



Take it easy under sail

# The Enthralling World of Nautical Photography

By Christine Danger

**Christine Danger** is originally from France but now calls Australia home. Chris is lucky to enjoy countless adventures with her partner on their catamaran. Sailing allows her to combine a love of nature, photography and writing. She shoots with a Canon 7D Mark II.

To see more of her work, go to [www.sv-takeiteeasy.com](http://www.sv-takeiteeasy.com)



What we never want to become - a wreck!

Picture this: dramatic coastlines, serene coves, fascinating wildlife, stormy seas, busy harbours... Plenty of material for a passionate sailor and photographer! But there are also plenty of challenges: salt, wind, sand, sea water, and, if you shoot from a boat, constant movement. The

environment is demanding of your technique and hard on your equipment.

So let me share with you the enthralling world of nautical photography, and how I am learning to manage the difficulties it throws at me.

## So Many Photo Opportunities

### **Variety, the spice of life**

What does the word 'nautical' evoke for you? Ocean, boats, and sea is probably what comes to mind immediately. To me it is also about waves, sea creatures, water textures, billowing sails, dramatic clouds, coral and shells, underwater life, lighthouses, sunrises and sunsets over the water, horizons where sky and sea blend together. The possibilities for captivating shots are as varied and many as your imagination lets you discover. The marine environment is an endless source of inspiration.

With such variety of subject matters, you do not have to be narrow with what you choose to capture. You can build your portfolio on a range of subjects and work in series. For instance I am fascinated by textures and collect images of patterns in the sand, rocks, tiny drawings made by crustaceans. Sometimes the little things are just as remarkable as the dramatic, wide angle scenes.

Clouds, sunrises and sunsets at sea are also very exciting. There is nothing quite like watching big skies, dawn and twilight over the horizon with the show of colours reflected in the ocean.

Having many choices of what to photograph is valuable. It keeps us engaged, interested, looking

at things differently, and when you are on a boat for extended periods, it is an important aspect to consider.

### **The special attraction of sailing and photography**

The exceptional thing that a boat allows you to do is reach places less travelled that a land based photographer might not be able to get to. And this is precious. In a world where people have a tendency to copy each other and where it is hard to take unique images, pristine, uncrowded, even uninhabited locations are incredibly special.

Photographing from a boat also gives you a very different perspective. For instance, think about lighthouses. They have a special appeal for most people. They are a structure that symbolises our struggle against the elements, but also the guiding light that can save many lives at sea. You feel this more intensely when you view a lighthouse from the ocean, rather than from the land, and this is conveyed in your images.

Another special aspect of sailing is the gentler pace away from the frantic action of a busy and demanding work life. The pace of time on a boat leads you to be quite reflective and meditative, and this is very conducive to moody, atmospheric photography.



Sunrise on the Gippsland Lakes, taken from the boat at anchor



Green Cape Lighthouse from the ocean



Taking a wave in the Keppel Islands

### Nautical Photography Challenges

However, as well as unique settings, nautical photography presents challenges, especially when you shoot from a yacht.

#### **Camera shake**

When you are on a boat, movement is constant, even at anchor. The wind, the swell, even an engine quietly purring away can contribute to camera shake. A tripod is of little use while on board. So how else do you minimise camera shake?

With any photo taken on a moving platform, you need to shoot at high shutter speed and have your Vibration Control (VC) or Image Stabilization (IS) turned on. In addition you should set the camera on high speed, continuous shooting. This maximises the chances of getting at least one shot in focus in a series.

I have also found that a monopod can help stabilise you. It does not need to be fully deployed and be

resting on a surface. Simply holding onto to it in one hand or against your body while it is still retracted, seems to help absorb some movement. You have a more solid stance.

#### **Camera adjustments**

At sea, light changes very frequently and the wildlife is unpredictable. Often you have just a split second to get your shot. This is why 90% of the time, Aperture Priority is what I shoot in. On a moving platform there is enough to worry about with looking through the viewfinder, composing a shot, and focusing, while still keeping your balance! There is simply no time for manual adjustments.

For sunrises and sunsets at sea, since you cannot use a tripod on deck, you have to dial up the ISO to anywhere between 250 and 1600, depending on the light. This also applies to dimly lit days and when you want as big a depth of field as possible. In many ways, it is the same whether you are on land or on the ocean.

When photographing sea birds or sea mammals underway I use AI Servo. The AI Servo mode is Canon's predictive auto focus system. It greatly increases your chances of getting a sharp image when your target is moving. It is also helpful to memorise a custom setting in your camera so you don't have to fumble about when a creature appears. I use AI Servo: Spot Metering, and Central Point Focusing. With the shutter button pressed down half way, you track the motion of a moving subject with the active focusing point and pan for one or two seconds prior to shutter release. The shutter should be set on high speed continuous, as previously indicated.

#### **Glare**

In the ocean, bright light and reflections are intensified. So, on sunny days, a Circular Polarising filter will suppress the bleaching effect of sun and water glare. As a rule, out on the water, if you need to put your sunglasses on, your camera needs a polarising filter. It reduces the glare, and you get deeper colour tones and definition in the water and sky. When photographing dolphins, for

instance, without a polarising filter, all you get is the shining, blinding surface of the water; whereas with the filter, the water seems darker but more transparent and all animals within it are clearly defined.

### Safeguards in Unforgiving Surroundings

A marine environment also means sand and salt. Both are equally mean to your gear. Both are exacerbated by wind. So finding ways of protecting your equipment is vital. And this brings us to the subject of safeguards.

#### **Avoiding lens changes**

My default lens is an AF18-270mm f/3.5-6.3 Tamron, a versatile, good quality lens that enables me to go from wide angle to close ups without the need to change lens – an important consideration in a punishing environment. If changing lenses on board, I make a point of doing this inside the cabin, not out in the cockpit. When on terra firma, I try to avoid changing lenses when it is windy or dusty. I also always try to shelter my camera and lens when making a swap and I make it quick.



Green Cape Lighthouse from the cliffs



Humpback Whales on the approach to Lady Elliot Island

### Gear Cleaning

Salt gets everywhere. It coats everything. Cleaning the camera, lenses, filters, tripod or monopod regularly is a must. On a boat you are likely to get a lot of sea spray, even if you do not see it or feel it. The same happens if you are ashore photographing seascapes on a windy day. Salt water should not be left to dry on your gear, especially on your lenses and filters. The salt is abrasive and can cause microscopic scratches on your lens when left to dry then wiped. So a supply of microfiber cloth and some lens cleaner spray, or pre-moistened lens towelettes in sachets are a good investment.

Periodically, it is also advisable to get your sensor cleaned. With lens changes, it is unavoidable that over time you will get dust on your sensor and spots will appear on your images. I choose to get my sensor cleaned professionally. Most camera cleaning services have a 24 hour turnaround or less, so you do not have to be without your camera for long.

### Protection from impact

Everything moves on a boat, even on a catamaran and it is easy for the camera to fall or get hit. So it is important to have the discipline to put away the camera in its case when not in use. When on board I also use a neoprene cover to give a bit of protection to the camera and lens from impact, dust and moisture. These pouches come in different sizes. I use Op/Tech USA, but there are other brands about.



Bow wave

Moving between the boat and the shore can be a risky business. While in the dinghy you can get swamped by waves, fall over as you get out, or simply get splashed. I never ever get into a dinghy without putting my camera in a dry bag. It is simply not worth the risk. I use a Sea to Summit dry bag. The

brand is not important and there are other choices. But what matters is that these bags are waterproof, and as you seal them air gets trapped in them which make them float if a mishap occurs. I have put them to the test many times, even using them to store my camera while paddling on a kayak.



Lake McKenzie, Fraser Island

## Back up routine

Salt and corrosion get into everything and computers are not immune to their damage. On a boat you are doubly at risk of computer failure. I had a scare during our last cruise when my laptop decided not to launch Windows and displayed worrying messages such as "could not locate the hard drive." I got it going eventually, but it was a little too close for comfort!

So my routine is nightly backups from my SD card to my laptop, then onto another external drive. I use several external 2TB Seagate hard drives when we are cruising, and these are organised according to different subject matters. Once backed up, the SD card is reformatted.

Losing material is devastating and it is even worse if you cannot reproduce what you lost. I am particularly conscious that the locations we sail

to are not easy to access. Where a land-based photographer may be able to readily return to a site, it is harder when you are sailing. Wind and sea may not allow you to do so. Accidents do happen, so I am extra cautious.

## The Risk and Reward Equation

Nautical photography is full of challenges, but so rewarding. For me it is a consuming passion. Even

if the conditions are not always comfortable and sometimes downright risky, discovering breathtaking scenes and finding endless sources of inspiration brings me many hours of pleasure. When it comes to sailing and photography, it is an enthralling world and I receive far more than I seek.



Garry's Anchorage