



UnterWasserWelt

das Tauchsportmagazin exklusiv im Internet

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In 1952, when a fourteen-year-old Arnold Stepanek built his first underwater camera housing from rubber and glass, there was no indication his hobby would develop into a world renowned manufacturer of fine underwater imaging solutions. Fast forward to the Europe of today and Subal –still based in Steyr, Austria– has developed into a company that proudly looks back at the longest and most distinguished history of designing and manufacturing high quality underwater housings for photo film and video cameras. SUBAL's latest outstanding success is the ND 20 housing for the Nikon D200 digital SLR. UnterWasserWelt uses this housing for the magazine's productions around the globe.

There would have to be good reasons for internationally renowned underwater photographers, –including Howard Hall, to name but one– as well as many leading photographers in the German speaking world to make SUBAL housings the tools of their choice. Reliability and ease of handling, highest standards of optical quality both in dome ports and finder optics, as well as robust construction are standards, which are valued and asked for by professionals as well as advanced amateur photographers.

With the emergence of the first high quality digital SLRs and the camera industry's gradual exit from the film based end of the business came a small temporary vacuum. Manufacturers of underwater camera housings trying to follow the market wondered which particular model of a digital SLR or compact camera to support and develop

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housings for – and what numbers they could realistically expect to sell. Keeping in mind the kind of firm committed to manufacturing fine underwater housing usually is not a plant with dozens of workers but operate with minimal personnel and subsequently limited output capacities.

Insiders felt it was unlikely to ever reach these limits as the market became increasingly swamped with hundreds of thousands cheap digital compact cameras in simple, see-through plastic housings appearing in divers' equipment around the world. At the same time the SLR camera market experienced a drastic decline.

The change of trend first became noticeable with the introduction of Nikon's D100; but it was the D200 – no longer affordable on the petty cash account – that started a run amazing anyone in the industry. Unprecedented pre-sale orders arrived, both from national and international clients, and these clients had to contend with considerable shipping delays. Little has changed in this respect; the demand for Nikon D200 in a SUBAL ND20 housing is as great as ever.

Since early 2007 the editorial staff of UnterWasserWelt has worked with a D200 and we use focal lengths including the AF DX Fisheye-Nikkor 10.5mm 1:2.8G ED, the AF-S DX Zoom-Nikkor 12-24mm 1:4G IF-ED and the AF Micro-Nikkor 60mm 1:2.8D. For ports we use a macro port and a wide-angle/fisheye port with extension tube for the 12-24mm wide-angle zoom lens. The Nikon System Strobe SB 800 lives in a SUBAL Strobe Housing and is supported by a small pilot light. For attachment we use strobe arms from ULTRALIGHT CONTROL SYSTEMS (UCS).

Nikon D200

Little needs to be said about the D200, a camera getting close to professional standards and expectations. A resolution of 10.2 megapixels delivers finely detailed picture files, which at manual setting to 100 ISO are comparable to results achieved by Canon 5D's full format chip. The D200's default sensitivity is 200 ISO, which is appropriate for most imaging situations. Lenses specifically designed for digital SLRs with less than a full format chip for cost reasons usually aren't all that fast. Leading camera manufacturers compensate for this draw-back by jacking up the sensitivity of the sensor chips and attached circuitry. That's quite okay as long as it doesn't come with increased pixel noise and reduced resolution.

In fact the reproduction quality at high sensitivity settings is remarkable. Subjectively compared the results far exceed those achieved with fast negative or positive films. Pictures taken at 800 or 1000 ISO on one hand do not hide the fact one is approaching certain limitations but the results are quite satisfying and pleasing. In wreck photography and at greater depth with ensuing lower existing light this feature can be used in combination with fisheye or other short focal length lenses to create overview shots hitherto only possible with far greater technological effort. Subsequently the D200 breathes new life into the art of reproducing the mood created by existing light in an underwater setting. (Hint: Keep control by setting the sensitivity you consciously choose to work with manually from the camera menu. ISO 200 should be about right for average imaging situations. Leaving the camera to decide on aperture, speed and sensitivity would be like racing the Monaco circuit in a Formula One car on autopilot.)

Whether a picture is saved either in JPEG or RAW format or parallel in both is up to the photographer,



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a decision informed by the future use of the images created. With few exceptions we use the JPEG mode in the field, if at the highest and finest resolution settings, keeping large format printing and cropping options in mind. The size of the camera's intermediate memory in combination with processing speed allows for serials of up to 5 frames per second – even at highest resolution (file size ~ 4.5MB). (Hint: Obviously this is limited to non flash photography as even the highest specification amphibian flash units throw in the towel. At close-up range short sequences are possible using the SB 800, though.)

The complex capabilities inherent in adjusting the D200 camera computer to personal preferences or imaging situations require the novice user of digital SLRs going through a steep learning curve. First, and often lasting, success can be achieved on the Program automatic setting (P). With this setting and the SB 800 flash in TTL mode pleasing exposure results can be achieved even at the beginning of an underwater photography career. Nikon even allows for the option to change the aperture via the front bezel with the exposure time changing accordingly. This correction facility is particularly exciting when taking close-ups or macro shots where each millimetre of depth of field comes at a premium. To adjust the auto exposure to underwater conditions we recommend applying an exposure correction factor of -1 (shortened) for a multitude of imaging situations (view to blue water, view to reef). Under these conditions auto exposure is usually tricked into exposing too generously. With back light or large bright areas in the motive (sandy ground, water surface), however, a correction factor of +1 (extended) may be a good starting point.

In our experience configuring the central measuring spot to temporarily store focus and exposure upon slight depression of the shutter release allows to "freeze" a certain focal plane and exposure before pointing the camera at the subject.

Time and aperture pre selection, as well as manual choice of all exposure parameters empower the photographer to push the envelope and use the D200 for the realisation of individual imaging ideas.

The autofocus facility comes with a number of automatic and pre selectable options that facilitate fast, accurate focal changes on objects rapidly approaching the camera.

Because of the generally lower speed of digital SLR lenses screen brightness is somewhat reduced when compared with that of analogue cameras. For above water use this factor is all but negligible. Finder optics of underwater housings, however, face the challenge not to further noticeably reduce brightness and hinder observation of motive and focus. The test housing therefore came with the Finder Optic GS 180, which enlarges the finder by 150% creating a 2.5 times larger image.

The technical features of the D200 with all their creative capabilities combine with a tough magnesium body and a special dust seal at the lens bayonet to create an imaging tool ideally suited to the rough conditions underwater photographers routinely face.

SUBAL ND 20

A critical skill all successful underwater camera housing designers need to master is to mould the housing snugly to the camera so all functions are accessible as comfortably as on the 'naked' D200

itself – with or without thick neoprene mitts. Arnold Stepanek masters this task admirably and always considering the overall look of the underwater housing, as he values both functionality and design.

Typical features are the adjustable hand sling on the right grip and the ergonomically laid out function switches, which if so arranged on the camera can all be operated without letting go of the handle.

The approach to linearly transfer functions of the D200 to the outside would be too simple, creating bottlenecks in many places with negative consequences for handling. In such cases transmissions shift the function to a more appropriate position on the housing, as exemplified in the transfer of the focussing control. Especially well solved is the large format shutter release that affords positive control by the index finger and allows acquisition of trigger threshold even when wearing thick gloves.

Housing functions TRANSMISSIONS/ FUNCTIONS

Main switch, display light, shutter release, front bezel, manual focus/zoom, operational mode, lens decoupling, focus mode, rear bezel, exposure field control, exposure mode, AF lock.

Push buttons for: mode, exposure correction, image quality, white balance, ISO, exposure bracketing, delete, menu, saving, enter, multifunction selector.

TECHNICAL DATA

Seawater resistant aluminium alloy, tooled from block; hard coating affords maximum surface hardening and corrosion resistance.

All parts made from hard anodised aluminium, acid resistant stainless steel and highest grade plastics.

Seals are seamless precision O-rings.

SUBAL QuickLock closing system.

Width x height x depth: approximately

245x180x145mm (without ports and handles)

Two flash connector sockets: choice of Nikonos V, IKELITE or Subtronic S6 flash connector sockets, wired in parallel.

Strobe arm attachment points: 2 T-plates 25mm, TLC or Ultralight shoe are optional extras.

Komfortable SUCHE in UnterWasserWelt

Suche:

Portrait: Monika Wiget / Jasmin Diving I