

Unlock the Photographer Within:

Learn How to Take Great Snorkeling Snapshots

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Snorkeling allows you a brief glimpse into the wonders of the undersea world. There are so many beautiful things to observe that you will want to share them with your family and friends back home; and photos are the best way.

Your choice of a snorkeling camera is very important. We suggest a small, compact camera that leaves you unencumbered. Avoid bulky systems that have lots of arms, cords and accessories. Leave those for the scuba divers. Remember, one of the advantages of snorkeling is freedom of movement. You want your camera to fit into this philosophy.

There is a range of cameras available, from inexpensive, single-use to costly professional models. The Sea & Sea Motormarine 35 MX-10 is priced somewhere in the middle. We tried it snorkeling and have found it fits all the requirements. This system has a normal, 32mm lens, with wide angle and macro lenses that can even be changed underwater, a feature unique to the MX-10. There is a caddy, so you can carry an extra lens and change when you need a different type of picture. With many of the other systems, you have to decide what type of photo you are going to take before you enter the water. The MX-10 gives you the freedom to decide once you see what's there.

One of the best aspects of snorkeling photography is that you are not restricted in your bottom time or surface interval. You are not encumbered by scuba gear. You have complete freedom to easily move from one spot to the next in search of great critters.

The method for taking pictures while snorkeling is dependent on the water depth. It's easiest when the bottom is within arm's reach. No breath holding is required as your snorkel remains out of the water, yet you can take pictures with total control. To take a picture, you merely hold out your arm and depress the shutter release.

This depth is great for macro and close-ups. Simply place the framer around the subject and shoot. The subjects found at this depth can fill rolls and rolls of film. You should look for crabs, nudibranchs, tube worms, snails, seahorses, small fish, starfish and eels. Since you are snorkeling in shallow water, there may be enough sunlight to photograph without an electronic flash. We still recommend the use of a small internal flash or one attached directly to the camera as this will help stop the action and make your photos sharper.

When the depth increases to about the same as your height, hold your breath and bend at the waist. This moves your head, arms and camera to about half the distance from the surface to the bottom. You can then angle the camera any direction you want and take the picture. We suggest presetting the exposure or focus so all you have to concentrate on is capturing that elusive fish on film.

If your camera system has a close-up lens, you can photograph larger subjects than were possible with the macro attachment. The biggest problem with these systems is that focusing is usually by the guess and by golly method. Some systems have a framer that shows you the focus point. The disadvantage to this is that the framer tends to scare the critters. It is best to practice ahead of time in a pool. Remove the framer, use your arm as a distance guide and you will have the focus point nailed quickly. Then, when you go on your trip, your images will be in focus. With the framer removed, you can get great pictures of fish, jellyfish, squid and octopus. Many of these animals move around a lot and the freedom you have as a snorkeler gives you more control when taking these pictures.

Your freediving skills come into play when the bottom exceeds your height. The best method is to raise your legs out of the water and bend at the waist. The weight of your legs will push you down. Once underwater, swim to the desired depth. When you locate your subject, stop, depress the shutter release and then float back to the surface for air.

It is best to get a level or an upward angle on your subjects with a wide angle lens. You will have to work at getting yourself below your subject. This may require several attempts but the end results will be worth the effort. This upward camera angle is necessary for wide angle photos as the blue water provides a bright background for your subject. A downward angle usually results in the critter blending into the reef.

If you are going to freedive to get the photo, visually plan the trip in your mind ahead of time. Where are you going to dive? How close are you going to get to the animal? What angle are you going to use? Are there any fragile formations near your shooting area? Once you have mapped the dive in your mind, go for it. Since snorkeling with a camera can be exhausting, pace yourself.

A better understanding of the reef and its inhabitants is the key to getting good photos. Before you take pictures of any animals, study them. You will see that they repeat patterns of action. Many fish have routes and often return to the same spot. If an animal is stationary, swim around and look for the best angle. Look for dead areas in the reef, in case you have to steady yourself with a finger.

Some of the best snorkel photography is where the bottom is out of sight and out of mind. Open ocean diving and kelp bed exploration have furnished some of our most exotic animal photos. Many of these animals bounce around so much in the surface water that the only way to photograph them is by snorkeling. The most important thing here has nothing to do with photography but with camera security. You should have some kind of lanyard attaching the camera to your wrist. You can never tell when you will get hit by a wave or caught up in a piece of kelp. If you drop the camera it will be out of sight in seconds, along with your photographic future.

In kelp beds, the macro framer is best for capturing the animals that live among the fronds. The wide angle lens is best choice for larger animals swimming around in the kelp. Open ocean animals can range from very small jellyfish to whales, so the choice of camera lens will depend on the size of animals in the area. Be prepared and bring plenty of film.

Speaking of film, let's talk about film choices. If you talk to most photo pros, they will tell you that slide film is the only way to go. If you were working for a magazine, then slide film would be your film of choice. The truth is most snorkelers just want to get some nice photos to show their family and friends. So, the film choice for snorkelers is what 92 percent of the photographers in the United States use today; color print film. If the sun is out, ISO 100 will work fine; if the light level drops, switch to ISO 400.



Snorkeling offers freedom of movement without the encumbrance of equipment. This freedom, coupled with a camera, can net some great end results. Photography allows you to share your new found underwater paradise with those landlubbers. Hang your own photo of a moray eel on the wall; it will serve as a constant reminder you need to go snorkeling again soon!