

Red Sea Workshop. November 2008



This is my diary from my Red Sea Workshop on MY Blue Horizon in November 2008. You can see a gallery of topside images taken by folks on board, [here](#).



And so they gathered, in Port Ghalib on the Egyptian coast, underwater photographers from around the world. Such a grandiose introduction implies extravagant arrivals. Stretched limos, photographers pushing through the crowds, sunglasses firmly in place, as security guards struggle behind with the luggage. But that rather oversells the luxury levels on the charter flights that ply the routes from Europe down to the Red Sea Riviera. We can't complain though. The planes are modern and clean, ran on time and most importantly we all hoodwinked our weighty camera systems on board. Everyone and everything arrived safely for a week of indulgence for underwater snappa-holics.

Most travelled from Europe (Denmark, England, Holland, Northern Ireland, Sweden and Finland represented), but we had a few more exotic travellers too, joining us from as far west as the Pacific coast of the USA and as far east as Mumbai in India (Bollywood actor Parvin Dabas adding a bit of glamour from the Sub-Continent). I am always proud that my workshops attract such an international gang. I think it really benefits the group learning, as everyone brings slightly different experience, viewpoints, equipment and techniques.



I was joined on this workshop by Lars Kirkegaard from Red Sea Safaris, who made the whole trip run super-smoothly and provided another pair of expert eyes to give the gang 1:1 feedback on their images. Our final special guest was Eline Feenstra, this year's Rolex European Scholar for the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society. Although Eline is the fourth Scholar who I have dived with, and the second who has been on one of my photo workshops, I am happy to say I have drunk beer with many more of the scholars than I have dived with!

Day 1 Marsa Alam Area



Our first full day got off to a slow start, with the port authorities dragging their feet in signing all the necessary paper work. Frustratingly, this left us running late and it wasn't until mid-morning that we were waving land goodbye and heading out to adventure. Our plan throughout the week was to move the boat as little as possible, staying on each dive site for the whole day and travelling at night. This would allow us to run a pool-is-open policy between meal-times and give photographers as much time, freedom and flexibility as possible in the water each day. It also provided everyone with a chance to dive their way, and even come up and change lens if they wanted. Tom Forwood was beaming after completing his first two hour dive, and Kathryn Arant contentedly informed me that she managed close to 5 hours of underwater photography most days.

Learning to dive for your photos, rather than taking photos as you dive is *your first step into a larger world* of underwater photography (gotta get a Star Wars quote in somewhere). Underwater freedom is essential in producing high quality results and I was very grateful that our dive guides Dray, Karin and James totally understood the way we wanted to dive. I guess it helped that the three of them are pretty handy with their own cameras. So a big thank you to them and also kudos to Blue O Two for employing such experienced guides. Not all boats are like this. As long as we obeyed their rules, we were trusted with the freedom to get on with our photography. The crew also worked really hard to accommodate our unusual ways. So a big thank you there too. They really made our holiday.

Anyway, back to our first day. For our warm up dive we headed to Marsa Shouna. This is a shallow site with a coral mini-wall, scattered patch reef and seagrass bed. I love these sorts of sites for fish photography and after sampling it, I was keen to come back at the end of the week to allow everyone to fill out their portfolios with macro and portraits after a week of predominantly wide angle opportunities.



We took lunch and then afterwards I gave my first talk of the week, which was something of a welcome message. The talk covered photo opportunities that I hoped we'd experience and aquatic etiquette both regarding other photographers and the marine life. I am always keen to stress that I won't tolerate damaging or harassing marine life for the sake of a photo. I also wanted to encourage everyone to work together through the week. If you see someone setting up a wide angle shot - volunteer as a model. You'll help them get a more interesting shot and you'll get to build a nice collection of photos of yourself! Unless you get Photoshopped out, as Neil Roseworn did to Tom in one shot!

For our second and final dive of the day we headed to Elphinstone. Although not the intended focus of all our photography, the timing of this trip was specifically to catch Oceanic Whitetip sharks, which traditionally come in close to the offshore reefs, such as Elphinstone at this time. This year they had been around unusually early, about a month before our trip, but for the last three weeks there had been zero sightings at Elphinstone. I wanted to check the status quo for myself, so I was pleased to be checking Elphinstone early in the week. Sadly, there were no sharks. I crossed my fingers that they would be back when we passed this way at the end of the week.



We were running late because of the Port hold up in the morning, so it was getting very dark by the time we got out of the water. This didn't stop Ralph Mortimore taking a lovely wide angle overhang shot, with me doing my best to model. Great, one nice shot of me already! It was so dark when we got out I ran up to the top deck and photographed the scene of the last few (Lars, Lars, Jeanette and Mikkel) on the dive platform in the fading light. Compared with the deck lights the sky is black. Then we began the long overnight steam down to St Johns just north of the border with Sudan.

During my Red Sea workshops I like to give my instructional talks during the day, leaving the time after dinner free for going through peoples images & both projecting some with the group for general discussion and also looking at them individually on the laptops. In the group sessions I always encourage everyone to think of their own critique of each others images and how they would improve them. Since we were planning to dive just one site each day, our time would not be cluttered by dive briefings and it is easy to fit in a talk after lunch and then again before dinner.

That said, on this first day I gave my evening talk after dinner as we were running late. I gave a refresher on the basics of underwater photography, but from the different perspective of controlling light. There are only two types of underwater light to worry about & ambient light and strobe light. Learn how to control each of these and how to exploit them photographically and you can take any underwater photo you want. I argued then demonstrated.

Day 2 Uum Aruk



We woke up early on day two down at St Johns Forest/Wood, also known as Uum Aruk, in the deep south of the Egyptian Red Sea. This site consists of a forest of tall narrow pinnacles, which grow alongside a much larger circular reef. Throughout the week we chose to dive sites that we could access from the back of the liveaboard to save all the effort of clambering in and out of zodiacs with our kit and cameras. The main motivation, though, was to give us as much flexibility as possible to allow each of us chose when to get in and out, meaning it was easy to find solitude underwater.

This site is great for wide angle reef shots, the forest making for a very different background to a typical reef wall. I really liked some of the wide angle shots that Fergus Kennedy and Alan Cranston did here. Taking time to model for each other as they worked the topography. On the second dive Fergus took his tripod down, fitted with his panorama head that rotates the housing around the lens's nodal point meaning he can accurately stitch images together. His planet 360s are awesome.

Before the second dive I showed some of the forthcoming [Shooting Magic](#) video and gave a talk on filter photography. The second dive, when the sun was highest was a perfect chance to try them and the site covered an ideal depth range for filters. Ralph and Neil, who have been on workshops with me before, were straight in the groove and produced some very polished Magic images.



The other great feature of this site is multiple scarlet skirted anemones. These really appealed to me and were my main focus on the third dive in the late afternoon when, as they usually do, they began to close up revealing their red under garments. Quite a few found them irresistible. Rob van de Louw took a lovely series of some classic anemone fish face portraits against solid red backgrounds. Steve Banks did some impressively well-lit wide angle images of the anemones against the silhouetted reef (while claiming to be a wide angle novice). Pull the other one, Steve! Whenever I was by the anemones I saw Eline and Kathryn there, Kathryn continued to feed her *nemo* addiction. Being a diver from the USA's Pacific Northwest, she thinks nothing of seeing a six-gill shark, but these were her first anemonefish! The other two who seemed focused on the anemones and the snapper schools hanging out in this areas were Ole Nienstadt and Magnus Mattsson, who I think I saw on every dive this day. I am not sure who was following who! Lars and Jeanette also worked these subjects and Lars got a nice shot of a pair of anemonefish posing against a mixture of red skirts and tentacles.

In combined dive time, the group clocked up several days of underwater photography at St Johns Wood, so the evening was dedicated to a major review session. Before dinner, I collected up a lot of the images and we went through these on the big screen. I also did a few examples of workflow with the shots, having a tough time trying to adjust images for the contrasty TV screen, rather than my laptop. After dinner Lars and I went around looking at people's images from the day.

Day 3 St Johns Caves



On day three we headed an hour or so north to St Johns Caves, which is a wonderful shallow reef, that is cut with a maze of caves and caverns. This is a popular dive site on most liveaboard itineraries and particularly for the middle dive of the day it was a busy place. The caverns are very picturesque, but with visibility stirred up by divers and the bright beams of sunlight cutting through the darkness, it is a challenging place for photography. Three long dives here would provide us with the chance to try things, review images and then hopefully go back and nail the shots.

Before the dives there was quite a bit of interest in shooting High Dynamic Range series of images and then combining them in HDR software. Mikkell Noe-Nygaard and Ferguson Kennedy tried this.

Although both concluded that the technique didn't really work with this type of subject. After all, the caves look dramatic because of their areas of highlights and shadows. HDR flattened the drama.

On the middle dive, when the sun was highest and the sunbeams were at their strongest, spearing down into the caverns, I found a nice spot in the caves and organised some set ups for those who came past. The two Mortens (Larsen and Beier) were the first to arrive. Next along were Mikkel and Dan Kaasby and then finally Ole and Magnus. I am not the most attractive looking model, but at least I was willing to pose for their photos! Just around the corner I met Bent Jensen and Henrik Adelborg, who were working some similarly impressive caverns for images.



A little later I ran into Andy Barker, who had managed to give his buddy Jarret Brown the slip! Andy was very willing to pose for me in one of the big entrances to the caverns. When I tried to suggest we swapped places and he photograph me posing, something was lost in the translation of my hand signals. It seems I am better at speaking Danish underwater! Jarret would be keen for me to point out that he had not 'photo-gotten' (loosing your buddy while distracted taking pictures) Andy and waited on the back deck for Andy to return. Not that Andy was concerned as he bagged a very attractive shot of the cavern that looked like a view into a gorge. The walls covered in golden seafans and the sea's surface appearing to be a meandering river.

It was busy in the caves and it was always amusing when you ran into a divemaster from another boat ordering you out of the way, by indicating how many divers they had behind them. Some divemasters do have a rather high opinion of themselves. As the old joke goes, what is the difference between a God and a divemaster? God doesn't think he is a divemaster. This is a lovely site, how frustrating to must be for those who are made to dive it seeing only the fins of the guy in front.

After lunch and before dinner, I gave a two-part talk on Composition, Communication and Commercialisation. The theme of the talk is about doing more with your viewfinder. Starting with the basic rules and guides of classic composition and going on to examine making images that really tell a story. It can be a simple story or a complex one. But once you know what you want to say about a subject, it makes it so much easier to decide how to put your images together. The final part of the talk is a light-hearted look at the commercial use of images, shooting for covers, spreads, magazines, books and advertising. And goes to show how ever clever you think you are the customer is always right!



More excellent images today and I was very impressed with how people handled the difficult exposures of the caverns. Steve took a very simple, yet strong cave opening shot and Tom, Neil, Fergus and Alan did a whole series of images of each other photographing each other at the same time. Ralph got a very colourful shot of Eline passing by an orange coloured black coral bush. As Ralph said there were so many divers around you didn't have to wait long for a moment of opportunity to come along. He made the most of it, though. Probably my favourite image of the day was taken by Rob of our dive guide Dray setting up a tripod shot. Rob captured a wonderful moment with Dray and the tripod exactly in a spotlight of light shining into the caves. Very cool.

Day 4 Fury Shoal



On day four we headed up to Fury Shoal to dive on at Abu Galawa Soraya. This relatively shallow site has attractive coral gardens and small, but picturesque wreck of a sailing boat. We were going to do two dives here before heading further north to make a night dive, closer to Elphinstone, where we planned to dive the next day.

I had a very lonely first dive, as I had a bit of a navigational issue as I jumped off the back of Blue Horizon and headed off in completely the wrong direction. It was a nice reef, but not the one we were supposed to be diving on! After 45 minutes of not seeing anyone it finally occurred to me that it must be me who had gone the wrong way, so I headed back towards the boat. And on arriving there I discovered the proper dive site right underneath it. How did I miss that?

So, about 55 minutes into my dive I finally found the wreck. And luckily met Jan Krogh and dive guide James there. I took some shots of Jan photographing the wreck and then asked James to swim by the wreck a couple of times and pose for me. After this I headed back towards the boat and bumped into Eline and Kathryn shooting in the coral garden. I beckoned Eline over and took a

couple of photos of her, but found it really hard to light her black-skirted mask. Then despite being no more than 10 metres away from the boat I got all navigationally challenged again and proceeded to swim off down the reef in the wrong direction, while I did my safety stop. I finally had to surface to get my bearings, dropping back down and swimming back past Eline and Kathryn on my way back to Blue Horizon. Oh dear.



Our second dive was timed to provide ideal lighting on the wreck for filter photography and many of the group strapped on Magic filters. Everyone's results were very impressive and I spent much of the dive at the bow of the wreck, posing in and setting up model shots for the group. I took some shots of the two Mortens taking it in turns to model for each other. Despite Morton B's best modelling efforts I thought that Morten L's best shot was actually of a group of divers that turned up. Tom and I both modelled for each other. Mikko Voipio found a very nice angle on the wreck, including some of the reef wall too, which adds a real sense of place to the wreck. Morten B worked a similar angle, and it is one I intend to copy next time we're back in this area.

Not everyone shot filters, Parvin strapped on his strobes back on for the second dive and used long exposures to reveal details of the interiors of the wreck and the resident school of glassfish. And Neil spent his dive shopping for fish faces, getting some great poses out of a moray eel. Eline was focused on anemonefish and with a bit of help in Photoshop from Neil, she presented me later with a photo of an anemonefish sticking its tongue out at me.

Andy shrimp-goby spotter Barker and Jarret spent their dives on the sand pursuing portraits of the co-habiting critters. There was much debate over who had discovered the various burrows. In the end we settled on Andy's goby and Jarret's goby. Patience paid off, as it often does for photographers who focus on a specific subject for a dive. Jarret got some very pleasing head on angles on the partnership pair and Andy claimed the bragging rights with shots of a goby and two shrimps.

I took my own favourite shots while safety stopping under the boat on the second dive. I found Blue Horizon this time. Quite to my surprise I was joined on the safety stop by one of the crew who free dived down to about 10 metres with no fins. I zapped some rather atmospheric shots of him as he ascended past me with the rays of sunlight streaming down behind.



During the afternoon we steamed up to our night dive spot and I gave a talk on *Bits and Pieces* covering some detailed techniques in underwater photography. I spoke about the importance of understanding strobe colour temperature in digital photography, shooting sun bursts, macro-wide angle, filters for black and white photography and double exposures on digital. Jarret had brought with him some of the strobe filters I recommend in my talk and kindly lent them out to others on board to test. Everyone seemed happy.

The night dive was lots of fun too and meant that I only did a short image review session after a late dinner. On the dive I saw a Spanish dancer and Kathryn got some very nice pictures of a Red Sea *Chromodoris* nudibranch that I had never seen before. Lars O and several others took some classic parrotfish sleeping shots, but my favourite shots were Neil's rock concert high ISO images of divers torches in the darkness.

Day 5 Elphinstone



On day five we awoke at Elphinstone. I had never seen an Oceanic Whitetip Shark before, so my fingers were well and truly crossed for an encounter. Previously I had made a ten-day trip to the Bahamas to see them, and failed. This time I wanted to see them and not just for me. But I was far from confident. This is usually the best week of the year. But this year they had been here early, up to three weeks ago, and nobody had seen one since. Kitted up I stood on the swim step waiting to dive. Then Eline surfaced shouting words that were music to my ears *Shark, shark, there is a shark under the boat*. A giant stride later and I was no longer an oceanic whitetip virgin.

I am pleased to say that everyone saw one. Almost everyone had enough of an encounter to get some shots and about half the group had once in a lifetime encounter, with an impressive, probably pregnant, female swimming from diver to diver for over 45 minutes, with everyone getting excellent images. And not just good by the trip standards, but some of the best shots of oceanics I have seen for ages. They did get in a little bit of trouble from the dive guides for drifting off into the blue, which is why I won't mention names here. But getting a dressing down by the dive staff for following your photographic instincts rather than the dive plan is pretty much an occupational

hazard. Lessons learned and awesome shark shots safely downloaded there were big smiles all round at lunch.



The rest of us managed some decent images too, although close passes were fewer. And Elphinstone provided more than the sharks. Morten L got the other Morten modelling nicely with a classic orange seafan, Magnus worked batfish and sunbursts, Parvin used digital double exposures to combine unicornfish, diver and sunburst, Mikko found an electric ray and Ralph became close personal friends with a napoleon hanging under the boat. To mention just a few.

At the end of the day I gave a talk on fish photography, going through the techniques as well as providing a menu of options on how to frame fish. This was aimed squarely at our last day back again at Marsa Shouna. With sharks, wrecks, walls, pinnacles, caves in the bag it was time for some portrait work to balance up the portfolios from the week.

Day 6 Marsa Alam Area



Our last day actually had the worse visibility of the week, certainly on the first dive. But that did not stop the intrepid gang getting in the water and cracking on with imaging and recording massive dive times.

One treat here was a large school of horse mackerel circling beneath the boat with. Both Steve and Neil bagged the head-on shouting mouths shot. But there was much more to see too. Just below the dive platform were a family of very friendly reef squid. Certainly very friendly with Andy Barker who got some nice images. Plus there were all the Red Sea favourites around. Lionfish, bluespotted stingrays, crocodilefish, Forster's hawkfish, masked butterflyfish, anemonefish. The list goes on. This site also has an interesting bed of seagrass and this was home to some interesting critters. I saw snake-eels and an ugly humpback scorpionfish.

Before the second dive, we also posed for our underwater group photograph. We all jumped in and formed a massive circle in the water, while Dray photographed us from below. I have so say that

some of the group have a pretty poor idea of what a circle is! It was Morten B's birthday on the last day, so he even got a round of "Happy Birthday" while we were all in the water.



But the encounter of the day didn't go to the birthday boy. Instead it was Jarret, who ran into the famous dugong (seacow). Unfortunately, his camera was fitted with a 105mm. He was the only one to see it. Good luck and bad luck all rolled into one. So typical of underwater photography.

After a long and lazy couple of dives we headed back to port, tied up, and I began the long processes of interrogating the gang for a few of their favourite images from the week to project as an end of trip slide show. It was a really impressive collection and we had a great laugh going through them too. A perfect end to an excellent week.



I hope you have enjoyed my own memories from the trip. This is simply an account of a few of things that stuck in my mind when I sat down at my computer a week after the trip. I'd like to finish by thanking the Captain, dive staff and crew of Blue Horizon for making this week such a success. And also a big thank you to Dave and Lars at Red Sea Safaris for all their hard work in making this trip happen and run so smoothly.

Most of all I would like to thank everyone for making this such a great week of diving and a highly productive shoot. I learn a lot, I hope that you did too. We were brought together as underwater photographers, we parted as friends.

Alexander Mustard. November 2008