

Nikon Z50

by Tony Land

By now, it is pretty clear that mirrorless cameras are the future of imaging. There are numerous advantages to the format, not least of which is a more compact form factor relative to sensor size. There have also been traditional shortcomings; particularly in the arena of battery life, autofocus and the electronic viewfinder (EVF) performance as compared to an optical viewfinder. But as technological development has minimized these drawbacks, it is pretty clear where things are going.

The Nikon Z 50 is Nikon's first serious effort for a mirrorless APS-C camera and by all accounts they are offering a lot to like at a remarkable price point. This camera is similar to and in some ways exceeds the specs on Nikon's well respected enthusiast DSLR the D7500.

The Z 50 also borrows much that has been successful on the Nikon full frame FX Z series cameras. It shares the same lens mount and is capable of 11 frames per second continuous shooting: Better than a D500 or D850 and into D5 territory (at less than 20% of the price)! How things have changed in a few short years and our expectations have changed to match.



What Nikon has clearly aimed to do with this mirrorless is to provide a very approachable, affordable camera with best-in-class image quality (20.9 MP), excellent video capability and with build quality and feel not usually found below a \$1000 price point.

Having dual command dials is rare in this price category and a pleasure to find here. Strobe sync speed is higher than on a Sony a6600 for instance and video quality is a notch better than the traditionally strong Canon M6 II entry. 4K footage utilizes the whole sensor. Battery life seems exceptional for a small mirrorless camera.

For underwater photographers, low light auto-focus capability is hugely important and a weak spot on many traditional mirrorless cameras. The Z 50 started out with great specs on paper: Hybrid Phase/Contrast Detect AF with 209 PDAF points. There are also lots of selective focus options. The autofocus has indeed



The Nikkor Z 16-50 is also perfectly compatible with Nauticam's superb CMC 1 & CMC 2 so when utilizing Nauticam's quick-release bayonet mounting system, a true "do-everything" camera configuration is well within every user's grasp.

proved solid, and a firmware update for 2020 has improved it further. The Nikon Z 50 also has the lowest light AF capability of any camera in the field - another plus for underwater shooting.

While the APS-C Z Mount lens selection is not huge yet, the optional FTZ adapter for F mount lenses provide extensive possibilities and Nikon has the best macro lens selection of any manufacturer by a fair margin. We can't wait to try out

the fast focusing Nikon 85mm Micro-Nikkor on an FTZ adapter with the Z 50 underwater.

Fortunately, one of the Z Lenses that is readily available happens to be ideal for underwater use. The Nikkor Z DX 16-50mm f/3.5-6.3 VR is Nikon's smallest DX lens ever and is the perfect compliment lens to the Z 50 when shooting in a housing. Buying this lens with the camera still keeps the whole package under \$1000.



Thanks to some excellent optical engineering from Nikon and Nauticam, this set up is able to maximize the benefit of using Nauticam's new WWL-C: A water contact wide angle conversion lens designed for lenses with a 24mm full frame equivalent such as the new 16-50 lens.

With a stunning 130 degree angle of coverage, no vignetted at 16mm and full zoom through, this arrangement should likely be a starting point for anyone taking the Z 50 underwater.

There are some other 24mm

compatible wet lenses, but none use all glass elements at this time and image quality tends to be lower than the nauticam. Ikelite has released a 200DL housing for the Z 50, but we have not tested wet lens compatibility yet.

Nauticam's NA-Z50 Housing

The first housing we have tried with the Nikon Z 50 is from Nauticam. The NA-Z50 places ergonomics and functionality foremost. This is obvious the minute you start accessing controls underwater. The same at-



The WWL-C works well for models and provides sharp corners

your-fingertips feel for the shutter release, menu, info, command dials and thumb focus are all right right where you need them. The playback lever is poised by the left thumb. The patented Nauticam Multi-Controller Pad mimics Nikon's camera control nicely and allows for easy focus point adjustment which we put to good use for macro with the CMC.

Nauticam compatibility has been maintained with the N100 port mount (as found on Nauticam's Sony A7/A9 series housings) which allows a nicely compact form factor that is noticeably smaller than any of the Nikon DSLR

housings.

The port for the 16-50 lens is equally diminutive and should make this rig a pleasure to travel with. The full set up was easy to get on and off the boat with or clip off on a BC. It is worth noting that smaller housings mean less air space which equals less buoyancy, so we feel some flotation would be recommended.

We found either the Nauticam 90mmX170mm Carbon Fiber Float Arms or 70mmX250mm seem like a good match for this set up with strobes. Another quality and economical option would be the Inon Mega Float S.



Using selective focus with the CMC-1 on this blenny while viewing through the high resolution EVF produces impressive results.

The NA-Z50 comes set up to utilize the built in flash on the Z 50 which is a great convenience and offers the option of S-TTL functionality with many fiber optic compatible strobes. Inon, Retra and Sea & Sea all offer very good S-TTL Compatibility. You can see strobe options in our article on current strobes here. If left in this mode, we did experience noticeable flash recycle delays after repeated firings, so, depending on your shooting style, this might be a consideration for more action oriented subjects.

Fortunately, Nauticam's optional

TTL Converter for Nikon (26308) fits this housing (as well as a manual optical trigger) providing longer camera battery life and zero recycle time on the camera. For many of us, this really enhances the shooting experience.

First Impressions of the WWL-C with 16-50mm Nikkor

We have a lot of experience using Nauticam's groundbreaking WWL-1 water contact lens with underwater housings and have come to expect



exceptional image quality, zoom through flexibility and focus down to glass performance. All that was promised with the new WWL-C and while we expected no less, it was hard to believe this much more compact and lighter wet lens could deliver the goods on an APS-C zoom lens.

We needn't have worried. The lens was easy to mount and remove underwater, while the built in aluminum float collar is much more friendly than the foam WWL-1 collar and offers a good gripping surface. Most importantly, image quality was all we could hope for. With no vignetting to worry about, we could slam the zoom wide and

start shooting the moment the action changed.

Angle of coverage is the same as the WWL-1: a full 130 degrees, but distortion seems even better controlled. Sun ball flare was also well controlled and it was easy to get close enough to divers to light pleasingly without worrying about stretching legs or arms unflatteringly as a fisheye lens would do.

If moving from a DSLR, the Z 50 AF takes some tweaking to behave more like the way you might be accustomed to. It is plenty fast, but some of the intelligent AF settings can be confused in an underwater environment, though occasionally



Utilizing AF-ON and EVF playback allows the opportunity for multiple exposures and compositions of a subject without ever looking at the LCD.

helpful with special circumstances like fast moving nearby subjects. Using a movable group focus works well for general shooting with the WWL-C whether shooting traditional wide angle or close-focus wide angle zoom-to-frame shooting where the WWL-C also excels. The results with this wide angle set up were consistently in focus and tack-sharp.

Utilizing a Nauticam Bayonet Lens Holder on a Nauticam float arm, it was easy to switch out the WWL-C for a CMC-1 close up lens. By zooming to a 50mm focal length, the macro wet lens offers impressive magnification, but of course a bit more challenging focus. Fortunately, it is easy to adjust the focus point location while viewing through the electronic viewfinder that is a quite sharp 2.36M-dot OLED display.

The EVF makes it well worth investing in a



Looking at the detail provided by the using the Nikon 16-50 lens with the CMC-1 shows just how edge-to-edge sharp this combination really is.

Nauticam 45 or 180 Enhanced Viewfinder for easier, higher resolution viewing than the rear LCD screen can provide.

As we got comfortable with the CMC and its very shallow range of focus capability, we developed a combination of AF and “lock and rock” aided by the AF-ON lever strategically placed by the right thumb, it was simple to activate and lock focus as needed for these trickier shots and adjust the

camera housing.

One of the nicest things I found with the Z 50 EVF 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



Utilizing AF-ON and EVF playback allows the opportunity for multiple exposures and compositions of a subject without ever looking at the LCD.

settings, and just to get an idea of how your shot is coming out. 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.

It is also worth noting that the if your close up vision isn't great (welcome to the club), you will get a far greater critical detail by reviewing images in the EVF than on the LCD - no close up vision required.

With only a handful of dives with

the Nikon Z 50, it is clear we haven't explored all the camera and housing are capable of yet. What is clear is what an enjoyable, compact and rewarding system this is. Someone could easily spend years just relishing the versatility of the 16-50 lens and these key supporting wet lenses. Both the camera and the housing perform well beyond what their respective price points suggest we should expect. That makes this a system that is extremely appealing for someone graduating from a compact or older mirrorless camera or a Nikon shooter interested in downsizing, but



The WWL-C works well for models and provides sharp corners

maintaining some lens compatibility.

We look forward to playing with some other lens options - perhaps full macro (40mm, 60mm, 85mm and 105mm could all be fun options), perhaps a fisheye, but literally everything else one could ask for has been optimized with the lens configuration we used. It is nice to have another worthy competitor in the very hotly contested mirrorless market for underwater image makers.



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