Smartphone housings

by The Backscatter Team

This review places its focus squarely on underwater smartphone housings rather than getting into the specs of specific phone models.

The housing itself has the greatest impact on performance underwater, largely because of the companion app and available accessories.

The app controls key features such as wide and telephoto lens choice, camera settings, and color correction—the more feature-rich the app, usually means better overall image quality.

Accessories are equally important: color filters, wide-angle and macro lenses can dramatically improve color, sharpness, and clarity.

But a housing's role isn't just about capturing great images—it's about ensuring the phone survives the dive. To that end, housings vary greatly in their protective features. Some of the models we tested include vacuum systems for pre-dive leak checks or integrated moisture alarms, providing the confidence needed to protect the device that holds your essential banking and personal data.

SEALIFE SPORTDIVER ULTRA

The SeaLife SportDiver Ultra is our overall top pick, offering the best balance of ease of use, features, and accessory support. Its companion app is straightforward to learn yet powerful enough to deliver consistently strong results. The accessory ecosystem is among the best in this group, with a particularly well-designed lens mount that is easily adjusted underwater.

While the app occasionally lagged during testing and filters and lenses cannot be stacked, these are minor drawbacks compared to the overall package. With its user-friendly design, ergonomic build, and reliable performance, the SeaLife SportDiver Ultra is an excellent choice for both beginners and experienced divers seeking a capable, adaptable housing.

The SeaLife SportDiver Ultra works with most smartphones, including larger models, and supports both iPhone and Android. This makes it one of the most universal options available.

Smartphones provide an inexpensive, simple, travel-friendly entry point for divers looking to get into underwater photography. Check out our video review above.

This housing is comfortable and well thought out. A large grip and thumb rest give it a secure feel, while the extended shutter release and clearly labeled, easy-to-reach buttons make one-handed shooting a breeze.

The housing runs on two AAA batteries that power the housing and Bluetooth controls, with runtime depending on battery type (about 50 hours on alkalines).

SeaLife includes everything needed to mount the phone inside the housing in the box, including three different sizes of rubber grips that are easily installed and swapped out for a perfect fit.

Powering on is simple: press the internal power button, pair the phone through the app, and the app will guide you through setup.

The SeaLife uses a vacuum system that monitors internal pressure to detect leaks before they happen.

The SeaLife app is beginner-friendly yet powerful. It includes lens modes, zoom, exposure, video resolution, frame rates, and underwater white balance modes. The white balance system worked especially well when paired with the included SportDiver Bluewater Filter.

We did encounter two drawbacks: The app could be laggy at times, with a slight delay between

button presses and response. The mode menu can only be cycled through in one direction. If you skip past the mode you want, you have to scroll through the entire menu again, which is a hassle when trying to capture fleeting moments. Overall, the app is capable and easy to learn, despite these quirks.

SeaLife offers an impressive range of accessories. The included SportDiver Bluewater Filter worked well with underwater white balance modes, though the filter cannot be mounted with a lens, unlike the DiveVOLK SeaTouch. Additional filters include a SportDiver Greenwater Filter and a SportDiver Yellow Filter for fluorescence shooting.

The optional SportDiver 6-inch Dome Port snaps to the front of the housing, working as a wide-angle lens for scuba or snorkeling, and allowing for easy split shots. Unlike some housings, the dome doesn't need to be aligned with a specific phone lens, keeping the operation simple. The SportDiver 6-inch Dome Port was also one of the overall sharpest lens accessories we tested.

The SportDiver 52mm Wide Lens widened the field of view and allowed closer focusing, though the corners stayed soft. Softness at the edges was a recurring issue with all wide lenses tested on smartphone housings, some more pronounced than others. Among the options, this was one of the sharper lenses, yet its image quality still fell well short of what a compact camera paired with a dedicated wide-angle lens can deliver.

The SeaLife SportDiver Ultra has a suite of compatible accessories and includes a SportDiver Bluewater Filter right out of the box. SeaLife's lens holder system was also our favorite, since it can be easily adjusted, even in-water if needed.

DIVEVOLK SEATOUCH

The DiveVOLK SeaTouch stands out as one of the most versatile smartphone housings available. Its fully touch-screen compatible design uses a flexible gel membrane instead of Bluetooth controls, allowing direct access to the phone's native camera or advanced apps such as the Blackmagic Cinema app.

This opens up far more creative control and flexibility than other housings. Paired with the ability to combine a wide angle lens and the effective DiveVolk M67 Red Filter, it produced some of our favorite clips shot with a smartphone.

That said, the system isn't without flaws. The lens mount can be finicky in use, and the included macro lens leaves something to be desired. Still, for divers who want maximum customization and creative freedom in a compact rig, the DiveVOLK SeaTouch is an outstanding choice.

The DiveVOLK SeaTouch works with most smartphones, but requires a specific tray for each model and is purchased alongside the housing. While not as universal straight out of the box as some of the other housings in this review, it still covers a wide range of phones.

We have also experienced variable quality with DiveVOLK smartphone trays. The trays we received for iPhones were top-notch quality, made with durable plastic and fit the phone and inside the housing like a glove. Android trays on the other hand, were 3D printed and much lower quality, with some customers reporting them breaking or having fitting issues.

During our testing, we found the gel membrane to work reliably with taps, but swipes could take a few tries. Overall, this was a minor inconvenience compared to the unlimited app access gained by the touchscreen.

The gel membrane could be difficult to see through on land, but underwater, it was clear and easy to see. In terms of housing build quality, the housing feels less solid and ergonomic compared to other housings in this review, however, it encountered no issues during our tests.

The gel membrane itself does feel delicate, and we do advise taking extra care of the gel screen to protect it from scratches or hard surfaces when diving or traveling with the housing.

Critically, before the phone is installed in the housing, DiveVOLK advises that all screen protectors are removed. If the screen protector is in place, the phone can become trapped inside the housing. This problem has been reported by customers, with some needing to break the housing in order to free

their phone.

The app experience of the DiveVOLK is entirely up to the user; anything from the native camera app to pro-level camera apps will work. This flexibility even allows basic phone functions like calls and texts on the surface (provided there is a signal). We used both our iPhone 13 Pro Max's native camera app and the Black Magic video app. Though the phone's native camera app had novel features like panoramas, our overall favorite option was the Blackmagic video app. This app unlocked advanced features, manual controls, focus peaking, and reliable lens selection, allowing us to capture video with the most control.

The app flexibility has also made DiveVOLK SeaTouch popular with tech divers, who will leave the housing clipped to a downline during long deco stops to watch downloaded movies, shows, or play games while waiting to clear.

DiveVOLK has a wide array of accessories that cover basically everything you would need for your smartphone housing, but we found the optics of both the wide angle and macro lens to be of poor quality, resulting in soft-looking images.

Mounting additional accessories or attaching the housing to a tray requires the DiveVolk Expansion Clamp, which provides 67mm threads for lenses and filters. While useful, this clamp is somewhat finicky and did loosen mid-dive multiple times during our testing when not carefully secured.

In our testing, the DiveVolk M67 Wide Lens expanded the field of view but was very soft, producing smudgy corners with overall poor image quality. The DiveVolk M67 Red Filter on the other hand, was our favorite filter, delivering the best color correction of any we tried.

The +8 close-up lens also has poor optics, showing fringing, with an extremely thin depth of field, and a tight working distance, making it our least favorite macro option.

OCEANIC+

The Oceanic iPhone is the top pick for beginners and casual shooters, offering a streamlined experience designed around comfort, simplicity, and ease of use.

Loading the phone, pulling a vacuum, correcting color, and even sharing media are all straightforward processes. Nearly every function runs through the companion app, which also handles photo and video color correction. With a paid subscription, the app even doubles as a dive computer, making the Oceanic iPhone more versatile for recreational divers.

That simplicity, however, also highlights its limitations. Without support for interchangeable lenses or filters, the housing's creative potential is restricted compared to more advanced systems. The need for a subscription to unlock full functionality is also a drawback for a product that already comes at a premium.

The Oceaninc+ was the most comfortable housing to use in this review. The large grip and directional buttons make handling this housing a joy.

The Oceanic iPhone works only with iPhones, making it more limited than other housings. It supports a wide range of models, including larger phones. Everything needed for installation comes in the box, including rubber mounting grips and a retrofit kit for larger iPhone Pro Max Models.

The Oceanic iPhone was the most comfortable housing we tested. It features a large, secure grip, big tactile buttons, and clearly labeled controls. Instead of a cluster of buttons, it uses a directional pad with an orange command button, keeping the operation straightforward. Navigating menus is simple, and overall, the Oceanic iPhone set the standard for ergonomics in this review.

The Oceanic iPhone pulls a vacuum automatically, and no hand pump is required. Setup is completely guided through the app which uses a video to walk the user through every step of the way.

Oceanic is the most app based housing in this review. The app is super simple and easy to use, though it lacks some advanced camera control features of the others. It has photo, video, and a "Smart Mode" that captures both photo and videos

simultaneously.

The app accurately records depth and dive time, which is displayed on the screen. We found this info did get in the way when composing photos or videos.

What's unique is its one-touch, AI-driven color correction. The color correction wasn't always perfect for every image and video but it is effective for instantly sharing content.

Oceanic also offers a subscription for more advanced features, letting the housing function as a dive computer. Though this added functionality is cool, it is a hassle to continue to pay for a product that has already been purchased via subscription.

Accessory options are where the Oceanic iPhone falls behind. It does not support filters or lenses, relying solely on the app for color correction and lens control.

The Oceanic iPhone is a good simple system, but it will struggle to capture wider and close-up shots, keeping its field of view restricted for fish portraits.

KRAKEN KRH07

The Kraken KRH07 is the most durable housing in this review, built with a solid aluminum front and designed for divers who prioritize ruggedness above all else.

Powered by a single 18650 lithium-ion battery, it not only runs the housing but also charges the phone inside, making it possible to shoot all day without removing the device.

Kraken's companion app is straightforward and responsive, all while the housing also supports a wide range of accessories for added flexibility.

Additional features include a depth and temperature sensor, though the depth readings proved very unreliable in testing. Mounting the phone is also more involved compared to other housings, requiring extra assembly.

The Kraken KRH07 works with most smartphones, including both iPhone and Android models, making it one of the most universal housings available. It can accommodate a wide range of phone sizes right out of the box, with no need to order extra parts when switching between models.

While the Kraken KRH07 felt comfortable in hand and its controls were solid and responsive, other build-quality factors held it back. The unintuitive phone mounting system and complicated vacuum setup detracted from the overall experience and ultimately lowered its ranking.

The Kraken KRH07 has the least intuitive phone installation system we tested. Instead of a simple mounting brace, the phone is held in place with an adhesive pad, which is not very secure. Though Kraken does provide a spare sticky pad with the housing, the pads will wear over time. To fit the phone into place, the housing includes foam blocks which need to be trimmed in order to secure phones.

First-time housing owners, or those looking for a simple phone housing system will find mounting a phone in the Kraken housing to be a hassle, and we have had this housing returned for this reason alone.

While a vacuum system is a valuable feature on any housing, Kraken's was the most difficult to use in this review. The vacuum valve is located on the

front of the housing while the vacuum status LED indicators are on the back, making it awkward to monitor the light while pumping. Even worse, the vacuum status key is located inside the housing, completely hidden once a phone is installed.

The indicators themselves are unnecessarily complicated. One light controls four different patterns for Bluetooth and phone charging, while the vacuum indicator LED has five different patterns for vacuum status and housing power. The sheer number of LED patterns makes them almost impossible to memorize without a key for reference. To make matters worse, red can mean multiple things: a solid red means low battery but holding vacuum, a single blinking red means vacuum is holding but housing charge is under 50%, and a double blinking red signals a leak. The overlap of the red light creates serious potential for confusion that could result in water entering the housing.

Kraken's app includes everything needed to shoot photos and videos underwater. It starts with a written pre-dive checklist before moving to a clean, easy-to-use interface. Switching between photo

and video is done with a single button press, and the controls were among the most responsive of any housing we tested with no lag between pressing a button and the action taking place.

We did encounter some quirks when using the Kraken app. When switching between photo and video modes, our video resolution would change back to the default, resulting in some clips being shot in HD that were meant to be shot in 4K. Also, photos and videos taken with the app did not automatically save to our iPhone 13 Pro Max or 15 Pro's photo folder, and instead had to be transferred over using the Kraken app, twenty videos at a time. This was time-consuming, and makes this app less friendly for instantly sharing photos and video.

Kraken supports the Kraken KRH07 with a wide range of accessories. The housing itself comes with ¼"-20 threaded holes, making it easy to mount on most trays.

A snap-on red filter is available, though we found it the least effective of the filters we tested and often had to tweak and experiment with different white balance settings in the app for acceptable results. The red filter also cannot be mounted with a wide angle lens at the same time.

For lenses, Kraken offers an optional Kraken M52 and M67 Lens

Adapter that bolts securely onto the housing, supporting both 67mm and 52mm optics.

The wet lens must be lined up with the active phone camera lens before jumping in the water, as it requires a hex key to adjust the lens holder's position. We tested the Kraken KRL-07 M52 Wide Angle Lens for Smartphones and the Kraken KRL-03 +12 Macro Lens. The wide-angle lens was compact, and though it did increase the field of view, it had soft corners and lacked sharpness.

The Kraken KRL-07 also vignetted when using the app's ultra-wide lens mode. The Kraken KRL-03 macro lens provided a generous depth of field and comfortable working distance, making it one of our favorites for super close work.

All in all, smartphones make an excellent choice for divers who want a travel-friendly video system, a way to capture simple snapshots, or a lightweight alternative to carrying a separate camera setup. With the right housing, they can produce good video and snapshots, especially for casual shooters.

However, they are held back by key limitations. Smartphones cannot trigger strobes, making it impossible to achieve the same color, contrast, and lighting control as dedicated cameras.

Their controls are slower and less intuitive underwater, and lens performance is often subpar, with softer corners and less sharpness overall.

Importantly, there is always the question of risk: bringing a smartphone underwater means exposing a lifeline—containing banking apps, travel documents, and essential communication tools—to the possibility of flooding, as well as the risk of total loss if the phone is dropped overboard or not properly clipped off. While the risk may be small, it is never zero.

Dedicated underwater cameras, like the OM System TG-7, will deliver superior results, especially for serious photography. For divers who value image quality and creative control above all else, a dedicated camera remains the clear choice. For everyone else, smartphones offer a surprisingly capable, compact alternative.

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