

Get your digits out

by Peter Rowlands

I haven't had so much fun in a wetsuit since that Friday afternoon in a basement flat off Tottenham Court Road yet here I was in the Red Sea using it for the purpose for which it was really designed.

And the reason for this elation? I was taking still pictures, seeing the results instantly on a small screen and, if I didn't like them, I could erase them - also instantly. I could then change the aperture, shutter speed or composition and take the shot again until I was pleased with it.

Now that, to my mind, answers the prayers of most of an underwater photographers. Gone are the days of waiting to get home to see my results - only to find I've made some basic mistakes for most of the trip. Instead I surface knowing I've got what I want and had such a great time doing it.

Digital photography has made significant advances in the past couple of years. It isn't knocking on the door of 35mm yet but I'll bet anyone a fiver (five lira, that is, if I lose) that in about five years time it will be a serious contender for underwater use.

In the meantime there are some very capable digital stills cameras available today which can produce sufficient quality to be reproduced up to half a page in a magazine or to print a photo quality 10"x8" which would be as good as one produced by conventional means.

The range of consumer digital cameras falls roughly into two types - automatic point and shoot or user controllable. I tried both on a recent trip and thought you might be interested to know how it went.

The automatic camera was an Olympus C-960 zoom in a purpose designed Olympus PT-006 polycarbonate housing. The combination costs just under £500



Olympus C-960 and housing



and will fit in a large BC pocket. Underwater it is positively buoyant which is good if a snorkeller lets go of it but for scuba diving I'd recommend adding some extra weight (just a few grammes inside - not a whole kilo strapped to the underside!) to make it more neutral or even slightly negative.

Loading the housing couldn't be simpler. Slide back the lens cover and slot the camera into the housing. Nothing to line up, nothing to adjust. That's it. All of the controls except the zoom are push buttons and, believe it or not, there are eleven of them! This looks confusing at first but in practice you only really use two or three most of the time.

Once the housing is closed it



The Olympus is a delight to use in clear water and the built in flash can restore colours in close up shots. For a point and shoot camera, the results are extremely good.

can operate down to 30 metres but I would suggest this camera comes into its own in the 0-10 metre range where the light and colours are brightest. There is a built in flash



The Coolpix housing is neutral underwater and the LCD screen is easy to see in all but the brightest sunlight. All of the camera's functions can be accessed through the housing which allows TTL flash performance with Nikonos compatible guns.

Nikon CoolPix 990 housing from UK in Germany

which can be used to great effect in clearer waters and will add a sparkle to what would have been a dull shot.

Exposure and focus are both automatic so all you do is look at the small LCD screen on the back of the camera and shoot when it looks good. And this is when you get your first inclination that this is not like your ordinary point and shoot camera. There are two reasons for this - the camera has to set the focus and exposure and then fire the shutter. The result is a significant delay from the time you decide to take the shot until it actually appears on screen. This isn't a problem for still life shots but for fish portraits you need to anticipate where the subject will be in about two seconds!

Until you get used to this quirk I would stick to coral shots and try fish later but it is worth trying to take fish shots for the extreme glow of satisfaction you get when you anticipate right and a well composed image pops up on the LCD screen. It's the nearest feeling you'll get to being a spearfisherperson or a marksperson (doesn't PC speak ruin the flow) without actually killing anything.

Images from this miracle bag





The fisheye lens can be used as a circular fisheye or full frame . Either way the lens is very sharp centrally but falls off towards the edges depending on the aperture (see the wreck shot opposite).

of tricks are stored on an electronic “card” about a millimetre thick and half the size of a credit card. They are available in various memory sizes but the 8mb card I used was enough to give 18 images at maximum quality. That may sound limiting compared to 35mm 36 exp film but, when I tell you the four AA NiMh rechargeable batteries, which power the camera, last about 45 minutes, 18 images can sometimes be more than enough!

The comparatively heavy power consumption is a drawback with these cameras and you will need to have at least one spare set of batteries. I’m sure, just like mobile phones, power consumption will

become less of a problem as cameras are developed.

The Nikon CoolPix 990 is an altogether different animal. I was using it in a German UN aluminium housing which is very well machined and, although not very ergonomical, it became natural to use after a couple of dives. The complete outfit - camera, housing, fisheye lens and port and YS30 flash and arm weighed less than 5kg and fitted into a small camera bag.

The 990 takes a lot of understanding for, once you deviate from the Auto settings, you can control almost any function of the camera via a multiple menu system. I spent a lot of time with the camera

and instruction book and managed to control what I wanted but I wouldn’t be surprised if there are those who would find this camera too daunting. Fortunately, for those, the camera can be set to fully automatic where it does an excellent job.

In terms of picture quality even the Olympus was impressive and the 990 just amazed me. In technical jargon the Olympus image was 3.5mb 1280 x 960 pixels at 72dpi which will give a photo real print of about 7" x 5" (178cm x 127cm). The CoolPix 990 has a chip three times denser giving a 9mb 2048 x 1536 pixel image at 72dpi which will produce a photo real print of at least 10" x 8" if not significantly larger.

As if to illustrate the volatility of the market, the 990 has already been replaced and can be bought for around £600. The fisheye lens is around £200 and the housing complete with flat and fisheye port is around £1200.

If you are travelling, the downside is that you will have to take a laptop computer to download your images after each dive as the storage cards are quite expensive (about £1 per mb) but what better reason can there be for justifying the purchase of a laptop!

My trip to the Red Sea with these two cameras was not much short of revolutionary for it opened my eyes to the quality and versatility of the digital stills world. It is still a long way from competing with conventional film in terms of quality and price but, as we have seen with computers and video, it won’t be too long.

But the most impressive aspect is the enjoyment it gave underwater as I saw the shots appear on the screen no more than a couple of seconds after I had fired the shutter. It was fantastic. I was like a kid with a new toy and no you can’t have it because I won’t let go.

Peter Rowlands