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little cameras and as I sat at the back of the classroom I was mightily impressed with both Maria's and her Red Sea guests' photographs that she used to illustrate her point that compact cameras can and do produce exceptional underwater pictures.

On land a point-and-shoot compact is easy to use. Make sure it is in fully automatic mode and start pressing the shutter. Everything is done for you. Focus, exposure, white balance and colour are all worked out by Japanese scientists who offer their average view of the world through the software in your little silver box. But the men in white coats also give the user the choice of self-determination. Most digital cameras are packed with other modes and settings that 99% of the time are never used by the owner.

Underwater, the world is far from average. Cameras are designed to be used photographing Central Park in New York, Nelson's Column or Aunt Jane on the beach at Blackpool. They are great for taking perfect pictures in bright conditions on a sunny day. Underwater those pre-programmed elements do not exist. The

colour temperature of the light is different, the intensity of the light is different and on top of all that the subjects are different. But the cameras have modes to allow the photographer to adjust for the differences.

Beginner underwater photography courses are designed to introduce these adjustments and controls to divers keen on using their point-and-shoot cameras underwater. The difference in results between fully automatic and adjusted images is staggering. There are quite a few semi-pro and even pro photographers that would be happy with the results Maria and her students get.

After running through the various mode changes, camera maintenance and preparation techniques, basic composition and shooting processes, students head for the pool to practise, which is where Nemo and his friends come in. The pool is an ideal environment, as it is confined, shallow, light and easy to come to the surface for on-the-spot critique and improvement tips. Various small reef and wreck scenes are set on the pool floor that enable

DIGITAL DOWN-UNDER

Maria runs a one-day course tailor-made for divers with compact cameras. Topics include setting up and maintenance, macro-wide angle photography, understanding manual white balance/red filters/flash, what makes a great photograph and an afternoon extensive pool session to hone your photographic composition skills.

Price: £139

www.oceanvisions.co.uk

The PADI Digital Underwater Photography course is taught at many PADI dive centres. www.padi.com

students to work on exposure, colour balance, flash, composition and to get them to think more about taking pictures underwater.

The students all seemed to gain a huge amount from the course and seeing their eyes open to what they and their cameras are capable of was wonderful to see. While the majority of students will never go on to take up underwater photography more seriously, they will nonetheless be able to return from a dive trip with some excellent pictures to impress family and friends. **oe**