CAPTURE YOUR
UNDERWATER MOMENTS

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

If for any reason you think that underwater photography is something for you, then consider taking a course.
It does not take a lot of time and you do not have to buy a camera for it.
On the contrary, the course helps you purchase one.

If you had asked me until recently, my answer would have been that I would never take up underwater photography. Yes, sometimes I feel a bit jealous when I see beautiful underwater shots, but for me, it's more about the opportunity to dive on that magnificent dive site than it is about the skills to take amazing photographs. I do sometimes get frustrated when I have forgotten the defining characteristics of the fauna or flora encountered during a dive. Due to depth narcosis or age, I usually surface with inadequate information on what I have seen. If I then notice someone looking at the screen of their camera to identify what they have seen underwater, the thought flashes through my mind that it is maybe time to reconsider it.

Sometimes, I surf the net in search of a good second-hand underwater camera. If I could strike a bargain, I might be willing to buy equipment to take a quick photo when I see something. Until one blue Monday morning, during an editors' meeting, we were asked to choose a photo for a front page. I was the only one who proposed one photo which in my view was excellent. An image that, according to the experienced photographers around me, was substandard in terms of composition and

colour. Their conclusion: certainly not that one. They promptly picked another. My conclusion: forget about underwater photography and stick to videography.

I have dived with my underwater housing and video camera for years – a similar model can be found in the 'history box' in the Flemish Dive Federation building. Recently I supplemented my very heavy 'yellow submarine' with an action cam mounted to my dive mask. By setting it to time trigger mode, I have added a non-video component and solved my issue with the determination to capture the fauna and flora on my dives. Underwater photography was but a vague memory in my mind, until I started up the series, 'My buddy'.

ASPIRING TO BECOME AN UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER
The idea of exploring the different aspects of our sport had consequences, in that, in addition to an article, I had to also supply photos. The topic being unique made it virtually impossible to use pictures from an archive or the internet. A series about diving illustrated exclusively with 'dry' pictures taken by a not-so-good photographer would not be attractive for our readers. Because of the concept, no one

would accompany me on the dives, so I had to do it myself.

My initial solution was to set my action cam at 'one shot every 3 seconds'. I was aware that this would provide me with a bunch of useless photos, but chances were that a few would be great shots worth publishing. However, I would never be sure of success and with one dive per buddy this was too big a risk. Fortunately, in the beginning, diving photographers at the dive spots were happy to let me use their pictures. However smart, all of these were ad hoc solutions based on good luck. Because I wanted to continue the series, there was only one way that offered more certainty, and that was to ensure that I could take the pictures myself.

First step in the process of becoming an underwater photographer was finding an affordable camera that enabled me to take nice pictures at a decent price. That meant that I also had to look for a strobe with arm. Without this extra feature, I knew that the chance of publishable photos would be small. I scoured the internet for several hours, but the interesting devices always fell outside my predetermined budget. After a few weeks, I was fortunate to hear that our editor-in-chief wanted to sell his old camera and strobe. All, within my budget!
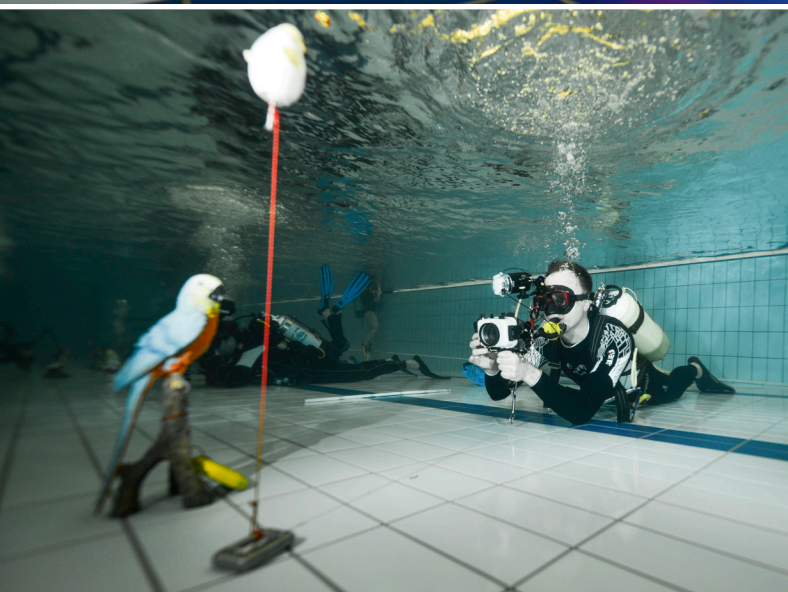
Pool photos by Alidoor Dellafaille.

With a bit of skill (and a lot of trying) I managed to get the camera to work with the strobe. In my ignorance, I thought that this cooperation was obvious, but I did not know what the term slave flash meant. I had to cover the camera's internal flash so that the light would not shine in front of my object. Light from the flash would light up dust particles in the water like a car's headlights in thick fog. However, at the same time, I had to make sure that the light-sensitive cell of my external strobe would recognise this light as the signal to flash. Moreover, everything I would build had to be water and diver resistant. An underwater engineering challenge.

Good equipment is only the first step and far from being sufficient to take good photographs, there is also a need for skill and knowledge. Attending the Underwater Photography Level I course seemed like a good start, so I signed up. To my surprise, a few weeks later I was sitting at a school desk in a classroom hidden in the WWI fort of Wommelgem, Belgium.

THE THEORY
A picture is worth a thousand words, but no one tells you that writing has a completely different discipline from photography. Hiding behind the excuse that I am here to write an article, I step into the classroom with a certain degree of self-assurance. I look around and see a camera on the instructor's desk that is many generations more advanced and complicated than the one protected in my transparent underwater housing. I place my case with camera next to me, a bit embarrassed.

The course's programme is light and therefore there is no excuse not to take it. With only a three night investment, you'll have a certification. The acquired knowledge will even help to get better holiday shots. What is your excuse?

The first lesson is about aperture, shutter speed, and the combination of the two. Then the instructor gets into ambient light and strobes, and ends with the function of a camera. All concepts are explained at the level of a beginner and well-illustrated with photos. All levels of photography are shown, from great photography to mediocre examples, even mistakes. You can learn from the failure of others. Our instructor, Jef Driesen also demonstrates the concepts. He manipulates his camera and allows us to see the results. This way we immediately see the effect of certain settings.

He then asks us to do the same with our cameras. A whole range of cameras come out. One more complicated than the other. The variety of possibilities is enormous and this is only a class of neophytes, although some have taken underwater photos for years. Before I realise it, we get our assignment for the next lesson: a practical session in the swimming pool.

On the second evening, we don our dive equipment and prepare ourselves for a long session at the bottom of the pool. The task is to try out the first lesson's theory with our cameras. We have to take pictures on the manual setting, without the automatic controls. We set the ISO to the lowest possible value as well as the shutter speed. With subjects at various distances from our lenses, we try out different aperture openings. For this, we had to bring an item that we could photograph far as well as close-up. I also discovered how my strobe really works. As usual, I had failed to read the manual beforehand.

We then played with other settings such as exposure compensation. The result was an exchange of battery power against a full memory card with almost a hundred photographs. I imagine this is the most amount of photographs one can intentionally take on one dive.

WHO SEEKS, SHALL FIND: This lobster was the only animal I encountered during this dive. It was well hidden and I wanted to photograph it without disturbing it. This photo was the best of a series of 8.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: No comments, just a shame about the weed in front of the lobster. **PASS:** Yes
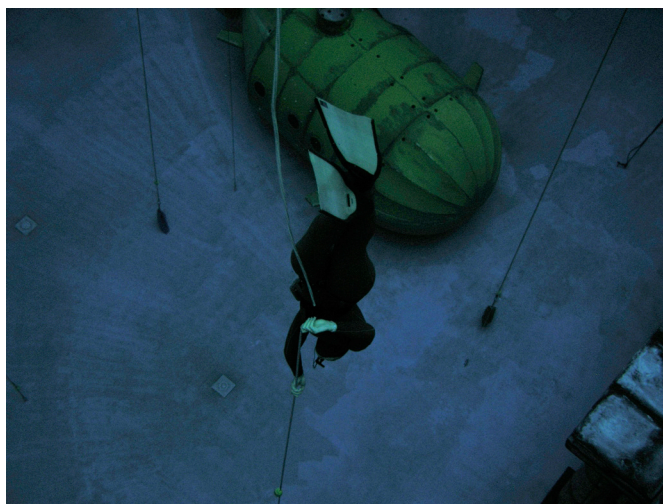

FREE IMMERSION: Freediver Linde on her way to 14 m in TODI. Although a little too dark to call it a success, I have retained this photo because it was taken whilst I was also freediving. As a photographing freediver, it is even harder to take an action picture.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Indeed a tad on the dark side, but nevertheless a great photo. It gives a nice atmosphere in which you as a viewer can see a story. **PASS:** Yes

MIRROR IMAGE: A bit too light but still a nice reflection.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Worthy attempt to visualise a reflection. Unfortunately, your photo is slightly overexposed. That's a pity, because for the rest it is a great photo. With silver fish you should always pay special attention to use less light. In post-processing, you can always correct a slight underexposure afterwards, but you cannot fix an overexposure. **PASS:** No
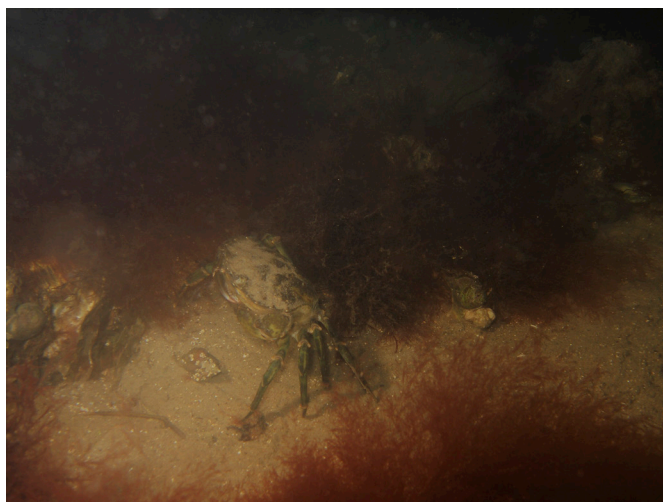
CRAB WALKING: Although slower than a fish, a crab is not so easy to photograph. After the first flash, they quickly get out of the way.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: The subject is quite small, and the top half of your photo is black. You can use a black background to make your subject stand out, but here your subject disappears. Next time, try to get closer and shoot from eye level. Taking photos from above is almost always a bad idea. **PASS:** No

After the underwater exercises, there is a dry part: homework. Based on the quality of pictures taken, we had to determine the correct aperture setting for each distance. The purpose was to determine the guide number of the flash. Of course, the setting of the ISO value also affects this number. That is why we had to use the full manual setting so that the camera's computer would not try to compensate. Additionally, the position of one's strobe plays an important role. Add natural light to this and you realise that you have to know and work with your settings in open water. Fortunately, our items stayed in place on the pool's bottom, despite the long time that we needed to adjust our settings. A fish however, will not wait until you are ready.

The third evening session was back to dry exercises. The group discussed the results of the swimming pool session, though the interpretation of the results was not as black and white as I had expected. The sharpness and clarity of the photos are not as easy to get. It is clear that taking good pictures requires a lot of practice.

After the discussion, we were introduced to the composition of photography. You will probably first take a quick photo so you can at least determine the animal if you miss getting another shot. Then you get in closer to establish a clearer and better angle. After all, you'll enjoy your work more if you have a beautiful composition in addition to a clear recording of the characteristics.

In the end we discuss the different types of devices and equipment that can be used as an underwater photographer. The theoretical part is concluded with the final exam. The latter consists of drawing up a portfolio of 10 good photos that are not only sharp and well lit, but also enjoyable.

PRACTICE

Taking ten photos did not seem like much, especially when there is no limit of time to get it done. However, the risk is that you postpone it until you forget about it. With the assignment in the bag and my camera in order, I had no intention to let this happen. I would take my camera out on my next dive and get my portfolio sorted out right away.

The following week, I spent an hour under the water looking for some good subjects.
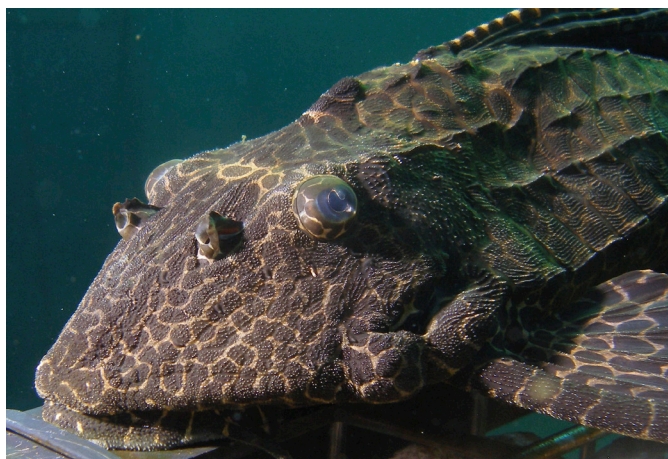
I'M GOOD HERE: Nice close-up.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Nice portrait. Without a doubt one of your better ones! **PASS:** Yes

THE SUITCASE: Several trials but unable to get a good composition and a bit dark.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Composition is ok, but your subject is dark. Did your strobe fire? **PASS:** No

MY BUDDIES: An obligatory photo of the buddies statue. Their gaze is just as penetrating as when they were first sunk.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Nice photo. Those bright eyes definitely add something extra. Just a pity that it is not sharp. Almost all your photos are with a shutter speed of 1/30. That's really on the edge of motion blur. In automatic mode and with ISO 50, your camera simply does not have enough light so it goes for that slow shutter speed. Start by setting your ISO value a little higher, for example 200. That's already 4x more light. But it is even better to simply shoot manually, and thus force the camera to take a higher shutter speed if your camera allows this. Shutter control can also help, but then your camera will probably go for a larger aperture. **PASS:** No

HERE I AM HANGING: The fish just kept hanging there but always turned its flank towards me. I had to cut the photo because of a black line on the surface below the fish.

JEF DRIESEN'S COMMENTS: Great photo. A strange blue "haze" around the head of the fish. It looks like a reflection of the flash light on the fish. Bizarre. **PASS:** Yes

Back at home, I counted my harvest of about 80 photos with the chance of ten good ones amongst them. And yes, in the evening I did indeed distil a complete set. There were even a number of fish photos in the collection. I remember from the underwater videography course I had done, that you always have to tell a story, so I came up with a title for each image. After I had uploaded the set to the internet that night, I did a bit of work on improving the light and reframing them, and then I proudly pushed the send button.

I read the results the following day with great disappointment. There were indeed a few acceptable photos, but others were below standard and the titles had not impressed. The criticism was justified and constructive. It is clearly not easy to reach level 1. There is only one thing left and that is to put my wetsuit back on and go out and take more pictures. Thinking I would be able to collect enough good pictures in one dive was a little naive, so I dragged my camera to every dive site during the next few weeks.

With the second submission of my reworked portfolio, I had more success. The selection reached the required minimum level. A few weeks later, I received my certification in my mailbox. Success!

AND NOW?
The course definitely taught me the basics and changed my view on underwater photography. I will never become a good photographer, because I like to tell a story and lack the ambition to become one. Nevertheless, I have considered taking Level 2 of the course, but I will first have to gain more experience and perhaps participate in a competition. Maybe I should purchase a more powerful device. After all, I have occasionally bumped into the limitations of my current camera.

Whether or not I have become better at taking photos, you will be the judge from the images that will illustrate my future articles.

If for any reason you think that underwater photography is something for you, then consider taking a course. It does not take a lot of time and you do not have to buy a camera for it. On the contrary, the course helps you purchase one. In any case, after the course you will be able to better appreciate good underwater photography. Good luck!