

Sony Alpha 350 and BS Kinetics housing

by Karin Brussaard

The Sony Alpha 350 is a digital reflex camera for the advanced photographer. Professionals will probably find the speed of 2.5 frames per second too slow. However, underwater photography does not require extreme speed since you nearly always make use of flashes and you also have to wait for the flash batteries to recharge before the next shot is enabled.

Sony uses Carl Zeiss lenses for the Sony Alpha 350. The camera is light with its 582 grams, as well as compact and has a pleasant hand-fit. The CCD sensor offers 14.2 effective megapixels. Pictures can be stored in RAW, JPEG as well as RAW + JPEG. The Alpha 350 supports various storage memory cards. Not only the Sony types (Memory Stick Duo, MS Pro Duo and MS Pro HG) are supported, also CF cards type I and II. To tackle the dust problem of dust sticking to the sensor, the Alpha 350 has been equipped with a dual anti-dust system. The sensor has an anti-static coating and a shake mechanism. This mechanism is activated automatically after changing

the lens, giving dust no chance to stick to the sensor. The tilting LCD of 2.7 inch can be folded out to 90 degrees upwards and tilted downwards at 45 degrees. It facilitates using the Live view. The Live view function of the Sony DSLR-A350 not only works at manual focus, also at auto focus. Focussing in Live View is carried out even faster than using the optical viewfinder!

BS Kinetics is a German company manufacturing underwater housings for photo cameras and video cameras. In addition, BS Kinetics also produce video lamps. The housing for the Sony Alpha 350 belongs to the Gibson models. This series of underwater housings of BS Kinetics is made in particular for digital reflex cameras that fit in the dimensions of this series (180 x 190 x 130 mm). Other series of underwater housings are available for larger reflex cameras and compact cameras. The underwater housing is compact and the small size of the Sony Alpha 350 benefits from this. The set as a whole remains pleasantly portable. BS Kinetics is one of few manufacturers that uses



carbon fibre for their housings. This fibre is light and solid at the same time. Despite this, the underwater housing weighs 1900 grams. This slightly surprised me, since I really expected a carbon fibre housing to be much lighter. However, this weight can easily be explained; the underwater housing has been tested to a depth of 80 meters. The pressure at a depth like that is of such height (9 bar) that a thicker layer of carbon fibre is required to withstand the pressure.

Obviously BS Kinetics deliver a large amount of ports for wide angle as well as standard and macro lenses. The ports feature bayonet mounts.

The low water temperature and the use of dry-gloves are the most extreme test conditions for an underwater housing. The BS Kinetics passes with flying colours. The handgrips look a bit silly at first glance, however, they are extremely pleasant to hold. The distance between the right handgrip and the shutter

release button seemed to have been hand-made for my hand! A flash arm can be attached to the outside of every handgrip which works perfectly. The buttons to operate the camera with are sufficiently large to press or turn with dry-gloves on. The underwater housing is made of (dark) carbon. This means that the camera itself is not visible once inside. To have a clue what you are doing, the buttons contain stickers as for what function they serve. Nearly all functions can be operated by the buttons of the underwater housing. One unpleasant factor is the on/off button that cannot be operated. I think that is a real miss. If you forget to turn on the camera before closing the underwater housing, you will have a dive without pictures. This is even more applicable to Spitsbergen where you cannot just take the camera out of the housing and in order to turn it on belatedly.

Underwater I concentrate on taking pictures with an overview. The ice floes and underwater landscapes are that fascinating and colourful, I find it a pity to take macro shots. It's the 11-18 mm wide angle lens of Sony that I use. The dome port of the BS Kinetics closes by means of a bayonet mount on the underwater housing. Turning it a quarter to the right suffices to attach the port to the housing. The dome port is extremely compact. This is pleasant while travelling as well as underwater. The bigger the dome port, the more resistance while swimming. The combination of the underwater housing with the dome port and two Sea & Sea YS 110 flashes is almost neutral. Personally, I like the set to be somewhat negative. It is easier having to hold the camera up underwater than having to pull it down. Although a heavy negative would not be that pleasant either: it would soon turn into a game of weightlifting. At 11 mm the dome port shows some



distortion, however, this decreases when zooming in.

One morning I am quietly chatting away to the captain as a sudden noise surrounds us. There seem to be walrus on the ice. From where I stand, I can only see a brown blob on the ice, nothing that looks like a walrus. The captain skilfully manoeuvres the big vessel closer to the blob and slowly but surely the contours of the brown blob becomes visible. The walrus are nicely nestled against each other and seem to have just woken up from a deep sleep. They peer around curiously and question is: who is watching who? Finally, we are close enough to take some pictures. And close enough means, close enough for a telephoto lens. These colossal giants can weigh up to an incredible 1400 kilos; you definitely don't want to disturb them and experience their rage. The 70-200mm lens focuses fast, very fast, even at 200mm. The lens offering a bright of f/2.8 throughout the entire zoom range is clearly noticeable. And the super sonic wave motor inside the lens performs greatly. Although the body of the Alpha 350 is not that big, the combination of housing and telephoto lens of 1340 grams is



pleasant to hold. I took pictures without making use of a tripod which is very well possible since the Sony Alpha features an integrated stabilizer (SuperSteady Shot). Shooting in ice and snow conditions is usually awkward and it is difficult to get a correct exposure. The Sony Alpha A350 seems to be prepared since the camera responds strongly to the light areas in the picture. Pictures with snow in the background tended to be underexposed. Obviously Sony is trying to prevent light areas to be



bleached at all cost. And to be honest, I appreciated this feature because it is easier to correct an underexposed picture than a picture with bleached areas.

The Live View of the Sony Alpha 350 is the fastest I have ever seen on a digital reflex camera, and can certainly be used underwater. I do regret the monitor not offering a 100% view. The dual anti-dust system is well thought-through because the shake mechanism is activated after every change of lens. And that is exactly when the highest risk of getting dust occurs. The underwater housing is extremely pleasant to hold and operate, even with large dry-

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gloves but, regrettably, it does not offer an on/off button.

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