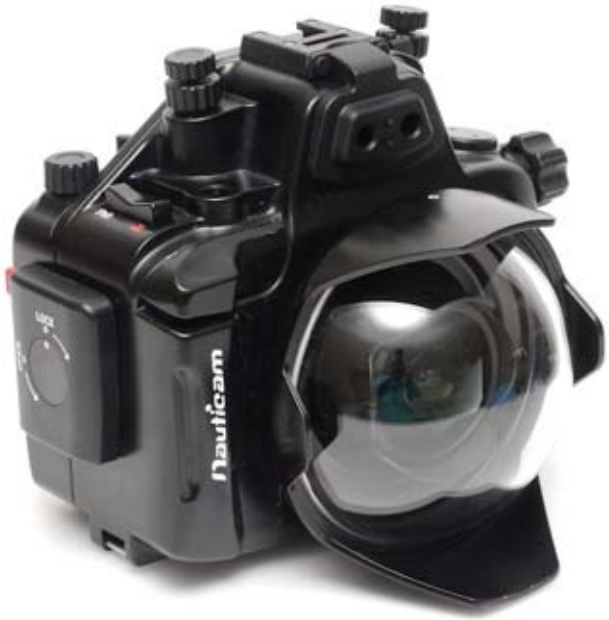
Nauticam NA-GH2 for the Panasonic DMC-GH2

By Peter Rowlands

There's no doubt that since their debut about 3 years ago Nauticam have captured a major slice of the market by producing well designed, ergonomic housings at competitive prices. In addition to the obvious Nikon and Canon ranges they have gone out on a limb and produced housings for cameras which only have a limited demand such as the Nauticam NA-645DF housing for PhaseOne 645DF and Mamiya 645DF cameras with Phase One P+ Digital Backs.

Now I'm not saying that their new NA-GH2 housing for the Panasonic Lumix DMC-GH2 will have limited demand, it's just that Nikon and Canon account for the vast majority of the potential market. However, since it's arrival, the Panasonic GH2 has been responsible for creating an almost new genre of camera and I, for one, am delighted that Nauticam decided to design a housing for it.

Before going into detail about the housing let's try and put the camera into context. Traditionally there have been compact and SLR cameras with an obvious gap between the two in terms of specification and performance. Compacts had small chip sensors and SLRs had much bigger ones including up to full frame 35mm. Obviously the bigger the sensor, the more it costs both in financial terms and in the corresponding processing power



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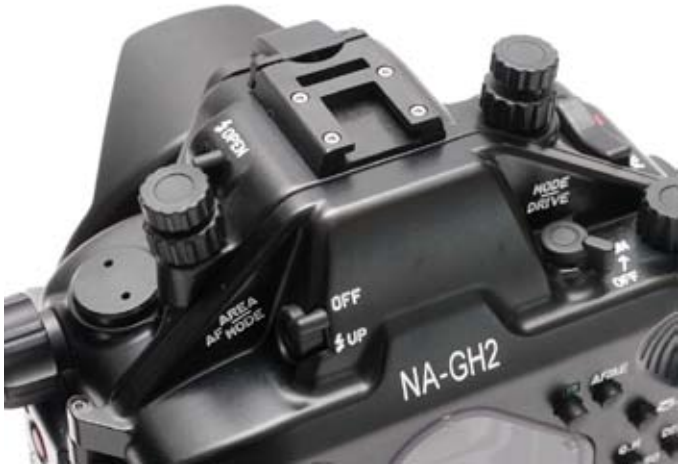
needed. It was developments in this power and chip technology that allowed camera manufacturers to produce mid size sensors at mass produced prices and this led to the arrival of what are known as EVIL cameras - electronic viewfinder, interchangeable lens cameras which offered much improved picture quality (over a compact) from a small package with the ability to use different lenses and have the ability to add an external electronic viewfinder. Let's call them compacts on steroids and they provided a very attractive option to those who felt limited by a traditional compact capability. Sony and Olympus were/are the market leaders with Panasonic linking up with Olympus to concentrate on the 4/3rds format EVIL camera while Sony went



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for a DX size sensor similar to most SLR cameras.

Now that's not too complicated, is it? Another genre of camera neatly slotted in between a compact and an SLR. Then what happened started blurring the gap with the arrival of Mirrorless Interchangeable Lens cameras such as the GH2 and Sony Alpha range. In truth they had always been around on the edge of the market and, in theory, offered the speed of an SLR in a smaller body without a mirror box. I think it's fair to say that the early models of the cameras, the Panasonic GH1 and early Sony A series were either too expensive or not really good enough, certainly as far as the electronic viewfinders and autofocus speed were concerned.

Then came the Panasonic GH2 and it made people sit up and take notice for several reasons. Firstly the electronic viewfinder performance was hugely improved as was the autofocus speed helped

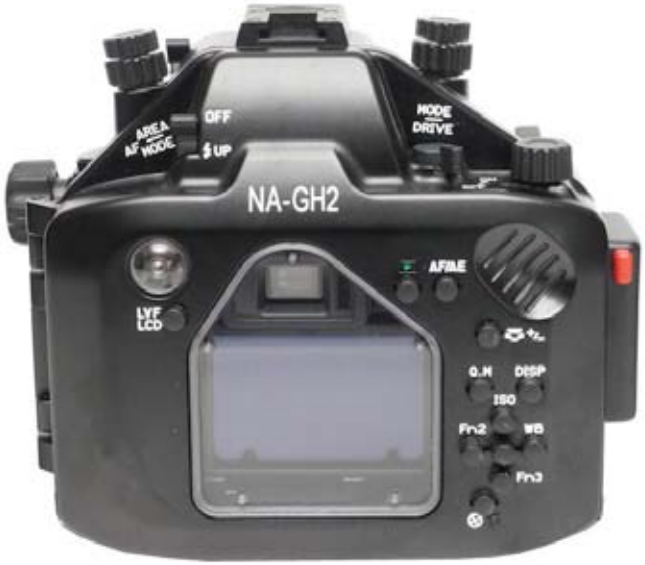
by the arrival of new lenses built from the ground up with speed and silence in mind. All of a sudden there was a really credible alternative to the more expensive and heavier SLR. The problem was that the new lenses were quite expensive so a multi lens outfit wasn't a whole lot cheaper but, for today's traveller, the whole outfit offered a significant saving in weight.

Why have I gone into so much detail? Well I think that it is important to know and appreciate it when reviewing the Nauticam NA-GH2 housing because I suspect that most people's route to the GH2 will be as an upgrading compact or even EVIL user (as I was) rather than an SLR user wanting a lighter outfit and this is important.

As soon as I read the spec of the GH2 I could hear boxes being ticked in droves, especially coming from my compact direction. It is a very fast, responsive camera, produces lovely high ISO images and both the video and stills image quality are of a very high standard indeed. Ergonomically it was instantly familiar on land and the electronic viewfinder made surface shots on bright days a breeze compared to having to use the LCD screen. The lack of a flipping mirror reduces vibration and most of the lenses have Mego OIS (optical image stabilization) which extended the shooting range in low light.

As soon as I heard that Edward from Nauticam was working on a housing, I made the commitment and sold my existing Sony NEX-5 outfit.

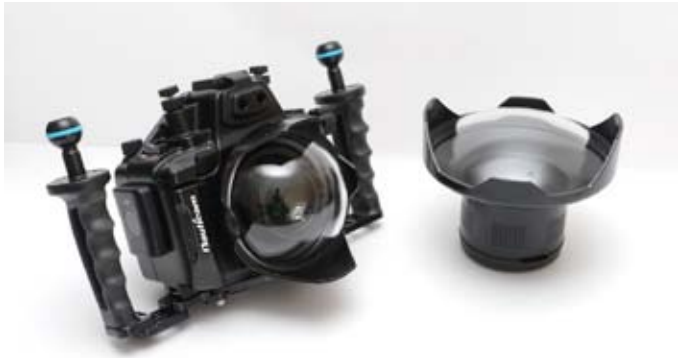
I have now had the NA-GH2 for over a month and only dived it in UK waters but each dive something new settles in, if you get my drift, in terms of handling and operating. It is a housing that takes time to get to know rather than one which is obvious from the start.



The Nauticam NA-GH2 handles really well as a hand held camera

Loading the camera requires a base plate to be attached to the tripod socket of the camera. This plate also incorporates an intermediate control lever for the lens release which is fine but if you want to change batteries you have to remove the base plate. With the base plate fitted, the camera slides into position once the AF Area/Mode and Mode/Drive knobs either side of the cold shoe have been lifted up. The camera slides in and hits a stop with a reassuring click as the locking lever on the right hand side engages. The camera is now held very precisely and all of the controls fall into line which is what you expect from a Nauticam. This is a very tricky camera to house but they have done a really good job.

If I'm allowed my first niggle at this stage, I'll take one but it's not one about Nauticam in particular - it's actually about all black housings



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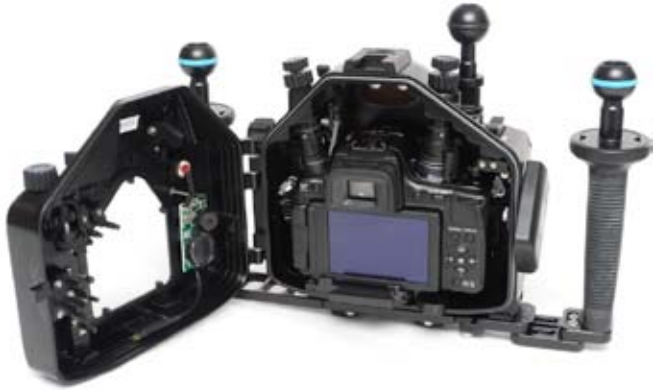

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with black internal parts – it's not easy to see where the camera tray is in relation to the corresponding track in the housing body. Black on black needs a well-lit room or holding a small focusing light in one's mouth to help guide the camera home. I will admit to having (and using) an elasticated forehead mounted LED light but I'm really not comfortable

with too many people knowing this but it does work very well.

With said camera now positively fixed in the front housing body, the AF Area/Mode and Mode/Drive knobs can be dropped down into position and the single O ring groove and mating surfaces checked (once again a light at this stage is very useful) following which the hinged rear door is closed and secured with Nauticam's trademark rotary control closure. It has a very positive feel indeed.

My first choice lens is the 8mm fisheye for both video and stills in UK waters and Nauticam offer a nice compact acrylic dome for use with this lens. This small combination is a pleasure to use for available light work even in UK waters where the camera's excellent high ISO performance comes into its own. Finally, and at the risk of hearing howls of derision, I can't help but believe that the addition of a GreenWater Magic filter makes this an unbeatable combination for such available light shots.

My other lens is the 7-14mm which provides a versatile very wide to semi-wide zoom range which is especially useful for video. The Nauticam acrylic dome port for this lens is naturally larger than the 8mm one and changing ports is very simple with the Nauticam design. Indeed so too is changing lenses which can be done without removing the camera from the housing.

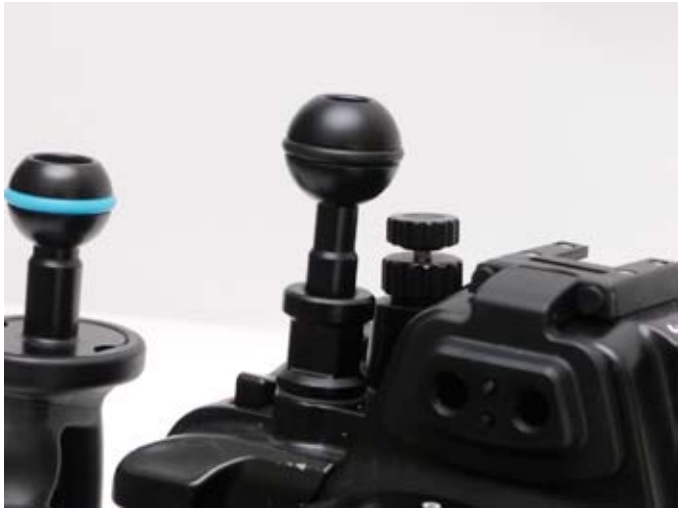
I was initially concerned about the lack of a manual focus control but in reality the GH2 has surprised me with virtually no 'hunting' even in quite dark conditions under a wreck in UK waters and using ISO 3200 gives smooth, noise free results. Coming from where I do when even 400asa was grainy and 1000asa was so bad it was treated as a special effect, having the ability to use 3200 is a dream come true.

The Nauticam NA-GH2 handles really well as a hand held camera but it also has available a neat base plate and handle assembly to which can be added ball sockets for strobe arms. The base of this can be adjusted quite precisely to get your hand and triggering finger in exactly the right place for you. A lot of thought has gone into providing the components for this system and a lot areas have been machined away to reduce the weight but at the cost of rigidity as there is a slight flexing movement when the weight of a strobe is added but this is not a major problem. The rubberised handles are very comfortable and this is something that Nauticam have always been very keen on because the handles are an important link to the camera controls and a comfortable hand position is the best start.

Strobe triggering is via fibre optic cables triggered by the camera's pop up flash which is easy to open and close. There is an external push fit adaptor incorporating 2 holes for Nauticam fibre optic cables and 2 for bare ended ones. Personally I would have preferred this to be retained with screws for security but having said that I haven't lost it yet! Unfortunately the output of the built in flash on the GH2 is not controllable so there might be a problem with battery drain on a long dive using strobes all the time but I haven't got there yet.

All of the important controls fall easily to hand, especially when handholding the housing, and Nauticam are to be congratulated on their design for this is not an easy nor a conventional camera to house but they have done a marvellous job.

I've left the final part of the review to the viewfinding because your opinion will depend on whether you are moving up from a compact or



A 10mm ball adaptor is available to mount spotting lights and there is a cold shoe adaptor on the top of the housing.

down from an SLR. Moving up from a compact and you will be impressed with the large viewing port for the 3" LCD screen. Unfortunately the electronic viewfinder is not really useable with one's eye displaced by even the lowest volume mask and there are no optics available to improve this situation and that is why someone moving down from an SLR, having got used to a 180° or 45° optical viewfinder will quite rightly be disappointed. Nauticam do produce 2 optical viewfinders but this housing is not designed to accept them.

Personally, as an ex-compact user, that's not a problem for me and I am just happy to be able to use such an excellent camera underwater in a housing that, for me, gives me exactly what I want.

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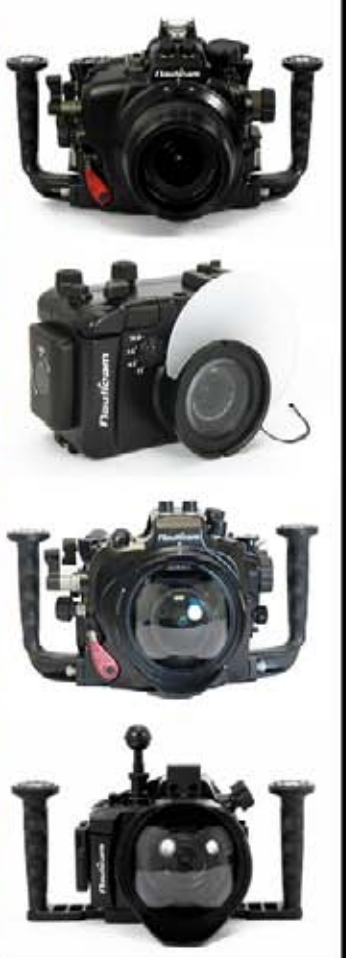
Under Water Visions

Stand Out from the Crowd



Underwater Housings for

Canon 7D, 60D, 600D, 550D
Nikon D7000, D300s, D300, D700, D90
Sony NEX-5, Panasonic GH2, LX5, Olympus EPL-2, XZ1

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