



In the pool you have more control and can build your own set, including your background. I often use black vinyl (vinyl is easy to sink in the pool and it doesn't wrinkle much) for dramatic, high-impact imagery.



A new location can spark creativity. When I started photographing in the mangroves, I immediately thought of Neverland, Peter Pan, and the Lost Boys' adventures on the island where they never grow up.

Below The Surface

EXPLORE THE CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES
OF UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELENA KALIS

Ten years ago, seeking to extend my traditional art background, I picked up a camera and an underwater housing and started “playing in my backyard” with my young daughter as my model. I was also lucky to live nearby clear, warm water, and soon became fascinated by what I found. The spectacular effect of sunlight through water, the dreamlike weightlessness, and the deep emotional attraction of the water itself inspired me to experiment more.

ELANA KALIS' ESSENTIAL GEAR

WATERPROOF CAMERA OR CAMERA WITH UNDERWATER HOUSING. From waterproof compact cameras to DSLRs that require an underwater housing, there are options for every budget. Professional housings cost more—and often many times more—than a camera. If you're going to make an investment in a professional system, check out the housings available before buying your camera or lens as not all models are supported.

WIDE-ANGLE LENS. Getting as close as you can to your subject is very important in underwater photography. Since water is much denser than air, the more water between the camera and subject, the greater the loss of color and contrast, especially if the water is not at its clearest. Photographing people with a fisheye lens can be tricky and lead to distortions—I find that focal lengths from about 17mm to 28mm (35mm equivalent) get the best results. The relatively low levels of light underwater mean that a fast (large maximum aperture) lens will give you more opportunity. The Tokina AF 10-17mm f/3.5-4.5 AT-X IO7 DX lens is a popular choice for underwater photography.

DOMES PORTS AND LENS EXTENSIONS. These are sold separately from housings and are customized for the length of your lens. Large dome ports will provide a sharper image, especially in the corners, for wide-angle lenses. They are also used to capture those images where both underwater and above water are shown in one frame.

UNDERWATER COLOR CORRECTION FILTERS FOR YOUR LENS OR PORT. To compensate for the excess of blue light underwater, and to draw out the red light that is easily lost, there are red, magenta, yellow and orange filters.

STROBES OR LED LIGHTS. On sunny days in clear shallow water, you probably will not need to use an extra light source, but red colors are absorbed very quickly and so artificial lighting can be useful if you have to go deeper. When shooting against the light in shallow water, artificial light can help fill unwanted shadows.



When you can't feel the effect of gravity, who is to say what is up and what is down?

Non-traditional underwater photography has grown rapidly and is gaining a wide audience, especially through social media. The unique characteristics of the underwater environment offer truly new and exciting possibilities for imaginative images. A little knowledge can open up this world to anyone who wishes to experience it.

LIGHTING

Almost all of my images in the ocean are shot with ambient light. When the sun is high, the surface of the water can create crisp, dramatic patterns on your subject. When the sun is low, and the

light softer, the effect can be dreamy. In all cases, light behaves quite differently in water, and although you have much less control over the scene, amazing and unpredictable effects are constant. Bursts of light and reflections flood the scene as the water surface is disturbed by wind or waves, or the angle of the sun changes. The magic is everywhere—you just have to catch it.

In the pool, you have more control over the lighting, and can place lights out of the water (please exercise caution when handling electrical equipment near water), where you can use many traditional lighting accessories.

COMPOSITION

Shooting through a mask and a small viewfinder while moving around your subject in an environment where you are sinking or rising, and holding your breath, is a challenge. But the reward of being able to compose your images from literally any angle opens up new possibilities, and the weightlessness of your subject provides equally new opportunities that are not available above water. Combine that with the “unreal” lighting effects underwater, and you have a totally different world to stage whatever you can imagine.

I do most of my photography in shallow water where there is enough sunlight, the natural colors are not too faded, and I don't need scuba gear. Sometimes I use a diving regulator with a long hose to a bottle of compressed air in the boat or floating on the surface above me.

PROPS AND ACCESSORIES

I have often used props underwater, especially when photographing children in the pool, such as balloons and inflatable toys filled with water, mirrors, frames, flowers and more. There is virtually no limit to the props with which you can experiment. If you can sink it, you can use it as a part of your composition.

Using a model is not so easy. Few people are comfortable enough underwater to open their eyes and relax their face and body for the required length of time to capture the images. It is physically very demanding, and I have been lucky to have my daughter, who grew up a mermaid. Having an emotional connection to your model will also result in a better image, something to which a viewer will more easily relate.

WORKING WITH MODELS

Planning ahead and discussing your ideas with your model beforehand is very important—communication is difficult underwater. At the same time, be prepared to adapt your plan as you have limited control over your underwater location, and unpredictable things happen. Experimenting, and allowing for spontaneity, is what results in fresh and exciting images.



Photographing children is challenging as they will only cooperate as long as they are interested. Playing in the water is what most children enjoy; using toys and props makes it all the more exciting.

When photographing a model in the ocean, be aware of costumes that can restrict movement and get very heavy. Having a helper with fins and mask in the water is a good idea.

POSTPROCESSING

Postprocessing is a very important part of underwater photography. All underwater images will benefit from enhancements such as lens correction and adjustments to contrast, clarity, vibrance and color balance. Learning your way around Photoshop and Lightroom is a must if you want your images to stand out. I recommend capturing your images in RAW format for best results in postprocessing.

Underwater photography in open water is challenging, so practice with your camera and equipment. Work on your swimming and diving skills, take a lot of images, and freely experiment with light, settings, and compositions.

A certain amount of technical competence is required, but in the end it is not the technology or the technique that is going to create the truly memorable, emotionally charged image. So open your eyes and your mind to where your underwater photographic experiences lead you, and your passion will be reflected in your work. DP

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH HOUSINGS

- Take your time to carefully assemble your equipment! This is very important, since most instances of leakage occur due to human error. Do it in a dry environment with good lighting. Don't open your housing outside, especially in a humid environment. Pay special attention to the O-ring, and check if there are any hairs, sand particles, or damage.
- Connect all the parts and test shoot at home before going out.
- Submerge your system (preferably in fresh water), and watch for bubbles, indicating a problem.
- Never jump in the water holding your camera rig. Get in the water first and let someone hand it to you.
- After use, submerge your system in clean, fresh water for a few minutes, turning all movable parts. Dry with a clean towel.

ELENA KALIS' work has been featured in numerous publications and gallery exhibitions. She is also a Fine Arts Underwater Photography Ambassador for *Ikelite*. See more of her work at www.elenakalisphoto.com.