

The Nikonos Conversion System

by Andrej Belic

This is the story of how a decade long underwater photographer's dream came true.

The first personal encounter I had with a Nikonos RS was in 2002 at one of Kurt Amsler's famous workshops. Before I've only read about it and considered it an overpriced Nikon F70. Kurt back then was sponsored by Nikon and Subal. He had a Subal Procace for the Nikon F5 as well as a Nikonos RS system consisting of camera, lenses and strobes. Once I asked him which system he preferred since I was a big fan of housed cameras (I was using a Seacam Nikon F100), he smiled at me and pointed to the RS. I argued: "This is an outdated F70 in a housing selling for way more than Seacam, Subal, etc..." Again he smiled and answered: "You don't care about the optics and this is what it's all about."

Ok, during the next days I got the chance to compare. I had a Nikkor 17-35/2.8 which was the best wide-angle zoom 10 years ago. I also had a coated 24 cm dome with an exactly matched extension ring sitting in front of my housed Nikon F100. This has cost me a small fortune and I was very proud of it since it took me a lot of mind work to get everything as perfect as possible. Kurt has also taught me how to place focus points away from the center in order to maximize corner sharpness. Actually in 2002 this was by far the best setup available to the enduser. At least I thought so until I compared a film slide shot with the Nikonos RS. Now my pictures looked dull, lacking contrast, losing sharpness and when you looked into the

corners you only saw some mug. Happily this saddening event was only for a holiday week because still my setup was the best of any housed camera.

With the digital revolution that came in 2004 the Nikonos RS was forgotten. Some aficionados were cheering about the optics but most photographers were just happy with the advantages that digital photography brought to them. At the beginning I was quite skeptical about digital SLRs since for wideangle it featured more problems than benefits: pictures lacking contrast and lack of availability of good wideangle lenses in DX format. In 2007/2008 the Nikon D3 came out and a lot of things changed. I also had to switch my uw-housing supplier. However this change also provided me with some new domeports. The first one was a huge 10" monster that had its' caveats but was quite sharp with the Nikkor 16mm fisheye lens, the other being an inside/outside coated strongly curved 9" dome delivering good results behind a very good lens. This very good lens was the Sigma 8-16 rectilinear DX lens. On a D7000 it produced remarkable results at f11.

In early 2012 it seemed that a new era in digital photography was about to emerge. DX format was already better performing than FX in many terms and many pros asked why they should waste their money again on new lenses and camera bodies and housings after they had spent so much time to get the DX system work as it should. I was one of them. Ok, there was a D800 with more pixels



The Nikonos RS Fisheye lens on a black Subal ND3s housing

but I seldom made large prints. The DX format gave me way more depth of field which improved macro and wideangle and was way more forgiving to errors. The lenses for macro were the same but gave me an increased magnification (of course the opposite is true, the sensor gets smaller, not the fish bigger). A lens like the Sigma 8-16 performed equal to a double-priced Nikkor 14-24 and giving more

depth of field (again this is not true: the sensor gets smaller, not the depth of field bigger). But still in practical terms the DX format had many advantages. So the 'full frame' FX format in order to get attractive needed some new lenses.

In my search for new lenses I soon started to ask myself why nobody has ever tried to put a Nikonos RS lens on a Nikon camera. In March 2012 I tried it and from that moment on I was sold.

The Nikonos RS lens bayonet is the same as the one for Nikon so a Nikonos lens fits on a Nikon camera. Actually a few people have ever tried this, even those that own lenses and Nikon cameras! Now I knew that I could do this even if it meant to stick broken matches inside the lens to block the aperture and prefocus on land with a screwdriver. However after a few months of investigating and hearing various opinions from various engineers mostly on why this is not possible I started to develop the system that is behind the electronic modification to make a Nikonos lens work a Nikon camera. This idea I have posted on such acclaimed websites as www.wetpixel.com or the pdf edition of www.uwpmag.com.

A lot of great people have contacted me after this news and expressed their interest in my



invention. Most of them used different housing brands: Nauticam, Subal, Seacam, Sea & Sea, etc.

This was the second part of my investigation and this one took me a lot of work. The Aluminum engineers were more cooperative than the ones from Nikon but still it represented an even greater challenge for someone like me. After weeks of intensive work and sweat we were able to produce the first Nikonos waterproof adapters for housings from Subal and Nauticam. Here we were confronted with the differences of each housing manufacturer. For example the Nauticam with its' large mount and the easy to use locking mechanism proved most suitable for future applications like the adaptation of Nikonos lenses. The Subal with its' smaller mount worked without having to remove any parts of the housing. The Seacam proved most problematic.



Here certainly some parts have to be removed.

We did some testing in Croatia. I was at 60m with a customized Subal ND3s and it was waterproof with the 13 mm RS lens. The pictures were remarkable especially regarding corner sharpness. The small dome of the Nikonos could easily surpass by sharpness with large 9" domes at larger apertures but still offering depth of field characteristics of small domes at smaller f-stops – and that with full FX frame. A dream came true. We had some issues with AF at depth however we now know where the problem lies and by mid September the serial production of the Nikonos Conversion System can begin. It will include the 13 mm RS Fisheye and the 28 mm for Seacam, Subal and Sea & Sea mounts. The Nauticam can additionally house the 50 mm macro lens. Feel free to gather information on my work at my newly launched website: www.abelic.net/wp or to ask any questions at andrej@abelic.net

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