

Nikonos V - the legend

by Peter Rowlands

This year marks the seventeenth anniversary of the launch of the Nikonos V. It has been in production longer than any other Nikonos model and its simple design has become a classic icon in the underwater photography world. Its status is confirmed by checking the equipment cases of most leading photographers. There may be larger housings in there but there is nearly always a diminutive, trusty Nikonos V which takes up so little space yet offers so much.

It hasn't all been plain sailing though. The Nikonos V has had to survive for several years in the shadow of its big brother, the Nikonos RS, a camera which threatened to kill off the Nikonos V. In the end the RS promised so much yet provided not enough and cost too much. It was much awaited yet, like so many dreams, when the myth became reality, it destroyed the myth. The Nikonos RS was discontinued. R.I.P.

As if the shadow of its big brother wasn't dark enough, the RS had opened peoples' eyes to the benefits of reflex viewing - the ability to see the exact focus through the lens and compose your pictures accurately. They flocked to housed land cameras with their bulk and weight, big dome ports and control gears. Everything was becoming very versatile and accurate but complicated and expensive. Yet the Nikonos V has still carried on and is currently experiencing a renaissance amongst underwater photographers.

So what is it about the Nikonos V that has enabled it to survive such competition. Firstly we must thank the accountants at Nikon for deciding that it is a profitable product. Without their calculators, underwater photography would be worse off by far. Secondly we must



look at what it is that the Nikonos V provides for, in doing so, we reveal so much about underwater photography itself. Let me explain but first let me briefly describe the Nikonos V.

Constructed from die cast aluminium, weighing just 860 gms and measuring only 146 x 99 x 58mm, the Nikonos V can operate down to 50 metres. Internally it utilises very little plastic so it is very hard wearing and all controls are O ring sealed - much abused magical devices without which there would be no underwater photography. The camera body offers aperture priority exposure automation, manual speeds from 1/30th to 1/1000th sec and TTL flash metering. Film speeds from 25 to 1600 asa can be used. Film wind on and rewind are reassuringly manual and there is a range of accessories from both Nikon and independent manufacturers throughout the world which extend its versatility beyond measure.

The reason for the Nikonos V's successful survival is that it provides 99% of what we really need at a cost which is not prohibitive and a size which is not arm stretching. Add to that a range of lenses which are purpose designed for underwater use and

you have a package which no housing, I repeat, no housing can compete optically. The Nikonos 15mm lens, for example, is the Rolls Royce underwater lenses which outperforms anything else especially at wide apertures.

Yet the Nikonos V is a non reflex camera using fifteen year old technology and still it survives. Why? The reason is that underwater photography can be as simple or as complicated as you want. The choice is yours but the Nikonos V offers the simple route and this is often the most effective. Most underwater photographs tend to be taken at the extremes - either very wide or very close. That's the nature of the medium in which we operate and the Nikonos V can excel at both.

For close up photographs there are either extension tubes or close up lenses available. The former must be fitted before the dive but the latter can be fitted and removed underwater giving you a two lens option. As the Nikonos V is non reflex you would be forgiven for thinking that the reduced depth of field with close ups would make focusing extremely difficult but fortunately all close up accessories come with either a framing device or probes to show you the exact

point of focus. All you then do is look over the camera at the frames/probes to arrange your composition. The result is an extremely easy to use system which will produce very consistent results with your first roll of film.

For wide angle shots there are several prime lenses which must be fitted before diving or supplementary lenses which can be fitted and removed underwater. Both Nikon and Sea & Sea manufacture excellent wide angle lenses and they also provide supplementary optical viewfinders to show you exactly what will appear in the frame. As wide angle lenses give increased depth of field, the need for accurate focusing is much reduced and allows you to preset the camera and concentrate on your composition.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the Nikonos V is its TTL (through the lens) flash metering. This is provided by a sensor in the camera body which monitors the amount of light falling onto the film during the exposure. When there is enough light, it stops the output of the flash and so ensures no overexposure. There are several underwater flashgun manufacturers, all of whom provide versions which are compatible with the Nikonos V TTL system.

The final point in favour of the Nikonos V in today's market is its price compared to housing a land camera. A good quality housed land camera could easily cost you up to and in excess of £2000 whereas a

Nikonos V with 35mm lens is well under £1000. A complete system with flash, close up and wide angle lenses will fit into a case small enough to be welcome as hand baggage and an additional camera body (which most serious photographers regard as essential for survival) will take up very little extra room.

Finally I have to declare a personal interest and thank Nikon for providing me with a career offering annual servicing of their cameras. I have worked on all models from the pristine which have seen little use to those which look like they have lived in the bottom of a RIB for weeks on end yet they all offer a reliability which is hard to beat.

Underwater photography would be a totally different world without the Nikonos V and long may it continue.

Peter Rowlands

Next issue I'll describe some procedures they don't mention in the instruction manual which could save you from an expensive repair.

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Nikonos V

For beginners who want to shoot like pros

It's the classic underwater camera.

Compact, rugged and with the sharpest underwater optics available, the Nikonos V is chosen by amateurs and professionals alike. Ocean Optics have specialised in the Nikonos system for a quarter of a century. We stock and understand the system in depth. We manufacture our own macro and close up lenses and have our own Nikon approved workshop with a huge parts inventory and fast turnaround. Along with our unmatched service, we also offer matchless prices. So why compromise.

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