

Book Review

Underwater Photography Masterclass

by Alex Mustard
by Peter Rowlands

Every now and then the underwater photography world benefits from new talent which appears from comparatively nowhere yet almost arrives perfectly formed; ready to push the boundaries further than we ever thought possible.

In my limited time I have had the privilege to have been associated with two of them, Peter Scoones and Mike Portelli and now Alex Mustard, the author of this new book on underwater photography. Peter and Mike never did get round to writing 'their book' before their untimely demise but Alex, fortunately, has and the underwater photography community is going to benefit from it for a long time to come.

'Underwater Photography Masterclass' follows in a long line of books on underwater photography and my claim to fame is to be part of that inner circle with a tome modestly titled 'The Underwater Photographers Handbook' in 1984. It was a different era then but Alex started his underwater photography around that time so he has experienced and learnt from both the traditional and the digital and this, I feel, gives this book a great deal of authenticity.

Underneath it all Alex is an academic. He applies and learns; going forward each time but fortunately he also has an artist's eye and instinct. That unique combination sadly passed away with

Peter Scoones but I feel sure that Alex has been 'passed the baton'.

And so it was that Alex's book arrived on my doorstep. I had known it was due to arrive for quite some time because Alex is a master of publicity. He wants you to know but not to tell anyone. I have a business relationship with him so I have been 'in' on this arrival for some time but it didn't stop me from taking time out to savour this new arrival.

UWPM (as I'm now going to abbreviate it) is a genuinely fresh take on underwater photography for several reasons. Firstly the author 'walks the walk' but secondly he has 'listened to the talk and soaked up the past' and thirdly, and most importantly for you the reader, he has the confidence to divulge everything.

I had already been told in the build up to this book that it was originally twice as long but had been

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS

CONTROLLING LIGHT UNDERWATER

Auto and manual exposure modes are there to help. Although everyone will tell you to shoot manual, it is OK to use auto exposure underwater, and TTL flash, if and when it helps. The truth is that auto modes, designed to work on land, are more often a hindrance underwater, particularly in more complex lighting situations. When auto modes get it wrong, and underwater they do frequently, you can't be completely sure why. Should you dial in exposure compensation for the flash, the camera, or leave it alone in case it gets it right next time?

Manual is the most popular route underwater simply because it is the easiest, most reliable way to get the shot. The big advantage of manual is that camera and strobes do what you tell them and they keep doing it. If the exposure is wrong, you see it, make a change, and it is right. As most underwater photos are taken from the same distance, exposures stay remarkably consistent.

HISTOGRAMS

A histogram is simply the image represented as a bar graph of exposure. It is a useful tool for checking exposures, when you are struggling. Histograms are particularly helpful on night dives, inside wrecks and caverns, when the LCD screen shines so brightly that correctly exposed pictures look overexposed, causing you to underexpose.

However, in my experience, histograms hinder underwater photographers more than they help. I have even banned people from having histograms overlaying their images on my workshops, because they are too focused on the graph and not the photo. Getting correct exposures is relatively easy underwater; what really marks out strong work is achieving a good quality of light, and the histogram tells you nothing about that. In fact, by overlaying a histogram on the picture, it stops you seeing the details of the lighting. Instead, look at your images full screen on your LCD to spot uneven lighting (with hotspots and unwanted shadows). Identify it and remedy it (see Chapter 4). There is no correct histogram, it depends entirely on the scene and photographer's intentions, which is why I have refused to show any in this book!

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EXPOSE TO THE RIGHT?

Some photographers extol the benefits of exposing to the right (known as ETTR), which theoretically gives better image quality. With the cameras of five years ago, there was definitely an advantage and I encouraged this technique. With the latest cameras and software, I do not see any difference between a correctly exposed image and ETTR in the final results. It remains a valued technique for my landscape photographer friends, who need something to think about to pass the time! But, underwater, I now believe it is a red herring. I see people missing shots because they were distracted trying to ETTR. It also greatly reduces the margin for error for over exposure and highlight clipping, which does ruin images.

TTL OR MANUAL?

I discussed this topic in the previous chapter (see page 32), but as it is a common question it is worth revisiting. In the days of film with just 36 exposures and zero feedback, TTL was a godsend and more reliable than guesswork. Digital cameras remove the need to use TTL to get the correct quantity of light. Good photographers now expect to get the right quantity of light and instead concern themselves with the quality of light.

TTL's Achilles heel is that it commands both strobes to give the same power, often giving a poor quality of light. As you will clearly see in the coming pages, this is far from ideal. Some suggest moving the strobes backward and forward to alter the amount of light that reaches the subject, but not only is this more effort than simply adjusting the flash power in manual, but also changes in distance alter the quality of light. Manual is easy: shoot, look at the LCD, adjust, and reshoot. The good news is that LCDs are bright and clear underwater and actually exposures vary very little!



UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS



ALEX MUSTARD

CONTROLLING LIGHT AND CAMERA



A A SCREEN TEST
Use the LCD screen not to admire your work but to check for mistakes in focus and lighting. You'll be taking lots of verticals so turn off 'rotate tall' or 'auto-rotate' so that they are shown full screen (not as a thin strip). You want to see them big and in the same orientation as the scene is in reality.

WHEN I USE AUTO

I choose my exposure mode, manual or auto, and my flash mode, manual or TTL, based on what gives the best chance of getting the shot. Almost all the time manual is my preference, but I will use auto exposure when it is better, say when shooting fast-moving subjects like dolphins, with only available light. I will use TTL for macro, especially on very cold water dives. It limits my lighting options, but when it is that cold, I probably wasn't going to try anything more fancy than point and shoot.



A PUGET SOUND KING CRAB Canada
I use TTL when it is the best way to get the shot. When diving in Canada, I knew my finger dexterity would not last as long as my desire to take photos. I used TTL for point-and-shoot simplicity for this juvenile king crab with simple flat lighting.

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refined down to be of a manageable travel size format (more of this later) and this has certainly been achieved without leaving anything out. It's like the perfect cooking sauce which starts off with all the bulky ingredients but which over time, and with lots of stirring and care, is reduced to perfection. UWPM is like that but, as with the perfect sauce, it can too rich when you have too much of it so you must dip in every now and again to get the best from it.

I also think the cooking analogy is very apt when it comes to Alex's images. There can be no doubt that he is consistently 'ahead of the game' in both ideas and techniques and his image legacy displayed in UWPM is of the highest and most original quality. The result is that I think he is the most 'copied' underwater photographer and yet nearly all of his images have been taken while on workshops teaching others how to take better images!

A significant part of Alex's income comes from escorted workshops where he takes groups to the right place at the right time to expose them to improve themselves. I have been on some of these trips (not to improve myself, you understand) and I can vouch for how much he puts into them and how much his clients get out of them. The only problem I have is that a significant

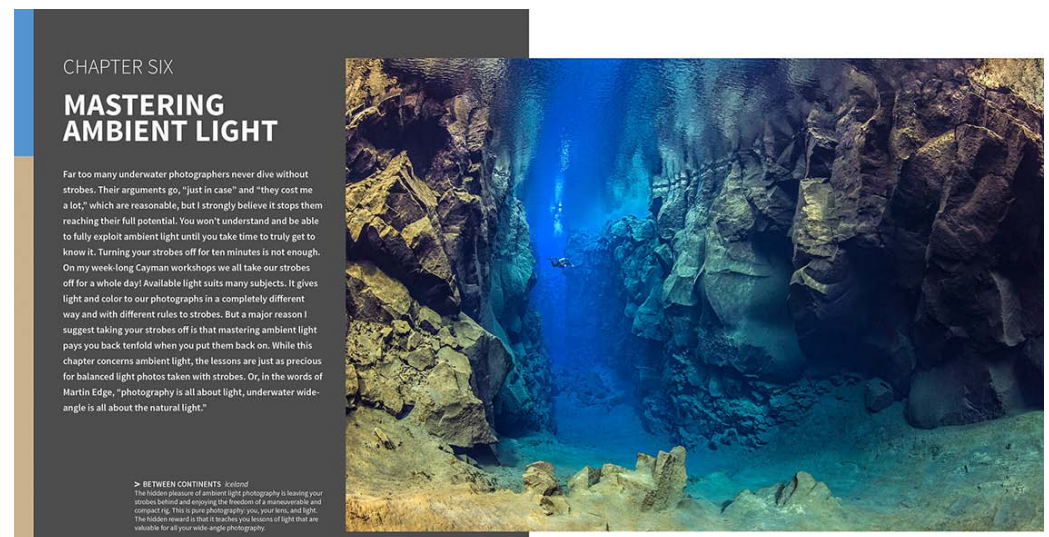
percentage are there (and those who buy this book will be, most probably) trying to emulate Alex's images and techniques; and this to me seems misguided but then it dawned on me that a cook book is a great analogy.

I like to cook and I have a collection of recipe books with excellent photographs of perfect looking food. I spend an inordinate amount of time and usually (as my wife points out) I use every pot, pan and work surface to try and create a meal which looks like the photograph in the book. More often than not the vision on the plate doesn't match the photo and that makes me despondent but actually I'm missing the point. The important thing is that the food should taste good and the ingredients should compliment each other.

In UWPM Alex tells you everything openly from the inception to the capture followed by the post capabilities. In UWPM he has literally imparted everything which makes him create his images and they are like 'the food on a plate' analogy. You can either use this book to emulate its images or you can use it to empower you to create your own. Either way, you have everything at your disposal.

Having said all of the above, there are a couple of points which I must raise for completeness.

Firstly, and to me most importantly, I had a growing feeling



of disconnect as I thumbed through this book; I was really enthralled by all of the background information and especially the images but, as an underwater photographer, I really wanted to know what equipment and settings were used for each shot (and with apologies for the capitals) WHEN I WAS LOOKING AT THE IMAGE (close capitals with apologies). Those details are included but as an appendix list at the end of the book. You have to refer back and forward to get this detail.

The second comment is an obvious one as I have been 'electronic' since 2001 and that is the lack of a downloadable version either as a direct copy of the print version or as an expanded and interactive

one (with photo captions next to the images!). Alex's preamble to the book was to have it in a format which would encourage it to be taken on location but in today's digital world surely the perfect format for travelling is the electronic one? I understand plans are afoot so I look forward to hearing about and publicising this development.

With all that said, Alex has produced a groundbreaking delivery with this book. He has shown you everything you need to know and the result is an excellent and visually inspiring tome.

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Book Review

Colours of the Reef by Roger Steene by Walter Starck

Roger Steene's three volume coffee table book is truly exceptional in scope as well as pictures and production quality. In over 1400 large format (265 x 315 mm) pages it presents almost 7000 high quality images of coral reefs and reef organisms from around the world of which more than 6000 of these images Steene has not previously published.

Uniquely for underwater photo books, scientific names are provided for almost all of the individual species depicted and great effort has gone into obtaining accurate names and identifications from numerous experts in the diverse groups of organisms involved.

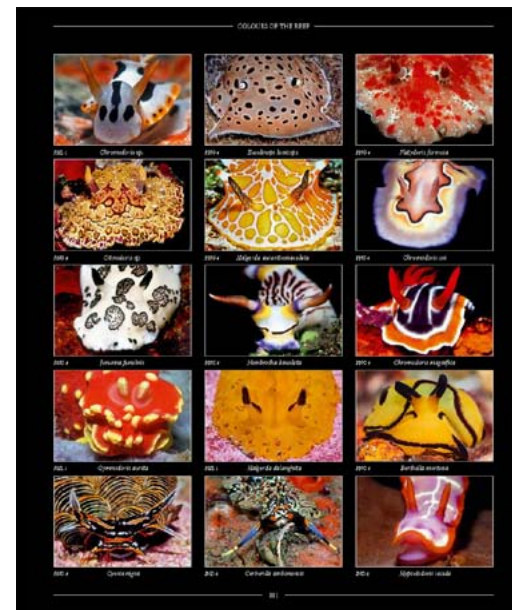
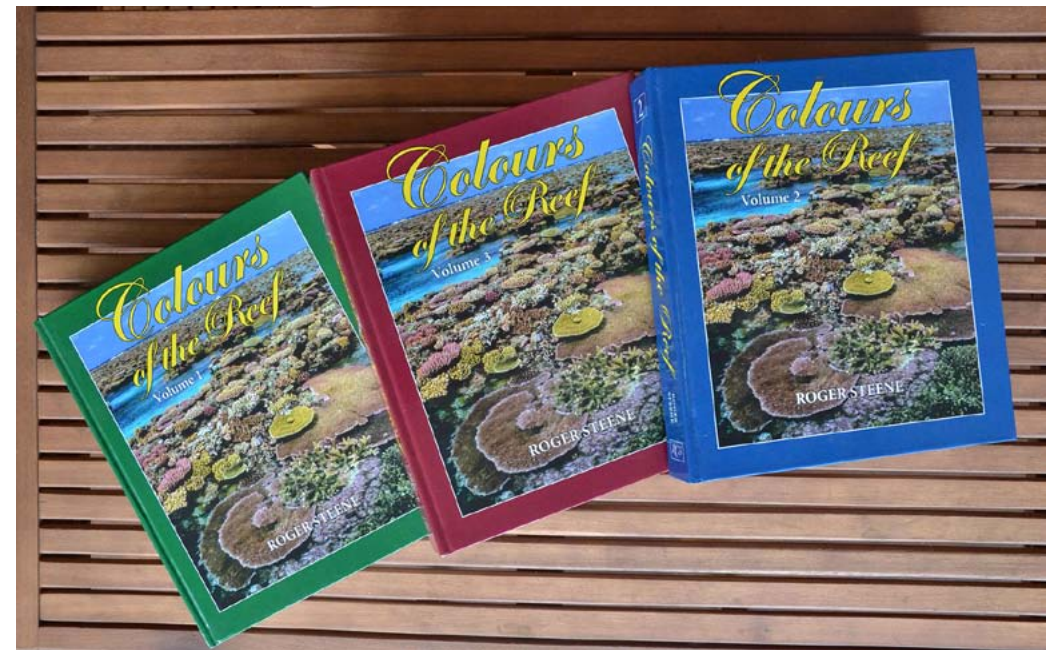
The vast majority of images presented come from Roger's personal archive of over 100,000 slides spanning a half century of effort. However, for Roger the subject matter and quality of an image takes priority over any personal concerns and 314 of the pictures used were taken by friends and colleagues who had an

image of something he didn't have or one he considered to be better than his own.

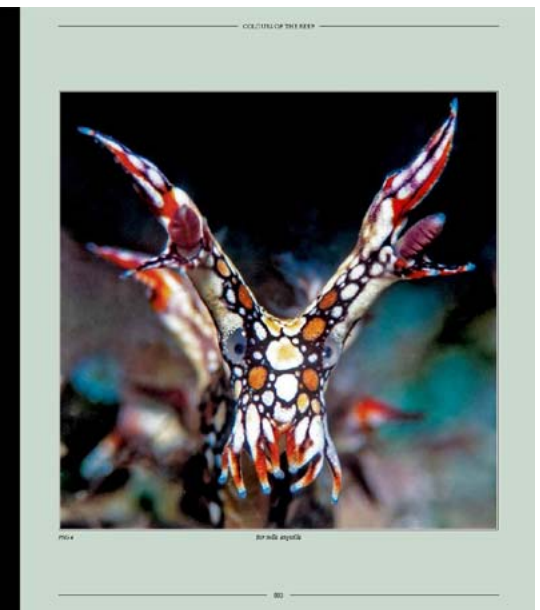
Over the years a dozen books of Roger's work have been published by various commercial publishers but like most photographers he found the care, quality and handling of his work in the commercial world left much to be desired and like most he dreamed of a book over which he would have control over its design and printing. Unlike all but a rare few, he decided to produce a magnum opus and take on the major risk of publishing it himself.

Being a committed Luddite intending to have as little to do with computers and the internet as possible was also not a small obstacle. It was solved through an immense effort by a friend and fellow nature photographer, Mike McCoy who had the computer skills as well as the near supernatural forbearance to scan the thousands of slides and work closely with Roger almost daily for two years to turn his photos and ideas into this monumental work.

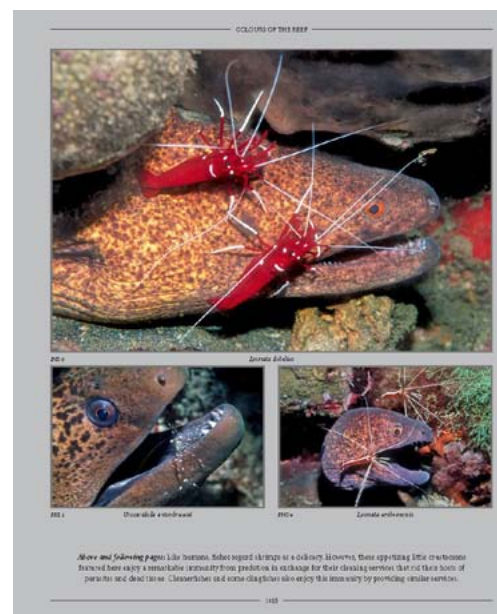
This effort included combining multiple scans of many slides to capture the full shadow and highlight details, trialling and tweaking numerous design ideas as well as repeated proofing to get the best colour possible out of the CMYK printing process. The result speaks



for itself. While not always perfect, within the limits of CMYK printing you won't see better and rarely



such consistent excellence. This is especially notable with the notoriously problematic blues some of which



Roger Steene ready for 'work'.

that even after years of diving you will have never seen. This includes new species, strange organisms in places we tend to overlook or choose not to dive, rare creatures in remote places and special behaviour or events which only rarely occur.

Colours of the Reef was printed in a limited edition of only a thousand copies and has only two small distributors. True to his nature Roger has no interest in distribution, marketing or promotion so it remains a sleeper which few people even know exists. However, if you are a book lover with an interest in nature, coral reef life or underwater photography this should be a must have. Not only

is it unique and superbly well done, it also seems unlikely to be reprinted, superseded or even approximated by something similar anytime soon. It thus looks almost certainly destined to in time become a rare and valuable collector's item.

It is available in Australia through Ocean Ark Alliance for AUD \$399 which includes \$59 P&H charges. They have created an extensive web page for it at <http://www.rogersteene.com/>

In the US it is available from

New World Publications for US \$320 + \$30 shipping.

Both Mike McCoy and I have been pestering Roger to release an e-book edition to give it the availability it deserves but our chance of success at this point looks about like that of getting a vegan to try a Big Mac.

Walter Starck
www.goldendolphin.com

www.fishid.com/colours.html

www.amazon.com/gp/product/0646909703?redirect=true&ref_=cm_cr_ryp_prd_ttl_sol_0

www.rogersteene.com

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