

Nauticam NA-GX1 for the Panasonic GX1 review

by Jussi Hokkanen

Before the digital camera revolution nobody talked about the picture quality of this and that camera. If you had a small camera with a decent lens it took as high quality pictures as any expensive SLR. Since then, for years now in fact, manufacturers and punters alike have been obsessed with megapixels and image quality comparisons. Today we are returning to the beginning of this circle. Almost any decent digital camera is able to produce stunningly good results and the image quality difference between top DSLR cameras and mid-range compact cameras has almost disappeared.

I don't generally bother with geeky image quality tests but as it happens I was browsing the pixel peeping Mecca of the world: DPreview.com and used their handy studio comparison tool to put four cameras side by side. The cameras I chose were the new Canon PowerShot G1X, the latest high-end Canon DSLR; EOS-5D MKIII, The Olympus interchangeable lens compact camera E-PL3 and the new Panasonic GX1.

All these cameras ranging from 500 pounds to 2500 pounds were able to produce, at least in my eyes, almost identical quality pictures when in low ISOs. The image quality difference between the chosen compact cameras and the Canon DSLRs are insignificant in real life. (OK, OK... once you turn the ISO readings up high you can see big differences... but let's say below 400 ISO). From an underwater photographers point of view this situation is ideal and this all leads me to the subject in hand: underwater photography with compact cameras, especially the one I have had my hands on lately; The Panasonic GX1 system compact and the Nauticam NA-GX1 housing especially designed for it. I was lucky to spend some quality underwater time with the said package this June in Yucatan, Mexico

Camera design:

The GX1 camera is the latest Panasonic system compact camera and it replaces the already dated GF1, which was one of the first successful



Pictures taken with Panasonic 8mm fisheye and Panasonic-Leica 45mm macro with Inon Z-240 strobe.

interchangeable compact cameras that helped to create a completely new field onto the camera marketplace. The new Panasonic GX1 has been updated with the latest micro four-thirds sensor, which is more up to date with the current strong competition. The GX1 has of course also a touch screen, which can be handy topside but useless underwater. From an UW-

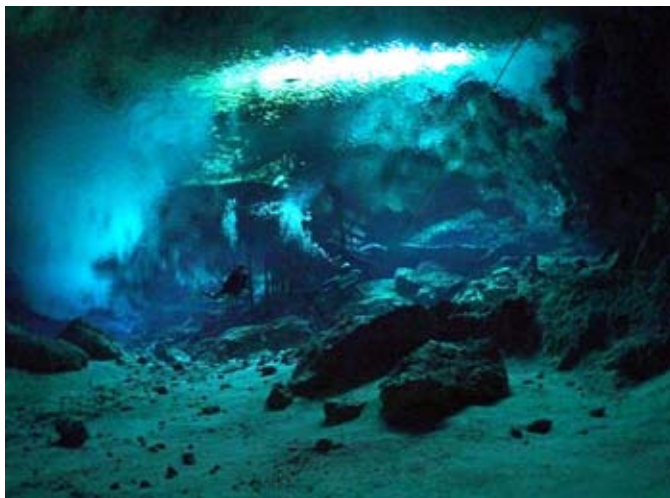
photographers point of view luckily all the manual non-touch-screen controls still remain and make this camera "houseable". Along with the GX1 update comes a new Panasonic lens called the X PZ 14-42 f3.5-5.6. This lens is an extremely compact standard zoom that has lost its zoom and focus rings and instead has power-zoom levers for zooming and

manual focus. I've never been a big fan of power-zoom glass and thankfully the fad passed in the early nineteen nineties as many of the lenses of that era were just cumbersome. The new Panasonic lens generally behaves reasonably well and zooming speed with this lens is quite manageable. Still, I have to hand it to Panasonic. Because of the lenses' unconventional motorized design; it is probably the world's flattest interchangeable 28-80mm zoom lens. The lens design brings also a reasonably rare extra feature for underwater photographers ... but more about that a tad later.

Housing Design:

Nauticam designed and manufactured very good aluminium housings for the previous Panasonic G range cameras but this time the offering comes with an added bonus. The new NA-GX1 housing retails in the UK for £899 and is over £300 cheaper than any existing Nauticam system compact housing. The new housing is slightly boxier in shape compared to the previous Panasonic housings and in a way somehow also feels a bit more bulky. However, when you put it next to a previous Panasonic housing you realise that the differences are more visual than anything else. Another new thing on the housing is the simplified flash connector port. Instead of the 4-way flap that was bolted on top of the flash window, the new adapter is a simple 2-way Sea&Sea type connector where the cable end openings are drilled straight into the polycarbonate window. Nice and simple. The housing buttons and levers are generally very nice to use, which is not a surprise, of course, as all Nauticam housings I've ever handled have been extremely ergonomic.

Earlier Panasonic G-range cameras suffered



from a housing related pop-up flash issue. Unlike some other cameras the pop-up flash of previous Panasonic system compacts only fired if it was allowed to open fully: i.e. the spring-loaded flash unit was fully extended to maximum height. If you take a look at the intricate flash system of the GX1 you will see that although easy to operate with a human finger, when in a housing with a small lever, the operation becomes very difficult. The problem was actually too hard to be resolved and so previous Nauticam Panasonic housings did not have pop-up flash push-down levers. This was a problem as the cameras did not have any other way to disable the internal strobe. Fortunately the new GX1 works better as the flash, although still having the same spring system, will fire without being extended to its full height. So now inside the housing the flash opens only about 1cm and can be pushed down with a simple lever.

The NA-GX1 housing offers full control of all camera buttons excluding the touch screen controls. A special mention needs to be given to how well the back rear dial now works. This was another



headache for some designers as the tiny flush fitting wheel needs to be both pressed and turned. With Nauticam's clever spring loaded design this task becomes a doddle underwater. The only slightly confusing housing control is the dual-tier main wheel that controls the on-off switch and the main mode dial. At least I managed to turn the camera off a couple of times accidentally when I was supposed to be only touching the top part of this dual-dial for mode change. During my week with the NA-GX1 I however quickly learnt to use this dial.

Lens Choices:

The system compact camera lens range has been growing steadily and now for the GX1 camera you already have pretty much all the lenses you could really want for both land and underwater photography. For underwater super



wide-angle photography you can use the Panasonic 8mm fisheye or the 7-14mm super wide zoom inside a dedicated dome port. Don't forget you can also use all Olympus system compact lenses like the well priced 9-18mm. For macro you can use the 45mm Panasonic-Leica inside a basic flat port, which quickly became my favourite during the tests. This lens is as good as any 100mm DSLR macro lens and can produce amazing results. Additional magnification can be added on the 67mm port thread if so desired.

An interesting newcomer to the Panasonic lens range is the new, already mentioned, motorised Vario X PZ 14-42mm zoom. What makes this lens stand out from the previous

Panasonic 14-42 lenses is the wet lens possibilities it offers. Because of the new X zoom design the lens, while zooming, only moves in and out about one centimetre, in a pump action sort of way. This makes it a perfect lens to be used with an external wet wide-angle and macro adapters that can be attached on to the port thread and exchanged during the dive. Unfortunately the ports Nauticam currently offer are either too long or too short as the port needs to be just the right length. The company is to release a new flat port for the Vario X lens that will be the correct size but unfortunately this port did not make it in time for my trip. Nauticam is also bringing out some sort of gearing



device that allows the operation of the Panasonic X lens' power zoom lever inside the housing. The Vario X 14-42mm will be an interesting and extremely flexible choice for UW-photographers once all the necessary bits and bobs are available.

Final words:

Nauticam manages to somehow raise its game again with the new NA-GX1 housing. Never before there has been a sub thousand pound housing of this quality, size and material. Also the GX1 as a camera is extremely attractive choice among the ever-growing range of interchangeable lens compact cameras. Its image quality is as good as it gets, competing with the Sony NEX range. My biggest gripe with the Sony's admirable NEX range has always been the toy-like user interface. The Panasonic comes

with a normal camera interface that is much more pleasing to use. Also, in comparison with the other manufacturers like Sony, the GX1 lens range is pretty unbeatable. The Sony NEX range only really offers 5 lenses. For the Micro Four Thirds system the choice is already nearly twenty.

Forget your cumbersome SLR housings. This package costs a 1/3 and weighs a quarter of a full-on DSLR setup. You can't go wrong with the NA-GX1 as it easily matches at least the low-to mid end DSLRs underwater.

Jussi Hokkanen
www.deepshots.co.uk