OrcaTorch D900V review

by Kate Jonker

The biggest problem I had when I started out in underwater photography was getting my camera to focus. I soon realised that in order for my camera to focus, it needed to see contrast and in the often dark and dingy underwater world, there isn't always sufficient light to create enough contrast for the camera's sensor and the camera really struggles to focus.

This was easily remedied by attaching a focus light to my housing. And voilà - I pointed the light at my subject and the camera focussed quickly and accurately. Problem solved!

As divers, we are taught how to keep neatly trimmed to prevent drag and to help with air consumption. As photographers, we tend to scupper all of that by adding focus lights, strobes, snoots, snoot torches, snoot torches with multi-coloured filters, UV lights and video lights. And sometimes we dive with all of these together so as not to miss 'that' shot – or 'that' video. And then, eventually, it just gets too much. All those lights and torches get in the way, your rig becomes bulky and you start wishing you had a compact like your dive buddy.

Dive torch manufacturers have started to realise that we want less on our camera rigs but we still want to do 'all that'. Enter the new generation of underwater lighting solutions. Dive lights that double up as torches, focus lights, video lights, spot lights, UV lights and red lights. Some can do 'all that' and reduce what is attached to your housing. Diving becomes more streamlined, the task loading becomes less and suddenly underwater photography becomes a lot more fun!

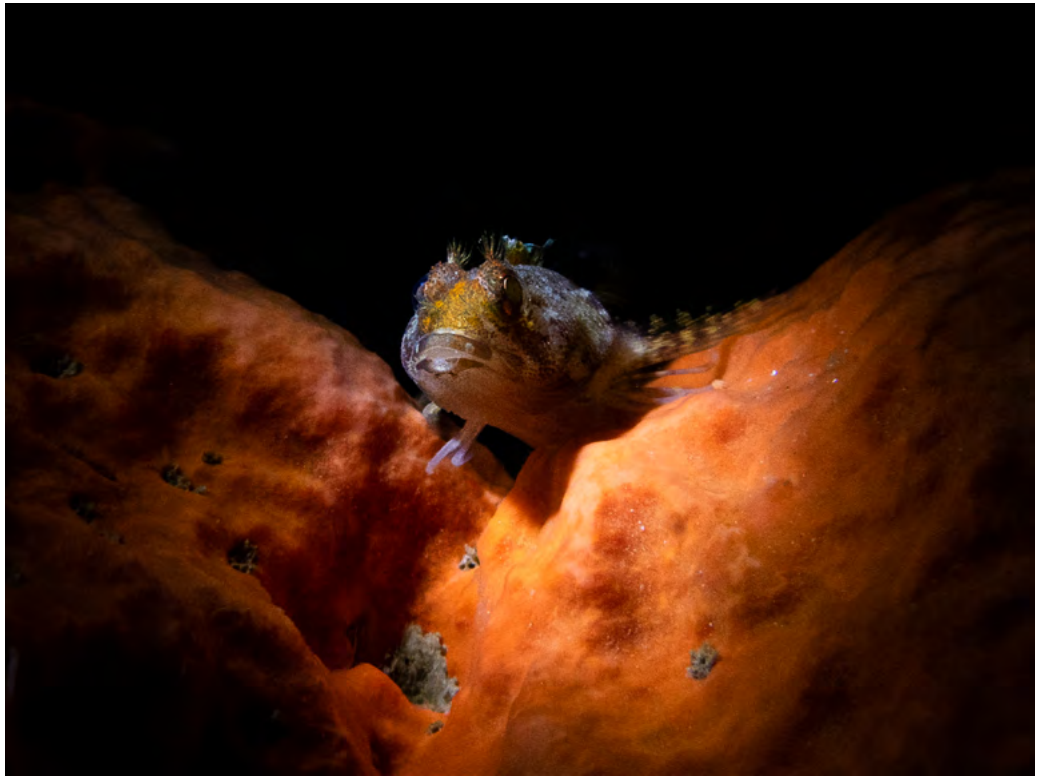
These lights are also great for compact camera owners who no longer need to invest in strobes, but can opt for a powerful dive light that they can attach to the cold shoe of their housings instead.

One such manufacturer is OrcaTorch, who produces internationally available high quality underwater lights. They advocate the spirit of "follow your heart and just do it" and as this aligns with my personal approach to underwater photography, I was keen to discover whether their OrcaTorch D900V video light could be the solution to my over-crowded camera rig.

The OrcaTorch D900V is designed especially for underwater photographers. It features four colours within one light: red (250 lumens), UV, neutral white with 120° flood beam with two strengths (2200 and 600 lumens) and cool white with an 8° spot beam, also with two strengths (820 and 250 lumens). It has a magnetic fast-charging system and can recharge within two and a half hours, reducing the need for spare batteries and chargers.

My D900V arrived securely packed in its own little carry-box. Inside was the torch head and rechargeable battery which screwed together and sealed securely with two o-rings;

Red Roman at Steenbras River Mouth
Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, Tokina 10 – 17mm fisheye lens, two Sea & Sea YS-D1 strobes with OrcaTorch D900V as focus light. F9, 1/160, ISO320



Cape Triplefin rests on orange wall sponge
Olympus TG5, Olympus PT-058 housing and OrcaTorch D900V on narrow beam F9, 1/2000, ISO250

magnetic cable and charger; ball joint mount; mounting screws and hex wrench; spare o-rings and a user manual.

The first thing that struck me was how well-made the torch was. According to OrcaTorch, it is made from aircraft grade aluminium and coated with a diamond grade, hard anodized finish to protect the torch from seawater corrosion. It is built to withstand a drop of 1m (great for clumsy people like myself) and could be taken to depths of 150m.

Weighing 430g out of the water and 215g in water, the torch felt sturdy and solid in my hands. Before I received it, I was a little worried it might be a bit too bulky, but when it arrived, I was pleasantly surprised to see how compact it was. The length is just under 130mm, with a maximum diameter of 53mm.

I was keen to find out whether the D900V would be suitable for both compact and DSLR camera owners.

My first field test was with my TG5 in an Olympus PT-058 housing. I attached the torch directly to the cold shoe on the top of the housing using a cold shoe mount. I set my camera to microscope mode, auto white balance, ISO400 and used the exposure compensation dial to adjust exposure as required.

Switching between the flood and spot modes on the D900V was very easy. One firm, two second long press of the right hand button turns the light on in full flood mode, a second press switches to dimmed flood mode, pressing again gives you the narrow beam on full strength, the following press dims the spot and a fifth press turns the light off. Presses of the left hand button toggles the torch between red and UV modes. Having one button for the neutral white flood and spot beams and another button for the red and UV modes allows for some creative photography techniques.

Underwater, I found the flood

to be incredibly bright and even. It was great for lighting up the reef and critter hunting (and letting my buddy know where I was in less than great visibility). It was also good for video on the TG5, although you want to be less than a metre away from your subject to light it properly. As I'd purchased the TG5 for its fantastic microscope mode, I preferred the narrower, spot beam with this camera as it created a lovely concentrated beam similar to using a snoot.

On my next set of dives, I used the D900V as a focus light with my Canon 7dmkii DSLR set up for wide angle. I attached it to the cold shoe of my

Plum anemone. Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, 60mm macro lense, no strobe with OrcaTorch D900V on flood beam. F2.8, F1/250, ISO100

Juvenile basket star. Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, 60mm macro lense, InonZ240 strobe with OrcaTorch D900V on flood beam. F5.6, 1/250, ISO100

Speckled klipfish. Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, 60mm macro lens, no strobe with OrcaTorch D900V on red light only F3.5, F1/125, ISO320

School of strepies at Steenbras River Mouth. Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, Tokina 10 – 17mm fisheye lense, two Sea & Sea YS-D1 strobes with OrcaTorch D900V as focus light. F9, 1/160, ISO320

Gasflame nudibranch. Canon 7dmkii, Sea & Sea Housing, 60mm macro lense, no strobe, OrcaTorch D900V on flood beam. F2.8, 1/250, ISO100

housing, with dual Sea & Sea YS-D1 strobes on medium and short arms, attached to the handles. I had my Tokina 10 - 17mm fisheye behind a compact dome port.

The D900V worked seamlessly and as the dive was a little dark and deep, I had the light on full flood, giving me just the right amount of light for fast focussing without creating any hot spots in my images. I couldn't have been happier.

I did try my hand at video and found that the D900V was good for subjects closer than 1m from the camera. Although the beam was bright and even, serious videographers would benefit from having two of these lights.

As most of my work involves macro photography, I was very keen to put the OrcaTorch D900V through its paces with my favourite macro set-up, my Canon 7dmkii with 60mm macro lens.

I tested the D900V as my only source of lighting. For straight forward macro photos, I found that the full flood beam worked really well, giving great, even lighting and true to life colours. I didn't have to colour correct in Lightroom afterwards at all. I found the best results came from ISO320, 1/160 and an open aperture of F5.6.

The spot beam is a lot of fun to use and works really well. Most of the critters where I dive are pretty large, measuring between 4 and 10cm and the beam provided an excellent snoot lighting effect. Being able to switch between the full and less-bright narrow beam allows for leeway with depth of field. My favourite settings in this mode were 1/250 at F5.6 on ISO100.

For more creative shots, I loved using the red mode at the same time as the full spot mode as it created a red background with natural white spot in the middle in which I was able to use to highlight my subject. It was also fun and interesting to use the UV mode on some of the critters, although this did work better on the deeper, darker dives. I used an open aperture

of between F2.8 and F5.6, adjusting exposure through my shutter speed (but no lower than 1/125 as below that the images started to get motion blur) and kept to ISO320 throughout.

The OrcaTorch D900V is now a constant fixture on my rig. For macro, I tend to dive with it on my right hand strobe arm and my Inon Z240 strobe on my left hand strobe arm. When snooting, I use the D900V as a spotting light, turning it outwards, away from my strobe so that it does not affect my snooting. It is also a lot of fun to use the UV light and red light to add some colour around my snooted shots. With settings of ISO100, 1/250 and apertures of F5.6, I am still able to get a black snooted background, adding some colour to the photos as well.

In use, I found the battery life to be excellent, with the torch providing me with over two hours on full flood beam. When using the spot beam on full, I was able to get four hour-long dives out of the battery before I needed to charge it. Charging is an absolute pleasure – just allow the magnetic charger to attach to the back of the torch and let it charge.

Over the past couple of months, the OrcaTorch D900V has excelled as a spotting light on full flood beam, as a snoot torch when I've wanted to keep things simple and as a creative tool when I've felt like following my heart and just doing it! It is a sturdy, well made light, easy to charge and easy to use. I can happily recommend it to anyone looking for a reliable light that will brighten their dives and spark their creativity!

My thanks to OrcaTorch for entrusting me with their D900V for this review.

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