A Digital Velvia Revelation!

The SONY DSC-F828 / Ikelite housing

Review by Michael AW

My first impression of the SONY DSC-F828 was akin to using Fuji Velvia film when it first hit the industry some 10 years ago. Okay - for the new breed of digital photographer, Velvia is not a new cyberspace language, not a pixel and certainly not a number. It is one of the greatest photographic films ever invented in the last century – it revolutionized colour dynamics - it introduced to underwater photography bold exaggerated colour, saturated rendition that had never before been achieved. Seemingly Velvia pops the colour of ornamental reef fishes, soft corals, produces absolutely pin sharp imagery and it consistently yields excellent results even in tough lighting conditions.

Indeed the SONY F828 gave me the same sense of astonishment when I reviewed the images after my first dive with it in a brand new Ikelite housing. The wow factor was a sensory overload and without a doubt it is the fastest prosumer camera I have ever used. As impressive as the performance may be, how does the Sony 828 rate among the emerging crop of digital cameras (where a new one seems to surface every other day of the week) – how does it rate as an underwater photographic camera?

Firstly the camera represents the next level

of digital still photography, which enthusiasts will surely appreciate. Encased in a black, magnesium alloy body, the F828 sets itself above the competition with several features that make it a contender as the best in its class:

An 8 Megapixel imaging chip – at time of writing this is greater than any entry level DSLR camera such as the Nikon D70, D100 or the Canon 300D, 10D

(Top right) 28mm, the SONY 828 and the glass port of the Ikelite excel in colour rendition and sharpness. DS125, 1/4 power

(Right) Fast to focus, fast to shoot - capturing a moving jack is merely point and shoot.

An integrated 28-200mm (equivalent in 35mm term) f/2-f/2.8 Carl Zeiss Vario-Sonnar T* zoom lens.

Capable of handling Compact flash cards (CF), including Microdrives up to 4GB

A brand new colour technology - a 4 colour RGB+E Super HAD CCD sensor, that uses Emerald Green as the 4th colour.

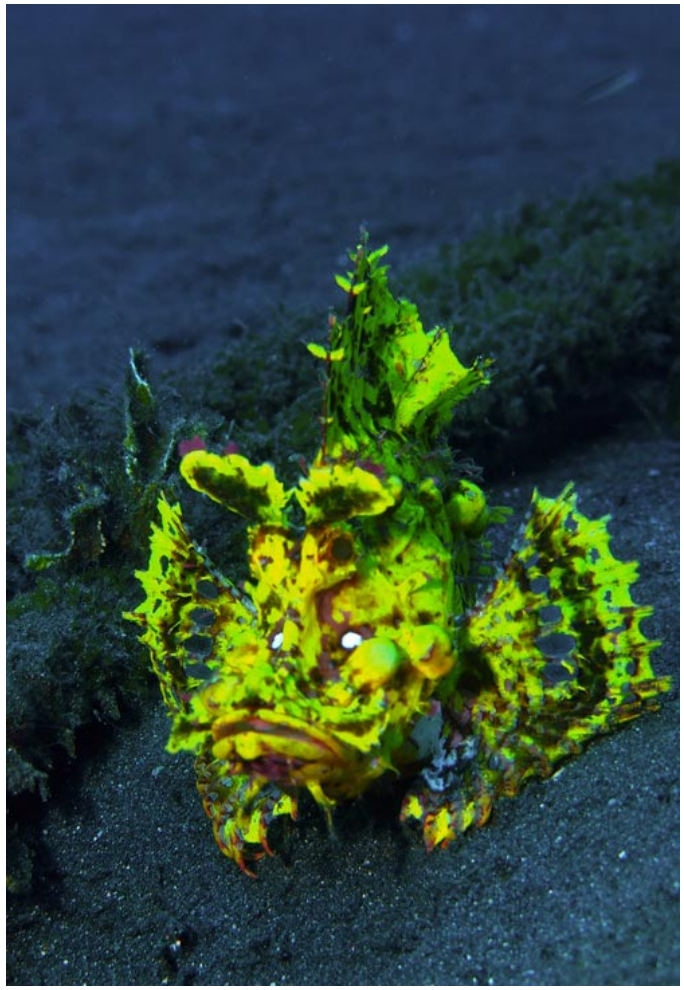
Standard or Real Colour

Like most gadget aficionados, I took the camera out of the packaging, inserted a 4gig microdrive, formatted it, popped the unit straight into a brand new Ikelite housing and took it for a test dive!

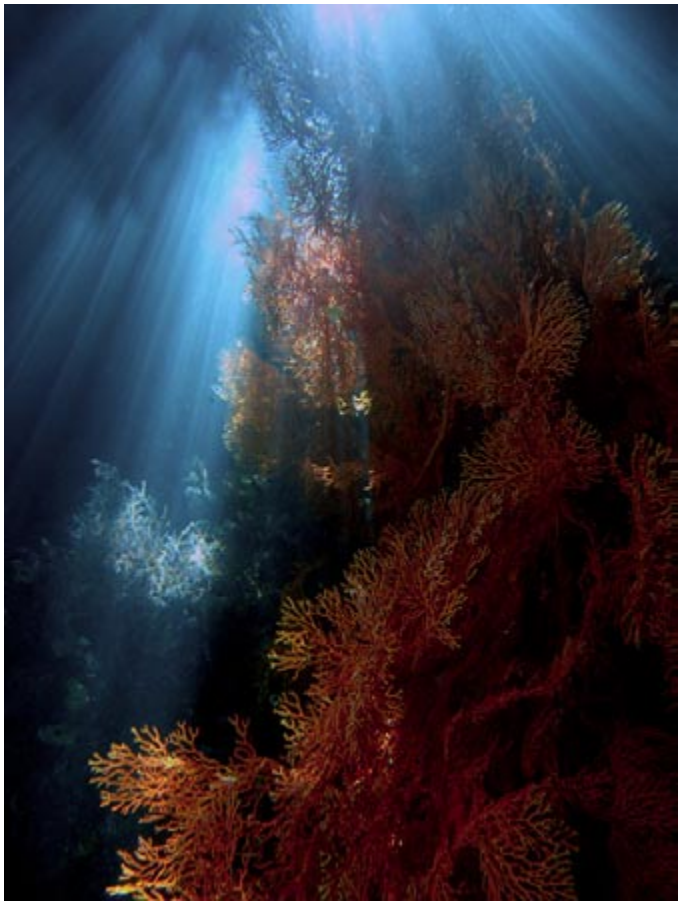
Well literally in that order with a few diversions in between – adjustments and water integrity test – only to return from the dive with some bizarrely gaudy and outlandish images – Willy Wonka's Candy garden pale's in comparison – sort of a case of Fuji's Velvia that had gone seriously wrong. Well, when things go erroneous, the secret of the intrepid professional is to refer to the manual. I quickly discovered that the F828 camera has two colour "modes", Real and Standard. One would think that the Standard mode, as default is the basic starting mode – wrong. Standard Mode is in fact an 'UNREAL' mode that significantly punched up colour to almost garish quality much like a Picasso with a bad palette .

I switched my test to use the 'Real' mode and the results excelled with the new RGB+E1 technology which supposedly adds an emerald-colored pixel to the filter pattern, thereby achieving color fidelity that is closer to our color perception. Though mustard, browns and oranges and yellows look punchier, reds and magentas are very accurate and likewise blue and greens. Whilst skin tone is reasonably reproduced, neutral gray is quite consistent with a bias towards the red channel being weaker at lighter tonal values and stronger at darker tonal values. Specifically, for the underwater images, I noticed the extraordinarily life-like rendering of blue and blue-green hues. Overall, images are punchy in the rendition of bright colours but naturally tolerable and pleasing to the eye.

(Above) Standard colour
(Below) Real colour



Whilst the camera excel in speed and sharpness for wide angle image, macro is only at best acceptable for this close up shot of a Rhinopias. DS 50 with manual controller



Morning at the Waigeo/Gam passage, Raja Ampat - ambient light.

For the purpose of this review, I am limiting the context mainly for underwater imaging. There are already excellent benchmark test and reviews for this camera at http://www.dpreview.com/reviews/sonydscf828/ and http://www.steves-digicams.com/2003_reviews/f828.html

3 Clowns - again the camera demonstrates its ability to focus and capture this image of moving clownfish. DS 50

The Ikelite Housing

As mentioned my test was conducted with a brand new Ikelite housing specially made for the F828 – Being new, I was advised there may be some teething problems. It took us just 15 minutes to figure some make-shift crude modifications to a few controls and the base plate.

Thereafter I was able to use the unit for a 10-day live-aboard trip without any problem. By the time this feature is in print, I am sure all the adjustment problems would have been rectified. Once set up, to replace battery and CF card, the back of the housing which is attached to the camera base plate has to be pulled out in entirety. Though this sounds like a complex process, after two dives, I was able to replace battery and CF card in under 3 minutes and that is doing it meticulously.

Like all Ikelite housings the molded corrosion free clear polycarbonate provides a clear view of the camera and 'O' ring seal. Around the rugged, thick walls, controls are provided to access all camera functions though I find some absolutely redundant such as the delete button. Time underwater is precious. By using at least a 1 gig card, there is no reason to waste effort and time to edit images during a dive. A first for Ikelite, the housing is equipped with a glass flat port. I took the unit 51m (168 ft) and access to all essential controls was not a problem.

Shooting mode & Strobes

Though the TTL is not supported with use of external strobe, my test was conducted with the DS 125, the DS50 with the Manual Controller which provides 10 power settings. However after a few dives, I preferred to bracket images by use of the shutter speed setting on Manual mode – whilst the F-stop is restricted between f2 to f8, the speed setting allows for from 1/30 s to 1/3200 second at 1/3 step increment! (see specs from images). Whilst preparing the camera, I did discover a weird flaw in the camera flash control. The Pop-up flash even when set to manual and external flash enabled, the

Autofocus & Shutter lag - though with a benchmark test of 1/10 second, shutter lag was rarely noticeable during the test. While shooting moving fishes has been a nightmare with ordinary prosumer camera, I find the F828 to be the quickest draw of its class. Likewise the autofocus is fast and rates well with the larger and more expensive DSLR cameras

Sharpness - lens Quality

Equipped with one of the most renowned lens in photographic industry – the F828's Carl Zeiss T* Vario Sonnar of 7.1 — 51mm focal length (equivalent to a 28 — 200mm zoom lens in 35mm terms) is a manual zoom allowing for precise framing control. Again this is a significant introduction to digital camera of its class. After exhaustive testing of about 1000 frames, I found the lens to be sharp from the range of 28mm to 70mm and only acceptable at range of 200mm.

While many argue that the price of the F828 is just about the same as an entry level DSLR such as the Canon 300D. Realistically, the CANON is significantly much more expensive. It is essential to compare, apples for apples - one has to add the price of additional lenses, ports and arms, oh yes did I mentioned paying excess baggage when flying or fees for the chiropractor for carrying all the additional lenses, ports and arms for the CANON 300D. While for the SONY F828, all is required is the purchase of an Ikelite housing which even comes delivered with its own external UR PRO filter! Additionally the 8 megapixel imaging chip with the revolutionized 4 colour RGB+E Super HAD CCD sensor technology will literally blow a CANON to smithereens, all pun intended!

In my opinion the SONY is a camera for serious novices who wish to capture mind-blowing underwater imagery especially lush colourful seascapes but do not wish to be encumbered with the expense and weight of an SLR setup.

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