Nikon Z50 and Nauticam Housing

by Tony Land

Many years ago, I had extensively used a few mirrorless cameras - specifically a Sony NEX5 and NEX7. As a hardcore DSLR shooter, I did like these setups, but wasn't impressed enough with them to consider making the switch from my regular SLR camera. The Nikon Z50 and Nauticam NA-Z50 housing has me rethinking this.

The Nikon Z50 is the newest in Nikon's interchangeable-lens mirrorless cameras, offering an APS-C sensor, 20 megapixels stills and 30 FPS 4k video. The kit lens it comes with is a 16-50 f3.5-6.3 Z-mount.

Last week, I was fortunate enough to get my hands on one inside a brand-new Nauticam housing for a week of test-diving, courtesy of Reef Photo and Video. Over this time frame I was able to get 6 dives with it, and without further ado, here's my first impressions of it.

Like all Nauticam housings, the design is well thought out and ergonomics are superb. I particularly like how even though the playback button is located on the bottom right of the camera body, some clever control routing has this function as a lever for your left thumb - consistent with many other DSLR housings. With the exception of the ISO control (something I address later in this article) every function of the camera is easy to operate with your hands on the handles.

The muscle memory of this setup took me a bit to get used to. Several dives were required just to get the camera set up to shoot in a manor I was accustomed to, but once I did, everything clicked, and I began to really enjoy it.

My loaner camera came with a standard viewfinder, however since most Nauticam housings are compatible in this regard, I immediately swapped it with my personal and beloved Nauticam 45 degree viewfinder.

The Nauticam NA-Z50 housing with WWL-C lens, and Inon Z330 strobes

NA-Z50 left rear, illustrating the playback lever.

NA-Z50 housing with 45 degree viewfinder.

Immediately I noticed it was very negative in the water for such a little camera. Dive 1 was mainly me flailing about as my muscle memory was off from the added weight. Easily resolved using some carbon buoyancy float arms. Using a pair of Nauticam 70x300 and a pair of H2O-Tools 30x300 arms made the setup just slightly negative, and far easier to handle.

What I loved

This particular configuration came with both the Nauticam WWL-C 130 degree wide lens, and the CMC-1 macro diopter. In my former life, if you had ever asked me about doing both macro and wide angle shooting on the same dive, I'd have given you a hard "no." Wet lenses just weren't up to the task. Nauticam has changed the game here, and they claim their WWL wet lens series are "mathematically sharper" than anything else in the market. I don't doubt it. This lens surprised me in its ability to deliver sharp images corner to corner. The bayonet mounts allow for quick and easy changing from wide angle to macro and back.

The electronic viewfinder surprised me. It was sharp and easy to see corner to corner. One of the nicest things I found was the ability to check my image without removing my eye from the viewfinder after my shot. I found this particularly useful for macro photography - something you just can't do on a traditional SLR. Normally after a few shots, you need to look at your LCD screen to make sure nothing weird is happening with your strobe placement or power settings, and just to get an idea of how your shot is coming out. With macro and super macro, doing this breaks your focal plane and requires you to recompose the image and focus - something that can often be easier said than done. It also minimizes you frightening your subject, who could get spooked and disappear.

With the electronic viewfinder, you don't even need to move. The image will appear automatically or on demand without you ever needing to take your eye away, frightening the subject or moving your composition and focus. I loved this feature alone.

That said, initially I found the viewfinder too

Top rear view of the Nauticam NA-Z50 housing

Front view of the Nauticam NA-Z50 housing illustrating the bayonet port mount system.

USS Kittiwake shot with the WWL-C wide lens. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

bright - something easily corrected in the menu settings, but it also contributed to my images to be vastly underexposed. On my first few dives I had forgotten how to bring up the histogram function, so I found myself going by the light meter, and the preview shown on the viewfinder.

Determining focus, either through the e-viewfinder or the LCD is super easy using the center button in the image review. A press of the center button does a super-zoom of the shot center, allowing you to see if the image is in focus or not.

Battery life is shockingly good. In my past experiences with mirrorless cameras, I found the battery would last 2 or 3 dives if you were lucky. Out of habit I charged this battery between trips, but even after a 2-tank boat dive, I noticed the battery meter hadn't dropped even a single bar. I've since stopped charging it to see how many dives I can get out of it.

What I didn't love

My really only complaint on this camera would be the focus. Getting sharp focus when using the WWL-C wide angle was a non-issue, and otherwise flawless. It was hard to get shots that weren't in focus.

Shots in macro were far more difficult. Super macro shots using the CMC-1 were maddeningly difficult and I found myself yearning for the manual focus control of my DSLR. To be fair, I was not

using a focus light, so this could have added to my issue. Also I did manage to make the task easier by switching focus to a single point mode, and the 4-way control makes it easy to put this focus point exactly where you want, but it was more challenging than what I was used to. This is probably the worst thing I can say about this camera setup.

From looking at the lens arrangement, a manual focus control might be technically possible, but not without a major housing redesign, so that's not likely to happen.

In the grand scheme of things, this isn't that bad and I was still able to get some great super-macro shots with it.

Minor gripes

These remaining talking points are really minor issues I noticed, but can certainly live with. They are worthy of mention, but I would certainly not rule this camera out for any of these reasons at all.

The flash

Like most mirrorless cameras, the camera's internal strobe triggers your external flash. While there is a very innovative control on the left rear of the housing to activate and deactivate the internal flash, the flash

Inside rear view of the NA-Z50 housing with the Nauticam optical strobe trigger board installed.

tube itself is very tiny. As a result, shots taken in quick succession can cause it to overheat. When this happens, the camera will not allow you to take any more shots until it cools off. I was shooting in manual flash mode, using the absolute minimum power the flash allows (1/32nd of a second) and I still found it overheating with a reasonable frame rate. On 2 occasions I lost the opportunity for some good images, when I found my subject perfectly framed, yet the camera would not fire.

However, this flash issue is easily resolved using an optical trigger. The solution for me was to remove the optical flash trigger from another housing I had on loan, and install it into this NA-Z50 housing. The change took about 3 minutes to do, and worked perfectly. Anyone looking to

Goliath Grouper, inside the USS Kittiwake. Shot with the WWL-C wide lens. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

buy this setup will be well advised to get an optional flash trigger installed when you buy it. If you're a serious shooter, this is a must-have.

It's worth noting that Nauticam's optical flash triggers are really nice. Thin and unobtrusive in the housing, they can support both manual and TTL modes. Unfortunately you can't change between these modes underwater, but I find this a minor inconvenience. The advantage the board offers for shot-to-shot recycle time makes this a must have for any serious shooter.

The ISO adjustment

This is kind of weird. On the camera, to change ISO you need to hold the ISO button while turning the rear command dial. Not a big deal. When in the housing, in keeping with Nauticam consistency, the ISO control is a lever on the right side of the housing, just behind the shutter release.

On my personal setup, changing the ISO requires you to push this lever with your right thumb, and turn the front command wheel with your right index finger. Again no big deal.

A super-macro shot of a Painted Elysia, shot with the CMC-1 magnifier. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

Hawksbill Turtle, shot with the WWL-C wide lens. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

Guardian of the Reef. Shot with the WWL-C wide lens. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

But on the Z50, you need to push the ISO control with your right thumb, leaving you with nothing to turn the rear command wheel, unless you have been equipped with an extra thumb.

What you need to do is adjust your grip so the lever can be pressed with your right index finger, while you adjust the rear command wheel with your right thumb. It's an awkward arrangement, and would be much easier if Nauticam changed this to some sort of toggle control, instead of a 'momentary on' type that they currently use. It's a minor gripe, considering I don't often adjust ISO underwater, and when I need to, I can manage it with this modified, albeit odd grip.

Note: After reading this article, Kevin Palmer of Reef Photo pointed out to me, that this issue can be mitigated with a camera setting. In the custom settings menu > controls > 'Release button to use dial' should be set to "on." When this is enabled the ISO button becomes a toggle, rather than a momentary on control, making it far easier.

Blenny. Shot with Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

Cropped image of a yellow-headed jawfish. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

Shutter sync speed

For some reason, the maximum shutter speed when using a strobe is 1/200th of a second. A bit too slow for my taste, and I wish it could go up to 1/250th or 1/320th like some other cameras do. Even use of the flash trigger board in manual mode keeps the shutter speed firmly capped at 1/200.

Note: this was questioned, as most Nikon cameras will allow higher shutter speeds when

Divers on the USS Kittiwake. Shot with the WWL-C wide lens. Nikon Z50, Nauticam NA-Z50 housing, 16-50 lens, Inon Z330 strobes.

using an electronically triggered manual flash. The reason for the 1/200 limit could have been because the optical trigger hotshoe had a 5-pin connection and the camera though ttl had been enabled by default. Unfortunately I don't have a manual hotshoe to test this theory. Once we learn more, I will update this section.

Summary

My own personal benchmark of any camera system boils down to this: is it easy to operate and can you get good results? The answer to both these questions is yes.

I really like this camera, and would confidently recommend this setup. It's compact and lightweight, versatile, and yields great images and video. The wet lenses yield great quality images - something I would not have dreamed of years ago. They also allow for the underwater photographer's Holy Grail - the ability to do both macro and wide angle on the same dive.

The setup as I tested it (less strobes and arms) would retail for around $7,500, which is expensive, however I did have a few luxury accessories like the optical trigger and 45 viewfinder.

Those looking to keep this more affordable can forgo the viewfinder, trigger, and CMC-1 lens, bringing the cost down to around $5,500. Something that really makes it worth considering.

A comparable equipped DSLR rig would in my rough estimation cost $2,000 more, and not have the same versatility these wet lenses offer. In addition, the more compact nature of this setup will make it travel easier than it's big brother SLR setups.

The electronic viewfinder changes the game for me when it comes to macro photography.

The downside compared to a SLR? Well I really didn't find one. I did find the focus difficult on macro and super macro, and the loss of a manual focus mechanism is somewhat frustrating, but certainly not a deal breaker for me. I was still able to get great macro shots using this setup in the limited time I played with it. I imagine when I try again with a focus light, I will have better luck. The other minor gripes I've listed were for the benefit of the reader, and are things easily addressed.

For those looking to upgrade from a point and shoot, I can confidently recommend this camera, housing and configuration. As a SLR shooter, this would have me seriously considering making the change to mirrorless. My only reservation would be that you cannot use your existing Nikon glass with this camera. However, retaining a SLR and associated lenses for topside use while adding this as a travel and/or underwater setup would be something worth thinking about.

I've not addressed video quality at all - while I did take a few quick video clips, I didn't devote the amount of time required to give a full review just yet. As they say in Cayman - soon come.

Tony Land
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