

'Underwater Photography Art and Techniques'

by Nick Robertson-Brown

Reviewed by Dan Bolt

I always enjoy being asked to do a book review for UwP, because no matter how much I think I know about this underwater photography game there's always a new approach, technique or idea I've not come across before and this new book from Nick Robertson-Brown doesn't disappoint.

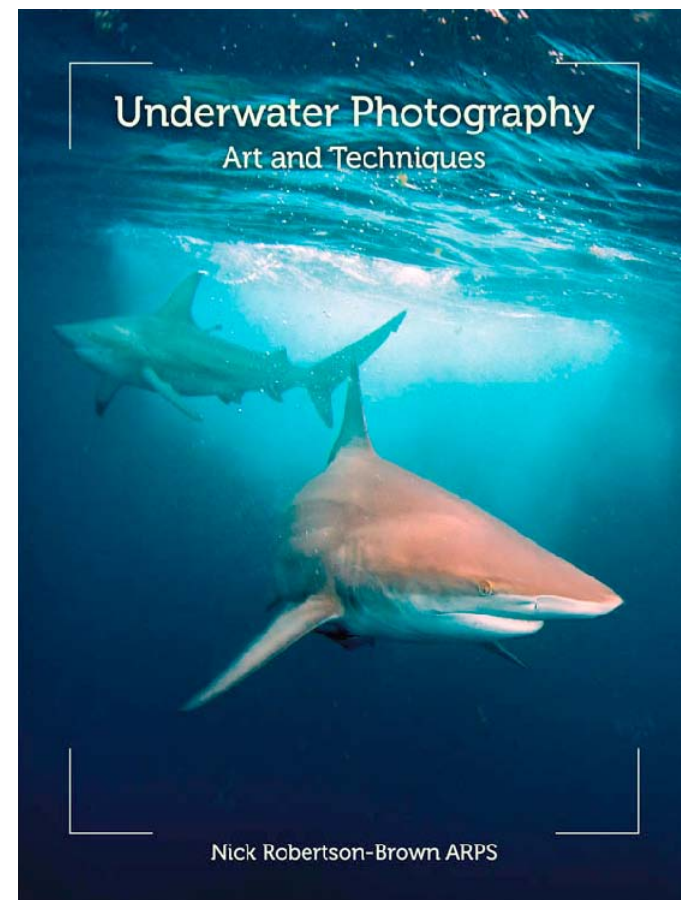
Before cracking on with the review, I have to admit that I was slightly mis-led by the title: 'Underwater Photography Art and Techniques' (UPAT). This is not the fault of anyone or any thing, just my mis-interpretation of what that could mean. This is in fact a 'generalist' underwater photography book which covers everything from camera/housing selection, through learning about exposure and composition and ending with the obligatory chapter on post-processing. That's not to say it's a bad book, far from it, but I was looking forward to getting into some semi-esoteric philosophy about the subjective 'art' of underwater photography. My bad. (Note: I had to explain this term to our esteemed Editor!).

As with many books which choose to cover this subject (this is the third I've reviewed for UwP), UPAT follows the same tried and tested pattern by taking the reader on a journey. This book's opening chapter starts with an historic look at the camera that builds nicely into explaining why we have the complicated system of shutter speed, aperture and ISO to give us this thing called exposure. A whole chapter is dedicated to a more in-depth look at exposure later in the book too, but setting out the basics at the beginning is a nice touch.

In all there are 14 chapters, covering everything from wreck photography, habitats and composition, through to both artificial and natural lighting techniques. 14 chapters in a 175 page book (actually if you take out the comprehensive glossary - I'm pleased this was included to help explain all the technical terms used in the book - and initial intro chapters, it's about a 150 page book) doesn't give a huge amount of column space for each subject. I do take my hat off to Nick for putting together a fantastic publication that covers all the necessary areas for beginner/intermediate shooters, but sometimes it does feel a little rushed. For example, the otherwise spot-on Natural Lighting chapter demotes filter photography to a single paragraph and gave no photographic examples of how effective they can be.

The chapter on artificial lighting was very well thought through and explored all the options available. With the current flood of high-powered, and progressively cheaper, video lights now coming onto the market, it was a timely piece of writing to discuss the pros and cons of using them for photography in this chapter. Other topics included strobe positioning, using one or two light sources, as well as snoots and remote triggers for off-camera lighting.

I must admit that the first chapter I always jump to is the one on Low Visibility shooting - a subject close to my own heart. I have to say I chuckled when I read that one of the causes of poor visibility was 'careless finning' techniques - well



done Nick for putting that in! The thorny issue of strobe positioning in low visibility is not covered to any great extent, but a raft of other techniques are mentioned giving the reader plenty to think about and ways to combat the dreaded backscatter.

The book itself, when viewed as a 'product', is a good quality paperback, but on three or four occasions I felt the photos used to make a point were let down by the printing. That's not to say that the quality is bad, far from it, but the subtle nuances of a point to be made, for example, in post-processing were slightly lost because the difference between the before & after photos was very small in



the final print.

The publishers were kind enough to supply both a printed copy of the book, as well as a rights-managed ePub file. I was eager to see how this worked as a technology, being heavily into the iBook format myself and not having had much exposure to full-colour ePubs. To my delight (and as you'd expect) the images in the electronic version of the book all looked bright, sharp and crisp on the screen of my MacBook Air, despite Adobe's 'Digital Editions' ePub reading software not being the nicest thing in the world to use. Skipping ahead to the images that I thought had been less successful

in the print version; all my worries vanished as now being displayed on-screen, the photographs chosen to illustrate every technical point did so very well indeed.

Herein lies the quandary currently facing authors and publishers; to print or not to print. In this particular case the nicer 'product' is definitely the printed book, but viewing the electronic version on a good screen definitely helps to make the most of the authors' well chosen photographic illustrations - heck, buy both!

Nick is a well travelled photographer and journalist and the the selection of images used throughout the book reflect this depth of experience. With photos from all around the globe taken in clear, and not so clear, warm and not so warm waters it is also a eye opener for the newbie photographer wishing to explore the globe. As a UK shooter myself it's nice to see the inclusion of quite a few images from around the British Isles.

The tone is very clear and topics are discussed in an easily readable manner but, apart from one paragraph at the end, there is little emphasis on experimentation. An important point to remember with all books like this is that, outside the absolutes of exposure and kit selection, the rest of the advice given is built upon the experiences of the author and what they think does or does not make a 'successful' image.

Nick is a very popular underwater photographer and his images are regularly published in magazines so he certainly is in a very good position to teach others about what makes such a successful image. But, and this isn't to detract from the content of this really very good book, there are other other ideas of what makes a successful image out there and it all depends on personal style

and the reason for shooting. Images that do well in competitions may not necessarily translate into popular magazine images and vice-versa.

A prime example of this was the book's description on how to make use of a model; without going into any detail at all I felt that if you followed the author's advice to the letter your images would do well in magazines but to my eye they would look a little formulaic and 'samey'. I recently gave a talk to a group of photographers, many of whom were college students, and a part of the talk was about models. I tried to emphasise that divers do more than just 'dive'; they breath - so make use of the bubbles, they swim - so make use of the curves of the leg/fin, and they don't always have a torch on every dive either! I only mention this because no matter how good this book is, it should be seen as part of a wider arsenal of knowledge for the budding underwater photographer.

In summary then, this is a great book for beginner/intermediate photographers and draws superbly from the author's breadth of experience from taking underwater images around the world. I know just how much effort goes into the creation of such a publication and I applaud Nick and his team for producing a book that not only educates, but also enthuses; a hard trick to pull off.

Dan Bolt

www.underwaterpics.co.uk

RRP: £16.99

E-Book Edition: £12.99 (incl. VAT)

www.crowood.com