

Upgrading to DSLR

by Aengus Moran

What motivated the upgrade to dSLR?

A photo dive to the wreck of the USS Aaron Ward in mid 2004 had highlighted the limitations of the Compact camera to me. The Ward sits at 60 metres and I was shooting wide angle with natural light. Post dive I really noticed the poor performance of the Compact at increased ISO and the lack of detail on the wider angle shots.

My Nikon Coolpix 5000 had served me well for 2 years but I felt a Digital SLR with its larger sensor, better quality lenses, and ability to write raw files fast, was my answer.

Which camera?

My price point was entry level. The popular 6MP Nikon D70 and newer 8MP Canon EOS 350D Digital Rebel XT were principal candidates - In late April I bought the 350D.

I knew mega pixels weren't everything, yet the higher pixel count of the 350D would give me better crop options.

Initial reviews also reported better performance at increased ISO for the 350D, although either would have been an improvement on the compact camera. ISO sets the sensitivity of the "film" to light, so higher ISO performance would be great for natural light shots, especially at depth, but increased ISO does result in increased graininess.

The small body size of 350D also appealed for topside photography.



Many people would say, hey, you should just pay the extra few dollars (relatively) and get the Canon 20D, sturdier and plenty of housings available. A valid point, but I suspect, like many, I will shortly get a second backup body, so it may be price difference x 2, money I would prefer to invest in a lens or quality travel case.

Lens and Housing choice

I decided on an initial set of 2 lenses for underwater use, a wide zoom and a macro, and I hoped it would be some time before I needed to add a third.

The wide zoom choice was easy and I purchased the Canon EF-S 10-22mm. This is an expensive lens but I felt for a wide zoom it was important not to compromise on quality.

While I was seeing some awesome photography from 100mm macro lens, I choose the Sigma 50mm EX DG. The 50mm was a



*Hanging Out - Rocky island, Red Sea. 1/80 sec F/5.6
Taken with the Canon 10-22mm lens*

better choice for a dSLR newbie like me, its more flexible, gets me nice and close for subjects such as Nudibranch's but also is a good fish portrait lens.

As my Coolpix Ikelite housing had served me well, Ikelite was my first choice for the 350D. Port choice to suit the lenses was pretty straight

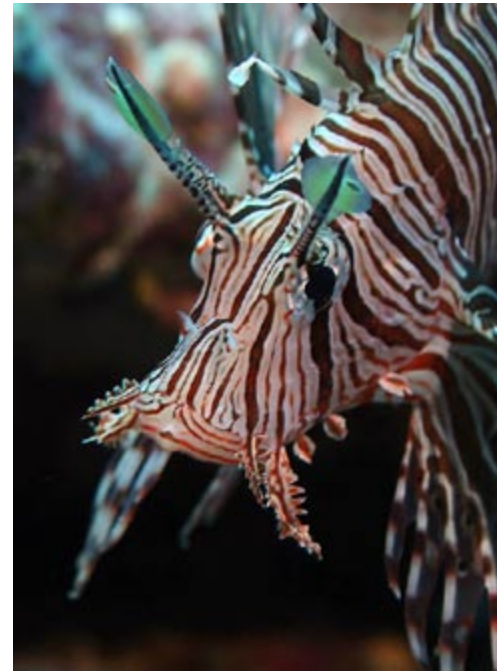


*St Johns Cave Reef OnTour. June 2005, Red Sea.
1/125 sec F/3.5. Canon EF-S 10-22mm*

forward as there is a good chart on Ikelite's website. The Ikelite housing also appealed because I have two Ikelite DS-125 strobes and the new 350D housing has the Ikelite eTTL2 circuitry that would assist with automated strobe use.

New things to learn?

Like most compact digital users I was using the LCD screen for shot composition, but the eyepiece is used on a dSLR with the LCD monitor displaying the results. The transition to using the magnified eyepiece on the



Elphinstone Reef LionHead. June 2005, Red Sea. 1/50 sec F/6.3. Sigma EX DG 50mm Macro

housing was seamless, and indeed I felt an immediate improvement to my composition.

The camera's settings LCD panel is positioned above the monitor LCD, and its slightly obscured by the housings eyepiece. Surprisingly this didn't present me with any issues. I simply tilted the camera forward if I needed to see the panel.

The 350D's eyepiece is apparently small, but it certainly didn't feel it to me and I had no problems. The eyepiece view does only cover 80% of the shot, but



Chief the Red Indian Fish. June 2004, Jervis Bay, NSW, Australia. 1/2000 sec F/8. Nikon Coolpix 5000

you quickly learn to compensate. Apparently most dSLR viewfinders don't provide 100% coverage.

Nikon's Coolpix 5000 had an awesome lens which would focus on a tiny Nudibranch at 4cm and in the same dive could get a wide angle of a wrecks bow.

Unfortunately that lens flexibility isn't available with a dSLR and an appropriate lens must be chosen before each dive. The trade off is greater image quality and I am hoping the lens restriction might even help me concentrate better on subjects within the range of the lens chosen.

The Compact Digital's have automated zoom and auto focus, and some also have manual focus via push



*Zabargad Island Squid. June 2005, Red Sea. 1/200 sec F/11
Canon EOS 350D. Sigma EX DG 50mm Macro*

buttons. Manual focus is of benefit in low light when the auto can't focus. This routinely happens with macro.

The dSLR's have auto focus, manual focus, manual zoom yet no auto zoom, that I know of.

They are just like film SLR's, the manual zoom or focus is done by turning a grip on the lens. On my Ikelite housing, I have one zoom/focus control, ie it connects a "ring" to either the lens focus or zoom grip.

There is no question with my 10-22mm, the zoom goes

on and the focus is auto.

There is no zoom on my Sigma macro lens, so I need to choose whether I go manual or auto focus before I house the camera. I can't switch focus mode mid dive with this lens because under auto focus, the zoom grip moves, and if the housing focus ring was connected, it would be a strain on the lens motor.

To date I've had no issues with the zoom/focus control, and I find the dial type control easier than the Coolpix 5000's push buttons.

My first dive with the rig was in the Red Sea. I did 20 dives on that trip and ended up with just over 5Gb of data. My average raw file size was 7mb. I could easily get 3 dives on my 1GB flash card and after the third dive used to change lens, battery and offload the card. It's great not to have to open the housing after every dive, as I used to do with the Coolpix.

The strobe sync cord on the Ikelite is located on the back plate below the viewfinder.

I thought this might affect my access to the viewfinder but it didn't, although I did have the cords aligned to the arms. The cord location is not good in terms of deckhands putting the housing down on the cord but Ikelite have addressed this and a new L shaped connector is now available.

What's really cool?

One of the first things I did when I got the 350D was to put the camera in to Continuous shooting mode and then I went crazy like a kid in a candy store. After

using Compact camera for some time, the instant shutter of the dSLR was fantastic.

Digital SLR's have large memory buffers and can write RAW files at great speed. At last, shooting all shots in raw viable. The RAW format gives you several more options in the digital darkroom.

The focus speed is significantly faster on dSLR's, although this varies with lens.

The 350D has focus points just like the Coolpix 5000. That's points across the screen which you can select for the auto focus to centre on. This feature is much easier to operate on a dSLR and on my first trip it made the difference to several shots.

The Ikelite housing comes with eTTL2 circuitry. TTL is Through The Lens, and a casual description is that it is light metering and in manual mode it adjusts the power settings of the strobes.

There is a control panel for the strobes on the rear of the housing and it allows compensation when in TTL mode, for example, I could turn the strobe down a stop

when shooting a macro subject on a reflective surface like sand. There is also the ability to easily switch out of TTL mode to manual and use eight half stop settings.

The result is that I have moved from using two Ikelite DS-125 strobes, one with a sync cord and one with an Ikelite EV (manual) controller, to a much simpler setup of a dual sync cord direct to both strobes.

Conclusion

I'm delighted I have moved up to a Digital SLR. I feel I have completed my internship with the compact cameras and I think that internship was probably necessary for me. It is a big step to move up and I hope my experience reassures some of you readers that maybe in a similar situation.

I'm looking forward to getting back to the Solomon's and the USS Aaron Ward.

Aengus Moran
www.aengusm.com

Underwater Photography

is pleased to present

Alex Mustard's Digital Techniques Workshop

Red Sea 25th June - 2nd July 2006

in association with

www.scuba.co.uk

Tony Backhurst Scuba

£975

London to London**
full package price



MV Typhoon



©Peter Rowlands

Alex photographing an aggregation of snappers at Ras Mohammed. This trip is timed to co-incide with the appearance of these large schools.

** Packages excluding flight can be arranged.

The unique combination of Alex Mustard, UwP Editor Peter Rowlands and Tony Backhurst are collaborating to bring you this special event in the Red Sea where you can concentrate on your underwater photography and benefit from Alex's digital knowledge and enthusiasm.

MV Typhoon has been especially chosen for this trip because of her underwater photographer-friendly design (by Tony himself), great hospitality and the diving freedom essential for producing stunning images.

In addition UwP Magazine will have a range of new photo equipment on board for you to try out.

In Alex's own words "Shooting digital is different from film. Digital has made getting technically correct images easy. I will help transform your pictures from images that come out into images that stand out. I will also show you the new techniques that digital has made possible such as available light filtering, telephoto and panoramas and cover post processing as well as giving informal illustrated talks each evening."

This is the perfect opportunity for you to improve your images and have a great holiday in a photographer friendly atmosphere on a superb boat.

For further details e mail Alex direct at

alex@amustard.com

www.amustard.com

