



By Todd Essick

# Master Plan of an Underwater Artist

Todd Essick gives us an exclusive behind-the-scenes look into his fine art photography projects

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■ **The creative** process is, for me, a spiritual and cathartic one. Each underwater image I produce is profoundly personal and it is this personal element that is the heart and soul of my work. While I, like most artists, seek inspiration in personal experience, dreams, and the intangible influence of a muse, these are personal and private sources of inspiration; however, they share a common source—my love for the sea. My passion is the sea and my project, Goddesses, Sirens, and Mermaids, grew from a simple desire to tap into and convey the connection each of us has with the sea. While the results of that artistic endeavour speak in a very personal voice to me, I have always understood that they will speak in varied voices to my viewers.

The process of producing my underwater photographs begins nearly eight weeks before any actual photography takes place. At this point, the process is reminiscent of planning a vacation for a large family replete with a variety of needs and an unwieldy mountain of luggage. The logistics are often a nightmare and involve the artful juggling of hotels, transportation, dive operators, assistants, schedules and models.

## A word on models

Over the years, my models have become my friends and collaborators. They possess abilities that make them uniquely qualified to help me realise the photographs I envision. As I have been quoted as saying many times, it is my models that make me look good. This is a tribute to far more than their beauty—which is considerable.

Generally, I have two types of shoots: type one can last as long as a week and involves several models, a large crew and typically deeper water (10-20 metres); type two is a one or two day shoot involving no more than a couple of models and a small support team.

For example, in the Bahamas I created an image series with models and sharks that drew significant attention not only because of the provocative nature of the photographs, but because we had a couple of shark-related incidents, including a shark's getting caught in a model's costume and another model getting nipped on the foot (ScubaDiver AustralAsia January 2007). Another example was in Palau at Jellyfish Lake, where I shot my most recent series of pictures, a setting chosen for its incredible beauty and because it is immediately recognisable to divers around the world.



## Palau

A one or two day shoot is usually more quickly organised and is sometimes an addition to a longer shoot, perhaps utilising another animal or nearby location. It can also be as simple and spontaneous as a sudden burst of creativity. It was in Palau that I recently found inspiration for one of these shorter shoots. I was taken in by the sublime natural setting, the charm of its people, the richness of its vistas and history, and the extraordinary offerings of this Pacific Island.

I owe a great deal of thanks to Dermot Keane and the entire staff at Sam's Tours Palau. Dermot became a supporter of my artwork while attending a show in Germany. He honoured me by welcoming me to Palau with typical island hospitality, making a personal effort to help me see all that Palau had to offer. His friends and colleagues guided me to amazing scuba diving locations like Blue Corner and Ulong Channel, excursions that helped me to re-connect with the raw beauty of a nature that had originally inspired me, nearly a decade earlier, to embark on my underwater fine art photography project.

The first time I went to Jellyfish Lake, I found such peace and grace in motion amongst the golden jellyfish, that I knew I wanted to capture this feeling in an image as soon as possible. I also knew I wanted an Asian beauty to complete my vision. Oddly, it was a struggle to find a willing participant in Palau. I approached many potential candidates only to be turned down. This proved a frustrating situation for me as an artist, as I am constantly receiving requests from models all over the world who desire to participate in my projects. When I had nearly given up hope of finding a willing model, fortune smiled upon me in the person of a Japanese dive instructor. She was immediately agreeable to modelling for my work. As English was not her first language, I was concerned that she might not fully understand what I was asking. I encouraged her to look at my website and then tell me if she still wished to work with me. She called me the very next morning to say that she was still very much interested in appearing in my photographs. She very quickly became my muse in Palau.

The shoot at Jellyfish Lake was a one model, shallow water affair made far easier by the fact that both of us were attracted by the beauty and majesty of Palau's diving. We also agreed that Jellyfish Lake provided the perfect location for representing this magical island. The planning required only a brief discussion of the images I envisioned and my desire to evoke the mystic quality of Palau. As far as my crew, a couple of people would suffice to help make the shoot a success. Sam's Tours obliged with a boat and the necessary personnel, including videographer Nick Martorano.

The vivid green rock islands off Palau's coast stand out like emeralds reflecting in the tropical sun, a hue native only to Palau. Once docked, getting to Jellyfish Lake requires a bit of a climb, hauling equipment up and then down a short but steep trek. The climb is well worth the effort, as becomes abundantly clear when one tops the final rise and begins a descent to the placid and serene waters of the lake. Shortly after arrival, we quietly slipped into the lake bringing along a modified inner tube rigged to hold extra camera gear and various swatches of translucent material. This inner tube would also offer a floating respite when needed.

The jellyfish follow the sun. On this day, the mid-morning light illuminated an area that extended almost to the far side of the lake.



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As we snorkelled across the lake, the volume of jellyfish grew geometrically, their pliant forms bouncing and tumbling around us. At one point, they became so thick, eerily displacing the water, that our swim became surreal. We gently drifted into the bloom of burgeoning aquatic life; we all knew this was the time and place we had worked to reach. My newly anointed muse made her way into the slow moving, gelatinous golden orbs. Wrapped in a translucent sash mimicking colour and fluidity of the jellyfish, she rose and fell and drifted in perfect harmony with the thousand tiny forms surrounding her. Working mostly at the surface or just below, I captured each moment, creating a series of images that convey the ever flowing and cascading emotional content of the scene.

Every shoot has its own set of positives and negative experiences. Most of the time however, they do not completely manifest themselves until the shoot is over and sufficient time has elapsed for final effects to sink in. From a shot that you thought was going to be amazing, but turns out to be a dud. Or a near horrific tragedy when a shark bites a model, but turns out to be a life altering experience for many involved. Or the ultimate experience of getting the exact shot just the way you wanted. For me, it is truly the journey and not the destination that makes it all worth the while.

## Bahamas

Upon deciding to photograph women with sharks in the Bahamas, I researched the limited number of dive operations that do shark dives that could provide support for the type of photographs I hoped to take. Ultimately, I decided to go out with Stewart Coves out of Nassau. Their experience with underwater filming (including several Hollywood movies including James Bond) and their confidence to work with me and the specialised shooting I had in mind made my decision an easy one.

My crew for the Bahamas shoot consisted of an assistant, three models, an animal coordinator, three safety divers, a deckhand, a backup diver / videographer, and myself. When I go on a shoot, I typically arrive on site with 10-15 clear shot ideas in mind. The shot-list ultimately gets modified on location, most often through collaboration with the models, who have carte blanche to take advantage of opportunities they may see while underwater. It is up to me to intercede or to stay with them and get the shot. Generally, their instincts are good and to the benefit of our work.

### Day 1

On the larger scale shoots, the first day is reserved for a test run in the various locations recommended by the local dive operators. It is a chance for me to check out all of my camera and scuba gear. I presently use two Nikon D3s in Austrian-built Subal housings. I use ScubaPro dive gear and have been for over 25 years. The first day is

always a light, fun day, allowing me to reconnect with my crew and also helps us to establish a degree of camaraderie with the people we have not worked with before.

One of our first tasks is assigning safety divers, each of whom work with the same model for the duration of the shoot. This is one of the most important aspects of the shoot, as a model's comfort and confidence with her safety diver can translate directly to a great picture. The models wear full scuba gear as we go through the setting up of the shots, allowing them to see clearly the animals and locations for the first and only time, since they do not wear masks during the shoot. We proceed through the shot-list and the process of refining each shot begins.

With the first day's teambuilding and rehearsals complete, we have the first of our nightly meetings. Before dinner, I meet with the entire crew and the day's events are discussed. The things that worked and those that did not work are noted and changes are made. Boat times and wake up calls are established and the workday is officially over.

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### Day 2 to 7

The days fall into a regular routine: shots in the sand; shots with a wreck; shots with an anchor. Similar shots and locations are worked on a daily basis with each model gaining in comfort and confidence until she has made a particular location or style of shot uniquely her own.

The first shooting day is filled with excitement and apprehension as we head out to the day's first location. We arrive at one of the established shooting locations; in this case we are working on a shot that will ultimately become an award-winning, magazine cover photograph. The animal coordinator enters the water first to set a steel box with bait inside. The sharks move in.

The videographer and I enter the water. Video documentation has become a standard practice on all of my shoots. It was truly born out of necessity. From the beginning, people had difficulty believing that my work was actual photographs, created in the oceans realm and not in a lab or on a computer screen. Video became the only way to prove to non-believers that the photographs were real and not the work of Photoshop.

With the arrival of the sharks, the model's safety diver escorts her into place and the scene is set. For this particular shot, the model is wearing a fishnet over a light-coloured bikini bottom. The idea for this shot is to have a shark bearing down from overhead toward the respectful and frightened model, whose wide-eyed face will be upturned, observing the shark's approach. In preparing for this shot, a drawing was made to assist in the visualisation of what I was hoping to capture. The finished image, in this case, was as close to any pre-visualised image of a photograph I have ever captured.

To get the shot I wanted, we buried weights in the sand and secured the model, draped in fishnet, on her knees. We worked on this shot for more than an hour a day on several consecutive days: countless passes of the regulator to the model from the safety diver, she holding her breath for what always seemed an eternity, the sharks getting ever closer. The shot is in the details: getting the models expression to appear just right; making small refinements of position and camera settings. Finally, on the fourth day, we were rewarded with the shot as I had previously seen it only in my imagination. My dream had become reality so I titled the photograph Shark Dreams. [SDAA](#)



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#### MASTER PLAN

- **PRE-VISUALISE** pictures, make a list, draw them, discuss them with the model and crew, and communicate your ideas
- **CHOOSE** models and crew who are excited and passionate about being involved; people that will create a positive environment and go the extra distance to get a picture right
- **RECOGNISE** strengths and weaknesses in people and situations; turn them into advantages
- **ALLOW** models and crew to do what they do best
- **PATIENCE**; let the pictures develop naturally, recognise a good picture even if it is not what you first had in mind, be open-minded and always ready to capture the perfect moment.



## DEEP INDONESIA