

A year with the Seacam Fuji S2

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When I decided to move over to digital for underwater use, I was already running a D1X above water. So I had a choice of either housing the D1X or buying another camera (for underwater use only). My existing two housed cameras were both Nikons: an F100 and an F80, both in Subal housings and I had a variety of lenses which included the 12~24 DX from Nikon.

Without running through my decision making process too much, the critical factors which finally influenced my choice were the ability of the Fuji S2Pro to operate ttl flash with Nikonos V type flash units, and its use of AA cells. So in the end I went for the Fuji S2Pro and am still running it with 12~24 DX zoom and the 60 micro Nikkor. (Out of interest, these equates to an equivalent 19~38mm wide-angle zoom, behind a dome port, and 144mm macro lens behind a flat port).

Perhaps it is pertinent at this point to first comment on my impressions of the Fuji S2Pro and Nikon D1X comparatively – based on my own opinions, and based on the results that I have had. Although the D1X is a 5 Mega Pixel camera, I believe that it produces marginally ‘better’ image quality than the S2Pro – files are very even in terms of tonality and there appear to be less noticeable chromatic aberrations. Its build quality is of course in a different league to the Fuji as it equates squarely to Nikon’s pro series 35mm cameras and,



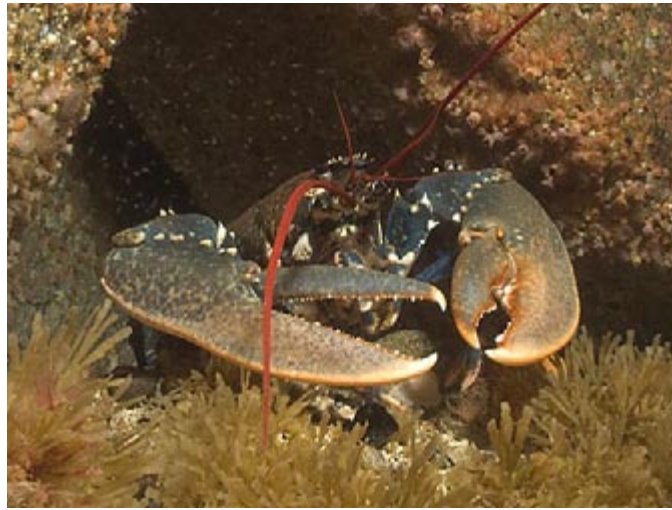
as you might expect, it performs extremely well in all aspects such as autofocus accuracy and speed, exposure, ease of use and so on. The D1X is a very competent, robust and well-specified camera, suitable for professional use.

The S2 on the other hand is a far more lightly built unit but one which I believe is ideal for putting in a housing. It is based on Nikon’s F80 and an F80 can easily be put into an S2Pro housing by having an adapter block built – dual format! Its real advantage over most other dSLRs is its ability to work with conventional ttl flash – which is excellent for macro work as it is very accurate and this combined with the histogram feature on the camera makes for a versatile close-up flash system. Underwater it is a very viable machine, almost certainly offering more features than most users will ever need for most underwater photography (as do many housed cameras).

My opinion, having used it underwater for over 9 months, is that it works very well in the vast majority of situations and delivers excellent images. It does though, have downsides when housed. Some are common to many other dSLRs, others are more specific to the S2Pro.



First is the fact that it is based on a relatively cheap Nikon film camera – the F80. Now I have used an F80 in a housing for over a year and found it to be a perfectly usable camera underwater, but sales of F80 housings almost certainly bear out the fact that it was not a popular camera to house – am I being cynical in thinking that this is because it was too cheap a camera to bother housing? I’d like to know sales figures for F80 housings compared to say F90 or F100 housings but expect that the F80



sold far less. Which makes it odd that dSLRs based on or similar to the F80 are very popular!

So why should this be a problem? Well basically because the autofocus is quite simply not as good as say an F100 or F5 or D1X. The F80 and F80 derived units also all seem to have a feature described as focus tracking in the manual. I have found that this can cause problems if the photographer and the subject are both moving (as is often the case underwater) and conditions are not quite as perfect as they might be. Then autofocus has a tendency not lock on properly and hunts. As light levels and contrast reduce then the problem becomes worse – this may not affect tropical divers as much as those of us who dive in cooler, murkier waters where it can be frustrating at times. I've found this with both F80 and S2Pro and assume that it happens with the D100 and Kodak based dSLRs too. It's a feature I would rather not have and which cannot be switched off.

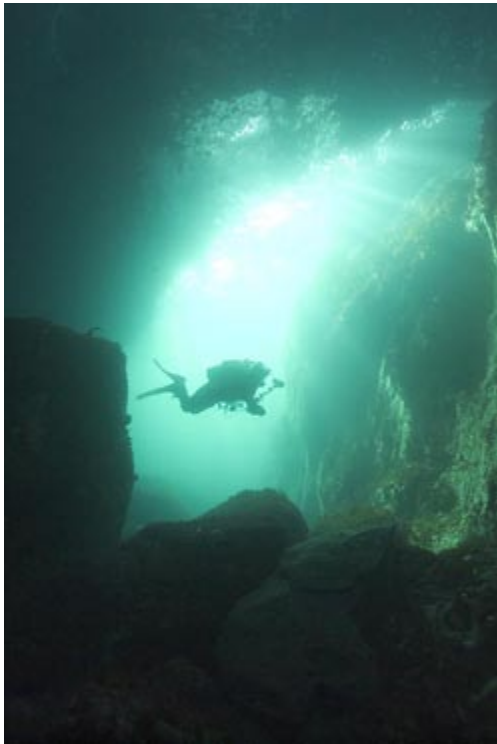
Another problem that the S2Pro suffers from is that it can be power thirsty, although this depends on what compact flash card is in use as well as the

way in which the camera is used. The battery level indicator is about as useful as the fuel gauge in a Peugeot 205, which if you haven't driven one means that it bears little relationship to actuality! The good news is that the camera runs on AA sized batteries so spares can easily be carried – either rechargeable (now up to 2300mAh) or conventional.

Otherwise, I have very few gripes with the camera, other than that its viewfinder! Fuji have simply masked off the F80 full frame 35mm viewfinder to produce a smaller image of the actual image area of the sensor, and have left the viewfinder display where it was, sitting somewhere well below the viewed image. This means that the viewfinder is smallish and that it can occasionally be awkward to see the data. There is a very effective solution which I was able to adopt. I use a Seacam S45 Sportsfinder – a simply superb viewing system which compensates for much of the Fuji's smaller view by producing a very clear, easily viewed image indeed – but at a significant cost! I could not go back to using a conventional viewfinder after the S45 – it is that good.

Which brings me on to the Housing. As the British and Irish importer and retailer of Seacam housings, I obviously opted to use a Seacam Silver housing for my S2Pro. Seacam have been producing housings for a long time now and concentrate on Pro and high end enthusiast cameras. They produce a range of dSLR housings for cameras including the Nikon D1 series, D100 (and soon D70) Fuji S2Pro, and Canon EOS1 Series (the latest of which will take the 1/1DS/1DmkII). All are similar in design and offer use of most controls.

Although I may be accused of bias, I have to say that in my own, honest opinion, I consider Seacam housings to be extremely well built. All glands are all double 'O' ring sealed and the main and port 'O' rings are large and would be very difficult to fit wrongly – I doubt that a port could be fitted if the 'O' ring was not seated accurately. The Silver finish is extremely hard and durable – after 9 months my own housing looks hardly used (and you should see some of my other housings – I do not treat them with kid gloves, they are to be used). Seacam are getting an enviable reputation



the only one to require any care in operation is the rear command dial, which is a trifle small and needs care to ensure that it rotates (by the right hand thumb) properly.

The SCM focus selector switch is an optional feature from Seacam. Whilst I had this fitted, I am not sure why as I have rarely used it to date and as it is possible to knock it to MF (as on many other housings – this is due to the camera control's position) inadvertently. I did have a second flash socket fitted (so my housing has two Nikonos 5 type sockets as flash sockets are the most likely area to give trouble on ANY housing) and I also had the audio/visual leak detector fitted.

One feature that I have been pleasantly surprised with is the shutter release, which can be operated either by conventional forefinger or by thumb. After nine months use I now prefer the thumb – it gives very fine control indeed! A clear window on the back of the housing allows for easy viewing of the lcd screen – which on the S2Pro is positioned better than some dSLRs for housing – it is not blanked by the viewfinder. Reviewing is very straightforward underwater and use of the histogram allows for accurate checking of exposure as the lcd is a little bright sometimes, depending on ambient light conditions, for a purely visual

check.

Handles are fitted to either side of the housing and are easy enough to grip – they also offer some protection against bumping! Ports are glass and are available with an optical coating – despite this they can be scratched (especially if thrown into a rib about to be run down by a merchantman whose radio watch keeping was less than good!) if badly treated!

I use a flat port for the 60mm lens and a WidePort plus Extender 35 tube for the 12~24 which produces excellent image quality if used at f/11 (which is my preferred wide-angle aperture).

Flash mounts are conventional flat plates mounted on top of the housing but are slightly deeper than most. Some arm systems such as Ultralight will require a thinner plate or dovetail adapter to be used. I use a Seacam arm which has a ball size similar to Ultralight/TLC/Inon etc (1" or 25mm). Seacam arms are similar to 'buoyancy' arms and are virtually neutral underwater.

Whilst Seacam produce flash units, they utilise Subtronic electronics and I have to date stuck with my old SB105s and a wondrous Subtronic Mega Colour. This flashgun has the ability to be warmed or cooled in colour temperature. Combine this with RAW files and matching of the colour temperature of the

image with that of the flash allows the background water colour to be changed – something which I am currently experimenting with. The S2Pro works very well in ttl mode (between 100 & 400 ISO settings) for macro photography with both the SB105s and the Subtronic unit (I've also tried a YS120 with good results). For wide-angle I prefer to use manual flash settings and again find the Subtronic very helpful here as it is very adjustable.

All in all I am satisfied that I made to right choice in opting for the S2Pro in a Seacam housing. I only operate using RAW files and find these to provide quality sufficient for many purposes if opened in Adobe Photoshop CS and optimised appropriately. My only real complaint is that the S2Pro is only a 6 Mega Pixel camera and in the near future I have no option other than to switch to using a Canon EOS1DS (in a Seacam of course) to improve on this!

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for producing a very high quality, precision engineered product. Sadly this usually means that newly designed housings have a waiting list!

The S2Pro housing is very similar to Seacam's D100 housing – the front section is actually common to both. It appears to be a 'chunky' housing although actually weighs very little more than my old Subal F100 housing. The size is a design feature as, depending on lens/portfinder, buoyancy varies from slightly positively buoyant to a little negatively buoyant. Buoyancy is a function of size so....

Controls are well placed and