

NIKKOR 18-35mm LENS

By Neil Vincent

“A poor tradesman blames his tools”

Does anyone remember having this drummed into them as they grew up?

I remember and I still continued to blame my tools as an underwater photographer. I began with Nikonos cameras and framers and it seemed to me that every time I found the perfect subject I had the wrong framers on. I even tried only looking for the right subjects but this just never worked the best subjects just didn't fit.

To solve this problem I changed to a housing and prime lenses. This worked well for macro with the Nikkor 105mm Micro. I could photograph from 1:1 through to theoretically through to infinity, in reality about 1:4. When targeting larger fish the Nikkor 60mm Micro lens achieved the same great results.

On the shipwrecks or in underwater caves, the lens of choice for me is my ultra wide Sigma 14mm Rectilinear lens which allows me to get really close to big subjects and fill the frame without barrel distortion. Or if I felt that that some distortion would add to the photograph then I use the Nikkor 16mm Fisheye lens.

My dilemma for many years has been what to use in between these sets of lenses. For example when diving a location which is new where I wasn't sure what I would see or what to use, wide angle or macro. I had an old Nikkor 24mm wide angle lens which I added to my underwater arsenal. It was good and for a while filled this gap. With this lens I could photograph larger fish, head and shoulders of a diver, a Cuttlefish or a seal. For a while I was satisfied.

I had never used a zoom lens underwater but I became aware of other photographers who were beginning to use them. They were using lenses in the 28mm-100mm range and this did not interest me. My interest in zoom lenses changed following a discussion with Fred Bavendam (National Geographic Photographer) who was using the new Nikkor 17-35mm lens. I was excited about the versatility of the range which this lens seemed to offer, I quickly lost interest when I asked the price. This a fast zoom lens with a minimum aperture of



f2.8, unfortunately this special professional quality does not come cheaply so the price was high, too high for me to justify. So I went back to the 24mm.

Mr Nikon must have read my thoughts as not long after feeling and coveting Fred's lens, Nikon released the Nikkor 18-35mm f3.5-4.5 D IF lens. Not as fast as the 17-35mm f2.8 but who uses f2.8 underwater and at one third the cost this lens sounded great. To replace this lens with prime lenses would mean owning a 18mm, 20mm, 24mm, 28mm and 35mm lens and I would be back to having the wrong lens on the camera again.

My next question was, would the lens fit inside my Subal F4 housing and what else did I need to make the system work. I rang David Hill at Sea Optics, Australia. David had the answers, as Sea Optics is both a Subal and a Nikon dealer.

I would need a 150mm dome port DPSWB (which I already had) or a Fisheye dome DPFE, a 40mm extension ring EXR40 to go between the dome and the housing, a plus 4 diopter and some gears. The aperture gear required is the same as that for the Nikkor 105mm, Subal did make a zoom gear for the lens but Subal did not make a manual focus gear, which meant the lens would have to be used in auto focus mode.

Being old and still coming to grips with the metric system, auto focus was not something that I personally have felt comfortable with. I obtained the physical sizes of the lens, using these dimensions and my engineering skills I designed a gear that would fit and work within the housing. Once I had convinced myself that I could make it manual focus, I ordered the lens.

On land the lens is very versatile, with an angle of view from 100° to 62°. It is quite light for a lens with 11 elements which makes it ideal for travelling or bushwalking. It has internal focus making it much more usable in a housing as its length doesn't increase when focusing in close. And it does focus close, 0.33 metres.

When it arrived I checked the fit in the housing and decided to have the gear made. (After going to all of this trouble of designing a focus gear David now tells me that Sea Optics are making the manual focus gear for the lens. This is no consolation to me but it does make it easy for future buyers.)



I fitted the gear only two days before the Jervis Bay Shootout on board Ocean Trek. Very bravely I chose to use the lens in the Shootout and my confidence in the lens was rewarded. It performed perfectly, I could full frame Blue Wrasse, Indian fish showing some of its habitat, big jellyfish, big jellyfish with a diver and a wide angle cave photo with a diver, her reflection in the air pocket on the ceiling, all of these situations with one lens!!! For the Shootout it was ideal as you have a set time and a limited amount of film to use in the competition. I believe the lens played a big part in me receiving second place. It was very stiff competition with Nigel Motyer, one of Europe's well known photographers winning and Robb Westerdyk from the Central Coast a very close third. I think it was this lens that gave me the edge.

Later in the Year I won the Open section of the South Pacific Divers Underwater Photographer of the Year, three slides of my winning five slide portfolio were taken with this new lens.



In this time of automatic everything, I still choose to do some things manually. I don't use program mode underwater because the camera cannot understand that someone actually has taken it underwater. It becomes confused. I use manual or in special situations like fast moving seals I will choose Speed Priority, making it easy for the camera leaving it only to calculate the ideal aperture. Since the Shootout I have established that underwater the 18-35 lens works best with apertures greater than f8 so I rarely go wider. Using this and the configuration described above, I have had corner to corner sharpness.

One word of warning. I recently came close to a group seals sitting on rocks near the waters edge, I surfaced very close to them, lifted the housing from the water and tried to focus. It won't!!! With the +4 diopter, it's like the Nikonos 15mm lens, it only works underwater. The seals remained and posed beautifully, knowing full well that the lens would not focus.

My ranting here may appear to be a great big advertisement for Nikon and Sea Optics. It certainly is an endorsement of the two companies that have contributed to the biggest leap forward in my photography in the past ten years. In the past I have bought new housings, changed lenses and camera bodies but since changing from manual flash to TTL, this lens has provided me with the next biggest advantage.

Don't get me wrong this lens is not going to make you a better photographer, that's something that you gain through experience. What this lens has allowed me to do is to take better advantage of the subjects and opportunities that present themselves underwater. In other words I won't be able to blame my tools in the future.

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