

Can you Choose a Digital Still Camera Intelligently?

by Michael Wicks

Little did I know when a diver friend of mine threw me a “disposable” underwater camera that I would be hooked faster than I was hooked on diving?

It was a 35mm crank, point, and shoot camera. But when I got the film processed it had scratches down the center of each negative. Even with the scratches, however, I could see I wanted to continue my quest for good underwater images. I also knew that if I wanted anything decent I would have to upgrade to a device of slightly higher quality.

Thus began my search for a new camera. Now keep in mind, since I am not a world renowned diver/photographer nor am I a PADI Course director, companies won't just send me cameras and housings to play with to see if I like them. Pity. Therefore all my research had to be theoretical and on the web.

I wanted a device that I would be able to use both topside and down below. My criteria for choosing were not too intense. 1. The camera should be small so that traveling

with it would not pose too much of a hassle. 2. The camera should be a minimum of 6 mp so that I may be able to enlarge an image here or there for home, friends, or sale. And 3 it should be able to be set with different white balance and ISO modes. My budget was about \$450 for the camera with housing. Any concerns about additional lenses for macro or wide angle was not great as I figured most of the point and shoot digital still cameras today have pretty wide focal lengths.

What I wasn't prepared for was the number of choices out there. Just to give you an idea of what I saw, Canon produces 24 digital still models and Olympus makes 21 and that number includes 10 new models from Olympus and 10 new models from Canon in the past 3 months. Sea and Sea has 6 models, some of which are recently discontinued and Bonita has 1 sticking to the KISS methodology of Keeping It Simple Stupid.

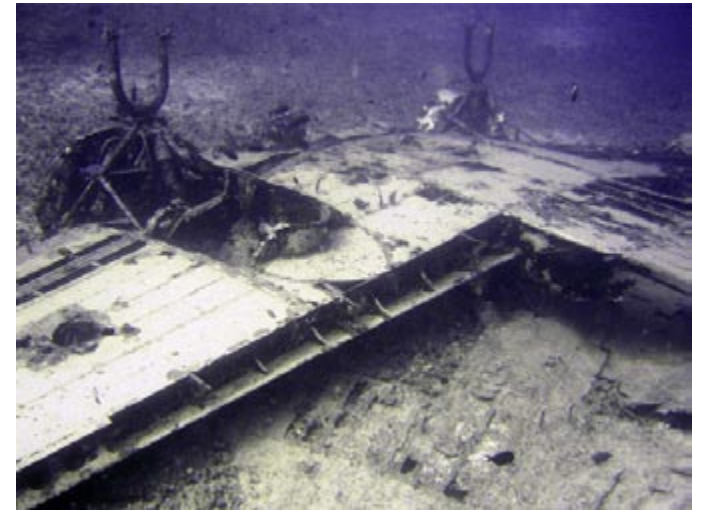
Since Bonita has just the one model I started there. Although the LCD is large measuring in at 2.5" and



one dive shop told me that there is virtually no shutter lag, the mega pixel range was only 5mp. The camera had some nice features and uses a “skin” for its waterproofing thus making

it easier to handle. The price was within my range but the pixel ratio was a little lower than specified.

Sea and Sea has some really nice models and they all come with their



respective housings already. Only one model still in production met my resolution specification and price range; the Dx860 with an effective range of 6.2 mega pixels. The optical zoom was typical for this type of camera with a maximum of 3x. Another nice feature of these cameras is the availability of the external wet lenses (macro and wide angle). The price point was about \$499.

Canon definitely has a vast array of digital still's to choose from which can be a curse as much as a blessing. I quickly became fatigued whilst trying to cross reference a camera I liked with searching on-line for a housing that would fit (I've since found out that there are resources that help in this but hindsight is of course 20/20 and the resource was at a small dive shop in Hollywood). One of the issues I was running into was that many of the housings were for cameras that had been discontinued. Of course with the rate that new cameras are rolling off the line it's no wonder. The canon A95 does have a housing available and the price is within the range I had, but again the mega

pixels were only 5.1. There are other companies, such as Ikelite, that make housings for the Canon's but the housings were in the \$300-400 range which would bring this solution way outside my base price criteria. I definitely got the feeling that in the Canon world, underwater housings were more geared to matching what you already had rather than having a solution for purchasing a package.

Since Olympus manufactures their own housings for their digital still cameras they've done something that I have yet to see other camera manufactures do. On their website they have put a section just for underwater housings. Once you navigate to their housing site you can click on the housing and be shown which cameras it will fit. Compared with the Canon experience this was like having a VIP pass at the security lines in JFK Airport. In fact, during this writing Olympus has even put a quick link on the main consumer products page directing you to all new housings. Quite nifty.

They have quite a few cameras with housings

that will work and surprisingly both the cameras and the housings combined fall well within my price range. But what about my other criteria? Last year Olympus came out with the 740 mu and 750 mu models. The resolution is a whopping 7.1 mega pixel and the 740 has a 5x optical zoom. The 750 mu has a higher optical zoom and some other features but the camera does run about \$100 more. There was one other really interesting feature I found on these 2 cameras that I didn't see on any others. Included in the 27 shooting modes, yes 27, were 3 underwater modes. Other features included image stabilization, a 2.5" LCD screen, and all weather protection. This doesn't mean that it's waterproofed by no means, but you can stand out in a mist or drizzle and not worry about the camera getting ruined. There were 2 downsides that I found whilst looking at these 2 devices. The first, Olympus decided to remove the viewfinder. But since most people don't use this with digital point and shoot cameras anymore I didn't see this as a show stopper. The 2nd is that the housing uses



might be a really excellent fit. The best price I found new was \$220, which isn't so bad since the MSRP retail is \$299. Since I tend to take chances on a refurbished camera I searched ebay as well as other on line venues. I was able to find one for \$169 with a 3 year warranty. The housing cost me another \$200 but I like everything else in life I have since seen it lower. The whole set up is small enough that it will fit in my cargo shorts pockets. Just the other day I was able to stash it with the housing in my cargo pockets whilst Kayaking of the coast of Florida.

I firmly believe that any of the cameras I researched would have worked fine for me had it not been for resolution or price. It is not my intention to say that this camera was the best out there. If being able to use wet macro and wide angle lenses with your setup then this definitely won't work for you, at least not yet. It's very

easy to start adding on features that you want, but soon you will be up in the high 500 or 600 dollar range just for the camera.

As with all goals, the object should be to keep it simple and inexpensive without sacrificing your needs. By the time this is published I'm sure there will be even more options available. After all, since I bought my camera from Olympus, they've released 4 new cameras in the same model range (the mu). And one is cheaper than mine. Newer and cheaper, who would have figured? In the end stick to your budget, your camera's out there, you just have to dig a little to find what will work for you..



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a 52mm screw thread for additional lenses. In fact Olympus states this as a feature but when I asked the Olympus representative at a dive show he merely stated that, yeah, we have no plans on making any lenses that will fit it, but you can try the guys at Fantasea. And so close to being completely diver centric. But again this was not one of my criterions for the new camera so I didn't get hung up on this feature.

So which camera was right for me and met my criteria? As you might have guessed I settled on the 740mu. With all my specifications for a new camera and with all the features that this camera had it appeared that this

