

Subtronic Mini TTL review

by Mark Webster

Those readers with good memories may remember my review of the Inon Z220 several issues ago when I sang the praises of small flash guns. For the past few months I have been waiting patiently for the delivery of my Mini TTL's which are the latest offering from Subtronic in Germany. Subtronic have a well deserved reputation for producing their own superior flash guns and electronics for other manufacturers, but to date their guns have been a little large and heavy for my needs - one of my priorities is always to reduce the level of excess baggage I have to pay for when travelling! I was therefore very interested in the introduction of these new flash guns and as soon as I saw the prototypes I was immediately tempted to order a brace.

The Mini is a small and powerful package which comes in two versions - the standard TTL version and a 'digital' version which provides TTL exposure via a sensor that reads the flash output from the camera's onboard flash in the housing. Both versions have a power output of 100WS (f11 at 1m 100ASA), a beam angle of 90 degrees, and come in a tiny aluminium housing measuring only 160mm x 73mm weighing in at 0.8kg on land and 200g underwater. All functions are controlled through a single switch - TTL, four manual powers (F, 1/2, 1/4, 1/8) and three slave powers (F, 1/2, 1/8), pilot light and a SOS function. The unit is charged through the synch cord connector and there is a switch setting for this also.

So with a pair of these guns you can cover the lighting requirements for both macro and extreme wide angle, particularly if like me you prefer to balance the flash output with the ambient light when



shooting wide angle. If you are shooting digital you will also need less power output than you need with film.

My tests were made with the Mini TTL's using a Nikon D100 in a Light and Motion housing, which provides extensive control over the guns via the TTL circuit. I also used the four on board manual settings and found the power divisions provided very accurate control over the light output. I also shot back to back with a Nikon F90X to test the TTL exposure control with film which produced equally reliable exposures, particularly in macro and medium wide angle. As I always find, TTL reaches its limitations when ultra wide and fish eye lenses are used, but this is more a product of the camera's TTL sensor rather than a failure of the flash capability and is a common feature with all flash guns.

In the water there is barely any weight to the Mini TTL and in fact my Ultralight arms are heavier in the water, so handling and positioning the guns is very easy. Being so compact these guns are also very easy to position close to the housing port or framer



F90X, Subal housing, 105mm macro, twin Mini TTL's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/125

when shooting macro. If you have two you can either shoot both via synch cords or have one on slave. The slave sensor responds well from oblique angles and operated faultlessly. The back plate features the legend 'TTL slave' but in fact this facility is not available on the first production run, however Subtronic tell me it is not far away and you can then have your gun upgraded. The slave will then also quench in response to the power output of the key

*(Right) Nikon D100,
Light and Motion
housing, 18-35mm
zoom, f14 @ 1/125, 200
ASA, twin Mini TTL's
(Far right) Nikon D100,
Light and Motion
housing, 10.5mm FE,
f16 @ 1/125, 200 ASA,
twin Mini TTL's*



flash, much like a Sea & Sea YS30.

The pilot light is in fact a high intensity LED which is not particularly bright in daylight, but surprisingly useful on a night dive. However, for auto focusing a macro lens at night you will want to add another light source I think. One advantage is that it consumes very little power when on.

Charging is via the synch cord plug either with the standard charger provided (4-6 hours) which is remarkably small and light, or you can specify a slightly larger fast charger which will take only 1-1.5 hours. From a full charge you will get around 80 flashes if firing at full power, but in reality if you are shooting in TTL (or lower power settings) you will obviously get more. If you fire at full power then the recycle time is 2-2.5 seconds, but once again this is very much faster on TTL or lower powers.

The colour temperature is quoted at 4500k which is quite warm, but I must say I did not notice much if any difference between these and my 'cooler' flash guns.

Travelling with these guns is bliss as they are so compact and light. A housed SLR system with two of these guns easily fits into a standard sized carry on and if your hand baggage threatens to go over your 5kg limit, then just pop them into your jacket pocket. If you already have larger heavier flash guns that must go into the aircraft hold then consider one of these as a back up which can travel with you in the cabin - complete peace of mind.

If I must offer a criticism it would be reserved for the synch cords. These are Subtronic's own design which offer an efficient double 'O' ring seal when mated to the Nikonos plug. The contacts within the plug



itself are designed to be compatible with either the Nikonos style plug with three rigid pins and two spring loaded pins, or the European style plug with five rigid pins. Maybe it is just me, but I find that the plug does not always mate immediately with the spring loaded pins, but once there and secured operates faultlessly. My preference would be for the Subal approach which has a Nikonos style connector on one end (with three pin sockets and two solid contacts) and a five pin socket on the other end for the flash.

So to sum up, if a flash gun can be sexy then the Mini TTL would certainly be a page three candidate.

For me they have all the attributes of small size, low weight, high power, adjustable output and built in aluminium like the proverbial brick outhouse. The price is also highly competitive when put up against similarly specified guns from other manufacturers - so if you are in the market for a new or replacement gun, for film or digital, then give these a close look.

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