

Subal ND70 housing for the Nikon D70 digital SLR camera

by Peter Rowlands

In the fast moving world of digital SLR cameras it is becoming more and more difficult for underwater housing manufacturers to produce quality housings before the model is either discontinued or devalued by rumours of a higher specification replacement.

Fortunately computer technology with laptop CAD design software right through to hugely expensive computer controlled mills has allowed those manufacturers who have invested in the technology to get their housings to market first. The Subal ND70 is one such example.

The Nikon D70 digital SLR camera became available in about April 2004 and Subal were able to get their first batch of housings into the market by August. This is a quite remarkable achievement by any standards but to produce a housing of such quality, design and finish is a credit to the team at Subal in Austria and especially Arnold Stepanek, their founder and designed.

The Subal ND70 is not the first housing that Subal have produced using this new technology so they are building on their experience with every new model they produce. Comparing the ND70 to the D10 for the Nikon D100, the first impression is how much smaller the new housing is. This will be a welcome feature for frequent flyers.

In terms of controls, the majority of the functions on the camera can be operated through the housing and they are On/off, Shutter release, Metering mode, Exposure compensation, LCD light, AE-Lock / AF/Lock Manual Focus/Zoom, Front command dial, Rear command dial, Zoom



/ manual focus, Autofocus select / Menu options, Delete, Mode / Mode window, Bracketing, Play / monitor on/off, Menu, Thumbnail button, Protect button, Enter, lens release.

The camera mounts very precisely onto a baseplate saddle which in turn slots into the front of the housing and holds the camera exactly in alignment with the housing controls. The rear housing is a clam shell design with a locating lug on the right hand side and a single QuickLock lever on the left. It is very easy and virtually foolproof to operate.

Generally the ergonomics are excellent but with so many controls on these modern cameras it is becoming harder for housing manufacturers to get all of the controls in the perfect place. In Subal's case I think they have got 22 of the 23 controls spot on but access to the front aperture knob is a bit of a stretch for the right hand middle finger past the large shutter release lever. My personal preference

would be for the right handle to be placed nearer the housing and the shutter release lever to be smaller and then access to the aperture lever would be much improved. A small change which I think would transform the performance of the housing. However this is a small flaw which I am sure I could learn to live with especially as the control requires far less turns than the D10 to change the aperture.

A big improvement over the D10 housing is the provision of a small port to view the position of the 'Mode' dial on the left hand side. This makes



operation of this control much more user friendly. However, unlike the D10, the ND70 does not have a Manual/Autofocus control which may be an important omission for some people but I was converted to Autofocus a long time ago and have no desire to go back to manual so it's not a problem for me. The On/Off control has been modified to a claw design which I feel is an improvement but there needs to be some lining up dots on the housing to indicate the position of this control internally.

Presumably for economic reasons there is only one flash sync port provided which seems a little shortsighted but I understand that, presumably as a result of customer reaction, a second flash sync port is an optional extra. In addition there is only one flash arm mounting shoe. This is mainly due to lack of space on the right hand side around the LCD viewing port but the base of the housing has two M6 threaded holes to attach a baseplate which could incorporate a flash arm on the right hand side.

There are two versions of the ND70. The

standard housing comes with a basic viewfinder optic similar to the D10 which gives an adequate view of the camera's viewfinder whilst wearing a low profile mask. The deluxe version incorporates the GS viewfinder magnifier which, for once, does exactly what it says. Many companies in the past have claimed their optics 'magnify' the viewfinder image when what they were actually doing was reducing it so that the full frame could be viewed.

The GS viewfinder magnifier actually enlarges the image by 150%, so Subal claim, but when you put your eye up to it it feels more like 1000%. The image is, quite frankly, superb. It is very large and sharp yet there is very little, if any, loss of brightness. To my optically challenged brain the GS viewfinder seems to produce the impossible in a comparatively small size. I cannot find words to describe how drop dead gorgeous the GS viewfinder is. It is a delight to view and compose images, it is easy on the eye but unfortunately a bit heavy on the pocket.

However once you have looked through the GS and then gone back to the standard viewfinder it's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. That's how good the GS viewfinder is and, for me personally, the increased cost would be repaid every time I put my eye up to this superb optic.

Overall my impressions of the Subal ND70 are very positive indeed. It is superbly crafted and, in the main, very well designed housing. I have always been a huge Subal fan and the ND70 has done nothing to curb my enthusiasm.

The standard housing weighs approx. 1.8 kg (2.0kg with GS viewfinder) and is neutrally buoyant in seawater depending upon which port is used. It is depth rated to 70 meters (230 feet).

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com
www.oceanoptics.co.uk