

Canon HF-S11 in Gates housing with GP32 wide angle port

By Simon Deane

Simon Deane is a videographer working on the Andaman Coast of Thailand. For the last 5 years he has been making diving and snorkelling tour movies for visitors to Krabi. Most of the tours are daily trips to the reefs close to the Krabi coast and to the Phi Phi Islands.

The marine life in this region is rich and varied and the reefs are generally in good condition with large areas of soft and hard coral species. Simon tries to capture as much of this as possible to produce a new 20 minute movie everyday during the high season. Some of his customers are veteran divers with hundreds of dives whilst others have never seen a tropical fish in it's native environment.

The workhorse for this has been the Sony HVR-A1P camera in an Amphibico housing, a great compact combination providing good access to camera functions and a high quality HDV picture recorded to DV tape.

With business expanding and technology presenting new products a recent purchase is the Canon HF-S11 video camera and the Gates underwater housing. The video camera records pictures using the

AVCHD format straight to memory card. There is built-in memory and a slot to record to a removable SD card.

The Gates housing provides access to all of the camera's functions by traditional control rods and arms and also the novel feature of inserting the camera's remote control into the housing and using it's functions through housing controls.

This report is the first impression following a two dive trip to try out the new set-up.

A short movie of test footage can be seen here;

www.pushingfin.com/galVidGnl0809.htm

The Housing aesthetics

The first impressions, out-of-the-box...everyone that has seen this Gates housing has commented on how good it looks. Not only is it aesthetically 'cool'; the engineer types all appreciate the quality of the finish. Regardless of the fact that it's an underwater video housing or an overnight bag it looks 'cool'....



Set-up & camera installation

I purchased the housing from Scuba Symphony in Kuala Lumpur, despite the initial fumbblings of Sim and I in the shop I am now finding it a straightforward procedure to install the camera.

Initially it did take some experimenting to work out where the on/off control arm was supposed to be positioned for installation and operation but now I know it's easy...

The biggest issue I have with the housing is the mounting screw in camera mount (CDM). The CDM is a plate that screws into the tripod mount of the camera, once in place the CDM is inserted into guides inside the housing so the camera is always

located in the correct place for the controls. The mounting screw on the CDM needs to be retained somehow in the mounting plate as I am always dropping it as I remove the plate from the housing to mount the camera initially. I can see that because the base of the plate has been counter sunk for the screw head it leaves no easy option to retain this screw but it would help.

The CDM is a tight fit into the housing and I did find it 'stuck' when trying to remove the camera after the dives. I'll add a film of silicone and see if that helps, I expect frequent use will also free it up a bit. Other than that, mounting the camera securely was very easy and the housing

controls all operated the camera controls without issue.

Controls & Operation

The 'feel' of the controls is good, matching the look and finish of the housing.

The record on/off requires some pressure but is a distinct and 'positive' feel. The zoom control is great as the long lever gives a good degree of control. However I did find that zoom-in would stick. After I released pressure from the lever the camera was still zooming-in so I had to touch the lever back. Zoom-out however would stop zooming as soon as I released pressure from the lever.

All the other controls worked as I expected.

The remote control operation is straightforward. I'm glad I had a few hours to the camera on land previously or the menu options may have been difficult to remember and navigate while underwater.

Accessing and using the pop-up menu is a little bit easier via the remote control than it is using the camera's joystick directly – so that's a bonus.

The GP32 wide angle port

The wide angle port is wider than the Amphibico WA port I am used to using; significantly wider so I actually got my fin tips in a shot that I was not



expecting.

Despite it being wider there's no noticeable fish-eye like 'bending' of the picture or any distortion at the edges. At the other end of the scale the close ups cannot match the set-up I have with the Sony.

I had discussed the optics with Pam at Gates before purchase and her information was accurate, zoom through holds focus to between two-thirds and three-quarters of the camera's zoom range.

In the movie see the shots of the small grouper (white tip), the flounder's eyes, the scorpion fish, the feather star and the anemone fish.

You will also see with the scorpion fish sequence and the black and white (Clarks) anemone fish the use of the camera's 1.7x magnify feature. Here I used the zoom to the maximum the port would allow then

used the camera's 1.7x feature.

Feedback from Gates is that this camera has used a different optical set-up to any other camera on the market. This GP32 port is modified but essentially 'off the shelf'. It is likely other wide ports will be introduced that allow more zoom through capability.

For those who need macro, a flat port is already available and this allows for diopters to be mounted too.

The dome of the wide angle port is from optical acrylic. The information that comes with the housing recommends using air to clean it as this material can scratch easily though Gates also assure me it has been coated to makes scratches from normal cleaning unlikely.

Housing ergonomics

Holding the housing steady underwater is something I still need to get used to. My other housing is narrower and I use the viewfinder so my position gives a third point of contact with the viewfinder up against my mask and my elbows tucked in against my chest.

This housing doesn't allow that position, being much wider and there's no viewfinder to use in that way. So initially I was finding it hard to hold the housing steady laterally. I felt I was tilting left and right, up and down, like steering a car down a

bumpy road.

You will see stability problems in the scorpion fish sequence as this was filmed in surge on the reef top too.

Having said that, it's more a case of getting used to the camera's balance and my position. The final shot of the bubbles and water surface was filmed one-handed as I had already deployed my SMB.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to hold the camera steady to record and use the remote control buttons or the assign control at the same time but practice makes perfect...

Overall I'm very happy with the housing. It looks good and works well.

Camera performance

I am also impressed with this for such a small camera, it's performance is very good.

While using the camera on land I have been surprised by the sharpness and detail in the picture; underwater I'm still impressed.

Focus

I'm used to using the Sony A1P which is also a small camera but not renowned for good low light capability.

You will see in the footage that the first dive was not well lit. It was overcast with light cloud and the dive site was in shade. If I was shooting



Auto white balance

Manual white balance



with the A1 I would lock focus otherwise I would see occasional focus hunting.

Since I was testing the HF-S11 I went without focus lock most of the time and it did not focus hunt at all that I can see. Even with fast movements and low light.

White balance

The camera required the red filter at a shallower depth than my Sony but once in place it

had no problem finding a white balance.

The red filter is built-in to the housing and is moved into place or removed using a lever on the front of the housing.

After pressing the MWB button via the remote control the camera found a white balance whether it could 'see' the white slate or not. I will have to experiment more with this but initially it seems very easy and 'clever' and gives good results.

Custom control

I had the camera's custom button and control set to manual focus, this will take some getting used to or it may be useless. The camera does not display the focus distance until you reach it's limits of infinity or minimum focus distance and the control is not sensitive so it takes a lot of twirling the control to see the focus move. This is a problem on land as well as in the housing.

Being able to lock focus is very useful to avoid focus hunting and for ensuring the subject is in focus and not the background but this can also be done via the camera's pop-up function menu.

I will practice more with the custom control and also try it set for exposure and see which will be more useful day to day.

Photos

During the dive I experimented with the camera's dual-shot mode which allows you to capture high res. photos while recording video at the same time. The feature works well and may allow me to offer additional products on the day trips. However dual-shot mode sets all functions to auto including white balance so I end up with clips with different colours as some were with manual white balance and some with auto. Correction 'in post' is

possible but not ideal.

Nonetheless the photos are good quality.

Summary

I'm happy with this package and am beginning to see the future of recording to digital media. I use the Edius video editing package and their latest version makes native AVCHD editing possible even on a two year old dual core PC. My equally as old laptop can almost edit the files, but not quite, so a new laptop should be able to cope.

For shooting and making 'dailies' time is always an issue, a huge benefit is the time saved in quicker than real time footage acquisition. It also frees-up the camera and gives more available time to capture 'more of the action'.

So no more DV tape but a lot more hard disk storage.

For the price of the camera I'm impressed with it's performance and picture quality and combined with the housing and the ingenious use of the full-function remote control it's a great solution for me.

Thanks Pam at Gates and Sim at Scuba Symphony for your time, advice and service if you have any questions or would like more information let me know.

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With thanks to:

www.scubasympphony.com

www.gateshousings.com



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