The C5050 as a Prosumer Point-and-shoot

By Matt Segal

In this age of underwater digital photography, we are presented with a multitude of choices of cameras, housings, strobes, lenses, etc. Many of us see spectacular images and think, "I want to be able to take that shot" or "It'd be great to be able to show people what I see underwater," and yet lack the financial means to buy a new dSLR system. For a total cost equivalent to that of a Light & Motion Titan D100 housing (roughly $2700 without ports and accessories), I have over the past year been able to assemble a camera setup capable of shooting photos that I first could only dream of taking.

When I first looked into this whole business of things, I wanted a fair amount of flexibility, reliability, and capability for expansion. To accomplish this, I chose a series of components that, while in some cases not the most expensive or most advanced, suited their purpose. The setup is comprised of the Olympus C5050 digital camera, an Ikelite non-TTL housing for that model camera, a single Ikelite DS-125 digital strobe (with manual controller allowing 10 power settings), and a Transcend 45x 1gb CF card. While the C5050 was adequate in its own right for the majority of pictures that I looked to take, I knew that I would want to explore both macro and wide-angle photography, and I purchased the Inon UCL-165 macro lens and the Inon UWL-100 wide-angle lens to allow some room for creativity.

Despite the fact that Olympus has recently released two new editions to their digital line, the C5060 and the C8080, 5.1 and 8.0 megapixel cameras respectively, the C5050 remains in high demand among fledgling underwater photographers due to its fixed zoom-lens design (lost in the C5060), its lower noise CCD (compared to the C8080), and its low cost for the amount of available control over aperture, shutter, and flash power. Additionally, the C5050's ability to shoot RAW is incredible, and should always be utilized. The creative aspects over JPEG are innumerable. In regards to housing the camera, there are three major choices: Olympus' PT-015, Ikelite's housing, or the Light and Motion Tetra 5050. As a student, I chose the middle road and went with the Ikelite housing for the greatest amount of durability for the price. In the water with only the camera and the single-handle tray attached, the housing is just slightly negatively buoyant. The housing, like most of Ikelite's products, is rated to 200ft. I doubt the casual photographer is going to be doing much exploring past that depth.

Being that the Ikelite housing is very well suited to Ikelite strobes (there exists the capability for a sync-cord connection), as well as the knowledge that the Ikelite DS-125 has one of the

Ikelite DS-125, digital ISO64. F5.6 1/200 manual exposure

fastest recycling times (on the order of 1 second), one of the largest strobe coverage angles (100º with the diffuser), and enough power to light any scene I could conceive of, I decided to stick with Ikelite in this area. The basic DS-125 has a selector switch for four manual power settings of Full, 1/2, 1/4, and 1/8. To complement these settings, I chose to purchase the Manual Controller, allowing me a range of 10 power settings, from Full to just under 1/16 power. The Manual Controller has a slave

sensor on the front, so if I ever was to experience a sync-cord failure, I would be able to aim the slave sensor at the camera's on-board flash. In regards to color temperature of the strobe, Ikelite made a decision many years ago to market strobes with a slightly warmer tone than the competition. Often, this serves to remove the anemic blue coloration of some subjects even when lit by a strobe. If this is undesirable, shooting RAW solves the problem completely through the absolute control of color temperature and tint.

Macro and Wide-Angle

The Inon UCL-165 macro lens, combined with either the Macro Mode (focus as close as 20cm) or Super-Macro mode (focus as close as 3cm), has proved itself to be a very powerful tool. Photographing smaller creatures such as crustaceans, gobies and blennies, or nudibranchs can be slightly more difficult with a prosumer digital camera as compared to a dSLR, and the macro lens allows one to just get a little bit closer to fill the frame with your subject. In both the local California waters where I dive, and on my recent liveaboard trip to Papua New Guinea, I found myself using this lens exclusively on some dives. It is true that the reduced depth-of-focus takes a little practice to get used to, but, in the words of another, "the results can be stunning." Especially when visibility is decreased (it's always a touchy situation in the Channel Islands), the macro lens is there to shoot everything small, where backscatter is less of an issue, and concentration falls more on composition than finding a variety of subject matter.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Inon UWL-100 wide-angle lens. With nearly 100° coverage, it captures the full field of view as illuminated by a properly positioned strobe. If I wanted more coverage, I could buy the optional dome unit for the lens, which brings up the coverage to almost 130°, but would also require an additional strobe. Along with the wider field of view, this lens shortens the working distance of the camera, allowing for close-focus-wide-angle photography. Backscatter and lens flare are much more significant problems in wide-angle photography, and when I have used this lens in the past, my efforts have been towards trying to minimize both. I use the wide-angle lens a lot for ambient light photography, because of the fact that it collects so much more light than the standard lens, and there isn't the issue of backscatter. I'm still searching for the elusive "sun rays" that some photographers have become masters of capturing in wide-angle photography.

(Right) Inon UCL-165 macro lens, Ikelite DS-125, digital ISO64, F8.0 1/125, manual exposure
(Below right) Inon UWL-100 wide-angle lens, digital ISO100, F1.8 1/320 manual exposure

Conclusion

It is true that for those who have more money than they know what to do with, this is probably not the system they would choose to use. But, for the majority of underwater photographers, a simple, yet capable, system is much desired. My system started as the Olympus C5050 in a housing with merely the internal strobe, and in a matter of time, has progressed to a strobed system with various lenses and accessories that has resulted in photographs that I'm proud to have printed, framed, and mounted on my wall. Sure, I envy the dSLR photographers, with their fancy setups and powerful lenses. And yes, I do eventually hope to join their ranks. But for now, I'm happy with what I've got, and the results it yields.

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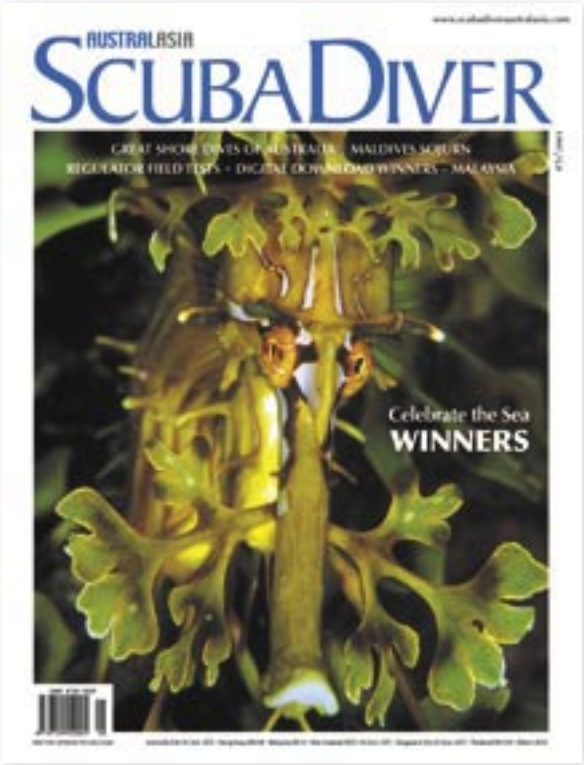

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