AquaTech Sports DC5V2

By Wade Hughes

It's kept me awake at night sometimes. Just imagining a fumble as my camera housing is passed from water to boat in rough seas. Not really an issue when the bottom is reachable. But over the abyss, in mid-ocean? Loss of the equipment is one thing, that's insurable and replaceable. What's inside, though, the images, would be lost forever.

Lanyards and neck straps are a pain in the bum. I used clamps and strobe arms and flotation foam on one expedition to the Azores but still could not bolt enough foam onto the housing to make it neutrally buoyant. And on the first swim from the boat, in an attempt to reach a meandering sperm whale, I discovered another characteristic of the padded girders – drag. If a sperm whale merely flexes it's flukes in a lazy stretch, it propels itself ten metres or so, so something approximating hydro-dynamic efficiency is essential for anything but serendipitous photography. Trying to push or pull my inelegantly festooned heavy metal housing through the sea made the thought of dropping the bloody thing seem quite a good idea.

Scuba bubbles would spook sperm whales and the drag from a tank would render the photographer much less mobile than is ideal. In addition, in the Azores, conditions of the permit which allows us to enter the water with cetacea prohibit the use of scuba. So everything we shoot there is done using snorkel only. And that's what led me to think about using surf or sports housings for whale work. No need for 100 metre-proof seals and full metal jacket housings.

Lightweight and compact; ideal for shallow water work...and it floats.

Good corner to corner sharpness

But there was always the question of sharpness. Just how good could these plastic domes be, compared to the multi-coated nine inch mineral glass dome that I pamper and protect as carry-on baggage? It was that question, more than anything else, that held me back from trying one of these housings.

But I finally sagged under the weight of concern for images lost in the abyss and bought an AquaTech SportsDC5V2 housing.

It's a delightful housing. It's not without shortcomings for the kind of work I do with whales,

but most of those can be overcome, and it has the potential to be not just adequate, but actually an excellent tool.

Straight out of the box, the quality of the build is immediately apparent. It's a solid and well finished aggregation of fibreglass, polycarbonate, aluminium, and stainless steel. It is light in weight, but the individual parts, the housing, the extension ring, the backplate, the camera mount, and the dome all exhibit the substance and feel of high quality. The controls reassuringly firm and stiff in their glands. There is nothing whatsoever flimsy about this rig.

Installing the camera is so easy it left me, used to jiggling and wiggling precisely machined and zero tolerance gears and wheels in my regular housing, wondering if I had overlooked some steps in the process. It's simply a matter of attaching the base plate to the camera, sliding the camera into the housing, and clamping the acrylic backplate in place with the four sturdy double-action over-centre stainless clips. The main o-ring is visible through the backplate, so it can be visually inspected for an effective seal.

I shoot mostly prime lenses, but, for those times when a zoom is preferable, the lens needs to be wrapped with a quick fit velcro and

The baseplate slides in, the acrylic back clips on, and the camera is ready to go

plastic belt. This engages with a nubbed neoprene gear on the housing zoom control. The extension ring and dome attach via a coarse and positive thread. No risk of cross-threading.

Overall, I think the design strategy can be summed up in three words: quality; precision; simplicity.

And so to the dome. I bought the LP-3 eight inch dome for use with a 35mm prime and a 16-35mm zoom. It is razorsharp. I still worry about the softness of the acrylic, and my mineral glass multi coated nine inch dome does give better results - but only marginally. Perhaps as a concession to the inevitability that the acrylic will get trashed, AquaTech has made it a replaceable element. No need to pay for a complete dome, just remove the acrylic dome from the aluminium mount and install a new one. That's not something I

High quality but the Live View control makes it difficult to see through the viewfinder if you're wearing a dive mask.

could do with the expensive big-ass glass dome I own. So, the AquaTech dome is thoroughly acceptable under most conditions. I say most, because it has one major flaw, and that is lack of shading. With no lens shade, any shot into the sun is likely to be watermarked with a reversed reflection of the lens mount and, if they have not been blacked out, the brand name and specifications of the lens in use.

That problem is difficult to correct so it requires diligence on behalf of the user. Not so with some of the other shortcomings.

Once again, these are shortcomings that I see in the context of my particular use of the housing. They may well not apply to other users.

The viewing is poor. There are two reasons for this. The first is

A n easy solution; remove the control (who uses Live View in the water anyway!) and replace with flat plugs supplied by AquaTech.

that there is no viewing system other than the transparency of the acrylic backplate. There is a neoprene ring that encircles the viewing area in case you don't know where it is, but that's all. Wearing a mask, it is impossible to see the full frame on the camera viewfinder. That costs the whale photographer shots through poor framing and unintended cropping. That problem is compounded by the protruding Live View control. It pokes into the faceplate of the mask and makes it even more difficult to frame shots.

But there are solutions for both these issues. AquaTech can supply blank plugs to replace the Live View and, for good measure, the smaller and less obtrusive AF control. The Live View control has to be snapped off at the threads to

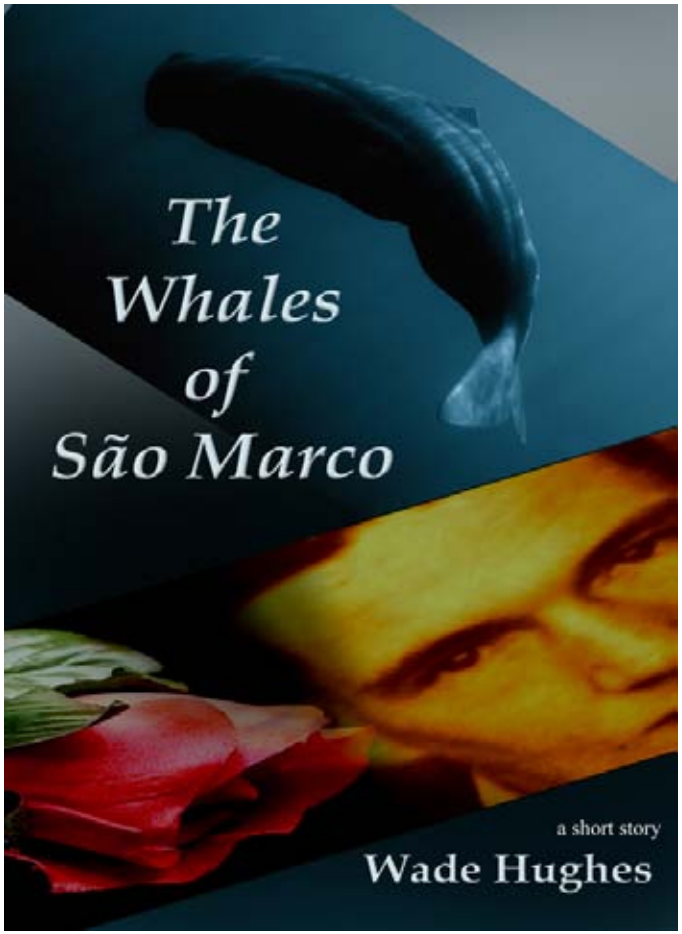
extract it. A huge improvement would be an option to fit an Inon finder which would allow corner to corner, magnified view of the camera viewfinder. That's simple enough to do with a hole machined through the backplate as is done by many other manufacturers.

I found the housing to be just a tad too buoyant. This is an asset for some uses and it certainly removes any risk of loss through sinking, but it's quite difficult to manage the buoyancy for just-below-the surface shots. A small weight plate, attached to the trigger realse mount on the base of the housing will easily remedy this. And probably so too would installing the Inon 45 degree finder. This would both add some weight, and allow the housing to be held below eye level, and therefore position it lower down in the water to avoid some of the surface chop intruding into the frame.

My only other gripe is the colour. AquaTech only supply this housing in a green that might be suitable for covert missions in the Irrawaddy River. Two people asked me, seriously, if it was a military issue. Colour is subjective, of course, and standardizing brings efficiencies into a manufacturing process that help contain costs and therefore prices for consumers. But, given the other sparkling colours offered by AquaTech in its range of housings, it's difficult to understand why the obsession with olive drab green for this model. In oceanic blue water, it jars.

That said, there's one other strong plus in favour of AquaTech. After sales service. It's terrific. I bought mine through Phil Gallagher in Australia. He and the AquaTech team responded swiftly and sent blank plugs to both my home in Dubai and to the Azores expedition base so that I would be sure to receive them and be able to replace the offending Live View control. They followed up with details and advice on how to extract the pop-centred control as soon as I raised it as an issue, and continue to offer highly personalised contact and support. In all, this housing has been quite a find.

Wade Hughes



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