

Diving with the Aquatica Canon 5D Mark II

with Bruce Yates

Strange as it sounds, I want to begin this discussion of Aquatica's new housing for the Canon 5D Mark II by stating that underwater camera housings just don't get any better than Seacam. I've used two different models now (Canon 1Ds MkII and 1Ds MkIII), and LOVED them. In fact, I still have a 1Ds MkII Seacam, with no immediate plans to sell it. I also can't say enough positive things about Stephen Frink (Seacam U.S. distributor) and his operation; without exception, they have been responsive, easy to deal with, and provide extraordinary customer service (not to mention Steve's considerable testing and educational work).

Indeed, I have found precious little about Seacam to complain about...except the cost. We poor Americans, with our sick dollar (getting sicker all the time, it seems), have seen the cost of new Seacam equipment – which is priced in Euros – skyrocket to the point that it is downright prohibitive for many non-pros like myself, who just take

underwater photos as a hobby (and very expensive one at that!).

So awhile back at a scuba show, as I looked at all the new toys, the Aquatica booth in particular got me thinking. I looked at the build quality of their 1Ds Mark III housing – which was surprisingly high – and their prices, which were surprisingly low (relative to Seacam's, in U.S. dollars). I began thinking seriously of changing brands when the time came for my *next* housing purchase. Sealing the deal was the fact that Jean Bruneau of Aquatica said they were planning to come out with an adapter that would permit the use of Seacam ports on Aquatica housings. That was no small issue, considering the amount I have invested in Seacam ports and extension rings.

So...to cut a long story short, when I bought my new Canon 5D Mark II, I was one of the first to put in an order for an Aquatica housing. I received it a few weeks ago, just in time for a 1-week trip to Rangiroa, French Polynesia.



Canon 16-35mm at 16mm 1/60 @f9, ISO 400





The Aquatica 5DII housing feels solid and sturdy, and every part meshes precisely. It is truly a professional-grade housing.



Canon 16-35mm at 19mm 1/80 @f7.1, ISO 200. Two Inon Z-240 strobes



Canon 16-35mm at 16mm 1/80 @f7.1, ISO 200. Two Inon Z-240 strobes

The following are my observations but note that I have only used Seacam housings previously so that is my frame of reference.

Build quality The build quality is excellent. The Aquatica 5DII housing feels solid and sturdy, and every part meshes precisely. It is truly a professional-grade housing. It has a moisture alarm, and I like the way the camera mounts onto a tray, and the mounting tray slides solidly on two rods and latches in place, so there is no question of it being in place. I actually prefer this to the Seacam mount, which requires that you screw and unscrew into the camera's tripod hole each time (I stripped the threads in one of my early 1D MkII bodies doing that). The only build aspect for which I still give a distinct nod to Seacam is the absorbent "fuzz" that covers the inside of Seacam housings, just in case any bits of moisture find their way in. Although I've never needed it because I've never had a Seacam leak, anyone who has ever seen salt water

sloshing around inside their housing (even a few spoonfulls can fry a camera) instantly appreciates the value of Seacam's absorbent liner.

Design and ergonomics The design and ergonomics are also excellent. Knobs and controls are easily accessible, in a few cases slightly more so than Seacam for my particular hands, and in no cases less so. (Each person's hands are different, so it's worth getting your hands on ANY housings you're considering.) I especially appreciate the pronounced finger grooves on the handgrips, which allowed use of controls while only keeping a finger or two on the grip, and also the large white labeling of all of the major buttons. My only complaint was that the top of the rear window covers the top line of info of the camera's rear screen (i.e., shutter speed, aperture, etc.), except when viewed from an extreme angle. Not a huge problem - just the only less-than-optimal thing I noticed. It is possible that the window position was limited by maintaining

housing strength for the eyepiece above.

Ports The port adaptor (allowing use of Seacam ports) ended up being far less useful than I had hoped. While it indeed allowed me to use my Seacam ports, the fact that the adapter itself is approx. 19-20mm thick meant that it significantly limited which LENSES could be used with those Seacam ports. For example, with the Seacam Superdome, I could not use my Sigma 15mm fisheye or Canon 14mm-II, two lenses I really like for wide angle photography. To use those, I will need an Aquatica dome port. Since traveling with multiple dome ports is a hassle, this diminishes the value of the adapter.

The adapter is somewhat more useful with macro, especially if you shoot only auto-focus (AF), because most macro lenses require extension rings anyway. If you want to use manual focus (MF), however, which most of us eventually do, there's a problem. The MF knob on the Aquatica housing is



Sigma 50mm 1/60 @f8, ISO 200. Two Inon Z-240 strobes



Canon 16-35mm at 35mm 1/80 @f16, ISO 400. Two Inon Z-240 strobes



in their port, whereas Seacam's MF knob is in the housing.

I have since learned that there is partial (for certain lenses) solution to this problem. A company called Xit 404 has designed a few gear sets that employ Aquatica's zoom knob—located on the left side of the housing—to manually focus the Canon 100mm macro lens, as well as a few others.

Their gear sets (\$325) are available through www.backscatter.com. While that is most of the cost of an Aquatica macro port (\$390 at B&H Photo), it at least provides an option that doesn't require buying another port.

I was initially discouraged that my Seacam ports aren't going to be as useful with the Aquatica housing as I'd hoped. But the fact is that, for the cost of a new Seacam housing, I can pay for the Aquatica housing AND replace my ports, extensions and gears. And I can always sell one or more of my Seacam ports to help pay for it.

Optional viewfinders I find the regular viewfinders for both Seacam and Aquatica housings unsatisfactory for my big-nosed face, which I don't enjoy cramming up against the housing in order to get a decent view. I have used the optional Seacam S180 viewfinder for years, and absolutely love it. (I also tried the S45 for awhile, but—while many people swear by it—I never *could* get used to the

angle, so I sold it). Naturally, at the same time I ordered the Aquatica housing, I purchased their "Aqua View" viewfinder.

Both the Seacam S180 and the Aquatica Aqua View have three primary advantages:

1. They put your eye (meaning your mask) several inches BEHIND the back of your housing, so you don't have to jam your nose/cheek up against the housing to see what's in the viewfinder;
2. They have optics that magnify the image in the viewfinder to make it larger;
3. They can be adjusted for your specific eyes (i.e., like a prescription lens).

Both of these premium viewfinders accomplish all three very well. I personally (others might feel differently) give a slight edge to the Seacam S180 - it seems just slightly easier for my eye to see the edges of the image (the camera's exposure arrow, for example). However, I don't want to give the impression that the Aqua View is a bad product.

On the contrary - it is a *great* add-on to the Aquatica housing. I just don't think it is *better* than the Seacam viewfinders, and it certainly would be no reason to switch from one brand to the other.

Video Video controls—limited though they may be on this 5DII—are readily accessible on the back of the Aquatica housing. At the time of my trip, Canon was about to release a firmware update enabling manual control of aperture, shutter speed and ISO. Without that control, I only toyed with the video function of the camera on a few dives. Considering the fact that the camera chose all of the exposure settings (far less than optimal for underwater), and I was stuck with one focus per video clip (the 5DII has no auto-focus in video mode), it did a surprisingly good job.

Because the ability to shoot video with a DSLR is such a revolutionary development, I expect Stephen Frink and other experts to be doing extensive testing of the video capabilities with manual exposure controls in months ahead, and I'm sure you will see the results reported here and elsewhere. Suffice it to say that, with the new firmware update that provides far more control of video settings, this camera is capable of producing outstanding underwater video. My guess is that the next generation 5D will incorporate video

auto-focus, which will make it a truly great dual-purpose tool. For now, it will frustrate those seeking the best of both worlds in "point & shoot" mode, but will reward those willing to learn how to coax the most from its various lenses and video settings.

Value The value of the Aquatic 5DII housing is excellent, especially in U.S. dollars. I realize that value is subjective; a race car driver may feel his \$300,000 race car is a good "value", especially if it helps him MAKE money by winning races. Similarly, as I said earlier, you can't do better than a Seacam housing, and I am confident that Seacam will remain a staple of professional underwater photographers worldwide for the foreseeable future. OTOH, if you can't quite justify spending that kind of money, I can honestly say that Aquatica – at least judging by the 5DII - is producing truly top-notch housings.

I'm not willing to say that the Aquatica 5DII housing is *better* than Seacam's housings. But to even be compared to Seacam is an honor, and I'm not sure the Aquatica isn't roughly *as good* overall. And that is high praise indeed.



Bruce Yates

www.UnderwaterReflections.com

Bruce lives in Seattle, in the Northwest corner of the USA, and considers himself a "serious amateur" photographer. He donates all profits from his photography to charity. Currently, his selected charity is the International Children's Surgical Foundation, a small volunteer medical organization that corrects facial deformities of children in lesser-developed countries, including some whose waters divers are lucky enough to visit and enjoy.

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How many countries have you visited on dive trips, and noticed how lovely the local children were?



Give a little back to some of the children who aren't so fortunate.



Dr. Geoff Williams, with My Anh, a Vietnamese patient.

Geoff Williams is not a diver. He is a plastic surgeon specializing in children's facial reconstruction. But his life's mission has been giving unfortunate children in the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, and other such countries that we divers frequent a chance at normal lives.

Geoff gave up his lucrative plastic surgery career and spent his life savings to organize—and pay for—small teams of volunteer surgeons and nurses to travel to countries with very limited health care (e.g., Kenya, Bolivia, Peru, Pakistan, Vietnam and Tanzania, as well as the above) to repair facial deformities in children.

Geoff takes no salary. In fact, his mother runs his International Children's Surgical Foundation (ICSF) from her home in Idaho, also for no pay. They want all the donations they receive to go to helping children—to changing lives. And that's what they do—change children's lives, giving them at least a chance of not being lifelong outcasts.



"I've spent time with Geoff Williams in person, and I've been so moved by his selfless devotion and the work he's doing that I now donate all profits from my photography to ICSF."

Bruce Yates, Seattle
www.UnderwaterReflections.com



"... I think the moms are more my patients than the kids are. There's something about a mother of a disfigured child. They've spent years thinking it's hopeless and then it's fixed. It's a wonderful feeling to relieve their anxiety."

— Dr. W. Geoff Williams



This Kenyan mother suffered great anxiety when her baby was born with a cleft lip, knowing that in Kenya it can be difficult for the poor to find treatment. In this photo she is leaving the hospital after her baby received surgery from ICSF. Her smile says it all.

International Children's Surgical Foundation

You can help Geoff's work, too. Even a little will help. Most of ICSF's surgeries cost only a few hundred dollars, a fraction of what we all spend on a dive trip...and not much to give a child a shot at a normal life.

So give back to the people of countries whose natural beauty you have experienced. Visit www.icsfoundation.org to learn more. Watch the short video on the home page, and then, if you want to help, click on "How to Help" to make an online donation.

www.icsfoundation.org

