

Nikon D200 and Subal ND20 Field Report

By Mark Webster

The last couple of months has seen the long anticipated arrival of Nikon D200 housings from several manufacturers. Some of us have already upgraded and many more are contemplating the change from a first generation DSLR, making the jump from compact camera to DSLR or entering the digital market for the first time. As I have now had my Subal ND20 for a little while and had the opportunity to test it in temperate and tropical conditions I thought readers may be interested in how the package handles in the field.

The housing follows the now 'standard' Subal design - a deep front section that accommodates most of the camera (see observations below) and is very compact, perhaps a little smaller than the ND10 for the D100. Loading the camera and tray is easy, you just need to remember to turn on the camera and align the on/off switch and retract the CSM switch (note the setting on the camera to engage this once installed). You also need to align the focus mode selector on the back plate with the camera setting and then you are ready to go.

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Buoyancy - dependant on your lens and port selection the housing is slightly negative in the water - long ports and heavy flash guns will make the rig negatively buoyant. The same applies with the glass FE dome - if you are using heavy strobes like Subtronics then you may want to add some buoyancy to trim the rig. Try the UCLS buoyancy arms or making a cork overcoat for your flash gun (from a table mat), which can be slid under the neoprene cover works, very well. I still use my 'home engineered' perspex fish eye domes (these pre-date the first Subal FE dome) which for me work as just as well as the bigger glass domes I have tried but have none of the bulk and weight. With these and a Magic Filter for natural light photography the housing is all but weightless and a dream to use.

Ergonomics - the major controls are on the right hand side of the housing and are easily accessed if your hands are not too small or too large. I find that the shutter release falls more naturally under my second finger with the main command dial under the ring finger and the sub



The camera is virtually flush with the front half of the housing and so you need to remove the camera to change memory cards, battery or plug into the USB port.



command under the thumb. Even with gloves on for our cold British waters these controls have a good positive feel, however, I still miss the Miniflex design which had no handles as standard, but I digress. Unless you have very long thumbs you have to move your hand to reach the four 'toggle' buttons but this is a feature of all the current crop of housings - you may recall that the old F5 housing had a rotating geared control that could be reached with your thumb, but this was not a great success.

All the push button controls have a good feel to them and operate the camera positively. There are controls for almost everything, and you will soon find those that you need most and develop a routine for changing settings and reviewing etc. As has been mentioned in Peter Rowland's previous review, the one major omission is the flash mode control - however, I have simply set my camera to rear curtain synch' and this operates just fine with flash guns connected on the three pin 'manual' hot shoe option. Your shutter speed needs to be significantly slower than 1/30 for rear curtain synch to have an impact (just like shooting on film).

Viewfinder - I elected to choose the standard viewfinder optic. The D200 camera viewfinder is a big improvement over the D100 and so the image is bright and easy to compose through the standard optic. The GS viewfinder is excellent, although in my own experience with it I found it to be sensitive to the viewing angle, and it is a matter of personal choice and bank balance whether you choose this option. I have put the cost saving towards a second D200 body which soothes my paranoia regarding floods when I am on a trip. With the standard viewfinder I find that I occasionally knock the focus area mode selector switch with my regulator (which is very light to operate), this most likely would not



The standard viewfinder is excellent. The focus area selector switch can be easily moved by your regulator though.

be a problem with the GS finder.

Flash synchronisation - I had read with some trepidation that D2X users had been experiencing image write problems (i.e. to the CF card) when particular flash guns are connected with the standard three wire 'manual' hot shoe connection. In this case users have had to disconnect the third wire by removing the hot shoe contact or cutting the wire. The D200 does not appear to suffer from this problem, at least with the flash guns that I own and have tested: Inon Quad flash; Subtronic Mini TTL; Sea & Sea YS30, YS50, YS120; Isotecnic 33TTL. All of these work just fine on the manual settings.

D200 Performance - The camera itself is everything I expected it to be and I am now pleased that I resisted the temptation to upgrade to the D2X, which is a fantastic camera, but a much larger (and of course more expensive) package. I normally shoot in manual mode with centre weighted or spot metering. However, I have also experimented with aperture priority and matrix metering for



A tampon in the base of the housing is a good additional insurance just in case of a partial flood - talk to your wife or girlfriend for this unless you are brave enough to purchase your own!

natural light photography (with and without filters) and found the exposures to be very accurate - for example the camera performed very well in this mode shooting basking sharks in very variable lighting conditions.

Focusing - if you are coming from the D100 or D70 you will find the focus speed and accuracy far superior. The CAM1000 AF module is not the same as the D2X, but for most of us it will be more than adequate. Using a macro lens it will handle low contrast situations very well, but at high magnifications you will still want to use a focus light. There is a host of focus modes to choose from and it is a matter of personal choice which suits you best. Too much choice and too many buttons can be distracting however and it is easy to get carried away playing with your buttons when you could be taking pictures.

Images - I shoot mostly in RAW format for the flexibility it offers in post processing. You can also



Diver with blue spotted ray, Red Sea, Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10.5mm FE, Magic filter, ISO 100, f11 @ 1/100th

shoot in JPEG or combine JPEG with a raw file, the option of TIFF files offered on the D100 has now gone and was one I never used. The metering system is so good that you should be able to get perfect exposures almost every time when using natural light. Using flash in manual mode is really very easy with the instant review and the large screen is a joy to use. There are some digital TTL flash guns beginning to appear and you can also request a Heinrich Weikamp TTL converter be installed by Subal when you order the housing - this allows you to use standard Nikonos protocol TTL guns with the D200 - but really TTL is a luxury you probably do not need.

Image quality has been very pleasing so far and I find that I have to do less in the way of post processing than with the D100. The camera will produce very natural looking colours, although my preference is the use the vivid colour setting which mimics the saturation we used to have with Velvia film quite well. The enlarged viewing screen is



Basking shark, UK, Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm, ISO 100, f10 @ 1/50th

Tompot blenny, UK, Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm, Inon Quad Flash, ISO 100, f18 @ 1/100th

bliss and you can quickly see how your exposure is and zoom in to check focus if you enjoy fiddling with buttons during the dive. Maybe it is my failing eyesight or just that the D100 screen was so much smaller, but I find underwater that you can easily be fooled into thinking that the colours are off or muddy on the screen. You would of course expect some colour absorption even though the screen is back lit, but the D100 screen perhaps looked brighter and punchier - on the surface they look fine of course.

The sensor seems to cope with highlights much better than the D100. With caution you can shoot straight into the sun and produce reasonable sun bursts, but of course it is still not the equal of film in this respect.

Observations: Some constructive criticism I hope - as a long committed Subal fan I have returned to the fold after a brief and passionate



affair with a Light and Motion housing for the D100, which I have to say I will sorely miss for its ergonomics and ease of use. The Subal is a great housing, but there are minor observations which would improve the handling:

* Camera tray - the design of the housing is such that the camera is enclosed in the front half of the housing. Unlike the D100, the D200 compact flash door is on the side of the camera and so the camera must be removed or at least retracted from



Plenty of space to put a spring between the camera base plate and the front of the housing - perhaps a retrofit from Subal?



Home engineered perspex dome port selection - all these ports are 'tight' in the housing, whilst my Subal ports are 'slack'.

ND20 with Inon Quad ring flash.



The plastic accessory shoe on the top of the housing is a weak point - I replaced mine with an aluminium block.

the housing to access this. The same applies to the USB port. It would be nice if the camera tray was sprung so that when unlocked it would pop up and allow access to this - the F5 housing and I believe the F100 had a sprung tray which was very useful for rewinding film after a dive. Housings from competing manufacturers have a shallower front half which enable access, but for me were not so attractive ergonomically.

* Hot shoe - this point is related to the first. The length of the hot shoe cable (at least on my housing) is only just long enough to disconnect it when the camera and tray is partly slid out to grip it. It can be awkward to partly slide the camera out, hold it and disconnect the hot shoe without jarring the cable, which may



eventually lead to a conductor failure. Practice will make this easier, but a little more length and a sprung tray would make this a breeze.

* Remember to swing the lens release button out of the way when installing the camera and lens with a zoom/focus gear on - the gear will foul on this control and you will wonder why the camera will not seat.

* The accessory shoe on top of the camera is a potential weak point - it has a threaded insert embedded in a plastic base plate. My insert began to work loose the first time I attached my focus light arm base connector. I have replaced this now with an aluminium block. Focus lights are getting bigger and heavier (and more expensive if

you go for the fancy versions - e.g. Fish Eye, Light and Motion) and they require a solid mounting. As an aside, I have found that an Ikelite PCm or PCa light is an excellent compact, bright and cheap focusing light.

* Ports - this is my sixth Subal housing (seven if I include the port adaptor on the Titan housing) and all of them had a really firm fit with all the ports I own. My Subal ports are all first generation bayonet fittings with the thinner, harder 'O' rings. I have found that some, not all, of my ports are 'slack' in the new housing which has the new style port bayonet insert. The ports seal OK but are very easy to turn, which is a little worrying particularly with the big heavy glass

domes or if you have an attachment to the port (in my case a ring flash). I have noticed that this topic (which includes the latest generation of ports and "O" rings) has appeared in the Wetpixel.com forums and in one or two cases has led to flooding when ports are inadvertently turned when entering the water. Subal tell me that nothing has changed but I feel that here must be a small difference in tolerances between some housings. A port locking system would be the preferred fix, but until then I am using a piece of Duck/gaffer tape to ensure the ports do not turn - a popular fix amongst us photographers with a vivid imagination.

* Leak detector - works well

but if you activate it with a drop of salt water you may need to clean the contacts and remove the battery to clear the flooded 'signal' in the circuit. I also add a tampon in the base of the housing just in case.....

Despite these observations I am very pleased with the housing which I hope will give me long service - no doubt a vain hope in this digital world of constant upgrades. Perhaps we should start lobbying Nikon now for a D300 with the same body shell and control layout as the D200!

Mark Webster

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