

The Perfect System...

well for now anyway...

By Don Silcock

In September 2005 I came back from a trip to Raja Ampat in Indonesia convinced that I had reached the boundaries of what my current camera, the Nikon D100, could do and was seriously thinking of an upgrade. At that point in time the D2X was available if you could afford it.... and the D200 appeared to be finally not too far away.

My next trip was to Bali that Xmas and a good (and VERY trusting friend) offered to loan me his D2X and Subal housing! After coyly hesitating for at least two nanoseconds I gratefully accepted the offer on the standard proviso that if I flooded it, I owned it....

I have to say that I was amazed at the difference between the two cameras and very pleased with my results in Bali. So I began seriously contemplating upgrading to the D2X until I sat back and did the math. Back then I had two D100's and two Subal housings, one rig bought brand new and the other bought second-hand from another friend who had decided to upgrade to the D2X & Seacam housing.

Taking two camera rigs, strobes and all the associated stuff on a diving trip is an expensive business these days and I had decided that for my next upgrade I would go with a single housing and two bodies. Two D2X bodies and the Subal housing to match my existing ports is a LOT of money and at the end of the day I just could not justify spending that much on what is still a hobby for me.

So I decided to sell my D100's & housings before the D200 released and use my back-up F100 & housing whilst I waited for Nikon & Subal to get their acts together. I was pretty lucky with the camera as Sea Optics, the Australian agent for Subal are also a Nikon dealer and not only did they get me one of first D200 bodies to come into the country, but also one of the highly sort after 18-200 VR zooms in January 2006.

However, it was May 2006 before I actually got my hands on my new Subal housing complete with the GS viewfinder and June by the time I got it underwater in PNG.

Whilst I was going through this upgrade I decided that it was time to



take a long hard look at all my gear and find the optimum set-up that would give me everything I needed on a dive trip, but minimized what I took with me.

The objective of this article is to explain how I came up with what I now consider to be the “perfect rig” – well for me anyway....and for now!

The Camera: Overall, both for land and underwater, I cannot really fault the D200 – it is an exceptional camera that took prosumer DSLR's into the second generation of technology.

Much has been written elsewhere

about the functions & features of the D200 so I am just going to mention the two key things that have made a huge difference to the quality of my images.

First the sensor in the D200, which is CCD technology compared to the CMOS sensor in the D2X, and apparently made by Sony with Nikon engineering input. None of which really matters that much to me, but the results are clearly far superior to the D100 in terms of quality of the image and improved dynamic range. The smaller pixels in the D200 sensor @ 6.05 microns, compared to the 7.80



microns in the D100, produce tremendous detail in the finished image and although the dynamic range of both cameras are roughly the same overall at about 8 stops, the results from the D200 sensor are significantly better.

Secondly, the four channel histogram in the D200 is a tremendous improvement over the luminance version in the D100 which just showed the overall distribution of perceived brightness in the image, but no information on the color channels. So what would have appeared to be a properly exposed image underwater could actually be very misleading and quite disappointing when downloaded and viewed later!

I have come to realize that interpreting the four channel histogram – the white or luminance channel plus the individual red, green & blue color channels really is the key to realizing the full potential of the D200's sensor.

The Housing: I have owned four different Subal housings since 1994 and found them to very well designed overall & superbly made, very reliable, rugged and stand up to everything that gets



thrown at them.

They are not cheap, but you get what you pay for - I just wish they had a port lock on that fish-eye dome.....

Lenses: The really great thing about lenses for Nikon cameras is that they are all black - why is this important you may ask?

Well it's important because when my wife looks in the "camera cupboard" under the desk where I am writing this, or in my camera bag when we are on holiday somewhere, she just sees a lot of black things.... This means she has no real interest in what they are or what they do and, more importantly, how much I have spent getting to the point where I now feel I have the right set of lenses for my trips!

The lenses purchased on that journey are: Nikon 10.5mm, Tokina 10-17mm, Nikon 12-24mm, Sigma 15mm, Nikon 17-55mm, Sigma 17-70mm, Nikon 18-70mm, Nikon 20mm, Nikon 24mm, Sigma 28-70, Nikon 60mm Macro, Nikon 105mm Macro, Sigma 150mm and Nikon 70-180 Macro.

I shouldn't really be telling you this and in my

defense I would like to state that I have sold or am selling the ones I don't need.... But here is what I am currently taking on my trips and why:

Nikon 10.5: I really think this is the mother of all wide-angle lenses and once mastered produces sensational results - it's sharp, fast, focuses close and is just a great lens. If I know for sure the site is suited for fish-eye type photography then it's a no contest and this is what I use.

Tokina 10-17: This lens certainly has stirred up a great deal of interest and I had to get mine in Japan as it was hard to find. So far I have only done one trip with it, but I was very pleased with the results and will use the lens if I need some flexibility on a wide-angle site.

Nikon 12-24: Like a lot of people I struggled with this lens initially – nice & sharp above water but soft underwater using the Subal recommended +2 dioptre, 50mm extension ring and fish-eye dome. Then I read a post by on Wetspixel by Alex Mustard recommending a 30mm extension with a +4 dioptre and have been very pleased with the results.

I find this lens to be a good all round lens, but have to admit that I am using it less & less if there is any chance to use the 10.5mm or 10-17mm. Ultra wide angle underwater photography is addictive and produces such tremendous results that make the images from the 12-24 seem lacking somehow....

Sigma 17-70: This was the most difficult choice and where I spent the most money. Basically I was looking for lens that would give me the maximum flexibility when I was diving on a site I had not dived before.

I started off with the Nikon 18-70 after I read a positive review on Thom Hogan's site and figured it was exactly what I was looking for, but I was very disappointed with the results after forking out



were tough and looked kind of macho. But with the airlines trying to gouge every cent out of their passengers these days I reached the conclusion that they had become a liability - not only are they heavy at nearly 7kg without anything in them, so you are paying excess baggage for the bag itself, but they stand out like a sore thumb almost demanding to be stolen.

So I looked around for the right combination of carry-on luggage that would allow me to take all my gear on board and just check in my dive gear & clothes etc. It seems every underwater photographer has a different opinion about the best way to take



their gear with them, but here is what works for me.

I use two carry-on bags, both of which are within the standard airline size limits of 22" in length, 14" wide and 9" high. The first is a small "roll-on" suitcase that is just big enough to take the Subal housing & 70-180 port, plus the two Ikelite strobes and various bits & pieces like strobe cables. I assemble one D200 body and the 70-180 lens inside the housing & port to save space.

The second bag is a Lowepro Photo Trekker Classic backpack which takes the other body, all the lenses, my laptop and passport & wallet.

Most airlines have a weight limit of 7kg for

carry-on baggage and one bag, although I have never seen the one bag rule enforced, last Xmas on my way to Bali, via Melbourne, security was enforcing the weight limit as passengers went into the departure area. I was forced to check in one bag and opted for the small suitcase as I figured it was well packed with everything in bubble wrap and I was not going to check in all those lenses.... It arrived safely with no damage to any of the contents.

Generally though, the key appears to be keep the backpack on your shoulder when checking in, completely ignore the pain and then nonchalantly point to the roll-on suitcase when asked "do you have any carry-on baggage sir?"

Conclusion: In the "good old days" of film you could buy a new system and confidently expect to have it at least five years. Today the cycle is three years at the very most, unless you decide your current system still does everything you need and you will skip a generation of technology. My opinion is that the advances in each new generation of technology justify the cost and whilst I can afford to pay the cost I will continue to upgrade.

Once that decision is made, it's a question of managing the life cycle of your system. Selling your current system before the next generation of technology is available is the best way to maximize the price you will get and with my D100's I got half price by doing that. I got half the cost of the brand new system back after 2.5 years of ownership and the same price as I paid for the second-hand system after 1 year of ownership.

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