

Underwater Photography



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Underwater photography combines the two things I am really passionate about - diving and photography. Given the chance, I would do it every day.

I have been a scuba diver for over twenty years and as I got more into photography it was a natural progression for me to shoot and share the incredible sights I've seen over the last two decades. This is what I especially love about underwater photography: as with all things, if you see the extraordinary enough times, it becomes ordinary and you stop seeing it through the eyes of someone seeing it for the first time. But, with a camera in my hand, I can do that all over again.

I took the plunge three years ago. I realised I would be learning about a specialised and technically challenging form of photography. I also knew I would have to spend a fair amount of money acquiring the best possible kit to enable me to achieve quality shots.

Unfortunately, underwater photography is pretty technology dependent if you want good results. I would be misleading you if I said otherwise. Of all the branches of photography I have tried, this one makes the most demands on your kit and there is no doubt that better results come from good kit. Yes, you still need good technique, but I am afraid that without the right gear it is going to be a struggle.



David Keep (left) making way for a large Tiger shark (Grand Bahama) - Photo by Debra Canabal from Epic Diving



Underwater Camera Equipment

I use a Canon 5DS R in a Nauticam underwater housing. Really important additions are the two powerful strobes (flashes) that restore the colour back into the underwater scene. Water filters out colour from sunlight and the deeper you go the more colours disappear, that's why many of the underwater images you see appear grey and colourless. The colour is there but the camera cannot record it. The strobes bring artificial sunlight and restore colour.

Getting sufficient light on your subject is challenging, but the angle of the light is also important if you want to show all the glorious details. Flat light does not show them off at their best - but this is when being underwater is an advantage. The strobes are mounted on two articulated arms, giving a reach of almost 1m from the camera per strobe. It's easy to position them, and indeed yourself, to get the best lighting effect, because you can move effortlessly in all three dimensions. On land we would have to alter tripods & off camera flash stands, but underwater it can be achieved quickly without difficulty. My workflow is to decide camera settings, manually alter the strobes for the required light intensity and then think about the direction I want the light to hit the subject. With practice it becomes second nature to be honest.



It wasn't too difficult to adapt my diving style to photography, but I soon discovered that underwater currents are your main enemy. It's difficult to free up the mental capacity to select the correct camera settings and composition when you are holding on for dear life to stop yourself being swept away! But, as composition is everything in photography, you must find a way to remain stable so you can frame your picture. This usually involves jamming yourself into some crevice or holding the camera close into your body so you can stabilise it.

I try to tell stories with my images, so I look for situations and angles that help convey the character of my subject, and hopefully allow you to make a connection with the creature.

Here's the stories behind four of my favourite underwater images...

HAMMERHEAD SHARKS, NORTHERN BAHAMAS

The two weeks I spent photographing sharks in the Bahamas was without doubt one of the best trips of my life. For sheer adrenalin-pumping excitement, it cannot be beaten. I deliver a talk on underwater photography to local camera clubs and nature groups and it is always the shark section that makes people sit up the most. I use the opportunity to present sharks in a positive light as I actually find them graceful and gentle. The thriller movie "Jaws" has a lot to answer for - sharks are not man-eating killing machines as they are often portrayed. Having already photographed tiger sharks in this region, this time I was after shots of the Great Hammerheads. The unusual shape of their heads puts their eyes further apart and this makes them great hunters, particularly in low light. I found them difficult to photograph because to show the head in all its glory the body often ends up at an awkward angle. I got lucky with the pictured shot and I feel it shows the power and beauty of this remarkable fish.



Hammerhead Shark, Bahamas

THE GREEN TURTLES OF BUNAKEN

I went to the Indonesian island of Bunaken specifically to photograph green turtles because they are abundant there. Whenever I come across turtles on dives I am always struck by their calm demeanour - they really do not do anything in a hurry. A large turtle has an eye which is roughly the same size as ours and as you approach you can clearly see that you are being observed. I think we associate best with creatures on which we can imbue human characteristics, and to me a turtle seems like a wise old sage, quietly observing you before passing judgement on your worth. I particularly wanted to get a head-on shot so I could see the eye - and that was the real challenge. Turtles breathe air, surfacing roughly every 20 minutes, so as they headed off for the surface, I would swim alongside trying to get that head-on shot. I had lots of failed attempts - it's par for the course with underwater photography - but eventually I got this pictured shot and am so happy with it because, of course, you can see that beautiful eye!



Green Turtle, Bunaken, Indonesia

ARTICLES

THE DIVING GANNETS OF SHETLAND

My interest in gannets was piqued when I visited RSPB Bempton near Bridlington in the UK. The chalk cliffs at this nature reserve are home to the UK's largest mainland breeding gannet colony. I discovered that the gannet is a beautiful bird which is extremely agile on the wing, if a little boisterous in nature. Gannets sight fish from the air then dive down at literally breakneck speeds of up to 60mph (97km/hr), folding their wings back and hitting the water like a dart. Forward momentum takes them around three metres down and then they then use their wings to fly underwater up to 15 metres deep. After observing them from the cliff tops, I decided that to photograph them underwater, as they made their headlong dive to capture fish, would be a real challenge - but one worth pursuing.



Diving Gannets, Shetland, UK

I went to Shetland to try this because the water is much clearer there. However, it is also very cold - around 10 Celsius - so I had to wear a thermal diving suit. I used a local tour boat to take me to the gannet colony at Noss Point. When I first went under, I was concerned about getting hit by one of the gannets, but I quickly saw that they are far too agile for that. After all, they always avoid hitting each other - and I am a much bigger target to avoid. The sound of the birds hitting the water all around me was like bombs going off. It's a sensation I will never forget and, overall, this shoot was an experience I will remember for the rest of my days. I was thrilled with the shots and this pictured one stood out as everything came together perfectly. I vow to return.

CROCODILES IN CUBA

I have always had a bizarre fascination with crocodiles ever since I was a child watching Tarzan wrestle them weekly on TV. I spend ages watching crocs in wildlife parks - are they asleep or just waiting for an opportunity to pounce? I found a dive operator in Cuba offering afternoon excursions where you could observe crocodiles. When I asked if I could photograph them, I think they saw me as a bit mad. However, they assured me that my shoot could be done 'relatively safely'. I was taken to a labyrinth of mangrove islands within a marine sanctuary. It took us two days to find a crocodile the right size: too big and it would be too dangerous; too small and the images would have no impact. When we did find a suitably sized male, my guide slipped into the water first and, after sensing the mood of our new friend, he invited me to join him. Was I nervous? You bet I was! As soon as I entered the water the crocodile swam straight over to me to investigate. After a few seconds he decided I was of no interest and proceeded to find a spot to settle on the sea floor. He may have settled, but over the two hours I spent in the water, I never settled once. It was another great experience ticked off and I am delighted with the shots I got. But would I do it again?



Cuban Crocodile, Mangroves of Cuba

Definitely not!

Further underwater images, taken on dives around the world, are shown below. If you would like to see more of my work, or book me for a 90-minute talk on underwater photography, either in person or via Zoom, you can find details on my website: www.davidkeepphotography.co.uk



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A Western clownfish dances above a colourful anemone (Indonesia)



Banggai cardinalfish - one of my favourite fish to photograph (Indonesia)



Cormorants hunting in huge Sardinia shoals #2 (Mexico)



Green Turtle with attending Remora sucker fish (Indonesia)



Grey seal - it is nice to be able to photograph in waters closer to home occasionally (England)



Hairy Frogfish - the angle of lighting was important to highlight just why he gets his name (Indonesia)



ARTICLES



Homage to Nature. Huge shoals of Horse-eye jacks make for an impressive spectacle (Mexico)



Sea lions and Sardine shoals (Mexico)



Sharks at Sunset - one of the most difficult images I've ever tried to capture (Cuba)



Harlequin shrimps on soft sponge (Indonesia)



How cute am I - Sea lion pup (Mexico)



The beautifully marked Whale shark - the largest species of fish in the world (Mexico)



ARTICLES



The regal Caribbean reef shark is ushered into view by a shoal of Silversides (Cuba)



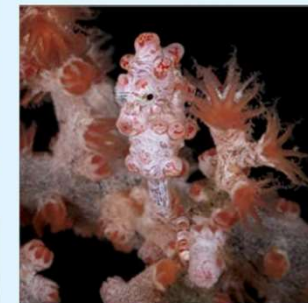
This Sea lion has a particularly proud pose I feel (Mexico)



A Caribbean reef shark patrols the surface layers (Cuba)



A Manatee in the Crystal River estuary (Florida, USA)



The Pygmy seahorse is a difficult subject to photograph because they normally live at depths in excess of 30m and are extremely well camouflaged (Indonesia)



A Cormorant hunts in huge Sardine shoals (Mexico)



A Porcelain crab feeds safely, protected by the tentacles of his host anemone (Indonesia)

