10Bar Panasonic LX3 housing

by Sim Chee Ghee and Peter Rowlands

I managed to test the 10bar-LX3 housing recently in Anilao, Philippines. The first dive with it was a night dive, which turned out to be a night(mare!) dive! The operations on the housing require a lot of practice and one must be able to see the buttons properly! I ended up turning my focus light to the back of housing to see them!

The control buttons are cleverly designed to reduce clutter, so some of them rotate to control separate buttons. It does require some practice but once mastered they do a very good job.

The housing is extremely compact and sturdy, barely larger than the camera itself. Do insert the camera carefully to avoid scratches, I already got some! The housing is made of 6061 aluminium, one of the most extensively used of the 6000 series aluminium alloy and is a good choice for tough performance in seawater.

The back of the housing is acrylic , which is good to allow full view of the camera's LCD and water tight control. It weighs 920g dry, slightly negative underwater and comes with double O-rings and a bulkhead. The camera's hotshoe cable is a tad too long, however it can be disconnected which I did since I was using fiber optic connection with a Sea& Sea YS-110 Alpha strobe. The bulkhead can be ordered with the standard Nikons V or S6 connection.

The housing also features the new key hole locking system, which locks real tight for superior water integrity. The port has the standard M67

thread to allow macro wet lens or colour filter attachment.

An optional dome port is available. It's to be used with Panasonic's own wide converter (DMW-LW46) with lens adapter (DMW-LA4),which converts the LX-3 widest setting at 24mm lens into 18mm!!!

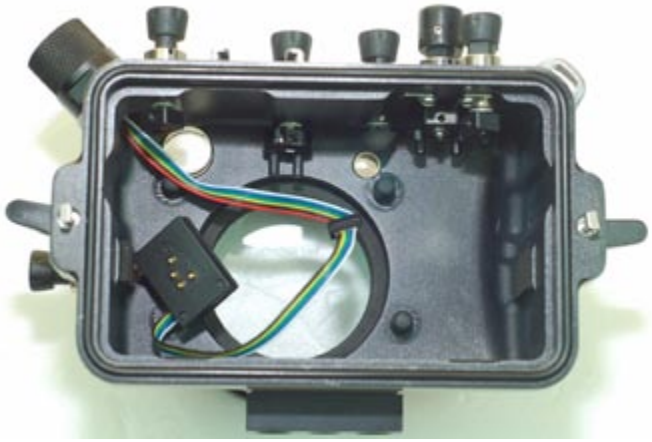
A comprehensive manual is available and the housing comes with a soft carrying bag and spare main O-rings.

Alternative housings

Currently not many choices out there for LX-3 housings except :

UK Germany recently announced theirs, more info at www.uk-germany.eu

Nautilus LX-3 from Japan, more infos at: http://dive-tail.cocolog-nifty.com/blog/2008/10/lx3-d762.html



All in all the 10bar LX-3 is a fully useable, reliable and reasonably priced compact housing with many pro-like features and it has a 2 year warranty.

Sim Chee Ghee
www.scubasymphony.com

I have always been a big fan of Panasonic compact cameras. They have a bewildering range but I am particularly drawn to the LX series which is their top end, controllable camera offering aperture/shutter priority automation as well as full manual control including manual white balance, not to mention 16:9 aspect capability and the ability to shoot RAW as well as jpg images. Finally I also think the cameras just look good and my latest LX3 in black livery has a great retro, almost 35mm Leica look.

My first LX was the LX2 and I bought it mainly for land use but, rather naively, I expected an underwater housing to become available to use it as a useful back up (or even an alternative) to a DSLR system. Such a housing never really appeared so I learned a useful lesson – if you are buying a camera to use it underwater, make sure there is a good housing available first!

In hindsight it came as no surprise to me that a suitable housing never materialised. There are just so many controls to operate. Now I know this is also true for many other compacts cameras but there is one particular control on the LX series which is different, if not unique, and that is the 'toggle' control which adjusts, amongst other things, manual apertures and shutter speeds. This nipple-like control can not only rock from side to side but also up and down as well as being a push button too. Show that to an underwater housing manufacturer and it's easy to see why the LX2 was largely ignored.

2 years later, enter the LX3 and, by sheer good fortune, my wife's compact had just died and I made the supreme sacrifice of letting her have my trusty old LX2, to help her out, so to speak. The next day I was down at the Panasonic shop making a mess on their glass displays with my wet nose pressed up against their LX3 cabinet, or altar as I call it.

The LX3 was an interesting development in that Panasonic had decided that enough was enough with the megapixel hype. The discerning photographer wanted to maximise the performance of the existing pixels rather than bloat the specification with extra megapixels. In addition it had the ability to shoot basic HD movie footage and finally, and most importantly for me, it had a Leica 24mm F2 lens. I especially love this focal length and F2 is a 'fast' lens for low light shooting. I was happy enough but when I heard Japanese housing manufacturer 10Bar were not only planning a housing but promising a 'toggle' control I was delighted and they kindly sent me one to evaluate.

First impressions are how small and light it is. Even with the camera installed

it only weighs 1.2kg and ignoring the protruding controls, the main housing body is only 140mm wide by 85mm high. Being aluminium it is bulletproof and can operate down to 60 metres and has been tested to 90m. A good start by anyone's standards.

In designing an LX3 housing, 10Bar had to make some tough but ultimately obvious decisions. With cameras boasting larger and larger LCD screens the controls get squeezed to one side. This is no real problem for land use but for an underwater housing manufacturer it becomes a real limitation. The result is that on the 10Bar housing some of the important controls operate 2 functions either by a rotating, swinging or pushing action.

For me, the most important control is Manual White Balance because I do a lot of available light work with filters. To achieve this simply you need to set the 'Assign' control to Manual White Balance, then all you need to do is press that control, toggle right and press toggle. Job done. It took a bit of working out but I got there eventually so if you have a favourite or much needed control, the secret is to set the 'Assign' button to that function.

Control over the LX3 'toggle' button is very clever indeed and it feels almost the same as using the camera on land but with one big difference. Because of the mechanical design (which basically reverses the action), pushing the housing control to the left actually toggles the camera control to the right. Similarly up is down and down is up, if you follow my meaning. This reversal is puzzling at first but it soon becomes second nature. The ability to operate this toggle control sets this housing apart and the engineers at 10Bar are to be congratulated for this achievement.

Closing the rear plate is done slightly differently with two rotating and sprungloaded levers. This is a neat design but takes some getting used to. However it is soon second nature and seals the housing very effectively with both piston and compression O rings.

The 10Bar LX3 housing is totally mechanical and there are controls for every camera function. The housing comes with an Ikelite bulkhead as standard but Nikonos V and S6 are available options. For those with fibre optic triggered external strobes, the 10Bar housing has a control to turn the internal flash on and even one to push it back into the camera when not needed.

The standard port is flat but is screw thread interchangeable and there is an optional dome port for use with Panasonic's wide adaptor which converts the 24mm lens into a very useful 18mm.

The retail price of the 10Bar LX3 housing is just USD $630 which, for a fully functioning aluminium housing, really is extraordinarily good value. It is a quality housing for a quality camera.

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com

Don't settle for 2nd best

Film - No Filter
No White Balance

Digital - No Filter
Manual WB

Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

www.magic-filters.com