

Board of Fish?

by Alex Tyrell

The idea came around when I received an email from Lia at Scuba Diver TTL asking for images for an upcoming issue of people participating in different kinds of water sports. However, the shots had to be from certain locations and unfortunately Thailand, where I live, was not one of them. But ideas had started to grow in my head already, with visions of ‘boarders’ hitting the wake in front of the setting sun. The more I thought about it, the more the idea sounded like it would be a lot of fun to shoot and may even produce some fresh images for my portfolio.

I live on a small tropical island called Koh Tao located in the Gulf of Thailand that has great conditions for wakeboarding, as there is always one part of the island in the lee of the wind and waves, leaving the calm seas that are needed. Luckily we were in the middle of a period of great weather with clear water, blue skies containing nice fluffy white clouds and, importantly for my photographic plans, no waves. So I contacted my friend Mabs who runs BT Water Sports out of Maya Beach Club and the following day we met up to discuss how we

would conduct the shoot, the type of images I was planning and how these could hopefully be achieved without me having a wakeboard planted in my head! To be honest, I was pretty clueless when it came to wakeboarding, only ever having seen it from a distance. My knowledge stretched as far as knowing it was similar to water-skiing, but the riders used a board instead of skis, and they jumped over the wake created by the boat performing jumps & flips! My lack of knowledge made Mabs’ experience and input even more vital during the planning stages.

A few days later it was time to head out on the first shoot, with ‘Captain’ Martyn at the wheel, Charlie the Labrador as his deck-hand, Zena chilling out with a beer and Mabs strapped to the the board. In the interest of safety we worked well away from any dive sites or snorkelling areas. I had considered the Tokina 10-17mm for this shoot, but in the end decided this was probably a bit too wide, as I was still unsure of how close Mabs could get to where I was positioned, waiting in the water on snorkel. So I elected to use the ‘tighter’ Nikon 10-24mm on my



Nikon D7000 + Nikkor 10-24mm Lens. Subal ND7000 + Zen DP-200 Dome & 50mm Port Extension f/18 – 1/125th – ISO320

D7000 behind a Zen DP-200 Dome, shooting with ambient light.

There were too many negative reasons for attempting to use strobes and we had chosen to go out for a late afternoon shoot, so the light was good. I had set the camera to Continuous Release Mode, allowing for high frame rates in order to capture as many images as possible in the second or two the boarder was in position for a photo. As I had no strobes, my housing would be a bit negative without the usual Stix Buoyancy Floats attached, so I managed to

squeeze a Stix Custom Buoyancy Float onto the 50mm extension ring to save a bit of arm-ache. So all in all this was a bit of an experiment and I wasn't 100% sure how things would work out.

I was hoping to get some partial split shots to show that the photos had been taken in the water and not just from the back of a boat. However, we were in water too deep for any interesting element to be shown in the underwater portion of the image, so I choose to only submerge the dome slightly, hoping for a small



Maya Beach Club

wavy waterline at the bottom of the frame. And with the sun to my back, I was facing the island and could incorporate the green of the mountains into the background. We spent around an hour and a half on the water that afternoon, before Mabs was feeling the strain and fatigue had set in, which was an element I hadn't actually considered when planning this shoot. I was fine and happy to continue, but all I had been doing was floating, waiting to take photos, whereas Mabs had been dragged behind a boat for ages! So we retired to Maya Beach Club to watch the sunset with a cold beer.

So what had I learned from the first day that I could improve on next time? Well, I tried a few different techniques for focusing on the quick moving subject. Initially I locked focus about 2m from the lens to avoid any AF issues and set the aperture at f/16 for adequate DOF. This didn't work too well and more shots were soft than sharp, due to the varying distances of the passes. I also tried using Multi-Point AF, but found this to be unreliable as the camera attempted to lock focus on the wake that approached me ahead the boarder. I then switched to Single-Point AF



Mabs Wakeboarding: Nikon D7000 + Nikkor 10-24mm Lens. Subal ND7000 + Zen DP-200 Dome & 50mm Port Extension f/16 – 1/80th – ISO100

and attempted to lock focus on the boarder at a distance further than I intended to shoot, then pan the camera to track the subject. My camera is set up with the autofocus allocated to the AE-L/AF-L, which I depress using a lever with my right thumb on my Subal ND7000 housing. I set the AF Mode to Continuous Servo (C), just in case the AF hadn't locked when I wanted to shoot and nothing happened when I depressed the shutter release, which happens when AF Mode is set at Single Servo (S). This final method for achieving sharp focus seemed to

work the best.

Another issue was water droplets on the dome, which showed in the images. This was hard to avoid completely and I had to use the Healing Brush in Lightroom on most shots. The water droplets became more of a problem when the speedboat made a closer pass to where I was in the water, creating spray and splashes. 'Dunking' the dome underwater just before the boarder arrived into position helped, but made focusing harder to achieve. To reduce this as much as possible, we had to

keep a bit more distance between the boat and me, so I was out of the worst spray and splashing. Mabs would then cut across the wake, either jumping off it for an action shot, or sliced by me for the shot with a 'Rooster Tail' of spray following him. For future shoots I will look at the ways to eliminate, or at least reduce, water droplets that form on the dome port. Maybe applying some Rain X, a hydrophobic liquid that stops water beading will help?

From Mabs' point of view, he had some difficulties seeing me in the water and this made it very hard for him to time his jumps for when he was close to me. Martyn tried to give him hand signals from the boat, but this wasn't a perfect solution by any means, working sometime but not others. Late in the session Mabs pulled off a great jump, but landed it less than a meter away from me, which was a bit of a close call! I couldn't see him coming, as the wake had obscured my view, but I clearly heard him shout just before landing the jump. I managed to squeeze off a single frame before 'balling-up' to protect my head from the advancing wakeboard! We decided it was probably best to keep the distance between the boarder and me a little further from here on.

So the second day with lessons learned, I used an SMB connected



Landing a jump. Nikon D7000 + Nikkor 10-24mm Lens. Subal ND7000 + Zen DP-200 Dome & 50mm Port Extension f/16 – 1/100th – ISO100

to me with a coiled lanyard, which really helped Mabs see me in the water. However this did cause me some issues, as it kept floating into the frame and ruined a few nice shots. This could have been avoided by simply changing the direction I was shooting, turning into the mild current, which would have pulled the SMB behind me. But then I would then have been shooting in the opposite direction to which I had planned, away from the setting sun that was the intended background. So I had to push the SMB away from me

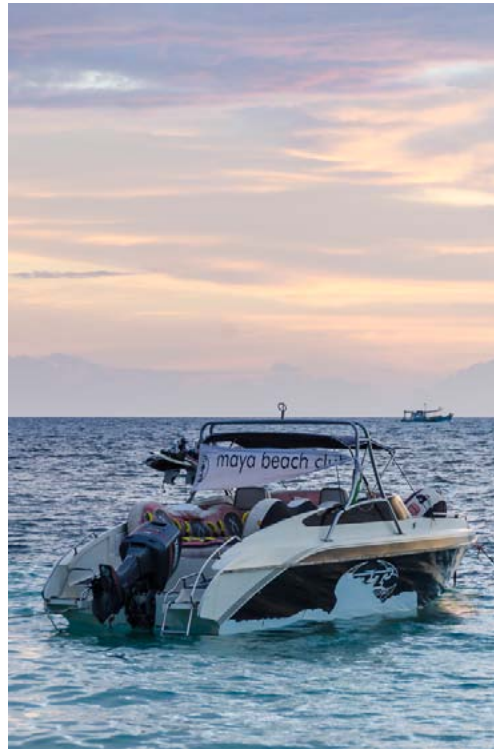
and out of frame just before Mabs was within a distance that I could see him through the viewfinder. At that point I would lock focus on Mabs, track his movement as he got closer and then, just as he passed the setting sun, I would fire off a burst of shots. A few times the SMB had drifted back into frame, so next time try a very short lanyard, which will hopefully keep it behind me.

The first session I had set my aperture to f/16 and the shutter speed to 1/80th with ISO 100. Later in the session I increased to ISO 160



Nikon D7000 + Nikkor 10-24mm Lens. Subal ND7000 + Zen DP-200 Dome & 50mm Port Extension f/16 – 1/80th – ISO100

allowing me quicken the shutter speed to 1/100th. For the second day they needed to be changed slightly, as this time I was shooting into the sun instead of having it to my back. As the speed the boarder passed me also varied, some of the shots from the previous day that were taken at slower shutter speeds had motion blur, so I decided to kept to a minimum of 1/100th to avoid this. I again opted



for a small f-stop of f/16-18 to ensure adequate DOF that also helped to control over-exposure of the sun. I varied the ISO starting at 160 and increasing to 640 as the sun set and lighting levels changed. The last run of the day when light levels were lowest, I needed to open the aperture to f/14.

The aim for this shoot was to get some nice sunset backgrounds, with the wake-boarder, hopefully, pulling off a few jumps and flips. As we were out an hour or so later than the previous shoot, light levels underwater were lower than before,

which ruled-out any split-shots as the underwater element was simply too dark. If I had changed the settings to correct exposure underwater, the sunset would have been massively over-exposed. I therefore opted to raise the dome out of the water to catch the orange reflections of the setting sun on the waters surface.

With the sun behind the boarder this time, my subject was more of less a silhouette. Mabs managed to get some nice 'air' during the session, but on the final run of the day he really went for it, hitting the wake fast and pulled off an inverted flip, which

looked great for the camera and was perfect until it came to the 'face-plant' landing!

This is only the start of my experiments with wakeboarding photography, having only gone out for two shoots, so I have lots more to learn. We have more shoots planned and I have a vision of a 'wakeboarding split-shot', showing a nice reef in the underwater element and the rider above, silhouetted against the setting sun. I am not expecting this to be an easy one to pull off though. I also have an underwater shot planned, which is definitely going to be a big challenge,

but if it comes off I think it will be quite a cool image. Even if it doesn't, I'm sure it will be a lot of fun trying!

Alex Tyrell
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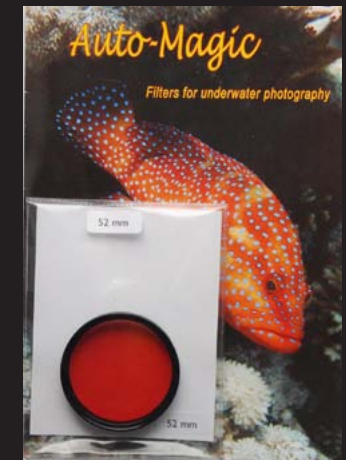
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