Aquabumps creator **Eugene Tan** has shot in conditions that have made him by necessity a low-light expert. Here, he shares his secrets to shooting the beach at its best – from the surf at sunrise.

RIDING THE WAVE

"It's all about what happens down at the beach in the early hours of the morning"

Every weekday morning, more than 40,000 people receive the Aquabumps email blast. Five or six inspirational shots of iconic Bondi and Sydney's eastern beaches are beamed around the world, each and every one photographed by Eugene Tan. Rain, hail or shine, this creative director turned photographer has spent the past six years shooting and sending out a slice of surf into the worldwide web.

What began as a fun email to a few friends has morphed into a fulltime business and an international reputation that's gone from strength to strength. We spoke with Eugene at his Bondi gallery.

Why Bondi?
My business is here, I live here, I love the area. It's an interesting place – you get a mash of people, there's lots of different factions and personalities down on the

beach. You've got this dilapidated beach town that was a really bad area, now it's a fancy area. There are lots of artists, a lot of fashion people, actors; so there's always something going on. I've been documenting buildings lately, because the buildings are amazing, they're very retro.

If people come to Sydney, they go to Bondi Beach. It's very Australian and there's always surf. It faces south so it sucks in a lot of the swell, which makes it quite a magnet,

■ **Desperations Duck Diver, Fiji**
Fiji has the clearest water in the world. Write that down. I just can't believe how clear it gets. On a recent trip to Namotu Island, a few boozers around the bar told me of this one spot a 30min boat ride away that was so clear it was just ridiculous. At the time I thought they were messing with me... but the next morning I just couldn't believe my eyes as I put on my mask. In the middle of nowhere on an outer reef was a surf break with crystal cylinders rolling over perfect coral reef.

DETAILS

Location: Lifeguard duck diving under wave in Fiji.
Equipment: Canon 1Ds MkIII; 14mm lens.
Specs: 1/1000sec; f/5.6; ISO 400.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, contrast, saturation.

"People overshoot with digital. I try and keep on the move and get a new angle every time"

there's always someone surfing. And why not? People swim, surf and exercise before work and they're at their desk by 8am.

Can you describe your photographic style?
People overshoot with digital. I try and keep on the move and get a new angle every time. Nearly everything I do is spontaneous, kind of like Max Dupain. I like to think he did what I do, documenting what he saw down at the beaches. For photos taken 80 years ago to still be relevant, that's incredible.

Where did you learn your craft?
I grew up in Perth and moved to Sydney 15 years ago when I was 22. I remember being about nine and shooting in the schoolyard, back when photography wasn't very cool. I'd use the black and white lab at school. We had a hot lab, stocked with everything you'd need, but not one kid used it. I befriended the media teacher and got the key. I wasn't very interested

in school so I used to lock myself in there and no-one could find me. At lunchtime I'd shoot the kids creating big human pyramids. Looking back, I was documenting what was around me and I loved how amazed people were when I'd give them a print, that I'd created something for them. So that's where it started. The teacher had no idea, so I taught myself. I read a book, probably the only one I read cover-to-cover. It was definitely old-school, using canisters and reels, and a Pentax with a 50mm. I still use 50mms today for about 80% of my shots.

How about the underwater photography side of things?
I learnt from a famous surf photographer, Jon Frank. His best lesson was about cropping. He reckons cropping is amateur; you should be framing properly in camera. About 15 years ago I went away with him and it wasn't like he sat me down and said, "I'm going to teach you." I had to ask a million questions. I went away

DETAILS
Location: Morning jogger, South Bondi.
Equipment: Canon 1Ds MkIII; 600mm prime.
Specs: 1/400sec; f/5.6; ISO 400.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, saturation

■ **Windswept, Bondi Beach**
The wind had been howling 30 knots all morning and the sand was flicking on your legs as you walked the beach. A morning jogger came to the water's edge and sat down in it all. Odd place to sit.

■ **Swamped, Bondi Beach**
I'm fascinated with the pattern people make when they come down the beach. When they sit on the sand, they evenly position themselves apart – they just do. From an elevated angle and with a tilt-shift lens, I created this image to show Bondi one fine summery day. The blurs give the image a heat wave feel.

DETAILS
Location: Bondi Beach.
Equipment: Canon 5D MkII; TSE 24mm.
Specs: 1/125secs; f/4.5; ISO 100.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, contrast, saturation.

PRO TIP
Get fast lenses. I love the 50mm f/1.2. If my house burnt down and I had to rescue one lens, I'd be running out with that one.

■ **The Cocky and the Kookaburra**
I'm not quite sure what was going on between these two birds, but they weren't too happy with each other. I was heading down the hill to shoot my daily pics, when a large Cocky was making a hell of a racket. Then it swooped down on this Kookaburra. And well, I just happened to be there with a 200mm lens in my hand and got a sharp shot of their bingle. The pipe they're on is the "poo" pipe near the South Bondi toilets.

DETAILS
Location: Cocky and Kookaburra, South Bondi.
Equipment: Canon 1Ds MkIII; EF70-200mm.
Specs: 1/4000sec; f/8; ISO 1600.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, levels, Noise Ninja.

Buckled Vapour, Ben Buckler Headland
The waves were quite unimpressive on the morning I took this image. The early low tides were making the 1-2 footers flop flat on a bank, robbing you of a decent ride. The clouds, however, were very impressive. Vapour stretched over Ben Buckler like a Turneresque masterpiece. An HDR shot, this type of photography is quite controversial at the moment, although I don't understand why. I see it as a means to shoot images that best reflect what I saw that morning. The dynamic range of my camera is nowhere as sophisticated as my eye, so shooting three images and combining them makes perfect sense.

DETAILS
Location: Clouds over Ben Buckler, Bondi.
Equipment: Canon 5D MkII, 24mm.
Specs: 1sec; f/22; ISO 100.
Post-production: Photoshop, HDR, curves, saturation

"I'm pretty hooked on morning light. There's a bit of midday stuff, but 90% of it is morning"

with him for three weeks to Samoa and, to be perfectly honest, those three weeks changed what I did. I was a web guy who went on a holiday with a photographer. He was shooting film and showed me his underwater housing. I'd never seen that sort of stuff before and when I came back I said, "I'm going to get into this."

We made a housing for a camera I borrowed from work when we were bored, sitting under a coconut tree. I wish I'd kept it and put it in the gallery but I didn't think this would happen, it's all been unplanned.

Do you ever work with other photographers?
When I was a creative director, I'd get the briefs and hand out all the good bits. I said to myself, "I want to do all the good bits!" I don't want anyone else shooting because that's what I'm

passionate about. I shoot for one to two hours a day and that's *my* time. I do get help with the management of the gallery and the business.

A lot of water photographers don't shoot too late in life, as it's quite physically challenging. There aren't many photographers who swim in their environment, and the environment's treacherous. If I could show you Pipeline in Hawaii, you wouldn't believe I swam out there in waves the size of buildings. I don't know how long I'm going to be fit enough to do that but until I'm not, I'm going to be shooting.

Aquabumps represents a lifestyle; you've essentially created a brand that's also a way of life. Can you describe the Aquabumps brand?
It's an underground brand: we don't mainstream advertise. You discover it yourself and it's all about the beach

– what happens down at the beach in the early hours of the morning.

What's the best time for photographing at the beach?
Sunrise. I get ready 20 minutes before sunrise – you need that to set up and get organised. The time changes all the time. In summer when it's at five in the morning it's tougher, but that's where I like daylight saving. I'm pretty hooked on morning light. There's a bit of midday stuff, but 90% of it is morning light. There's a real beach culture in the early hours of the morning that I'm trying to document.

DETAILS
Location: Swimmer at Icebergs Pool, Bondi
Equipment: Canon 5D MkII, 70mm.
Specs: 0.8sec; f/13; ISO 50.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, saturation.

Winter Swimmer, Icebergs
The Icebergs swimming pool is a hive of activity in the mornings. People do laps before work throughout the year. This was a freezing cold morning (6°C) and the water was around 17°C. I used a slow shutter to soften the falling water and waves, but luckily the swimmer (not set up) stood still just long enough for me to keep him in focus.

Eugene's start-up setup

Eugene is always asked for advice about gear. Here are his picks for all skill levels:
FOR FUN FAMILY SHOTS:
Canon 40/60/550D
SEMI PRO: Canon 7D/5D
READY TO GO NUTS: Canon 1D

DETAILS
Location: Surfers Tom Graham and Simon O'Brien at Bondi Beach.
Equipment: Canon 5DMkII; 70-200mm.
Specs: 1/400sec; f/5; ISO 320.
Post-production: Photoshop, curves, saturation.

Wave of the day, Bondi
On this cold morning down at Bondi beach I was trying to capture the metallic gold on the surface of the water. The surf wasn't big, tiny in fact, but I liked how the wave curved to echo the shape of the beach. The morning stand-up paddlers put the size of the wave into perspective.

DETAILS

Location: Angry wave at Seal Rocks.
Equipment: Canon 1Ds MkIII; 300mm.
Specs: 1/750sec; f/5.6; ISO 400.
Post-production: Photoshop B+W conversion.

■ **Rogue Shorey, NSW North Coast**
This beach is normally the kiddie beach – all nice and flat 'n' calm. It's the main beach at Seal Rocks, where the fishos launch their boats. Well, in Jan 2008 we saw a massive north swell blow down from a cyclone off Queensland. The whole east coast of Australia lit up with waves. This little beach facing north at Seals copped the brunt of the north swell. The shore break was neck-breaking. As the sun was going down I got these great shots of sets grinding along the cliff (the black background) and slapping on the beach. I tried to shoot this in the water, but had little success.

■ **Speed Blur, Mentawai Islands**
A slow shutter speed was used to capture the fast motion of the wave as a large charter boat heads back to the nearest port in the background.

DETAILS

Location: Surfer unknown, Ht's Sumatra, Indonesia.
Equipment: Canon 1D MkIV; 300mm prime.
Specs: 1/60sec; f/8; ISO 200.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, saturation.

■ **Sky High, Mentawai Islands**
This was shot at Ht's, a famous right-hander. Caleb Reid paddled out at sunrise and punted in the morning sky on his first wave.

DETAILS

Subject: Caleb Reid in Sumatra, Indonesia.
Equipment: Canon 1D MkIV; 300mm prime.
Specs: 1/1600sec; f/4.5; ISO 1250.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, saturation.

What do you want people to get from your photographs?
It's a positive escape. I want to look at pictures and escape. That's important. We live in such a beautiful place, to me it's a natural thing to want to document and show that to people all over the world. The newsletter has 40,000 subscribers and they're from everywhere. People in the UK and USA, ex-pat centres like Hong Kong and Singapore, even people in Poland, Columbia and Magnetic Island get my emails.

What are the challenges of shooting the beach every day?
Water temperature: for example, I'll shoot from the land today as it's too cold.
Setup: sometimes entry and exit isn't that nice. Say you're at Shark Bay in WA, some places you've got to jump off a cliff to get in and catch a wave to throw you back up. I don't know if I'll do that again.
Sharks: I've only seen them at Bondi three times in all these years. I'm completely safe here. But in Tahiti, shooting on the reef in the middle of the ocean, or in Bali, I've seen plenty. It's an anticlimax though: they just go under you, take one look at you and keep going.

Do you ask for signed releases from people you photograph on the beach?
If you ask, or if anyone notices you taking photos, it kills the moment. I know most people I shoot or I'll find them very easily. Because it's a daily email, I know a lot of the subscribers. And it's easy to find people. With the aerial shots, you'd never get a release because you'd be chasing 10,000 people and that's unrealistic. I've never had any complaints and I've shot thousands of people. It's about relationships, and people trust me. You can't just rock up to a beach with big lenses and start shooting. But I'm only 30, and I'm not wearing a trench coat.

What gear do you use?
It depends on the conditions. I've got a whole lot of different rigs. If the surf's small and I want something arty, I've got a really long pole I put a 5D on the end of. It's light and I can wave it around with a trigger. The 5D MkII is an amazing camera; I've got three of them. Most of the time I'll be shooting on a 1D MkIV, with probably a 50mm or fisheye lens. I've got a Hasselblad XPan in a housing that I use too.
In the water I can't take much. I swim with flippers – it would be too complicated with a board, I'd knock myself out.

"You can't just rock up to a beach with big lenses and start shooting. But I'm only 30, and I'm not wearing a trench coat"

Location: Caleb Reid, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia.
Equipment: Canon 1D MkIV; 14mm.
Specs: 1/750sec; f/5.6; ISO 400.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, contrast, saturation.

■ **Strange Fish, Indonesia**
I've been addicted to shooting underwater for over a decade now, especially in Indonesia where the blues are so deep out to sea. This image is taken of Caleb Reid cooling down after a long day of surfing at Icelands. He's pretty deep – strange looking fish, eh?

How does the underwater housing for your camera work?
It's quite tricky and clumsy. You can't focus as you can't get your hands on the focus. You can zoom, you can adjust your ISO and your aperture but it takes time. There are dials and mechanical buttons going into the camera so it depends on the type of camera. Some are more suited to mechanical settings than others.

How much adjusting do you do while submerged in the water?
Very little. I know my settings and setup before I go out. Even with focus, I'll think to myself, "A wave's going to come over my head, so it'll be fast and I won't have time to focus..." so I always set it first.

What are you looking for when you shoot underwater?
Shooting in the water, I've got to assess rips and the shape of the waves. I want throwing waves, as they're more exciting than waves that crawl. I look for which surfers are in the water, as there are ones that know how to

work the camera and you do have to work with them. There's a lot of sitting around and waiting for the light. It's not all action, there's a lot of sitting on the rocks, waiting for it to happen.

Do you check the weather before you go out?
I started surfing as a little kid and we didn't have surf cams, so I learnt how to read the weather charts. Now they forecast like you wouldn't believe, to the hour. I'll probably check about four different weather websites to see if there's a common thread. You get to know the area. Right now I could tell you the swell will be pumping up, doubling, but the winds are going to howl the whole afternoon.

What's your secret to shooting the perfect sunrise?
Peter Lik says, "The best setting for a sunrise is your alarm clock setting." That's a little corny but it's spot on. If you get up every morning for a month you're guaranteed to get one absolute cracker. Sunrise is so easy to shoot, it's the easiest shot I do. I don't have to swim a kilometre offshore or worry about being impaled on a reef. I just stand there with a tripod, remote trigger and an ND. You can do it without an ND, if you

want silhouette. You just need the right morning. There's no trick to that.

What post-processing do you do to your photos?
I use a bit of Nik Software but I'm always careful not to overuse that stuff. I remember when Photoshop first came out and everyone went mad for the effects. If I do an effect I don't want people to know what effect I've used, that's really important to me. Whenever I shoot I'm trying to capture and recreate what I saw.
    We all know you shoot a picture with a digital camera, you're disappointed when you get back and go, "It was so much brighter; it's flat." They're getting better, there's a lot more depth in the sensors. Even with a 5D MkII, shots can still be a bit flat and you can pump it up a bit. And that's when I get Photoshop and try and recreate what I saw. I never artificially put cloud in or replace the sky. To be perfectly honest, levels, curves and saturation in Photoshop CS5 can do nearly everything.

Describe a normal Aquabumps day.
Well, today I was up at six looking for the right place to shoot, starting off at Bondi, Bronte and Tamarama. I shot for one and half hours, went straight to the gallery, skipped brekkie and started downloading the shots. I shoot in RAW. And why not, if I've got the luxury of servers with 20 terabytes in the gallery? The hardest part is writing the copy; it takes ages but the newsletter needs copy to describe the day. I can only write how I talk, so it's always very colloquial. After all, it's all about the photos. It takes me a few hours to put the newsletter together. I upload photos to Facebook and Magic Seaweed, an international surf site. I finally popped home for a shower, got changed, spent half an hour with my baby boy, went to

■ **Raindrops, Indonesia**
Raindrops has been a popular image in the Aquabumps Gallery for a few years now. It was shot on a day when you traditionally don't get good imagery. The swell was small and plenty of boats headed south to surf the swell magnet "Thunders". It was 3-4 foot and clean until a torrential storm blew through, bringing heavy rain. I jagged this shot and was trying to shoot the surfer (Azza) but the raindrops kept on getting in the way. In the end, it looked better with the mistake!

Location: Aaron Graham surfing Mentawai Islands in the rain.
Equipment: Canon 10D; 17-40mm.
Specs: 1/750sec; f/5.6; ISO 400.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, contrast, saturation.

the framer, checked prints going through – and I'll spend the rest of the day in the gallery, answering emails and talking to people. And tomorrow morning I'll do it all again.

Why do you think Aquabumps has been so successful?
I got in early. I can honestly say no-one was doing daily documentation of a beach anywhere in the world when I started. Blogging wasn't around, so the concept of new content daily was totally new. Persistence – crazy, fanatical persistence – helped too. My wife thinks I'm nuts. You have to be fanatical. You can't just do it for one hour a week. I'm there every single day. I don't shoot weekends – everyone needs a little bit of a weekend. I go to the beach on the weekend. Every holiday I go to the beach. It's what I want and what I do.

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■ **Storm Cruise**
This image is a product of potluck. I was cooking dinner in my Bondi apartment, which overlooks the ocean, and a huge sausage-shaped cloud rolled in from Tamarama. It was big, round, black and about to dump. From my left I could see an ocean liner heading out from the heads, steering directly into the eye of the storm. I thought that was quite unusual and grabbed the camera – shooting three frames only (I was halfway into a risotto). The third frame caught a bolt of lightning. Seeing I was shooting at 1/60th, handholding the camera, that's a freak. I mean, what are the odds? P&O cruises contacted me the next day after I posted it on my site – they had a board meeting on the boat that day, and had to call everyone inside away from the storm it was that bad.

Location: Storm Cruise, 1km off Bondi.
Equipment: Canon 1Ds MkIII; EF70-200mm.
Specs: 1/60sec; f/5.6; ISO 1600.
Post-production: Photoshop curves, Noise Ninja.

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