

Martin shooting Marlon and Nemo in the pool



Martin and Maria review his shots

Take control of your camera



In an effort to improve his underwater photography using a digital compact camera, Martin Bruce enrolled on a one-day course run by Maria Munn of Ocean Visions.

Text and photographs by **Martin Bruce**
Additional photographs by **Maria Munn**

MARIA MUNN BIOGRAPHY



Maria Munn launched Ocean Visions, the first specialist beginners' underwater photography courses and trips for divers with digital compact cameras in 2001. She is passionate about helping beginners on her courses both here in the UK as well as abroad. She has been featured in more than 12 books and magazines worldwide over the last three years and her course guests are now starting to win their own competitions. She achieved a Distinction from the Royal Photographic Society for her own underwater photographs taken on a compact camera, and gives talks to dive clubs and schools in her spare time to raise money for The Shark Trust and The Scuba Trust.

F-stops, ISO and shutter speed. Four words that might as well have been a foreign language, but if I was to ever master underwater photography, a language that had to be confronted had on. Take a look at your digital compact camera – there will be a mode dial with a capital M on it for 'manual'. More likely than not, you'll have used the 'auto' or 'underwater' setting when on a dive.

A macro shot of some rather photogenic turtles

Now ask yourself: are you pleased with the results? Do you think you could do better? Underwater photography with a modern digital compact camera is made even easier by settings like 'underwater mode', which adds some red to the image to counteract the loss of colour at depth, but it has its limitations. To take your photography to the next level, sooner or later you're going to need to try that M setting.

I felt my underwater photography had reached a bit of a brick wall. I was happy with certain elements – shot selection and composition in particular – but the results were often disappointing, mainly due to a lack of colour and a washed-out blue effect.

Taking photographs for a diving magazine I needed to start getting consistently good results, rather than thinking: 'that's a nice shot, if only it wasn't so blue'.

I use an Olympus SP550 digital compact camera with PT-037 housing, Inon arm and Inon D2000 strobe. It's a decent set-up and I was convinced I



Patrick and Martin practice their macro photography

could get better results if I was shown how to use the camera properly.

Maria Munn of Ocean Visions specialises in teaching underwater photography using a digital compact camera. She holds courses around the country, and since September 2008 has been running courses from her home in Kent using an on-site indoor swimming

pool. I'd be wrong saying there's a standard format to the course, as whatever you feel your underwater photography needs, Maria can tailor the course to suit you. Specifically I wanted to grasp the manual camera settings, so in September Above 18m writer Patrick Shier and I enrolled on one of Maria's courses.

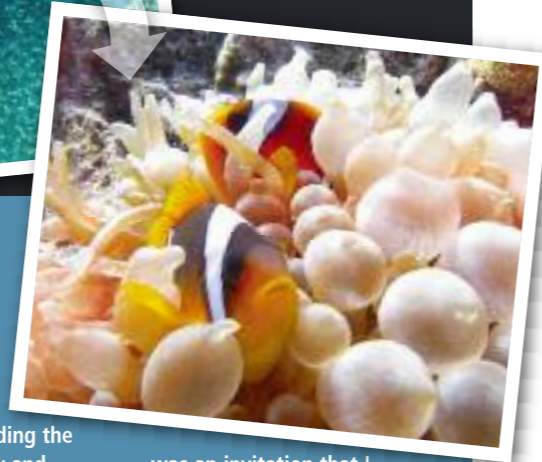
"I DIDN'T KNOW MY CAMERA COULD DO SO MUCH"

Sport Diver's Above 18m writer Patrick Shier explains how his photography was transformed with some advice from Maria Munn.

"If you are one of the thousands of divers that read my regular Above 18m articles, you will see that on many occasions I have had to beg, borrow or mug unsuspecting divers of their digital images. My compact camera is one of the best on the market, however I have never

used it to its full potential. I'm one of those people that opens the package and then starts using the camera without reading the instructions properly and immediately expects to become the underwater equivalent of David Bailey. All I ever did was put the camera on its underwater setting and then aim and shoot. I have never once adjusted the white balance or used the manual settings. ISOs and shutter speeds – these were all alien to me – and f-stops, I always thought these were polite, abbreviated ways of telling me to stop whatever I was doing. I have written around four articles where I have been lucky enough to use my own images, so when I was invited to attend a digital photography workshop with Maria Munn of Ocean Visions, it

Patrick's shots have vastly improved after the course



was an invitation that I wasn't going to turn down. Within a couple of hours of meeting Maria, she had talked me through the controls of my compact Nikon Coolpix and shown me in her on-site swimming pool how to use this fantastic piece of digital engineering. I really didn't know that my camera could do so much. The following week I was off to Egypt to practice my new found knowledge and the results were stunning. Many thanks Maria, your patience was tested time after time, but we got there in the end."

Patrick and Maria check out his practice shots



Patrick's lighting and composition is better

We were one of the first to use her new pool, which is just over a metre deep, warm and filled with photo subjects that, unlike real-life, don't move – the perfect training ground! Patrick and I had similar objectives, and brought along examples of our previous efforts for Maria to critique. Maria explained the results that can be achieved from changes to the ISO, f-stop and shutter speeds, which take a while to get your

head around. As with most things, the best way to learn is through practice, so we turned on our cameras to have a play with the settings. The results are dramatic, and the few examples here give you an idea of what can be produced.

It's in the pool where you can get the best idea of how you're getting on – and also to some extent have to think about buoyancy and your own exhaled bubbles. Maria has placed a range of

plastic fish, reef and even a wreck for divers to practice on. It's the closest you can get to recreating a seascape within your own home. They say practice makes perfect, but the very first image I took in the pool through luck or judgement turned out really well – nice blue background, pleasing composition and with the subject in focus.

Patrick and I then spent probably an hour or more in the water shooting

TECHNICAL TERMS



Changing the ISO setting can make a huge difference to the exposure of your shots

ISO

The ISO setting is also commonly known as the film speed setting, and while the range can go as high as an ISO of 5,000, the common range for diving is 100-400. The ISO controls the camera's sensitivity

to light. Daylight conditions need an ISO of 100, while 200 or even 400 can help you capture fast-moving fish. In reduced light, for example in a cave with ambient light, 400 is best. Aside from the extra light in the exposure, one thing I noticed

as the ISO is increased is a grainy effect. We began with looking at ISO settings. These shots of a fluffy shark demonstrate the changes that occur in your results as the ISO is altered, while keeping the aperture constant.

F-STOPS

The aperture controls how much light enters the camera, and confusingly, is inversely proportionate to the size of the aperture. For example, an aperture setting of 2.8 means the aperture is wide open, letting in the maximum amount of light, while a setting of 8 is the smallest aperture, and the lowest amount of light. Most digital compact cameras have a maximum aperture setting of f8. An aperture setting of f8 and a high shutter speed can be used to make a black background and your subject 'pop' with the aid of an external strobe to light the subject.



The shark 'pops' out of the shot

I had a go at creating a black background with these shots of the shark. If you have a great subject, but an uninteresting background, try this technique for a great composition.

SHUTTER SPEED

A high shutter speed of between 1/80th and 1/250th will help you capture fast-moving subjects, while get it too slow and the subject becomes blurred. As you increase the shutter speed the background becomes darker until it is totally black, which as I mentioned in 'f-stops' can produce some interesting results. For that nice deep blue water background, go for a shutter speed of 1/80th.



With digital, keep shooting till you get it right

The principles are the same, and you don't need to be on an actual dive.

different subjects and trying different techniques, while Maria joined us in the pool to offer advice. There was nothing more rewarding to see a genuine improvement in my results in such a short space of time. Initially there's a lot to take in, but the beauty of digital photography is that you don't have to worry about making mistakes. If the picture you've just taken is not quite right, review the settings and try again. You can even practice at home using

props. The principles are the same, and you don't need to be on an actual dive. Doing this course will make you want to go diving even more. The day was hugely enjoyable and productive, and gives me fresh impetus to get back underwater and try my new-found skills. If you've become frustrated with your photography, Maria can help you put the fun back into taking pictures. One thing's for certain: I know I've seen the last of 'underwater mode'. ■

COURSE INFORMATION

Photography courses are run from Maria's home in Kent, as well as bases in Essex, Oxford, Salisbury and Leeds. All venues include classroom facilities and an on-site swimming pool. Full-day courses cost £155, and a three-hour evening course is £79. Courses in Kent are limited to two people, and if you go mid-week, a second person pays half price. As well as UK courses, Maria runs escorted underwater photography workshop holidays to give you the chance to hone your skills. Tel: 07957 621915 Email: maria@oceanvisions.co.uk Web: www.oceanvisions.co.uk