

Nikon D300 and Subal ND3

by Martin Edge

When the Nikon D300 was released last summer (07) I along with many other underwater photographers recognised that its introduction coupled with the relatively low retail price would substantially influence uwp world over. In my role as uwp educator I decided to 'jump on the bandwagon' and up – grade from my trusty, reliable and much loved D200.

You need to know that I have favoured Nikon since my days with a Nikon F2 and Oceanic housings of the 80's. I have owned and used Subal housings since the introduction of the Nikon F801 in the early 1990's. In my teaching role I regularly instruct in Ikelite, Sea & Sea, Nexus and Hugyfot DSLR housings. Whilst I'll endeavour to be impartial as I can, the influence that Nikon and Subal have had on my own photographic career cannot be ignored. I am unable to compare the D300 against our Canon cousins but I do have sufficient experience using the D200 to compare against the Nikon D300

On first appearance the Subal ND30 is very similar to the ND20 (Nikon D200). It weighs the same, looks the same and when you take

hold, it feels the same. But then you notice the huge 3" LCD screen. Now, I am a firm believer that the larger the LCD the easier and more accurate it is to review the result underwater. I cannot emphasise this enough. It's no use finding out that you have clipped the composition or chosen the wrong angle when you're back on dry land! The time to review and correct an error or to pursue a new idea on a subject is underwater at the time of shooting. The 3in LCD of the D300 is bright, clear and easy to view even in shallow water. There is a one finger - press - zoom button on the rear of the housing. In practice I was able to determine sharp focus on my macro/close up subjects and on many occasions I persisted with the subject to correct my focusing/compositional mistakes. I doubt if I would have noticed underwater (at the time) these small imperfections/mistakes by viewing my Nikon D200 LCD.

I receive many enquiries concerning whether or not the Subal GS viewfinder is worth the money. In my opinion the viewfinder of any camera housing is without doubt the most significant feature of the entire



design. If we cannot see clearly and accurately what we are trying to shoot then what is the point? Doesn't it frustrate when a manufacturer produces a housing where the user is unable to see all four corners of the viewfinder to compose a subject correctly. Enhanced viewfinders like Subal and other housings, though expensive are definitely worth the money IMHO.

The front main dial (aperture) the rear main dial (shutter speed) and shutter release control are in exactly the same position as before. I have

heard criticisms that for users with small hands the shutter release is too far away from the right handled grip. My suggestion is to simply release the velcro strap to allow the right hand closer access.

The On/Off switch has changed to a circular design. In my opinion this is an improvement and I feel the sensitivity to turn the camera on and off both on land (without the back plate) connected and underwater have a more positive feel to it.

The Mode and +/- exposure compensation push down controls



situated behind the On/off switch are now raised up slightly. Whilst on first glance this would not appear to make the slightest difference, underwater I noticed that it was much easier for me to locate both the 'Mode' and +/- to push down and make changes without looking at either dial. I'm unable to comment on whether or not these dials are as easy to manipulate when wearing gloves.



A similar design improvement is evident on the left hand side of the housing with the 'QUAL' quality, 'WB' White Balance and ISO push down controls. With the ND30, Subal have disposed with the small black circular base on which these three push buttons were situated on with the ND20.

Now, I always change the 'Quality' and 'ISO' setting via the 'My Menu' in the rear LCD screen but with 'WB' White Balance I do need easy access to this button. My WB settings fluctuate between 'Auto' and 'Preset'. To set Preset WB via the housing I first use the LCD screen to locate and change it. This brings the 'PRE' setting up in the bottom right hand corner of the camera viewfinder. Once done, you push down and hold the 'WB' control for about three seconds and press the shutter. If this attempt to 'preset' is successful you will see the 'Gd' sign (which signifies the preset reading is 'good' and has worked).

I find it much easier to locate this WB push button control on the top left of the housing than it was before. With a little practice, 'preset' WB readings can be set quite easily without having to fiddle around to locate the control.

The ND30 now has a lever on top of the housing which activates the flash exposure compensation button

situated just below the 'pop up' flash button of the camera. The addition of this control is for users of Nikon SB flashguns in housings to control exposure compensation.

Moving down the rear back-plate towards the LCD screen the BKT 'bracket' button of the ND20 has been replaced with the 'playback' button and next to it remains the 'Delete' button. Below this in order are the following five push down buttons: Menu, ? Info and Lock, Zoom out -, Zoom in +, OK

Many readers will be familiar with the above but I'll just mention the highlights.



Press the Info/Lock button and the shooting display information comes up on the LCD screen.

Information including the Aperture, Shutter speed, Exposure Mode, etc are displayed on the LCD monitor. The implications of this I found to be a significant I did not have to look through the viewfinder to ascertain my exposure settings or exposure mode

The viewfinder's built in exposure meter is also displayed. Indicating if a scene will be under or over exposed.

I could easily change and determine my settings i.e chosen aperture and shutter speed by simply turning the appropriate dials and having a clear unrestricted view of my progress in the 3in LCD monitor.

In practice, I could swim towards a subject (turtle) whilst at the same time, adjusting aperture and shutter speed and without taking my eye off the of the turtle

The Zoom in or out is a one push zoom feature which can magnify the LCD by up to 27 times. Whilst this is not a new, it has been developed and I found it so much more ergonomic.

The MSC focus mode selector, lens release, shutter release, AF On lever have not changed to any degree. The spot, matrix and center weighted dial are also unchanged.

The multi selector push down controls now have an additional



to lock onto subjects. For the last eight months I have been using the Nikon VR 105mm macro lens with mixed results, the jury is still out on this! I love the results on land and the quality of blur (bokeh) but underwater I've found it difficult to lock on to macro subjects because the focus is so damn quick from minimum to maximum. Using this lens early one morning, I dropped to 30m to shoot a longnosed hawk fish which I had found the previous day. Once in the water I realised I had not attached my focus torch. I shot it all the same and was surprised and very impressed by how the focus locked-on in such poor ambient light. After 700 frames with my Nikon 105m macro VR - I can see substantial improvement in the focusing abilities of the D300 and this lens now has a permanent place in my camera bag.

Sunbursts and highlights

Just so you know where I stand



on this: By choice, I don't often include the sun ball itself within the frame. I find myself leaving it out and using the beams of light in the corners to add sparkle and 'jazz up' an otherwise monochromatic blue void in my wide angles. Will the D300 provide our sunbursts with the appeal they had on film? I think so but I'm unable to evidence it! Our 10 days in Cebu, suffered with poor visibility and whilst the sea was not rough it was often choppy. I shot sunbursts at various depths down to 25m but the beams were so scattered and diffused, it's hard to pass an informed opinion. As I recollect, shooting sunbursts in these conditions on film, the results were not that impressive either. What

I can confirm is that low light shallow water sunlight shots worked very well and there's a significant improvement over the Nikon D200.

On four consecutive mornings I shot sunlight with a 10.5mm fisheye in 1m to 6m of water. The sea conditions were glass calm and visibility was at its best for the day – 20m. I used shutter speeds of 1/320th sec with an whole range of apertures. I shot Raw at the 200 ISO default and Auto white balance. The sunbeams appeared more accentuated with the fast shutter speed of 320th as opposed to 125th. But I was forever minded that this could also be affected by the height of the sun in relation to the horizon. The 'highlights' warning

push button in the center. I found this very useful in order to activate a full size histogram overlay on top of the image and most importantly – activate it at your own convenience. This histogram can be set by going to Custom Setting F1

I used the camera and housing during a 10 day photo workshop at Kasai Village Resort in Cebu Philippines. Now, I'll point out that I am unable to thrill you with images of the likes which Berkley White produced with the sailfish but for everyday subjects then read on.

The ND30 felt no different in water than the ND20 but soon into the trip I noticed the improvement of both 'S' and 'C' auto focus (center point)



seldom indicated the sunbeams as 'clipped' but when the ball of the sun was present - this would 'blink'. In Raw postproduction – CS3, it was easy to recover the highlights as long as they were not excessively overexposed.

I have no doubt that the ability of the D300 to handle the nature of highlights so often associated with underwater is a substantial improvement over Nikon DSLR cameras which have gone before. Together with my photo buddy Shannon Conway we compared almost identical images taken with

my rig and his own Nikon D2x and we both agreed the D300 was superior for highlights. We also compared how similarly the D300 rendered saturation and colour, particularly with the tones of blue mid-water. An aspect of the Nikon D2x, which I have always been jealous of. For my own photography these improvements, together with the low light focusing abilities and almost double the pixel count are good reasons to justify an up-grade.

Noise

At 400 ISO I saw no evidence of digital noise. At 800 ISO I made

the mistake of underexposing several blue water examples and when these areas were magnified, noise was slightly visible. Expose correctly at 1600 ISO and the noise effect diminishes. In Berkley White's review of the D300 and sailfish he warns of the importance to shoot accurate exposures to avoid the noise enhancing effects of brightening a dark image in post processing. This is excellent advice and I would recommend readers revisit his review at UwP41

Live view Mode

During my 10 day workshop I looked for numerous opportunities to use the Liveview Mode as an advantage to normal viewfinder composition. Whilst it is quite easy to set 'liveview' on a Subal housing, all my attempts to use it in some meaningful way failed. Perhaps I was not selecting appropriate subjects or opportunities; perhaps the GS viewfinder is so outstandingly clear as not to warrant in the circumstances, which I found before me. Whatever the reason, at this time, I fail to see a purpose to use 'live view' mode underwater when used in conjunction with the ND30. Perhaps a housing with poor viewfinding characteristics would benefit.

Battery Life

Compared to the D200 the battery life is a very comforting and a much needed improvement. I averaged 700 frames with both 60mm and 105mm macro lenses.

With the 10.5mm and Tokina 10mm – 17mm the average was 800. I allowed the battery to 'run down' to 3% and it continued to function adequately until it reached 1% when it died. At 10% power I could find no difference in performance from 100%

Weight and Transport

The Subal ND30 housing with the Nikon D300, a Nikon 60mm macro lens and port. Two Inon Z220's with leads and a couple of Inon flash arms have a combined weight of 7 kilos. I carry this equipment in a large but light weight ruck-sac which can be crumpled up and made to fit the luggage rack dimensions at airports. I wear a photographer's vest (at the last count I found 15 pockets). I carry flash guns, a variety of lenses and other essential bits and bobs. My vest (on average) weighs between 10k and 13k. Once through all the check-in hassle I re-pack the contents of my jacket into the ruck-sac. This method is working well for me at international airports and I include it in this review for those who may find it helpful.

To Upgrade or not

For those of you who may be contemplating an upgrade to the Nikon D300. I would suggest you visit the most comprehensive review, which I have seen - by Thom Hogan. <http://www.bythom.com/nikond300review.htm> It's a long read but at the bottom of the review, Thom compares the D300 and offers his opinions on upgrades under the heading of 'Should I get a D300'.

For use underwater I recommend the Nikon D300 very highly and after using and reviewing the ND30, I

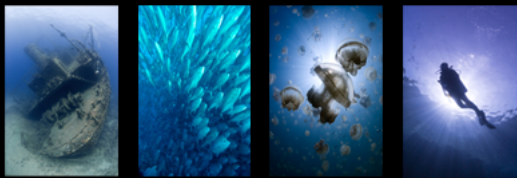
am unable to identify any particular aspect of this housing, which I believe could be improved upon.

Martin Edge

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