

Confessions of a Nikon Traitor

A Review of the Aquatica Canon 20D

Story and Photos by Tim Rock

I really didn't want to do it but I had no choice. I waited like a faithful puppy for Nikon to jump on the bandwagon and kick Canon's rear but it never happened. I just became an old dog while everyone else was shooting bigger and faster with their Canon cameras.

When Jim Watt showed up in Palau as one of the judges for the underwater photo contest this year with a 10-22mm zoom for his new Canon 20D camera, that was the last straw. The D100s were bid a fond farewell as they served me well. The wonderful 10.5mm lens found a good home as did the 12-24 Nikkor. I cleaned house and restocked with Canon 20D bodies.

So, this is a story of both switching from Nikon to Canon and my first experiences with the Aquatica A20.

After cleaning out my Nikon gear and getting some Canon goodies, I then called Blake at Aquatica and told him I needed to house these babies and he sent me a couple of shiny new Aquatica A20 digital camera housings made specifically for the Canon 20D. These housings

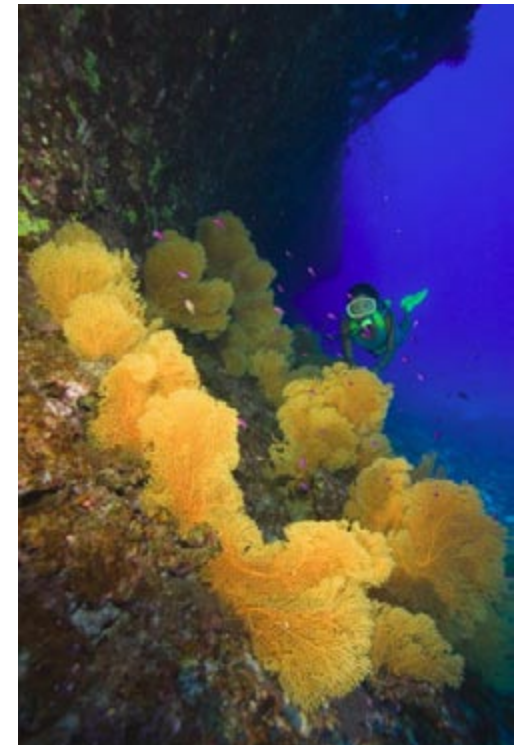
have the works. The features include On/Off control, menu button, info button, jump button, playback button, erase button, AE/AF button, AF point selection button, setting button, quick control dial, viewfinder options, lens release, mode dial, main dial, LCD illumination button, AF-WB button, Drive-ISO button, Metering/flash exposure button, and single or double Nikonos style bulkhead (I got the double). The things can go deeper than I do with a depth rating of 300 feet/90 metres. They are sturdy, made with a precision cast aluminum body that is fully anodized to military specifications. The body is then coated with a polyurethane powder paint and clear coat. The Canon A20 housings are bullet silver. I found them to be accurately balanced. They have ergonomic handles and design and strobes mounts on the handles. All controls are within easy reach. The size is just 9" x 6 3/8" x 5 1/4" / 22.9 x 16.2 x 13.4 cm and they weigh 2.72kg. I was able to hand carry one through security with a camera and lens inside and a dome port attached. I had the other in my camera bag and a flat port in the bag. Thus, packing



This shot is along a mini-wall at 80 feet with a garden of gorgonian sea fans on Rota Island. 80 feet deep with the AD20 & 10-22mm lens at 10mm in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

them on a trip is a breeze and they show up even if everything else doesn't.

I took them up to the wonderful little island of Rota in the Northern Marianas. Known for its extremely clear water, I wanted to dunk them deep and put them to the test. Rota has wrecks, current points, walls, caves, snorkeling spots and nice hard coral gardens. Plus dolphins and whales





The eyes have it. Clownfish eggs about ready to hatch at Fish Eye Marine Prk on Guam. 20 feet with the AD20 & 105mm Sigma lens in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

are known to come into the scenic Sasanaya Bay. So off I went.

Mark Michael of Dive Rota met me and told me I picked a good week as things weren't too busy, weather was good and his charming divemaster Fumiko Furukawa would model for me. This good news did ease my guilt somewhat.

You see, I made the switch from Konica to Nikon in 1978 and have gone through the ranks using Nikkormat, FMs and so on all the way up to the trusty F5. I bought a D1 when it first hit the market and

really enjoyed the D100s. But my professional needs dictated that I use RAW format more and more. And the D100 and D70 write RAW files rather slowly. And I haven't hit any lotteries lately so really couldn't afford a bunch of housed Nikon D2x cameras. But I shoot a LOT of wide angle. And the dedicated 10.5mm Nikkor and the 12-24 are excellent underwater digital lenses. Canon has nothing like them.

Then along came the 20D. It shot and wrote RAW better than the D100 shot FINE JPGs. And Canon finally jumped on the bandwagon and



Butterflyfish and others gather around a diver at Rota's Coral Gardens. 30 feet deep with the AD20 & 10-22mm lens at 10mm in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

made the 10-22mm lens for the Canon cameras with a crop sensor. I actually prefer a crop sensor as it boosts my telephoto capacity at no extra cost. So, like Judas and Peter Pocklington (the ogre who traded Wayne Gretzky from Edmonton to the L.A. Kings), I sold my Nikon gear for some pieces of silver and used that to buy similar Canon gear.

I had used the D100s with Aquatica housings and was very, very happy with them. Norma and Blake have made great strides with this company in recent years. The

housings are more compact. The buttons and bells all work well and the shutter trigger focuses and fires fast and faithfully. I was looking for this same response on my A20s.

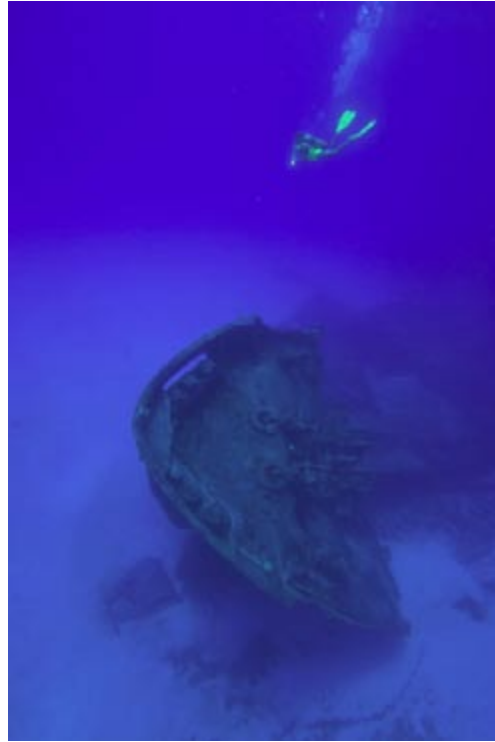
As I said earlier, the housings are even more compact and form fitting. One thing I like about all of the new digital SLR Aquatica housings is the fact that the old ports work with them. Thus, making the switch isn't as financially taxing if you had housings for the F5, N90 or F100. The same bayonet ports and extension rings work well and, for the most part, the



A pair of bannerfish at Fish Eye Marine Park on Guam. 20 feet with the AD20 & 105mm Sigma lens in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

extensions used for macro and wide angle both work with the same lenses.

Since the Canon 10-22mm is a zoom, the same extension ring that worked for the Nikon 12-24mm lens was placed behind the dome and I was in business. We descended to the Shoun Maru, a 400-foot long WWII Japanese freighter. How clear is Rota's water? If you snorkel over the top of the wreck, you can see down



This shot was taken on Rota Island. It is the narrow bow of a former Chinese river ship that was purposely sunk as a reef after it was caught smuggling. 100 feet deep with the AD20 & 10-22mm lens at 10mm in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

100 feet easily and take in both stern and bow. It is very clear. We gave the bow a good workout, overswam the wreck shooting wide shots of the open engine room and close-focus/wide-angle of diver and crinoid and finished the dive chasing pilotfish and curious spadefish.

As the wreck is deep, we had to

work fast and the camera and housing responded well. The only problem I had was with the control for the scroll wheel, a Canon feature most folks like. But it is placed on the back-center of the camera. The housing control for this conflicted with my mask frame. This made it somewhat taxing to see information at the bottom of the viewfinder. The smaller buttons for the Nikon touch pad don't pose the same problems. However, Aquatica's excellent design of the info window at the top right of the camera housing made it easy to see F-stop and shutter speed settings. I shoot in Manual mode underwater, so I do need to get to see functions and adjust as conditions change.

You must remember I was and am learning new controls after using Nikon for 23 years. I did practice on land shooting Tahitian hula dancers night after night who perform at the dinner show that is held in the same building as my photo gallery (Hey, somebody's gotta do it!). But I do think there are a couple of things about Canon that are kind of clunky. As James Wiseman also pointed out in his article about making the switch, Canon has a lot of functions and buttons to push and they aren't all conveniently located. Some do even require two buttons be pushed at once. That doesn't happen with Nikon. The 20D grip is kind of squarish and not

all that comfortable with a big lens like an 80-400. Nikon controls can, for the most part, be done with one hand and one never has to take one's eye from the viewfinder or the shutter. Of course, once one gets familiar with adjusting the Canon camera by feel, most things are fast and easily done.

The housing's controls made it easy to use many functions underwater including image review, trashing bad shots, changing aperture and shutter speed and using the very fast Canon auto-focus. The Canons have been lauded for their focus speed and that was apparent when a large pod of Pacific bottlenose dolphins greeted our boat. Mark drove slowly as a few frisky males played in our bow wave. I was able to stick the camera over the side and blindly snap away. The 20D managed to focus on gray dolphins in a blue abyss on virtually all 30 shots I tried and the housing worked flawlessly despite the fact that it was being pushed through the water at a couple of knots.

We took shots of sea fans during a current swept tide change 80 feet down at beautiful Pona Point, visited the wreck of the Seven Screws and shot flurries of visits by butterfly and surgeonfish at Coral Gardens. And the wide-angle dome and 10mm setting made for great half/half shots during high noon and sunset snorkeling excursions. Controls worked well at



A parrotfish mug shot at Fish Eye Marine Park on Guam. 30 feet with the AD20 & 105mm Sigma lens in Aquatica Housing with twin Ikelite strobes.

all depths.

At the end of a week, we had some very nice shots and both Canon and Aquatica systems performed without a burp. I tried some macro work on my home island of Guam and again the controls responded well. Image review with the scroll wheel is fast so I was able to see quickly how exposures were going on creatures resting on a white sand sea bed. I could view histograms quickly using the function buttons. I also like the

look of the files that one gets with the Canon CMOS sensor. Nice and satiny smooth. By the way, the Ikelite DS125s also did fine. Since Ike made a few mould changes, I have had more than 600 dives with my strobes without a leak.

Overall, the performance of both camera and housing was top notch. The Canon control design that can require a couple of hands at times also reflects on how one has to use the housing. There are times when one

has to take an eye off the viewfinder to check the settings window or punch a button. This didn't cause me to miss any shots but it wasn't as smooth as using the housed Nikon D100. The big plus was that focus was lightning fast and tack sharp, however. And RAW files wrote fast and accurately. I never had to stop and wait for the cache to empty. The Nikons can't make that boast.

The next workout will be Critter Hunt in Yap where it will get a shot at mantas, mandarinfish and ornate ghost pipefish. For price, performance and final product, this is a great combination that I am sure will produce some stunning images

in many trips to come for many underwater photographers.

Tim Rock
www.doubleblue.com



In-depth photography portfolio with trade secrets revealed, Best Dive Sites

Rated as the Best underwater photography magazine in the Asia Pacific

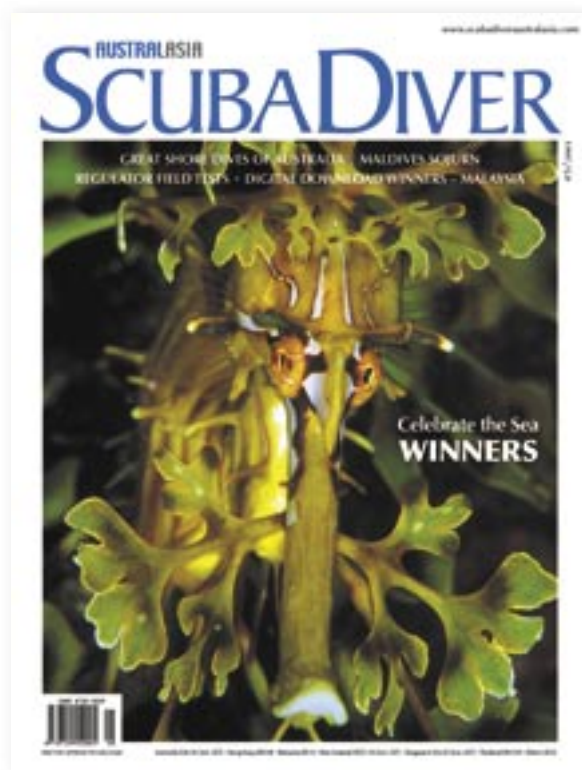


photo Annual (2003)



US\$10 postage included –
world wide Or

US\$25 – with
Golden Dolphin DVD ROM Biennial
Edition – postage included



save up to **25%** off newsstand price

SUBSCRIPTION 6 ISSUES (ONE YEAR) / Renew my Subscription (FREE X'plorer Membership)

- ☐ Singapore S\$32/ ☐ Malaysia S\$35/ ☐ Australia A\$37.50/ ☐ Hong Kong S\$35/ ☐ Asean (excl, S'pore & Malaysia) S\$45/
☐ Rest of Asia S\$50/ ☐ Outside Asia S\$60/

SUBSCRIPTION 12 ISSUES (TWO YEARS) / Renew my Subscription (FREE X'plorer Membership + NEW Say No to Shark Fins T-Shirt)

- ☐ Singapore S\$60/ ☐ Malaysia S\$65/ ☐ Australia A\$70/ ☐ Hong Kong S\$85/ ☐ Asean (excl, S'pore & Malaysia) S\$85/
☐ Rest of Asia S\$95/ ☐ Outside Asia S\$112/

**To subscribe or order the Photo annual 2003
email: lucia@asiangeographic.org**

SINGAPORE: Asian Geographic Magazines Pte Ltd, 36 Jalan Puteh Jerneh, Singapore 278058

AUSTRALIA: Asian Geographic Magazines, PO Box 2138 Carlingford Court Post Office, Carlingford, NSW 2118 (A\$ payment accepted,
A\$ cheque made out to *Asian Geographic Magazines*). SINGAPORE Tel: (65) 6298 3241, Fax: (65) 6291 2068 | AUSTRALIA Tel/Fax: (61) 2 9686 3688