

Back to Aluminium

with the Aquatica Pro D2x

by Charles Hood

My first venture away from the amphibious Nikonos range of cameras led me to the high-tech industrial lands of Austria. David Nardini, a prevalent underwater snapper in the mid eighties, had discovered the small housing manufacturer, Subal. He and I had both just purchased new Nikon F801's and decided the old screw thread Subal was the perfect casing. Indeed I think we did our research well for around a year later Ocean Optics (London, UK) decided to start importing them into the UK and the rest, they say, is history!

This F801 housing served me well until, following an unfortunate capsizing incident, I was required to upgrade to a F90x in a bayonet port Subal. Several years later a competition win led me to change to a Sea & Sea housing equipped with the Nikon F100. I then had a brief flirtation with a Nikon Coolpix 5000 in a Subal which convinced me digital was the way forward. However, the pattern I was noticing here was the longevity of the camera bodies was getting shorter. As ground breaking as the D100 was when it was launched, in the back of my mind laid the thought – 2 years max before it's replaced.

Thus I decided not to spend huge amounts of cash on an aluminium housing and opted for the moulded plastic Sea & Sea DX100. My premonition proved right and this summer (after only two and a half years!) my aging D100 needed to be upgraded.

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The obvious choice had to be the D2x – with so many f2.8 lenses I couldn't justify considering another manufacturer. Besides, all indications told me the D2x is a stunning machine.

As Mauricio Handler, the UK sales manager for Aquatica, is a close working colleague of mine the choice of Aquatica was also a bit of a no brainer. The point of the above story is that I'm back with an aluminium housing - and it's rather nice.

While I'm not knocking plastic, my Sea & Sea served me very well but the robustness of metal just provides that little bit more feeling of confidence. After just one week of ownership here are my initial thoughts.

The Aquatica Pro D2x housing certainly appears to be well machined, at first glance you'd have thought they had poached Subal's chief design engineer. Internally the similarities to a Subal abound with the cantilevering spring-loaded controls being almost identical. The camera also sits on a similar tray and is locked securely in place with a rotating metal disc.

Externally all the controls are logical and clearly labelled. Controls at a glance are:



On/off/light, Front wheel (normally aperture/sub command), Rear wheel (normally shutter speed and function changes), AF/AE lock, Metering system, Exposure compensation, Light meter area, Bracketing, Command lock, Flash mode, Manual



focus/zoom, Focus mode, Lens release, Playback, Delete, Menu, Thumbnail, Image file protection, Enter/playback zoom, ISO, File quality/size, White balance, Four multi select buttons, Auto focus style/predictive focus.

The retaining clips require quite a force to close but secure the backplate firmly against a juicy o ring. Control wise they all seem intuitive and the main adjustment wheels and shutter release are suitably large for use with gloved hands – particularly important for us UK divers.

The on/off and focus area select levers are a dream to use having the smoothness akin to a rare malt whisky. The spring resistance on all the push buttons is what I would call over-positive requiring a firm action. This confirms this housing can probably withstand its claimed 90 meter depth rating, although it may be a while before I test this in the field!

One amazing attention to detail on the push buttons is that the housing has been drilled to make a tiny drain for any water trapped around the 'o' rings. This is to help prevent salt build-up and aid rinsing with fresh water. Another feature that also confirms how well the engineers have designed this



housing is three small sacrificial anodes that are screwed into the base of the housing. These, being manufactured from zinc, are designed to protect the aluminium against corrosion.

The generous screen size of the D2x is accommodated well using a clear port at the rear of the housing. I chose to have the optional leak detector fitted which comes in the form of an LED in this window. It's a pity the LED is a bit on the average side of brightness and I think one of these super bright LEDs could have been fitted.

Another niggle is that the housing was not supplied with any flash arm shoes. Furthermore the standard fitting is designed to take the outdated Oceanic mount. Very kindly Peter Rowlands (UwP's very own) came to the rescue and machined my old Ultralight shoes to fit.

I've only had time to use the housing in the pool, however, this usually gives a fairly good indication on how it will perform in open water. Being half term I had two willing volunteers to help me. This at the very least provided something interesting to shoot. Kids are also a good subliminal test. They get bored quickly. So in order for me to get images I had to get to grips with the set-up



quickly. This I did achieve and I have to report the housing is a delight to use. I would say it is by far the most intuitive housing I've ever come across. And being DIVE magazine's equipment tester I've reviewed quite a few.

It does suffer from the ever-so-common 'the-dome-is-light-and-rotates-the-housing-dome-upwards' syndrome. Why don't these superb housing designers dive? They would then design a port that doesn't do this! I have subsequently ordered a port shade which, like my previous Sea & Sea port shade, I'm sure will have to be modified to take a counter-balancing weight.

That all said this is a superb housing of high build quality. Furthermore for under £2,000 including the eight inch (20cm) dome port it provides excellent value for money. The Aquatica Pro digital housing for Nikon D2x costs \$2,999 (around £1,700) plus VAT and duty. An 8 inch (20cm) dome port is \$395 (around £225) plus VAT and duty

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