

Nauticam NA-Z8 housing for the Nikon Z8

by Kevin Palmer

The Z8 is arguably the most hotly anticipated full-frame mirrorless camera from Nikon and the first to feature the '8' series badging.

For many still photographers, the Nikon D850 has represented the nicest all-around DSLR for underwater photography ever made. And while the Nikon Z6, Z7 and the mark II versions are certainly nice mirrorless cameras, they were not really nice enough to inspire an upgrade from a D850 for most shooters.

The D850 was introduced back in 2017. Many shooters have been waiting for Nikon to release a mirrorless version comparable to the D850. The Z9 certainly fitted that bill but the full size pro body and higher price tag were not for everyone. The Z8 gives us pretty much everything the Z9 has in a smaller body and beats most of the D850 specs! So is the Z8 your new mirrorless camera?

When rumors started circling that the Z8 would deliver most, if not all, of the Z9s impressive performance spec, it was easy to be a bit skeptical. But Nikon did not hold back and most of what makes the Z9 special has

somehow been stuffed into camera body that is smaller and lighter than a D850. That is especially good news for us underwater photographers who have been waiting for a reason to move to a mirrorless interchangeable lens format that is clearly the future of cameras in general.

A quick Z8 specs review:
46MP – Just about perfect for underwater resolution and a subjectively beautiful file
30 FPS – More than any of us really need
8K 60P & 4K 120P Recorded internally in N-RAW or ProRes RAW. Nikon finally takes video seriously!
CF Express B for enough speed to handle the serious video capability.
UHSII for the second slot
Max sync speed 1/200 unless shooting HSS
EVF 3,686,400 pixels
Same EN-EL15C battery as in D850/ D500

Even in tricky constantly moving environments, rapid adjustments with the Nauticam housings come naturally. Even when holding one's breath.





Z-24-50 with WWL-C. Even with only 1/200 sync, you can still get nice sun rays

No mechanical shutter
Much expanded AF menu of capabilities

Switching to a Mirrorless

Like most things that are new to us there is a bit of an adjustment period and learning curve when switching to a mirrorless from a DSLR.

One of the biggest learning curves for many people is going from an optical VF to Electronic VF.

EVFs do not perform well when shooting strong backlit scenes like sunballs. This is getting better as new cameras are released but for now when shooting into the sun and if you have something like a boat or diver silhouetted in the background you will probably not see the detail in the EVF. In these circumstances I suggest shoot, review, and make adjustments. This can all happen very fast because you can review your images right on the EVF without ever removing your eye.



Focusing head-on to a low contrast subject, in vertical, with a busy background will baffle many modern mirrorless cameras. Z8 nails it

Once you get comfortable with reviewing your images through the EVF display, you will never want to go back. I like to turn off auto review and use the playback lever that is conveniently accessed with your left thumb. EVFs also allow you to preview exposure simulation. As you make adjustments to



Fish portraits like this young hamlet with the Z8 are probably the most fun I have ever had doing it

ISO, shutter and aperture you will see the image getting darker or lighter. This can be useful in wide angle but in macro where images are generally 100% strobe lit you will want to turn this off. This feature is turned off automatically if the camera recognizes that a strobe is attached but many of the manual triggers that we use underwater are not recognized by the camera.

Another note on manual triggers, if the camera does not recognize there is a strobe attached, you can set the shutter faster than the max sync speed of 1/200. In this case the strobe

will not sync correctly and you will get incorrect exposures.

Nikon's popularity in stellar photography inspired them to offer a "Starlight View". This is a very useful tool for night dives and especially for blackwater dives. This lowers the AF sensitivity to about -8.5EV which is an amazing accomplishment and makes it easier to view tough subjects.

The data displays also turns red to help preserve your night vision. There is already talk that the Z8 will be "THE" blackwater camera and feedback from the field looks good.

Considering all the benefits of



The Z8 and Z 105 make a wonderfully versatile portrait combination, and it is a lot of fun to experiment with. Here providing a very detailed reef shark face portrait

utilizing the viewfinder, I think every Z8 owner shooting primarily stills should consider one of Nauticam's new Full Frame Enhanced Viewfinders.

These new viewfinders were designed in response to the ever-increasing size of the EVFs coming out that demanded a whole new optic design. Even on traditional DSLRs, using the new FF viewfinders show just how much sharper and defined the optics are.

AF and 3D tracking

I have always found Nikon



cameras to generally be better auto focusing still cameras than most. This is particularly true when it comes to low light and challenging macro fish portrait photography. The Z8 lives up to that tradition and then some. But



Zooming to about 35mm with the WWL-C is perfect for a grouper getting cleaned. Image quality only gets sharper as you zoom in

getting the most out of the camera does require some experimenting to find what works best for each individual's style.

There are a lot of AF options including different shapes and sizes of AF area and various tracking and animal recognition features. It pays not to just pick the same old focus size you have always used in the past, but rather take advantage of the new menu of tools at your disposal. The 3D tracking works particularly well and I believe one of the highlight of this camera.

Battery Life

The good news is that the Z8 uses the tried-and-true EN-EL15 battery (in updated form) that many Nikon shooters already have in their kit from many previous camera iterations.

The downside is the Z8 and all mirrorless cameras are much more power-hungry than traditional DSLRs. The real world results are that if you are shooting a modest amount of still photos, you can likely get through two dives without issue. If you are shooting a lot of stills or shooting video, you may want to change



batteries for each dive.

With the Nauticam housing, the whole process only takes a couple of minutes including pulling a vacuum. If you prefer not to open the housing you can add the new USB-C bulkhead allowing battery charging between dives with an external USB-C battery. Make sure to turn off features that you will not be using underwater, like wifi, to preserve battery.

Nauticam NA-Z8 Housing

The NA-Z8 offers everything we have come to expect along with some nice new features that are very useful.

When looking at the back of the Z8 camera, it is easy to see that all the controls the DSLR shooters have grown used to finding on the rear left side of the camera are no longer there. But thanks to some beautiful internal engineering, our left hands have still been given plenty to do when operating the housing.

Our left thumb now controls switching the EVF and LCD monitor displays, operating the Playback and



the Display function which I find of great use in both the EVF and LCD, rather than my right hand having to find the button.

Also on the left-hand side is the very useful Focus Mode lever and a dual lever for Function Buttons 1 & 2 which are physically located on the front right-hand side of the camera. Of course, the Zoom/Focus knob is also on the left. I really appreciated being able to spread the workload out a bit between left and right hands, an idea long overdue.

Whether using Z-lenses or the FTZ adapter, loading the camera, changing lenses and swapping batteries and media is pretty effortless in typical Nauticam tradition. As with



Zoom all the way to 50mm and the framing is perfect for an immature queen angel

the Z7 housings, the lens release functions with F and Z lenses and all existing port and gear configurations for F-Mount lenses will function on the NA-Z8 exactly as they worked on the Nauticam DSLR housings.

For those wanting to load up their housing with extra lights, monitors and GoPros, the top of the housing is now capable of supporting a total of six ball mounts without any extensive modifications – another nice improvement for gear intensive folks.

NIKKOR Z 24-50MM F/4-6.3

Part of what makes the current Nikon Z cameras awesome for underwater is the unfolding new lens line-up. In particular, the Nikkor Z 24-50MM F/4-6.3. This little walk around lens should be in all Z8 owner's camera bag for wide angle and blue water pelagic shooting thanks to what a powerful small package it creates when mated with Nauticam's WWL-C water contact optic on an extremely tiny flat port. It can also be used in the WACP-1 and WACP-C with some vignetting at 24-25mm.



Shutter Sync Speed

Some may find the 1/200 sync speed a little disappointing – but so far it has not seemed too limiting. For those wanting a higher sync speed, there are HSS compatible TTL converters and strobes available to make that possible.

CF Express B Cards and Video

For shooting stills, most name brand cards will function fine. When it comes to video, the Z8 is capable of generating very data intensive high bit-rate files. It has become pretty clear that certain manufacturer's cards will overheat quite quickly. Sandisk and Lexar seem especially prone to this. Delkin cards seem to perform much better and some other brands seem to be surfacing that also work well. This will no doubt be a moving target and needs to be assessed at the time of purchase based on the latest findings. Nikon's "approved media" list does NOT mean it will successfully record all video formats.

Final Thoughts on shooting the Z8

As most photographers realize, there is no perfect camera made today, but they are getting closer all the time.

As a long time DSLR shooter, the Z8 joins just one or two other mirrorless cameras that I find really fun to shoot the way I like to use a camera underwater. And as a long time Nikon shooter, I was pleased with how much seemed familiar, but also how much better this camera performed in several categories than its DSLR predecessors.

It's few weak spots (like battery life and sync speed) are really not deal breakers and both issues have solutions.

If you are a Nikon shooter who enjoys shooting video or wants to learn video, it is a no-brainer. This camera will blow away any Nikon you have ever shot video on and is worth taking advantage of.

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