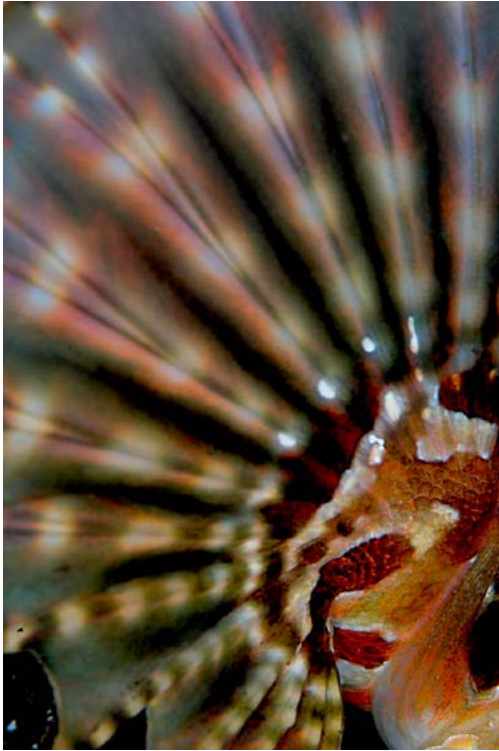
Puffer fish eye – species like this puffer fish will settle in and under the coral after dark and are generally mesmerised by the light, but once you move the torch off your subject they will often swim away. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f16 1/125.

trip to the Red Sea my wife was blissfully unaware of a very large lion fish that hovering directly below her armpit and against her BC, thankfully with its spines folded back. It struck just as she was finally ready to shoot a small cuttlefish that was slowly emerging from under the coral.

This raises another word of caution if you are diving in the tropics. Remember that a number of species with painful defensive mechanisms emerge at night. Not

only lion fish are active, but also moray eels and a number of species of urchins emerge which can give a very unpleasant sting. Scorpion fish and stone fish which are so difficult to spot by day are still there at night and have particularly potent venom's – so check the seabed carefully before you kneel down or steady yourself with a hand.

If you survive the attentions of the stone fish, you might try looking for macro compositions of abstract colours, patterns and delicate



Lion fish pectoral fin – don't forget to look for abstract opportunities at night. Lion fish will be hunting with their pectorals extended which allows you to focus on details like this. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f16 1/125.

shapes. These are often found in the polyps of night feeding corals, sea urchins, anemones and sleeping fish, particularly parrot fish. You can then fill the frame with only the pattern or perhaps use the eye of the fish within the pattern to produce striking image.

When moving about and settling



Keeping your rig compact helps a great deal on a night dive. Most of your subjects will be shot at close range so long flash arms are not required.

down for a shot, bear in mind that your vision is severely limited and pay particular attention to where you place your fins, hands or reef prod, whether you are diving a tropical or temperate reef, as delicate marine organisms are all too easily wiped out by careless or blundering movements in the dark.

If flash photography of the night critters is not enough to get you excited you might consider seeking out fluorescent subjects to create a really different look to common species. For this you will need some additional equipment and there two companies (NightSea and GlowDive) that currently offer underwater fluorescent filter photography kits. The kits comprise a filter for the flash and one for the lens and are not cheap, but will certainly give you a new perspective on night diving. If you are

the practical and resourceful type you might be able to make your own.

At the end of your dive you may be focussed on finding your boat, but be prepared for some last minute opportunities as the surface lighting will often attract squid, mackerel and garfish looking for an easy meal. They will generally drift around the edge of the pool of light but will often remain immobile when a torch is directed at their eyes.

Night photography can produce some dazzling and unique images and is really worth the effort and preparation involved. It is all too easy, especially on a diving holiday,

to think you have had enough as the sun goes down, the bar opens and the prospect of all that damp kit is less than alluring. So get organised, get into those dark and forbidding waters and you will be surprised at how exciting and productive this often underrated activity is.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk



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