

Digital Shootout 2014

Little Cayman

By Joanna Lentini

Compared to other professions, passions and pastimes, there aren't many live forums in which underwater photographers can congregate to learn, share and compete with each other all in one place. Of course there are some impressive online communities and "members only" societies that provide much of this, but in terms of comprehensive support and a generous selection of demo gear alongside world class diving, there really is nothing that compares to the annual Digital Shootout (DSO) hosted by Backscatter Underwater Video & Photo. Now in its 13th year, dating back to the days of film, 2014's event took place at Little Cayman Beach Resort. This outstanding event combined with an enviable dive venue undoubtedly offers a great opportunity for like-minded underwater photography and video enthusiasts to share their underwater passions.

Founded in 2001 by Backscatter Owner Berkley White and Light & Motion Int'l Sales Manager Dan Baldocchi through their joint dive travel venture Underexposures, this event has evolved into a true industry stand-out. What really sets this

Shootout apart is the extraordinary quality and quantity of demo gear, which is on offer for all participants to take turns on. The Backscatter staff literally lugged an actual ton of demo gear from both US coasts. The DSO staff also includes sponsor reps from an array of industry leaders such as Canon, Nauticam, Aquatica, and Light & Motion, many of whom had their own equipment and expertise on offer as well. I think we all know the heavy price tag on underwater imaging equipment, so this is a truly unique and invaluable opportunity to give a wide array of high-end cameras, housings, lighting options, and other big ticket items a try before you buy while diving with and learning from many of the industry's true knowledge leaders.

In recent years, the DSO has alternated locations bi-annually between Bonaire and Little Cayman. The return to Little Cayman this year clearly provided a familiar environment for the seasoned staff to operate within which facilitated a very smooth albeit frenetic agenda. The schedule below gives a sense as to the full end-to-end nature of this



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friendly competition. As clearly stated from the outset, the non-stop activities are not meant to overwhelm. Instead, the event is designed such that participants can pick and choose which dives and workshops they care to attend, while hopefully leaving enough on the table that they care to return year after year. Indeed, roughly 50% of this year's shooters were repeat attendees.

The daily seminars are tailored to all levels of experience, with attendees ranging from brand new shooters who are just getting started, to well-recognized professionals who still seem to be asking meaningful questions to continue to improve their expert technical skills. There is something to learn for everyone, and Berkley White stands out as an expert amongst experts who is able to connect with the audience at all levels. Attending Berkley's first two seminars of the week was a true privilege. For the chance to hear such an accomplished photographer passionately speak about his own personal underwater photo and video techniques felt well worth the price of admission on its own.

Later on in the week Erin Quigley of GoAskErin.com dove into the world of Lightroom



Randy Johnson. 1st Point And Shoot

5, highlighting all of its new bells and whistles, such as the awesome Radial Filter. Apart from the software updates, she articulated everything from workflow to image editing, even providing students with an invaluable laminated keyboard shortcut list. Erin is an award winning underwater photographer and Lightroom expert that is easily accessible throughout the week for any and all post-production issues. Super friendly, she is a pleasure to be around both in the classroom and on the dive boat.

If video is more your thing than you won't want to miss the seminar taught by Final Cut Pro expert Mary Lynn Price. In this class, you'll go over everything from pre-planning your shots to post-production work in FCP.

As each seminar is full of invaluable information all of the class notes are thoughtfully bound in a spiral notebook and provided to participants upon arrival to Little Cayman. Therefore, if you feel like an afternoon nap on the hammocks or that an additional dive is calling, you can feel at ease knowing you still have all the



Cecilia Clementi. 1st Wide Traditional



Jay Kavanagh. 1st Macro Traditional

content you missed at your fingertips.

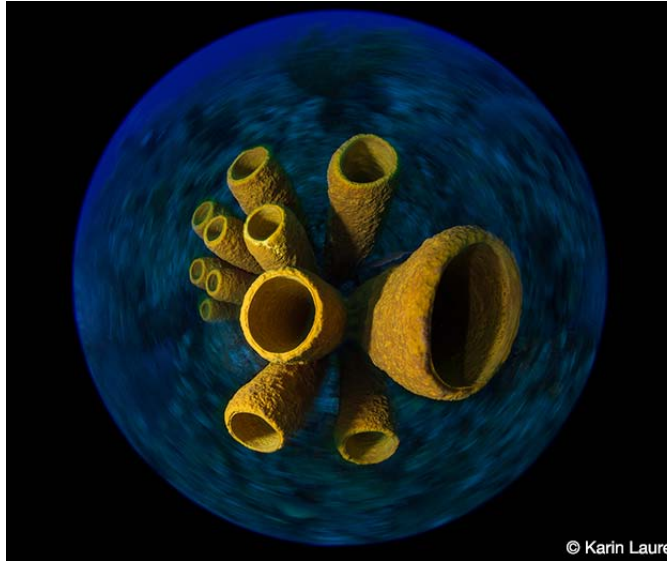
Each evening after dinner the staff gathers everyone alongside the pool and puts on a slideshow of submitted images from the day's dives. Each participant is encouraged to enter up to three images and/or a sixty-second video. If you can muster up the time and energy to get some JPEG's to the Creative Cave staff by 5pm you'll



Louis Kahn. Jim Watt Award

have the opportunity to have your images/clips critiqued by the DSO crew later that evening. This is an important step in the learning process but still some found there weren't enough hours in the day to make their submissions. If you plan to attend a future shootout make sure you don't skip this step, as there is a lot to be learned from the process. And as Backscatter CEO Jim Decker pointed out, the vibe at the DSO is not as ultra-competitive as one might think. There is a feeling of camaraderie and the emphasis is placed more on learning than on competition. Perhaps this is why the DSO has been so successful?

Speaking of success, let's jump into the competitive side of the event. The contest is broken into six categories and one Best in Show named the "Jim Watt Award" in remembrance of a true icon of the underwater imaging world. Jim Watt was the first pro photographer to attend the DSO and to share his knowledge with participants. After passing away in 2007, it was quite fitting to name the superlative category in his honour. Per Berkley White, the winning image, an incredible close-up



Karin Laurel. 1st Wide Unrestricted

macro shot of a nurse shark's eye by Louis Kahn from Seattle, was rightfully one that Jim would have loved himself.

Each still photography category has a first, second and third prize-winner, however the video contest includes an additional award for honorable mention. In addition to all of this, there are some incredible prizes raffled off to the rest of the participants at the end of the evening. Amongst the awards are camera housings, strobes, video lights, as well as trips to the Maldives and Indonesia!

As you can see from the winning images on the DSO's site, the diving and underwater photo opportunities are truly world class. The on-site operators, Reef Divers, are top-notch and these hard-working professionals handle the heavy lifting making a dive vacation what it should be. They are not afraid to share a drink or two with guests during Happy Hour either, providing for enhanced camaraderie by week's end. Sites such as Mixing

Bowl, Bus Stop, and Randy's Gazebo offer just some of the highlights. Over the course of the weeklong event the DSO crew split up and rotated between dive boats, providing participants the opportunity to actually jump in to the water with the experts and extract further advice while topside.

While plenty of macro opportunities exist, this is a wide angle mecca thanks to some dramatic walls, cavernous swim-throughs, and a spectrum of species of grouper, rays, and turtles all of whom offer up close and personal dome port contact. The popular Tokina 10-17mm lens would be a good choice here for cropped-sensor DSLR users. If lucky, you might enjoy a prized encounter with the gargantuan Loggerhead Turtle who can be seen barreling across the reef at this time of year.

At the end of the weeklong marathon, I sit for a moment to catch my breath and talk with Jim Decker, CEO of Backscatter. A true protégé of Berkley White, Jim's broad and deep expertise across the complete spectrum of equipment and technique is equally impressive. I learn that a semi-annual shootout is now being considered with one held on both the Eastern and Western hemisphere each calendar year. Now wouldn't that be something? For next year, Backscatter is planning a new venue in Roatan, Honduras (June 13-20, 2015). I can hardly wait . . .



Joanna Lentini



Seacam D4 Silver



Subal D800



Aquatica A-EM1



Gates XA25/XA20/G30



Aquatica HD Wave



Fantasea FG-16



Recsea RX-100MKII



Recsea G-16



Ikelite S-120



GoPro Hero



Watershot iPhone/Galaxy



AERIS
The adventure begins



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