

What's all the fuss about?

Nikon D70 & the Ikelite housing

by Will Postlethwaite

There has been a good deal of fuss about the new Nikon D70 in the photo media and all of it has been exceptionally positive. They have proved so popular worldwide that supply has been very short but I was lucky enough to get my hands on one, and an early edition of the Ikelite housing, so that I could take it through its paces underwater and find out if it is as good a performer down there as up here.

I took the camera, housing, Ikelite DS125 strobe, EV controller, slaved Sea&Sea YS90, Nikkor 10.5mm fisheye and Nikkor 60mm micro to Raja Empat in eastern Indonesia. Here the subjects really test the ability of the camera and photographer from the smallest, cryptic, macro pygmy seahorses to wide reef scenes clouded in fish with sunbursts blazing through the surface. If the set up could handle this then it really would be the camera we have all been waiting for.

The 2 hours it takes to fully charge the camera battery (Nikon claim this will enable you to shoot 2000 images!) gives you a great opportunity to read the manual - something us boys are usually rather bad at doing but in this case very well worth the effort. The layout is a very accessible and there are even what appear to be a couple of jokes added by those chaps at Nikon advising you not to put your finger in your eye and that deafness can be the result of playing the CD-ROM on your hi-fi.

If you have used a Nikon SLR then the general layout of the camera functions will be familiar and

the feel of the body is definitely robust enough for most users. The LCD screen is clear and its brightness can be adjusted to your preference. The function buttons and menu layout I found very easy to use and this augured well for a pressure action situation at 32m! The camera switches in an incredible 0.2s and, with no shutter lag, produces an LCD image within a second. The download time to your CF card depends but, with a good quality card, a RAW image is written in under 3s and it can do this at a rate of 4 fps. This is pretty breathtaking stuff and coupled with the incredible 1/500th flash sync shutter speed, and an improved, fast response auto-focus, I was really keen to get the camera under water.

There were a few camera parameters I wanted to choose before putting the camera in the housing. Not that I could not change them while it was in there, the Ikelite gives you full function control, but I wanted the camera set when I turned it on underwater with a few standard settings. The first was to choose the slowest ISO which is only 200 on the D70, the same as the D100. There have been a few queries over why Nikon have not provided a slower ISO but consensus seems to be that if Nikon do not think you get any less noise



with anything less than ISO 200 then why not.

Next I decided to shoot in the Nikon RAW mode. There is the choice of 3 grades of JPEG but the information capture in Raw and the ease of image adjustment using the Nikon View 6 software made it a straight forward choice for me. If the write

times were slower than they are then JPEG might have been an option but as they are so fast and with the capacity for 90+ RAW images on a 512mb CF card there is no need to have compression. If you want to shoot more than 90 pics on a dive then perhaps you should consider video?

Coupled with this I chose to capture the colour information in Adobe RGB. There are two other options in sRGB but if you are going to do any work on your images later on your computer then Adobe RGB gives you a far greater colour range.

I also set the white balance to auto. You have a wide range and a custom mode but these are mirrored in the Nikon Editor software and I feel it is far easier adjust it here where you can accurately see the image on a computer screen rather than on the LCD! While on the subject of the LCD I removed the cover. There is also one feature I liked but might not be to everyone's taste and that is a viewfinder grid. For me, I felt it really helped composition.

Another thing, that I only learnt to do after a few frustrating shots in a cave and on a night dive, was to turn off the AF illuminator. When it is dark the camera does not just use the small red light next to the lens but has a tendency to pop up the internal flash which, inside the housing, glares everything including the viewfinder, making composition almost impossible.

The first test of performance underwater was with the new Nikon 10.5mm fisheye. There were going to be two conflicting factors at work here. I was looking forward to see how the amazing depth of images produced by digital sensors would change the look of super wide angle shots underwater where darkness usually inhabits the middle ground and background. The second was the problem



CCDs have with the sun which we all use in an attempt to fill that dark background and add drama. The blast of light invariably leaves a large area of the image with ugly blocks of white and light blue.

Raja Empat is famed for its pristine reefs, fish life and steep sided islands so, with the vis. an acceptable 20m and the sun shining, how did the camera and housing perform?

The simple answer to this is extremely well. As you can see from the images the high ISO coupled



All photos taken with Nikon D70, Ikelite housing, Ikelite Ds125 strobe and EV controller, Sea&Sea YS90 on slave TTL synced with fibre optic cable, ISO 200, NEF Raw, WB auto

All manual exposures. Only basic contrast and sharpening in Nikon Editor. Some up to 1/2 an EV adjustment.



with the depth of the image produced stunning, wide, complete images of the reef with amazing colour, sharpness and depth of field. When the sun was added to the equation the 1/500th flash sync speed really came into its own. By selecting the correct flash power and aperture and then gradually increasing the shutter speed beautiful sunbursts were easily achievable. Admittedly at 1/500th the image as a whole darkens but with the more gradual shutter speed variation available with the D70 over its 35mm cousins the right effect is far easier to find.

I shot all the images with the camera in full manual mode. I used to

use aperture priority more often with my 35mm setup but one of the failures so far in the digital arena is to get the new range of DSLRs to acknowledge they have a flashgun attached to them. They fire the gun but you cannot get the camera to default to 1/60th and no slower as would have been the case before. This is not a real hardship as you do get to see your image instantly on the LCD anyway but it is a shame that the nice AE lock setup on the camera and the housing are thus somewhat redundant. Another small problem arises due to this as the manual mode is next to digi-variprogram portrait mode on the dial. Not in itself a difficulty but if you



accidentally jog the dial and then size up a shot there is a good chance in this mode the camera will automatically pop up its internal flash which you cannot then push down and will flash on each shot on the rest of the dive. Beware, but at least with the clear Ikelite housing you can see to check the dials.

So, apart from the odd niggle, top marks in wide angle. In macro the lack of flash TTL was going to be a potential difficulty but the increased depth of field was going to be a bonus. In fact I found that the lack of TTL was not a hardship. With the fine tune variability of both the flashgun power and the aperture, very quickly

using the LCD I could close in on the best exposure. I actually felt that I was far more in control of my macro exposure than ever before and composition was instantly reviewable. The autofocus of the 60mm was positive though maybe not quite as good as with my F90X and the viewfinder, although apparently an improvement on the D100, was still rather small and, with the housing in the way as well, it took a bit of getting used to.

Depth of field can only be seen back on your computer and here I found the great results I expected. Another point to note here with exposure is that in the Nikon Editor



software you can adjust your RAW images up or down by 1/3ev to a total of 2 stops. So complete accuracy underwater is not wholly necessary as long as you remember that there is a great deal of detail retrievable from an underexposed shot but not from an overexposed one.

So all round the camera and housing were a resounding success. The D70 was very easy to use both in and out of the housing. It produced rapid



— (Above) The author at work. (Ambroise Arnould)



images of stunning quality in very challenging conditions. The Ikelite DS125 with the EV controller gave excellent user control over exposure and this whole feeling was a delight. It gave me a lot more opportunity to experiment and see the results clearly each evening on my laptop, a piece of equipment I found essential. You cannot see focus and, more importantly, backscatter on the little LCD screen even if you do zoom in.

The new compact Ikelite housing shape makes the old bulky feel a thing of the past and in the new digital era of buttons, controls and screens the clear walls are a godsend. I found the fact that

I could see the camera buttons inside a great help especially on a couple of dives where the aperture control knob worked loose from the spindle and I was forced on the most fishy of dives to shoot with f4 all the way through. An annoyance but the D70 and the DS125 saved the day as you can see.

If I had one gripe with the camera then it would be that it goes to sleep and in this mode I could not see the aperture or shutter speed settings until it had been woken up. Although virtually instant, the act still produced a delay in a few manta action situations that I found frustrating. However, Nikon have scored a big blow back against Canon with this camera and I am about to utter the worlds I thought I never would, I am not going back to film.

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