

Judas Returns with a Nikon

The Aquatica AD200 and Aqua View in the Cayman Islands

by Tim Rock

While everyone was walking around indoors in jackets last November and talking about diving, I was actually doing some.

DEMA is the diving world's convention venue to show off the latest and greatest. I didn't go. I went to Grand Cayman. The fine folks at Aquatica did go. They were among those with some cool stuff to present to the diving world. In the offerings was a new D200 housing with a slide out camera mounting tray and an eye-popping viewfinder called the Aqua View. They had just finished the viewfinder prototype about a day prior to the November 2006 DEMA Show and installed it into the new Ad200 housing for the Nikon D200 camera. Intrepid pro Mauricio Handler had a chance to dive with it... in a pool. So when the Aquatica folks got wind I was cooling my fins in Grand Cayman at the lovely Cobalt Coast with the DiveTech folks, they decided to put me to work.

"Want to test our new housing and viewfinder in the sea?" they asked.

"Sure, send it on down to DiveTech here in the Caymans," I

said. "But I only have my Canon gear with me."

"Not to worry, we'll send ya a body and some lenses, too."

Yikes, could I remember how to use a Nikon again? Must be like riding a bike or throwing a boomerang. It all comes back.

I guessed that he wanted me to put it through its paces, as the shooting schedule I was on was heavy. I was updating a Lonely Planet Diving and Snorkeling Guide to the Cayman Islands and would have to shoot a lot above and below the surface in the coming weeks. I suspected he needed my innate skills as a deft shooter and creative genius.

It was probably more like he needed any near-sighted old guy to test the viewfinder and possibly come up with one or two images in focus and I happened to be there.

Now, you can do a search here on Wetpixel.com and find a diatribe/review about my switching to Canon after about 30 years as a Nikon user. I did this for the most part because I needed something to write RAW fast and then faster. Canon was light years ahead of Nikon in this department





two years ago. So I got outfitted with 20Ds and Aquatica housings and spent a couple of not bad years with Canon gear in my bags. And that's what I had with me in Grand Cayman until the ever resourceful Blake Stoughton packed up a D200, a 10.5mm lens, a 105 D Nikkor Macro lens and a shiny, new D200 housing already equipped with the new Aqua View finder. He knew I had ports with me already. All Aquatica ports are interchangeable on all of the housings so that was covered.

So like a kid at Christmas (closer to Thanksgiving actually) I unwrapped my FedEx box and spent an evening assembling a set-up somewhat familiar to me.

I found the nicest new feature

for this housing aside from its compact size is the slide in tray. You secure the camera with a single set screw and align it with a couple of stainless steel fingers at the inside bottom of the housing and the camera slides perfectly into place and locks in there. Before I knew it, I had a handy, dandy wide angle package hooked up with the 10.5, the 8" dome and Ikelite wires and Ike DS125 strobes. Looked pretty functional and Stingray City was on the agenda for the next day's diving. We'd see how fast this baby could write RAW in no time.

When I switched to Canon, I did talk to many friends and my brother who is a camera nut. Jim Watt and my brother were high on Canon. Watt likes to stuff his rig down the



mouths of tiger sharks and Komodo dragons and my brother's tamer aspirations are those of shooting loons in Minnesota. Don Doll, possibly National Geographic's only contract Jesuit, said he had been waffling between Nikon and Leica but was currently shooting Nikon. Tom Langdon, a truly creative pro who is never at loss for an opinion told me Canons don't even feel like cameras.

He later told me they even smell funny and he had one once in his Gargoyle Studio but got rid of it due to its objectionable olfactory essence. He is obviously a Nikon guy.

I actually like many Canon features. There is no doubt they are fine cameras. I also like a good many Nikon features and lenses. I still don't think Canon has a proper lens range for underwater although the Tokina



10-17mm may remedy that (sweet, sweet lens). But getting that Nikon back in my hands was a shot of heroin to my Nikon starved system.

November can have its windy days in Grand Cayman and it was so windy when I first arrived the tour ops hadn't been to the stingrays in a couple of days. This is highly unusual. So the rays were hungry for handouts when we hit the water. Big guys mobbed us. There were rays everywhere.



My model Olga Spoelstra had them on her head, swimming up her arms and coming straight at her and me! We couldn't stop laughing. This has to be one of the finest, wildest dives anywhere. The water is clear and blue and the bottom reflective.

Now this new Aqua View finder is blurry to look through on land as it's corrected for underwater use. So it looked kinda good in the hotel room. But Wow! I was blown away when I got a gander at it underwater. The brightness and detail is eye-popping. I was back in 13mm RS heaven. It reminded me of how big and bright the image was back in the days of the water contact RS lens days.

Now, I am not spring chicken so I have been celebrating my 39th birthday for quite a few years. Still, the eyes are pretty good and I didn't think I was going to be that impressed by this thing. But after that dive, I did not put this down the whole trip. It became the wide angle camera of choice. The viewfinder was truly a revelation. This combined with the D200 housing's nice, big playback window

to make both focusing and composing, shooting and then checking your image a pleasure.

I was able to fill a 4 gig card on the dive and remembered fondly how handy the Nikon controls are. Aperture and shutter speed are a one hand, couple of fingers operation on an Aquatica housing and I was able to adjust the varying light and distance conditions with ease. Even though it was still a bit currenty in shallow Stingray City, I came away with some pretty nice shots. We went back two days later when conditions were perfect and did a repeat performance with the same happy results. We also used it on some of the big dropoffs like Orange Canyon and Ghost Mountain.

The in-water functionality for wide angle half-half shots was also not a problem. Even though in the air the VF appears blurry, it is easy to compose with it just partially submerged. We snorkeled around a bit and looked for conch and starfish and had a nice session at Rum Point doing some over-under shots.

So if this thing worked so well with wide angle, what would it do for my macro? Here's where my eyes are fooling me a bit. With my normal 20D viewfinder, I find I have a tendency with macro critters to miss the exact spot of focus on occasion. Sometimes I get lucky and there's enough depth of field to save the shot. But sometimes its pretty obvious where I thought I was getting the eye of a grouper, I actually got the nose (sound familiar?).

So we hooked up the 105mm and headed for the Doc Polson shipwreck, which has some nice little macro critters like lettuce slugs, arrow crabs, blennies and a jawfish or two. I descended to the ship and I sat down on the top of the bridge. I saw there was a certain resting spot and I nestled in to



my favorite place to read up on things and studied the housing (see photo). I then headed into the ship in search of critters. The focus was fast and I was able to see cleanly the subject detail. I was truly jazzed and proceeded to wreak havoc on everything the size of my hand or smaller. I was able to really pick out the fine points of each

subject. Another 4 gig card drained. This new VF will not fit a 20D housing but will fit most of the rest of the new models in the Aquatica line-up.

So what's the moral here? First, don't tell Mike Veitch you're switching back to Nikon after a big Canon move. He will give you grief.



But the main points here are the robust nature of the Aqua View and its bright, 7 element body. This well-constructed viewfinder is worth looking onto whether you have Canon or Nikon. I liked it so much I used it as an excuse to sell my Canon 20D gear and get set up with Nikon again. I could have just gone to the Canon 30D, too, as this new VF fits on most of the new housings and pops out easily for travel and packing. If you already have one of the newer

Aquatica housings, then you can just buy the VF and you should be able to install it yourself.

So first, even though this hunk of glass retails for \$1149, it's well worth the extra expense. Just get it. I did have a day or two of adjustment with my mask, which is an older twin lens frame. I kept putting it in the center mask lens divider. Once I got used to situating it, it was not an issue. Olga had a single faceplate new Scubapro mask and the VF gave her

no problems at all. Aquatica did look into an eye cup but decided against the extra cost and also most people didn't find it a necessity. She was also impressed with the lens clarity as she does get on the other side of the camera on occasions.

Second, in this digital age, selling camera gear is kind of part of the ongoing process. If you like Nikon, stay with it as its on a par with Canon once again after lagging miserably behind. I now have my beloved 10.5mm and a new Tokina 10-17mm zoom for Nikon and am a happy camper in the wide-angle department once again. (Yes, Aquatica is generous, but not THAT generous. I had to send back the test housing and camera after the trip.)

Third, the new Aquatica housing with the slide out tray is a sturdy and fully functional piece of equipment. The focusing, shutter and aperture controls are all close to one another and easy to get to in situations that require fast reaction. Plus, Aquatica has announced a new dome super wide optical glass port and an optical glass flat port. Aside from improving optics, the glass port should be a boon to guys like Jimmy Hall who routinely let tiger sharks eat their acrylic domes. Both the housing and VF go to a tested 100 meters so

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even tech guys will be in business. The new visibility at great depth is a real plus for tekkies as well as normal imaging for aging shooters.

So I am back to Nikon. I am using the new Nikkor 105mm VR as well so we'll see how that goes. I got a couple of AD200 housings with Aqu View finders on them and I am a happy camper. Mike Veitch won't sell me back the 80-400 VR lens I sold him when I switched to Canon. What a guy. But other than that, I am back in business. I do miss the Canon scroll wheel but I just really like the feel of a Nikon. Different strokes. I promise not to switch back to Canon again anytime soon (at least another year).

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Learn from the pros



Mike Veitch



Simon Buxton



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