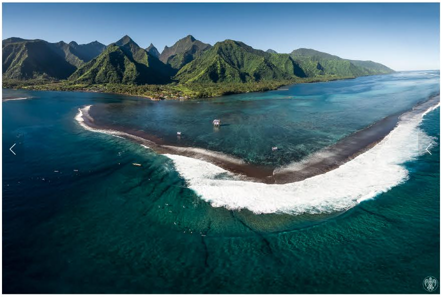
Ben Thouard, Ocean Photographer

Jul 1 - Written By Dan Wagner

Ben Thouard photographing Tahiti through a breaking wave! Photos © Ben Thouard 2020

Bobbing like a cork in the crystal clear waters off Tahiti, camera in hand, and waiting for the perfect moment to capture a surfer from below the legendary Teahupo'o waves swims visionary ocean photographer, Ben Thouard. Since the age of fifteen, Ben has been on a never-ending quest to capture his unquenchable love of the sea. His quest has carried him from his childhood home in Toulon, France, to Hawaii, from scenic locations around the globe to Tahiti, where he lives today.



Viewing Ben's work prompts a question: how does he create these amazing photos? And while the photos offer clues, they are no substitute to speaking with the man who shot them. So put on your goggles, swim fins, and snorkels, and prepare to discover what Ben Thouard has to say about his life's work.

***DW**: Ben, you mentioned your father is a sailor in your bio. Was that his profession? How did sailing affect your love of the sea?*

BT: My father is a surgeon. He always had a sailboat, so it was more of a passion than a job. We spent weekends and holidays on the sailboat. I think that's how I fell in love with the ocean.

***DW**: How did you discover photography at the age of 15?*

BT: So actually when I was a teenager, I found one of my father's old film cameras at home. For some reason, I was really attracted to this object. I bought a few films, and started shooting a bunch of stuff—especially my friends surfing—because I was already a surfer. I tried to recreate what I saw in surfing magazines. The surf in my hometown of Toulon, France, is pretty flat most of the year. So, it's not the best place for surfing photography.

***DW**: Did you enjoy furthering your photography education in Paris? What was the name of the school, and what was their photography program like?*

BT: After graduating from school in Toulon, I studied photography at the École des Métiers de la Culture et du Marché de l'Art (ICART) in Paris. To be honest, because I was raised close to the ocean, living in Paris was hard for me. I've always windsurfed and sailed. All of a sudden I was living in Paris, and I was young—just eighteen at that time. And all I was dreaming about was surfing and windsurfing.

Fortunately, ICART was great. The first year I really enjoyed the school. But when the second year became less enjoyable, I decided to quit school and booked a ticket to Hawaii to begin working as a freelance photographer. I was 19 at the time, and I just flew to Hawaii with my camera and my backpack. I went from Maui to Ho'okipa, and for three months, I was in the water—no matter what the conditions were. I just learned the job. That's really how it worked.

DW*: Moving to Tahiti when you were 22 sounds like a dream. French and Tahitian are the two official languages in Tahiti. Did your fluency in French help your photography endeavors? And has Tahiti become a second home for you?*

BT: While based in Hawaii, I traveled the world for a couple of years. A friend of mine brought me to Tahiti. I fell in love with Tahiti and decided to move here—because it was French, and because I just really loved the people, the culture, and the lifestyle.

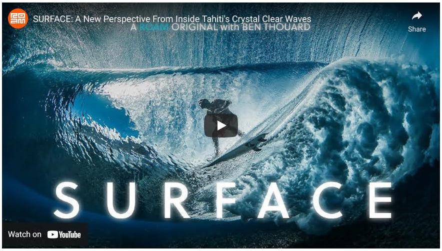
As a photographer, Tahiti is like a dream. I speak two languages, French and English, but besides a few words, I'm not fluent in Tahitian. For the most part, I learned English after moving to Hawaii—that was part of the adventure. And I think it was very important career-wise, to speak English.

Tahiti has been my home for twelve years. I'm not Tahitian, obviously. But it feels like home, and we have a great life here. I'm very thankful.

DW*: Do you use scuba and snorkeling gear for photographing surfers from below? How long do surfing photographers need to hold their breath when underwater?*

BT: I never use any scuba gear to shoot surfers from below. You need to be on the surface to see and to predict what's happening above the surface to position yourself in the right spot, and at the right time. I think it would be too tricky to be down there waiting for the action to happen. On top of that, swimming close to the turbulences with scuba gear would be very dangerous.

So it's all free-diving—just snorkeling gear. You don't have to hold your breath that long to shoot the surface from below. You're only down there between five and twenty seconds. It depends on the size of the waves, and where you position yourself. The challenge is more that you're swimming, and there's a set coming and, you're saying to yourself, "Oh shit I've got to get out of here!" And it's like you're doing a swim-sprint downward, which is very demanding. Even if it's just for ten seconds, it can be very tiring.


SURFACE: A New Perspective From Inside Tahiti's Crystal Clear Waves
A ROAM ORIGINAL with BEN THOUARD
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DW*: When did you begin your underwater surfing photography adventures? Was there an "aha" moment when you knew it was your calling?*

BT: I've always been amazed by the underwater world. When I moved to Tahiti and put goggles on to swim under Teahupo'o—I was just freaking out at how beautiful it was. At Teahupo'o, it's really amazing how clear the water is. When you're down there, and you're just looking at a wave rolling from underneath, it's mesmerizing and it's unreal. I love it. I've been shooting underwater for twelve years and I never tire of it. It's wonderful.

In May 2013, during a big swell, I shot what became a very famous photo of Landon McNamara at Teahupo'o—I named it, The Silver Surfer after the comic book action hero. The photo was featured on magazine covers, and seen by a lot of people. It changed my perspective on photography and inspired me to devote a lot more of my time to underwater photography. When the photo went viral, I said, "Okay, I should just dig into that direction and do more of it."

DW*: What are some of the dangers of underwater surfing photography? Teahupo'o is legendary for it's perfectly shaped waves and the shallow reef it breaks over. Do you have a support crew?*

BT: I don't have a support crew. I'm always by myself. Budget is a big reason for this. Plus, there aren't a lot of people who can swim under the waves at Teahupo'o. You need a lot of experience. The conditions constantly change and you can't really predict what they're going to be. You just have to jump on the opportunities to shoot. Teahupo'o is one of the heaviest waves in the world. When it's big, it can be scary and dangerous.

You can't really shoot Teahupo'o from underwater when it's above eight-feet high, because it becomes too murky for underwater photography when the waves are higher.

DW*: How do you stay safe at Teahupo'o and elsewhere? How do you stay in shape?*

BT: Experience and being in good shape is how I stay safe. Being a surfer and a swimmer my whole life helps. I still surf a lot. Between that and swimming, I'm able to stay in good shape.

***DW**: It must be very difficult to swim while operating camera gear. Have you ever had to decide between your safety and abandoning gear?*

BT: Yes, of course, though I've never abandoned my gear. But there are definitely times when you have a choice, and you question yourself. Am I shooting this one? Or am I just duck-diving and trying to escape and save my life? You're always swimming in impact zones where there are limits to what is possible, especially when shooting underwater turbulences and vortexes—or all those lines and bubbles that happen below the crashing waves. These impact zones are very intense. Sometimes I decide to save my butt, because swimming with your camera while operating it is a lot more difficult than swimming empty-handed.

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***DW**: Let's talk about gear—what cameras, lenses, housings and other gear do you use?*

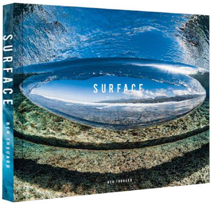
BT: I've always been a Canon user. These day I'm primarily shooting with a Canon EOS-1D X Mark II, and a Canon EOS 5D Mark IV. I also have the 50.6 megapixel Canon EOS 5DS R for when I go in the ocean, and don't need a fast camera. It's more for moody stuff, and for when I need to do very large prints.

For underwater shooting, I use AquaTech housings. They're the best for me and I'm an ambassador for AquaTech. In the beginning, when I couldn't afford to buy one, I built my first two underwater housings. After a few years, when my budgets improved, I purchased my first AquaTech housing, which I think was for a Canon EOS-1D Mark II.

In terms of lenses—when you're a surfing or an ocean photographer, you're using everything from a 15mm fisheye to a 600mm telephoto lens. Two of my favorite focal lengths for underwater shooting are my 16-35mm zoom, and 24mm prime lenses. The 50mm is good for days when Teahupo'o is very big. It offers a good blend between speed, angle-of-view, weight, and size. I also like using my Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L IS USM for capturing details and distant shots.

***DW**: How do you avoid getting in the surfers' way? Do you communicate with surfers ahead of time to plan shots?*

BT: Staying out of the surfers' way is mostly experience. I always say it's definitely a team job to get a good surfing water shot. I don't really communicate with the surfer right before the wave—it's mostly the long-term relationship that you build with the surfer. They know that you know what you're doing. So even if they see you in the middle of their line in the wave, they know that you'll move to the side or dive at the last moment. Because when you're shooting with a fisheye lens at Teahupo'o, the goal is to be in the barrel with the surfer. So you're definitely going to get very close, and the surfer is passing by very fast. But that's the plan: to be very close.



***DW**: The front cover and back cover photos on your book, Surface, are very intriguing. So many of your photos, such as the front cover shot, remind me of otherworldly glass sculptures. Please tell me what I'm looking at.*

BT: *Surface* has been the biggest project of my career. I wanted to express myself personally and show what inspired me. For fifteen years I've been working for brands and magazines. There have also been a lot of trips, documentary jobs, and commercial assignments and at some point I felt the desire to do my own work. I wanted to show what amazed me about the ocean, especially here in Tahiti where we have crystal clear water.

I've spent many years in the water looking for new angles and new ways to create unique photos. This led me to discovering specific conditions where you can actually see a landscape through a wave. And when it's clean in Tahiti, the waves break on the reef. This lack of sand, a long distance from the shore, clear water, and glassy surface create opportunities to photograph the trapped air caused by big wave turbulences. You need proper long-period waves that are not too big so the water stays clear and you need absolutely no wind.

The front cover on my book was shot underwater. You're actually completely under the water, looking at the landscape through a rolling wave! The goal was to show all this in the same frame. So the wave, the landscape, and the glassy water are one.

And the back cover of the book depicts the same scene a half-second later. So I'm actually below a crashing wave. And all the rings that you see are actually bubbles of air. It's all the energy of the wave that's pushing the air underwater. The air is combining in the rings prior to escaping after the wave passes. So yeah, it's very fascinating. It's amazing what you can see underwater. And it's very hard, because it can't be seen with the naked eye. When I'm shooting, the waves are so fast and powerful. When you're in the impact zone, all you can do is position your camera in a good spot and plan your escape.

West Bowl

DW*: The prints you have for sale on your site are gorgeous and the kind of art people would love to live with on a day-to-day basis. What are some of your most popular prints? And do you have any favorites?*

BT: Yeah—thank you. My most popular prints? There are a few actually. There's the anti-wave of Teahupo'o called the West Bowl and Surviving, which are well know, and work very well as prints. Then there's my photo called Lost, which is just a tiny wave breaking on a shallow reef with a big storm in the background. It's moody and dark, with some light in the midst of it. It's one of my favorites. And there's a similar photo called Animal, which is probably the all-time favorite of my career. This one is a limited edition of thirty. I created Lost and Animal on the same day.

There's also an underwater photo called La Faille, which means the crack in the reef in French. This one works really well as an underwater print. I have My World, too, which is a very simple photo that works really well as a print because people feel the vibe and the emotion of being underwater. It's a print where the viewer is looking at the surface of the water, and there are all these light waves coming through the surface. It captures the magic of being underwater.

DW*: The magazine covers and lifestyle commercial images on your site are fantastic. I imagine commercial work with models, tight schedules, products, clients, and crew is stressful. How do you approach this type of work?*

BT: Yes, you're right. And that's the reason I tend to work more and more on my personal work. Not that I don't like to be stressed or challenged with a job. Commercial work is definitely stressful since you have a lot of restrictions. Clients want something specific, which is good. You have to listen to the clients, and really understand what they're looking for. I think that's the biggest challenge—trying to create what the client is searching for.

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For any photographer, shooting only commercial work can become draining. To keep my vision fresh, I make time to focus on personal work. I believe I've found the right balance between commercial and personal work. The best part of sharing my personal work is when companies ask me to create commercial photos that reflect my personal projects.

DW*: How do you find harmony beneath the sea?*

BT: While underwater, I often let my mind wander free. I simply stop thinking—and allow myself to just be. Sometimes I'm in the water for five hours or longer. There are times when the conditions aren't suitable for photography. That's life. At other times, I'm inspired by what's happening in front of my eyes. Then all of a sudden I'm making some really amazing photos. As a man, and as a photographer, you go with the flow. That's what I like—pure harmony.

Jacque Cousteau's *World Without Sun*

DW*: When I was a kid, I loved Jacques Cousteau's movie, "World Without Sun". Did Jacques Cousteau affect your love of the ocean? What are some of your influences?*

BT: Yeah for sure, me too. It's this kind of stuff that you're dreaming of when you're a kid. It can be that *kind* of movie—Jacques Cousteau—or it can be a surf magazine. Just as you said, I was in love with that kind of movie, too. And there's the adventure of looking underwater and discovering new stuff. There have been a lot of different influences, but I would say being raised on the sailboat with my father, and then surfing with my brother, seeing a lot of movies, like with Jacques Cousteau plus all those magazines like *Surfer Journal* all helped me do what I do today.

***DW**: It sounds like your life has come full circle. From a child, to a young adult, and now to a man fully (excuse the pun) immersed in his career as an underwater photographer.*

BT: Yes, that's a good way to look at it. When I was young I did a lot of paintings and then I quit when I started photography. I think I was missing creating something that you put on the wall. And I absolutely love creating something you can hold in your hands and doing exhibitions. Watching people studying my photos, sharing my love for the ocean, and perhaps deciding to buy a photo for their homes is to me my biggest reward and joy.

***DW**: Speaking of joy, it's been a joy interviewing you. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts. We wish you continued success, and look forward to seeing more of your work.*

BT: Thank you!

I hope this interview has inspired you. Please feel free to share your thoughts in the comment box below. Thanks for visiting The Cranky Camera!

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