

3 into 2 Will Go

by Mark Webster

Nikon have a habit it seems of sneaking up behind unwary underwater photographers and surprising if not shocking us with the announcement of new cameras and lenses. The last ten months have been no exception with the arrival of the D3 and D300 together and most recently the D700. Although we had all anticipated a FX (full frame) chip in a small body following the D3 announcement, many in the industry were surprised at how soon it hit the market. If you have bought a D3 look out for the D3X rumoured to arrive before the end of the year!

If you are a serious or professional land photographer with the need or desire to upgrade regularly to the latest model then the expense is considerable. But for underwater photographers the expense can be terminal! Not only do you have the cost of the camera, but also the even greater cost of a housing and you will have the nagging doubt that by the time the housing manufacturers come to market the next upgrade is almost on us! You also realise that when you try to sell your current kit that the used value will have crashed spectacularly from the original purchase price. Another consideration is computing power and storage – more megapixels means bigger files so upgrading your laptop etc. may also have to be added to the equation. So, many who have just invested in the D300 and a housing in the last few months may be feeling a little bewildered and no doubt frustrated with the temptation of the D700 now dangled like the proverbial carrot in front of them.



Re-designed D300 base plate and the original D200 base plate side by side with D300 in background.

It seems no time at all since I invested in a brace of D200's and a Subal ND20 - in fact it is more than two years which in the digital race seems like several millennia – and I was resisting the temptation to upgrade to the D300 with the logic that skipping a generation would be less expensive in the long run. This was until I spotted an interesting post on Wetpixel by a gentleman named Sam Chae who was busy proving that you could use a D300 in a D200 housing with some very minor modifications. Suddenly the cost of upgrading plummeted to the price difference between selling a used D200 and the cost of a D300, which was already falling! With my interest rekindled I re-evaluated the upgrade advantages of the D300 and contacted Sam to see if he would make additional conversion kits for sale.

The body of the D300 varies very little in size from the D200 and many of the key controls and buttons are in the same place. The larger



Replacement of shutter mode release/lock control with new shorter control (i.e. for selecting single frame, continuous)

review screen has moved some buttons a little to the left and the camera body is a fraction deeper, but essentially it will line up with the majority of controls. At the heart of the Subal ND20 conversion kit (Sam has also converted Nexus and Sea & Sea) is a new base plate which shifts the position of the D300 a fraction to line up with all the controls in the front half of the housing. There is also a shorter shutter mode release/lock control (i.e. for selecting single frame, continuous etc.) and for the back plate some small extensions are needed to the existing push buttons to extend and line up with those on the camera and then you are ready to go. The added advantage is that these additions can be removed in a few minutes for use with the D200, so I kept one body as a back up.

I have been using this set up for several months now without problem and the drawbacks of not having a 'real' D300 housing are few. You do lose a little of the viewing area of the screen,



D300 mounted in the ND20 housing.

but I normally only use this for a quick check of exposure so has not been an issue for me. The only controls that you do lack over the ND30 are the new flash compensation control and the centre button for the multi selector, otherwise everything else is available. The advantages for me in upgrading to the D300 are the improvements in the auto focus system, particularly its speed, accuracy and low light performance. The larger CMOS sensor gives you a little extra resolution and also improved performance at higher ISO speeds plus some improvement in dynamic range which means sunbursts are looking better. You also have small improvements like the 100% viewfinder, the vibrating dust removal tool for the sensor and the ability to display the camera settings on the review screen, which I find very useful, particularly in low light. So the upgrade over the D200 is arguably not huge but if you can do it economically then for me it has been well worth it.

Why you may ask, if this is possible, don't the



Extension required for multi selector control buttons – these are M3 stainless washers.

housing manufacturers offer an upgrade option? There were rumours that Subal would offer a revised back plate and base plate for the ND20, but so far I think only Aquatica has actually done this and they are also considering a dual D700/D300 design. But you can see that it's really not in their interest to concentrate too hard on this as it will inevitably kill some sales of the housings for the new model. Having a larger more universal housing with remote control over the camera via USB is another alternative, but only Light and Motion have done this so far for the D200 but they say there will be no conversion kit for the D300.

You may now be wondering if the D700 can be shoehorned into a D200 or D300 housing? I seems that it might be possible in a Nexus which has a perspex insert in the back plate, but the difference in prism height and viewfinder position will preclude Subal and other brands. If only Nikon and Canon would provide clues to future upgrades and ergonomics of the camera then housing



Push on extension pegs for buttons on left hand side of D300 review screen.

manufacturers could respond and increase the life of a design over two or more models. But sadly we are a tiny consideration in a large market (one of the reasons Nikon abandoned the Nikonos line) and the race to constantly produce cameras with higher specifications is not going to end in the foreseeable future.

To upgrade or not is a difficult question. If you are a fan of the latest greatest kit and simply must have it (and have deep pockets!) or you are a professional who can justify the cost via income generated then the decision may be easy. For those who need a more gentle upgrade path you need to carefully consider the end use of your images and you may find that the quality of image that your current system produces will be more than adequate for quite some time.

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Reefmote Control

Testing Aquatica's New Remote Device

Story and Photos by Tim Rock

When the folks at Aquatica contacted me and told me they had developed a new remote control that worked with virtually all of its housings, I begged them to let me give it a try. "Jean, let me be the Pacific guinea pig," I begged. After promising not to bug him again until 2010 and buying Blake ringside tickets to a Habs game, they cheerfully relented.

I have a Guam-based marine photo gallery and gift shop that's part of an undersea observatory. Part of what we do is wild spinner dolphin tours three times daily. I thought I could rig a pole cam and get some great dolphin shots. That turned into a bit of a fiasco but every other thing I tried turned out great. Here's all the news that's fit to print.

The unit showed up just in time for my departure for Manta Mania in Yap! So I rigged it up. I then ambushed the wife a couple of times as she came into the house, strobes ablaze, to ensure it worked from distances great and small and then packed it up again and headed for Yap. I waved good-bye to her but she didn't see me.

Upon arrival Bill Acker, the founder of Yap Divers and Manta Ray Bay Hotel, greeted me. He told me something to the effect that the boat leaves in a half hour! We would do a manta dive and then a shark feed! Yikes, baptism by fire.

I studiously assembled the unit and in what was closer to 45 minutes I managed to show at the dock and off we went across the broad aqua lagoon



toward Gofnuw Channel. Bill and I discussed good spots for placement at the various cleaning stations found in Gofnuw. Each of about 5 sites has some areas of rock or dead coral where a unit could be placed, I could skitter away with a 20 foot cord and hide and wait for a manta to approach. So there I sat, hoping I had the right angle.

Now using a 10-17 Tokina zoom on my D200 inside the Aquatica housing with an 8" dome port turned out to be a pretty good selection. Except that the unit is pretty close to neutral and the dome actually made the camera point upwards or straight





up. Note to self: Get a 2 lb. Weight from shop manager Jan Sledsens,

So after a bit of jockeying, I managed to get a crack at three different mantas. All were totally unprovoked by the fact that there was a housing sitting next to their favorite blue-stripe wrasse. I had the Ikelite DS125 strobes on 1/8 power just for fill and the exposure set for pretty much what I could get from the natural light 50 feet down. The channel is made of lots of white sand bottom and some big cabbage-type corals so its pretty reflective. The lens was set at 10mm on auto-focus.

The first manta opened wide and I got one of those rare down-the-gullet cleaning shots that you rarely see, even when you aren't in camera range. They normally aren't that relaxed with someone around. It was totally relaxed and I was able to snap a half dozen frames before it went gliding past. As luck would have it, it actually following the strobe cord to my hiding place and went right over my head. Note to self: Bring a second camera for the occasional smartass manta belly shots.

At another cleaning station, a beautiful female had a legion of tiny pilotfish riding the bow wave of its gaping mouth. This manta also soared right over the dome and I nailed it with the remote as well.

OK, so it seems to work well with slow, coasting mantas. Now, how would it do with frenzied reef sharks?

Yap Divers puts a small bait basket under a coral head just out of the reach of the curious reef sharks that live at the stunning Vertigo Reef. The reef isn't that eye-popping really but the setting is. Vertigo slopes gently to about 50 feet and then takes a vertical plunge. Rocks and hard corals cover the top and everywhere the water is crystal clear. It ranges from a nice turquoise in the shallows to a deep cobalt blue in the depths. It is from this abyss the sharks rise.

Now Bill had a new manager with him named Andrew Sweeney. This new manager was also a student of Bill's and this dive would be his fourth open water dive. Andrew loved diving but was quite fearful of sharks. Thus, we decided to withhold a





bit of small (albeit) key information about this dive. It was going to be a shark feed!!!

So it was all I could do to set up the remote as close to the bait basket as possible without laughing. As Andrew's eyes stuck to his mask and his air stream was incredibly constant, I could see this was a dive for him like no other.

Me too!

The sharks were getting bolder and bolder as they tried to get at the tuna heads inside the bait basket. The housing was sitting atop a coral rock quite near the bait but also quit near the dropoff. When a shark was unable to get at the bait, its interest would turn to my Aquatica. A couple rubbed their rough skins over the dome,

another bit it and many came close. I fired away at will, capturing as many as four coming right at the dome at one time.

And to top it off, a giant grouper wandered up from the depths. This living ecosystem had a nose full of pilotfish, a following of rainbow runners and the respect of the wary sharks. But it didn't quite get close enough for a photo op.

On the way back we reviewed the shots. The boatload of divers was impressed. Manta expert Andrea Marshall said she thought the remote gizmo should also be good for getting those hard to get macro shots like bulldozer shrimps and garden eels. Now, its one thing to remote focus on a two-ton manta with a 10mm fisheye

lens. But to nail a reclusive shrimp or goby might be a stretch.

I wouldn't know until I tried. So off I went to "Slow and Easy", the diverse little macro bank in the Yap main channel. You can find lots of things here like sea moths, leaf fish and a gazillion types of nudibranchs. A good portion of the sandy slopes is home to sentinel gobies and bulldozer shrimp guarding their lairs.

So I found a likely active hole and set up the camera, focused on the hole and took a couple of test shots. So far, so good. A moved far away but still close enough to see the action. After a while, out came the goby. A minute later the industrious bulldozer shrimps were piling rubble. It became obvious to me that I

probably would get the entire goby in the shot even with my 50mm Sigma Macro. But the bonus was since I was shooting from shrimp level, I would get a perspective on the bulldozer shrimp that you usually don't get. To my amazement, some shots came out sharp as a tack and with a very pleasant new angle.

Back in Guam, I decided to try some close-focus medium perspective. In Guam's Tumon Bay we have some nice anemone colonies and a profusion of light blue chromis. Here I set the D200 up with the 10-20 Sigma lens set at 20mm. So it was essentially a 28mm or so. I then backed off and let the chromis, damsels and other reef fish do their thing during a minus tide in the shallow bay. As the popped into