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Aquatica Fuji S2 Housing Review

By James Wiseman

Shortly before Seaspacer, Aquatica had a prototype of their S2 housing ready for testing. Since I live in Houston - where Seaspacer is held - Aquatica sent me the engineering sample to evaluate before displaying it at the show. I was fortunate enough to get out to the Flower Garden Banks on a trip before Seaspacer, and again on another trip again shortly after receiving my 12-24DX lens. I have now made 18 dives with the housing, and while it is a prototype, it looks like very little will be changed for the production units. But keep that in mind while reading the review – this housing will get even better.

Size and Construction

I'll start out by saying, this is no small housing! The camera is almost as big as a Nikon F5 and the housing is sized to fit. With that said, it is still smaller than many of the housings available for the D100, D60, and S2. However, if you're used to a Sea and Sea F100 housing, be prepared for a little more heft. The housing is cast and machined aluminum with aluminum handles, and an acrylic window fitted into the back of the housing. The window gives the user unimpeded view of the color LCD and the Function LCD on the back of the camera.

The port opening is almost 4 1/2" inches in diameter to accommodate just about any lens. The aluminum housing is



The flat port with manual focus for the 60mm Micro

The camera fits pretty snugly inside the housing, leaving space under the tray for a moisture alarm, etc. The stabbing guides are visible at the bottom corners of the housing.



coated with a silver finish and a clear-coat on top of that, as well as anodized parts. The main seal is a single o-ring in a groove on the front of the housing and a face seal against the rear. To aid in aligning the rear of the housing when closing it up, Aquatica has fitted two stabbing guides to the bottom of the housing that fit into recesses in

the rear piece – a nice feature.

Functions

The following photo should give the reader a good understanding of the control layout for the S2. All controls are available through the housing save for the AE/AF lock button.

Functions accessible from



A view of the housing back showing the layout and function of the controls.



the photographers fingertips (without taking the eye away from the viewfinder) are:

- Zoom
- M/S/C Focus Mode
- Shutterspeed
- Manual Focus
- Shutter

To adjust the aperture, the photographer must take his/her hand off of the right handle and reach to the back for the Aperture Control on the rear of the housing. One control that I really like is the “stay depressed” lever for the Exposure +/- and the Flash +/- . When the knob is

pulled out Ω or all the way, it depresses the button for the Exposure or Flash comp. – then another knob can be rotated with one hand to the desired setting. If you are shooting in TTL mode, this control comes in very handy for adjusting your lighting at the start of a dive.

Available Ports and Lens Combinations

I tested the housing with the standard flat port with focus, the 8” dome port, and the extension for the flat port that

accommodates the Nikkor 70-180 ED Macro zoom. With this combo, and perhaps a different extension for the 105mm, just about any lens can be used. This port combination will enable the photographer to use all of the lenses that I believe will be popular with the S2:

- 60mm Micro
- 105mm Micro
- 70-180 Micro
- 12-24DX
- 16mm Fullframe Fisheye
- 18-35ED
- 17-35AFS

For my dives, I used the 12-24DX, the 16mm Fisheye, the 60mm Micro, and the 70-180 Micro. I was very pleased with the zoom and focus gears that Aquatica provided – they fit up easily and can be left on the lenses in between dives. The following photos show the ports and extensions.

Workability

This unit was designed specifically for use with the Fuji S2 and the Nikon D100 and it shows. The controls are placed right at the photographers fingertips and feel just like an extension of the camera. The camera mounts to the front tray of the housing so the back can be easily removed by opening the locking lid snaps. There are only two snaps, one on each side of the housing.

What I like most about working with this setup is that the camera is very easy to service. Pop open the back and the memory card can be easily removed and changed. After slightly loosening the tripod screw, the battery tray slides out for a quick battery change as

shown below.

On the front of the housing the bayonet port secures easily and smoothly. Changing lenses is especially quick as both the lens and focus/zoom gear can be removed through the ample port opening. Aquatica has also fitted a lever to release the lens from the camera body.

Getting in and out of the water the housing is fairly heavy when equipped with dual strobes and arms. The divemasters were certainly giving me a hard time about lowering it down over the side on the entry line.

Once in the water, the unit becomes much more manageable. I would estimate that the prototype I used weighed almost a pound underwater when fitted with only the flat port. The balance was good but the unit was a bit heavy and took some getting used to. When used with the dome port or the flat port with the extension for the 70-180 Micro, the setup felt a lot closer to neutral

– but still slightly negative. This is probably because the housing is built like the proverbial brick outhouse. Aquatica thinks that they can lighten the production housings by quite a bit, which I think would be a definite improvement.

As you can see from the photos, when the flat port and extension are mounted the housing starts to resemble a howitzer, but it is really pretty easy to handle underwater. The following photo shows how the housing can be held with the right hand for hitting the shutter, and cradled in the left hand for stabilization and turning the manual focus gear.



When rigged up with strobes and arms, the setup is pretty substantial.

The unit I tested was fitted with dual Nikonos bulkheads. One was set up for manual shooting and one for 5-pin TTL. I tried both and got good flash sync with both using a dual TTL sync cord. This is one area where the S2 really shines.

Conclusion

Basically, the Aquatica S2 leaves very little room for improvement. For an underwater photographer looking to make the jump to digital – this is it. The S2's TTL strobe compatibility is a great feature – although some will argue it is not necessary with digital photography. No matter how you look at it, it's sure nice to have in a pinch. Also of major importance is the fact that digital photographers can finally shoot the equivalent of the 17-35 AFS lens underwater and this is a huge draw for this system. This first lens designed specifically for Nikon digital SLR's is excellent in every way and it

works well behind Aquatica's 8" dome port.

Of course there are some areas that could use improvement, however, most of these are inherent in the camera and can't be fixed in the housing. The first of these is the viewfinder. The finder on the S2 is small' – it's basically the finder from the Nikon N80, but even SMALLER. That's because Fuji masked off part of the finder to account for the crop of the 1/1.5 sensor. Using the viewfinder for manual focus is "do-able" but not easy - the internal diopter helps a bit. Composing in autofocus is no problem – and it's easy to set the focus point using the buttons on the back of the housing to help the autofocus out even more.

The unit is a little too negatively buoyant in the water. Aquatica states that they will try to improve this on the production housings and I think they can do it. I decided to use buoyancy arm segments to help offset the weight of my strobes –



especially for better balance when shooting macro with the strobes out in front.

The tapped holes in one of my handles were not adequately spaced to mount my Ultralight ball adapter. Ultralight assured me that they haven't changed their adapter, so I'm hoping that Aquatica will increase the hole spacing on future production.

Aquatica has entered the digital market with both feet – and it appears that they are taking feedback from their users and improving each of the new housings as they come out. The S2 housing is certainly a winner and leaves very little to be desired. The construction is good, the versatility to use different lenses is there, and the unit is really a pleasure to use underwater. No matter how

you look at it, it's a big unit, but the housing isn't any bigger than it needs to be.

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