

Sea & Sea MDX-D300

By Berkley White

The Sea & Sea MDX-D300 has a very solid feel in the hand and its in water weight seems lighter than the Sea & Sea DX-D200 housing. Unlike the previous cast model, the MDX-D300 is milled from a solid block of aluminum and thus has a more rugged finish. It survived 2 weeks of very poor maintenance (fresh water rinses out of a gas can) and cleaned up easily with no signs of corrosion or fatigue. The quick lock camera tray makes camera installation easy, but when using a zoom lens, it's best to wiggle the zoom knob prior to locking down the tray to ensure a precise install.

MDX-D300 housing viewfinder options



Personally I find all stock viewfinders on underwater housings to be difficult if not impossible to use for accurate composition and focus verification. The stock viewfinder on the Sea & Sea MDX-D300 is no exception. I received the housing hours before departure and was unable to install the new Inon Straight (180) viewfinder and chose to use the Inon 45 viewfinder instead. The Inon



45 offers a bright crisp image with the largest angle of acceptance, but I found the 45 degree angle (head down) view to be difficult for the fast action of sailfish and dolphin. I brought the stock viewfinder along, but determined I'd rather have the large view of the Inon 45. I was able to adapt my technique over the period of a few days and would now like to travel with both the 45 and 180 viewfinders and swap based on my subjects.

MDX-D300 housing control ergonomics

The Sea & Sea DX-D300 housing features oversized knobs and buttons that are easily controlled with even gloved hands. Essential controls (shutter release, aperture, shutter speed, and focus lock) are easily reached with a large hand, but small handed users will likely find essential controls more difficult with only one hand supporting the housing. The round and non-indexed knobs for MSC and AF-area Mode require



practice to accurately adjust on the fly, but unlike myself, most users don't regularly access these controls. The unique barrel style control for the Sub Command Dial (aperture) is very convenient, but is half occluded by the Fisheye Dome Port when not using an extension ring. While I'm quite fond of the smoother controls and ergonomics of the Subal line of underwater housings, I was able to operate all controls on the MDX-D300 quickly within 15



minutes of the first dive. The last Sea & Sea housing I personally shot was their Nikon F5 underwater housing and it was a personal favorite. This new line of MDX housings is a great step back to their previous attention to detail. Hat's off to the new design team at Sea & Sea!

New custom settings in the Nikon D3 and D300 allow the user to program the AE-L/AF-L button to the same custom offerings as the Function button. The Function button is located on the front of the camera body (near the lens mount) and is difficult if not impossible to include in a housing design. The AE-L/AF-L and AF-ON buttons are conveniently located on

the back of the camera. The MDX-D300 housing offers access to either these buttons with a very cool pull and lock lever that allows the user to switch from one to another control while underwater. Unfortunately, the MDX-D300 (and other housings) do not allow simultaneous access to both buttons.

As underwater photographers we would really like access to both AE-L/AF-L and AF-ON buttons. The AF-ON button could be used to activate focus and operate similar to what Canon shooters call back focus. Press AF-ON to focus, let go and the focus is locked. With simultaneous access to the AE-L/AF-L button, we could

use the custom options to program this button for Flash Off (or numerous other options). With Flash Off we could temporarily disable strobes for silhouette shots when the subject is too far away for a good flash fill.

Summary

In my humble opinion, the Nikon D300 offers the most significant advance in underwater digital photography since the Nikon D100. It's beyond instant digital feedback and produces images on par and arguably better than results I've ever achieved with 35mm film. When considered at ISO 400, the results

are clearly better than scanned slide film. The Sea & Sea MDX-D300 housing might not be perfected in highend ergonomics, but it is clearly a professional level housing at a great price. If Sea & Sea continues on this MDX design and invests a little more in tactile smoothness, they could easily position themselves as the best housing / best price on the world market.

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