

Two views of the Nikon D80 & Ikelite Housing

By Dave Harasti and Peter Rowlands

Dave Harasti:

It took four years for me to cave in but I finally succumbed and upgraded to a digital SLR. For the past couple of years my photography skills had been honed using the Nikon Coolpix 5000 and more recently the Coolpix 8400 and whilst I've managed to get a couple of decent shots out of both camera's I had found the shutter lag to be extremely frustrating. This shutter lag has prevented me photographing many small fish species as all I ever ended up with was shots of their butt...

The Camera

The Nikon D80 was released in September 06 and is a 10.2 megapixel camera that sits on the Nikon digital SLR scale between the D70s and the D200. It utilises an image processing engine similar to the D200 / D2X and has a quoted 80 millisecond shutter lag. The large 2.5 inch LCD screen is fantastic to review images on and the D80 incorporates a new 11 area AF system that makes focusing your images all that much easier. The battery life for this camera is very impressive as it easily lasted 4 hours underwater and took over 300 photo's without going flat. A 2gb SD card will



give approximately 250 images whilst shooting the highest resolution jpeg or 130 in Nikon Raw (Nef) format.

The Housing



I'm not sure how they managed to achieve it but Ikelite moved heaven and earth to have a housing designed, built and shipped to

me in Australia within 1 month of them receiving the camera! It arrived a week before my research trip to Papua New Guinea which was to provide a perfect opportunity to give the camera and housing a good test run.

The Ikelite D80 housing is surprisingly quite compact and as the D80 is slightly smaller than its Nikon 'cousins', Ikelite have ensured that the housing is also of minimal size. The D80 housing is slightly larger than my Coolpix 8400 housing and even manages to fit in the same travel bag. One major difference in travelling between the two camera's is all the additional ports and lens that are required for the SLR; a drawback when it comes to flying! One excellent feature of the Ikelite housing is that the camera does not need to be removed from the tray to take out the battery or the SD memory card. This is very handy as it means you do not have



to keep unscrewing the camera from Ikelite tray.

The Ikelite housing provides full TTL functionality with digital strobes such as the Ikelite DS200, DS125 and DS51. The TTL system can only be described as sensational as it is very easy to change the strobe power output through the slight turn of the strobe control dial that is conveniently located on the back of the housing. With the simple turn of the dial, strobe power can be varied by four 1/3 f/stop increments over or under flash compensation, or seven manual power settings in



Angle of View: 72.4 - 20.2 degrees
Minimum Focusing Distance: 20cm/7.9 in.
Maximum Magnification: 1:2.3
Filter Size: 72mm
Dimensions: Dia 79mm X 82.5mm long
(3.1 in. X 3.2 in.)
Weight 455g/16.0 oz

half-stop increments.

The Ikelite housing allows control for all camera functions except the lock switch (which is not essential). Strobes are attached through the quick release handles that allow easy attachment and removal of strobe mounting arms at the touch of a button. One of the huge benefits of the Ikelite housing is that the clear polycarbonate material allows the photographer to check that the o-ring is sealed correctly. This is very important as it allows you to check if any sand, cable ties or other foreign matter are hindering the o-ring seal. The housing



The Sigma 17-70 macro is a versatile lens as these two shots, taken on the same dive, illustrate.



is also rated to a depth of 60 metres which is more than enough for most divers!

The Sigma 17-70mm macro lens

The Ikelite housing allows use of most macro, wide angle, and zoom lenses through the use of

flat and dome ports and the new 'Super Huge' 8 inch dome port. The 8 inch port is fantastic for use with the Nikon 10.5mm fisheye and the Nikon 12-24mm zoom lens; this port also makes under/over shots much easier to take. Another ideal lens for consideration is the Sigma 17-70mm macro zoom lens; this lens was used on a recent trip to Papua

New Guinea and proved to be very successful behind the 8 inch dome port. On the single dive I was able to take wide angle reef shots and then was able to zoom in nice and close on nudibranchs only 2cm long – the lens is incredibly versatile. My preferred lens for macro and fish portraits is the Nikon 60mm which works very well with dual strobes in TTL mode.

For further information on the Ikelite D80 housing and Ikelite port systems visit the Ikelite website at www.ikelite.com

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Peter Rowlands:

As soon as a new camera comes onto the market there is always a gestation period before a housing becomes available. The length of time depends on the manufacturers construction method i.e. machine a pre-moulded housing or start from scratch. Ikelite have always used the former method and as a result are nearly always the first to market when a new model becomes available.

The Nikon D80 housing was no exception and I was able to have one for a trip to Raja Ampat months before any other housing manufacturers had theirs available. Another point to bear in mind is that, as DSLR cameras become cheaper and the intervals at which new models appear becomes shorter, many aluminium housing manufacturers decide to concentrate on the high end, pro level cameras and don't produce a housing at all.

As a long term aluminium housing user I was



interested to gain my first impression of the Ikelite housing and I cannot say that I was disappointed at all. The main polycarbonate body felt very robust and reassuringly chunky. Mounting the camera onto the rear baseplate was easy and held it in position very accurately whilst still allowing access to both the battery and SD memory card.

Fitting the camera into the front of the housing was also easy and the three over centre catches closed firmly showing a nice O ring seal through the transparent hull. This transparency is always useful to keep an eye out should any water droplets enter but I must say that you would have to be extremely careless to allow that to happen. This is a pretty much foolproof design.

In keeping with their design philosophy Ikelite use standard control glands for their 1/4" shafts



The large dome port worked well with the Nikon 10.5mm fisheye producing no flare but the test conditions were a slightly overcast day.

which may be larger than others but they do allow for the controls to be lifted and repositioned if needed. Where Ikelite housings do differ is in their need to have extra weight added to keep them from being too light underwater. This is done using a weighted baseplate which incorporates handles left and right. The resulting system is larger than most but once underwater this is really not an issue.

Once underwater, ergonomic handling was good with all of the main controls falling easily to hand. With today's DSLR cameras and all of their function buttons/controls it is a near impossible task to achieve ergonomic perfection through a housing but in practice all of the controls which you need to use to shoot quickly are right where you need them.

The other big advantage when using an Ikelite system is their TTL flash system. I was using their D125 strobe and arm connected through the rear mounted sync socket. As a longterm manual flash



The large TTL control knob on the right hand side allows you to adjust the TTL output to your preference. The large strobe sync socket on the left hand side houses solid contact pins which give a good, reliable TTL connection but the downside is that it is bulky and obstructs access some of the left hand row of buttons. That's a minor drawback compared to a reliable TTL connection!



user I have always been used to setting my aperture dependent on the flash to subject distance. With the immediate results of digital cameras I have always found this worked fine for me. However having now used the Ikelite system I am sorely tempted to stick with

it because the performance of the circuitry was very impressive and gave me one less thing to think about leaving me free to concentrate on subjects and composition.

Fine tuning of the TTL output was very simple with the rotary control on the right hand side but in practice I

found there was very little tweaking needed and I soon became happy to trust the system's electronics.

One of the reasons for the reliability of this system is the larger than normal sync socket. This incorporates the five large solid pins needed to make all the contacts and, once again, it is virtually foolproof. As an underwater photo repairer I've lost count of the number of problems I've had to solve which were caused by using the old Nikonos V flash pins design with their two sprung loaded contacts and three small solid pins. Their design allowed previous model flashguns to be used but, in hindsight, it would have been far better to bite the bullet and use 5 larger and solid pins like those in the Ikelite connector.

As a user of the GS magnifying viewfinder now available on many aluminium housings I knew I would be disappointed by the Ikelite viewing optics but you must bear in mind that the cost of a GS viewfinder is not far off the cost of the whole Ikelite housing so this is definitely not a fair comparison! In practice though the viewfinder image was perfectly usable and the readings under the image were clear to see. The more I used it the more I got used to it.

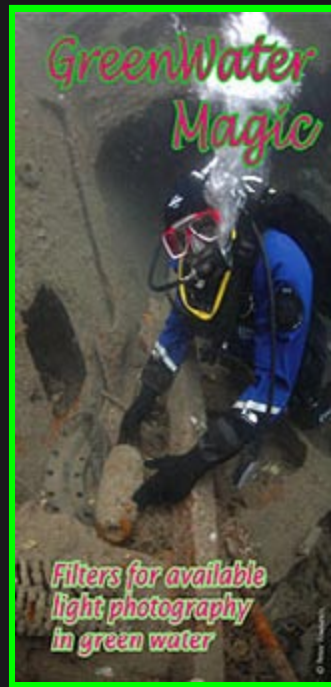
The interchangeable ports are one area which need care when assembling. The rear O ring is not retained in a groove and care must be taken to make sure it doesn't misalign when pushing the port into the housing. Once properly inserted the port is

retained by two push clips at 180° and it is possible to check the integrity of the seal through the housing.

I came away from my trip with the Ikelite D80 system very impressed indeed. This is a very good value for money outfit with few limitations but more importantly it was first to market in an ever changing world. You could wait for a more expensive aluminium housing in the belief that it is more durable and longer lasting but the chances are, by the time you take delivery of it, there will already be rumours about the Nikon D90. And then what do you do?

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