

Acquapazza APSO

Sony NEX-5 housing

by Peter Rowlands

The Sony NEX-5 camera was one of the first interchangeable lens compacts to have an APS size CMOS sensor and represented a real breakthrough in terms of image quality from a compact camera.

Sometimes, however, quality alone is not enough if ergonomics are compromised and, to my mind, the NEX-5 is far from perfect in this department. What would really make a huge difference is if Sony would make an electronic viewfinder as this would transform the handling. That aside, you have to forgive (well I have) the NEX-5 its shortcomings because it produces such high quality images from such a small package. Throw in interchangeable lenses from fisheye (adaptor) to long telephoto via a wide zoom and you have a system which will fit in a big pocket and weigh very little.

Underwater photographers were quick to recognise such attractions and the first manufacturer to market was Nauticam in the autumn of 2010 and as a result they hoovered up a lot of the initial demand for this camera. Phil Rudin wrote a review for us in UwP57 which was most favourable but I expressed my concerns in the Editorial of the same issue regarding the NEX-5's ability to tilt the LCD screen to 45 degrees in that if manufacturers didn't incorporate this facility they would be compromising the performance considerably.

Now it's easy for me to say that but it's another thing entirely to make such a design



The Sony NEX-5 with the 16mm lens and fisheye adaptor behind an INON 115 dome port in an Acquapazza housing makes a very neat and easy to handle package.



The design allows the LCD screen to be tilted up to 45 degrees which makes viewing and handling underwater much more pleasurable and productive.

work. Controlling a tiltable screen is simple enough but designing a housing to accommodate the swing is more complicated. The Nauticam design (and Aquatica's too for that matter, allows for a 15 degree tilt which is a good and practical compromise which should and does please most people.

However it was whilst ambling along the aisles at DEMA in 2010 that I stumbled upon the Acquapazza stand, away from the main photo section and I couldn't believe what I saw. A small aluminium housing with a bulge at the back which allowed the screen to be tilted to 45 degrees. I



rubbed my eyes to make sure it wasn't a mirage and then asked the Japanese assistant "Is that what I think it is?". She smiled shyly and her next word filled me with anorak excitement. "Yes" she said. It was like that moment when I saw UwP on an iPad. I had no chance. I buckled.

I must have spent a good five minutes operating the lever as I'm sure Homer Simpson would have done "screen goes up, screen goes down, screen goes up, screen goes down". I apologise for going on so about one single feature but to me it is the one which sets it apart and transforms the handling of the camera, especially underwater.

Acquapazza have not achieved the impossible in terms of design compared to the other manufacturers. The others could have done it too but Toshiki Yamamoto realised what an important feature it was right from the start and produced 2 designs of rear housing – one for LCD line of sight and the other for a tilt of up to 45 degrees. It would



The optional UN 3" image magnifier

All of the controls fall neatly to hand.

be very interesting to know which has sold the best.

Once I was convinced that this was not some cruel conjuring trick I started to look at the rest of the housing and became more and more impressed with what I saw. Picking it up, there was a natural position for my right hand with the index finger perfectly positioned on the stills shutter release lever while my thumb settled to the left of the video stop/start button, just above the main control wheel and the usual button array on the right hand side. In the meantime my left hand supported the underside of the housing making it feel just like an SLR to handle. The stills shutter release lever is sensitive enough feel the first and second pressures of autofocus and then trigger.

Shooting video underwater, with the fisheye adaptor and recommended INON 115 glass dome port (Acquapazza work closely with them) the handling was excellent and the 45 degree viewing angle produced steady footage. Adding an Ultralight TRSBLD baseplate, two handles and arms topped



18-55mm flat port with MRS (magnet rotary system) patented by INON.

out by Fisheye FIX1000 LED lights just made the handling even smoother as it widens the centre of balance and makes shooting steady video footage a pleasure. I know this isn't really relevant to stills shooters but, if a rig is easy to hold and handle, it makes everything much more comfortable.

Another spin off from their collaboration with INON is the patented MRS (magnetic rotary system) control for the 18-55mm kit lens. Magnetic rings are attached to zoom and focus barrels which are controlled through the housing by rotating external magnetic rings. The design works very well indeed and, again, makes it handle rather like an SLR on land. The inner magnetic rings need to be positioned precisely and time needs to be taken to make sure they are exactly right. I have yet to use this lens and system underwater but suspect it would handle best without a baseplate and handle on the left hand side. I think the vast majority now shoot



The built in flash can trigger external strobes via the INON fibre optic bulkhead. The top lever on the right raises and lowers the flash while the other controls the screen tilt.

using autofocus which has become so quick and accurate so there would only be one magnetic ring to position which would be much easier.

The Sony NEX-5 accessory flashgun can be raised and lowered with a simple lever on the left hand side which in effect turns it on and off. This flash can be used on its own with a supplied diffuser or my preferred set up was a cover for the flash which accepts 2 INON fibre optic cables.

The ports are screw thread design which is not my favourite method. I prefer the bayonet design personally but it could be argued that the screw thread is much more secure but is a little more time consuming to change ports. Additional ports are available for the Sony Alpha 50mm and 100mm macro lenses.

The main securing latch has a good locking mechanism which closes automatically with a very positive and audible click. To open the housing you just squeeze the 2 locking buttons and the housing



A very positive locking latch and a double O ring seal are very reassuring.

pops open to reveal a reassuring double O ring seal. There is a small baseplate which needs to be fitted to the tripod screw socket and this then slots into the housing and is secured by a locking lever. Loading the camera is very easy but removing it is a bit more fiddly as there are no obvious lifting points. I end up having to use the LCD screen to extract the camera which is no big deal except that I inevitably get finger marks on the screen. Much more annoying though is the tendency for the fully open rear door to push the screen tilting lever back into the housing. This lever has to be pulled out to allow the camera to be removed so in order to stop it getting pushed back in you have to hold the rear door with your left hand and pull the camera out with the other. I'm probably making this sound worse than it is and, in truth, practice made perfect but it would have been nice to have a better designed way to take



The standard of machining is extremely high.

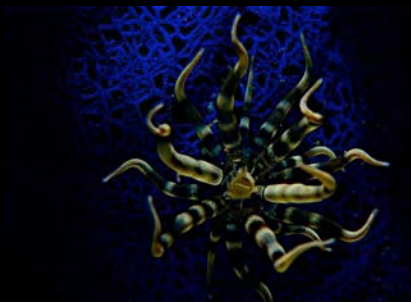
the camera out especially as it needs to be removed to change the battery and SD card.

The rear Perspex LCD cover has slots top and bottom to accommodate an optional external UN 3" image magnifier which as the name implies, provides a larger image of the LCD screen for improved composition and focus.

Overall the Acquapazza is a very clever design and the standard of machining is extremely high. The controls are very positive and accurate and the handling is excellent. If you have one or are thinking of getting a Sony NEX-5 for underwater use I would strongly recommend that you put the Acquapazza on your list of housings to evaluate.

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Many thanks to Kay-Burn Lim,
David Baxter and Jeffrey de
Guzman for the wonderful
photos above!

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Reefphoto & Video, USA: <http://www.reefphoto.com>

Fotosub, Italy: <http://www.fotosub-shop.it>

Onderwaterhuis, Netherlands: <http://www.underwaterhuis.nl>

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Digital Dive, Germany: <http://www.digital-dive.de>

Underwater Visions, UK: <http://www.uwvisions.com>

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