

Subal CP5 housing for Nikon Coolpix 5000

A review by Peter Rowlands



The advent of the Nikon Coolpix 5000 digital stills camera marked a watershed change from conventional film to digital photography and now, with the arrival of the Subal CP5 housing that same watershed now applies to underwater photography.

The Nikon Coolpix 5000 camera

The reason why the appearance of the Coolpix 5000 is so important is that it provides a fully featured camera which can be operated totally in automatic mode with programme, shutter or aperture priorities or fully manual with control over shutter speed and aperture. This places it one step up from the “point and shoot” digital cameras such as the excellent Olympus range complimented by the PT range of underwater housings.

The 5000 is not in the same league as the Nikon D1 type digital SLR cameras but, at around £850 it is a fraction of the

cost of these SLR cameras which is around £4000!

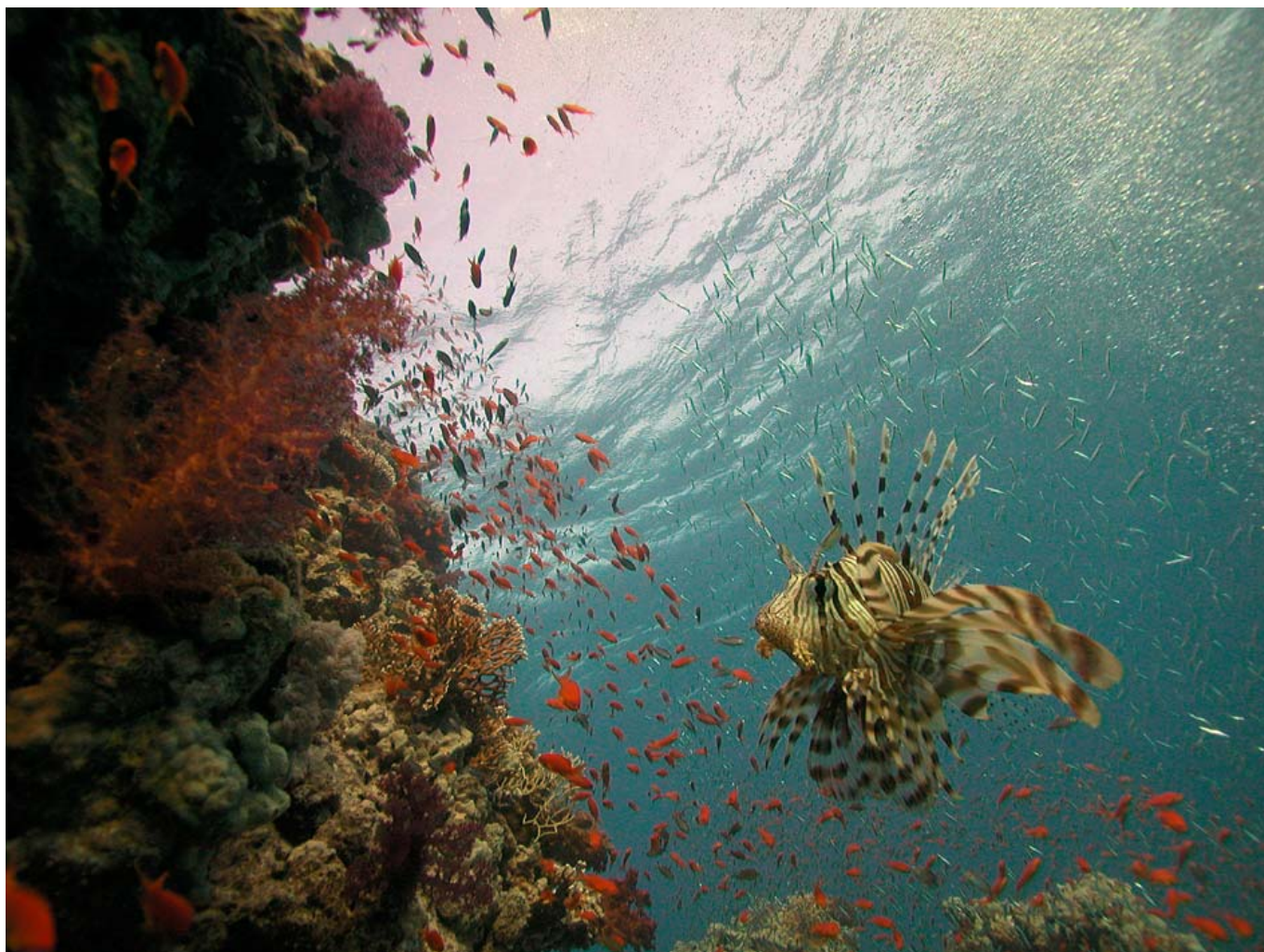
The final plus factor is the availability of two accessory lenses -the FC-E8 fisheye adaptor and the WC-E68 wide angle adaptor. The former provides either a circular fisheye picture when the camera is zoomed out or a full frame fisheye (like the 16mm Nikkor on a conventional SLR) when it is zoomed in. The latter increases the focal length by x.68 converting it to the 35mm SLR equivalent of a 19-60mm zoom with full macro capability. It's easy to see why such versatility is attractive especially when the lenses are only around the £200 mark.

The first impressions of the 5000 camera is that it is so small and light, weighing in at around 500gms yet is bristling with buttons and wheels which will force you to read the instruction manual to find out what they all do! Most of the controls are menu driven so you will have to sit down with a Coolpix 5000 for some time to

familiarise yourself with all of its features.

From an underwater point of view a big attraction of the 5000 is the fold out LCD screen which can be placed at 45° for the ideal viewing position and Subal's CP5 housing takes full advantage of this allowing you to choose between the 45° angle or the fully folded back position where the screen is directly behind the camera. I'll discuss the CP5 housing later.

Another attractive feature of the 5000 is the ability to trigger external TTL flashguns such as their SB land range and also the Nikonos TTL flashguns which are used with Nikonos and housed Nikon land cameras. I struggled to get the TTL to work initially scrolling through menus to change settings but then it started to click and the camera gave excellent TTL performance once I had adjusted to it underexpose by one stop as the initial results were too bright. The camera detects the TTL flash when it is plugged into the



hotshoe once you have set the camera to “Seedlight Control” - “Auto” in the camera’s set up menu.

The camera can be set up with no fewer than four sets of user settings which makes it easier to switch from one mode to another without having to set the camera up again. As usual with all such complicated and capable cameras, I ended up using just one set of settings for automatic exposures on land and, funnily enough, underwater, I actually preferred to use the manual setting - adjusting the aperture and shutter speed to achieve the desired result. This may seem a little odd not using the cameras automatic functions but when you can see your results instantly it is easy to make any necessary changes and then take another shot.

The shot above was taken by available light using the manual white balance setting which can add red to compensate for waters strong blue cast.

The camera is a snug fit with the camera secured on a baseplate which slides into the front. The LCD screen can be used tilted at 45 ° as shown here and also folded back behind the camera but the 45 ° position is by far the most comfortable



A good example of this actually blew me away underwater when I was shooting balanced light shots. For the first time I could see instantly how the shutter speed controlled the

background exposure and the aperture controlled the foreground exposure from the flash. Anyone who has had difficulty in the past with this technique will see instantly what



Subals port was not available for either the FC-E8 fisheye adaptor and the WC-E68 wide angle adaptor but I made one for my Red Sea trip. This was taken with the FC-E8 fullframe fisheye. These two lenses should be considered as essential accessories if you are to get the best out of the system.

controls what and have you producing superb balanced light shots in no time at all. Groundbreaking stuff indeed.

Yet another capability of the camera is the ability to manually set the white balance. This is not possible with conventional cameras without adding filters but the 5000 can be “manually white balanced” underwater and it will add red colour to compensate for the excess blue cast. This has always been available to video users with great success but it can now be used with still cameras such as the 5000. I have yet to explore the full capabilities of the cameras white balancing but initial trials give good colour

correction down to about 30 feet. The process is a bit fiddly having to go through menus and set the balance but it well worth mastering as this function alone will improve the quality of your underwater shots significantly.

The battery life of digital stills cameras has always been disappointing but the 5000 is better than most giving a good 90 minutes before needing to be recharged. This may not seem much but it’s plenty enough for a full dive but I would strongly advise the purchase of a second battery to be charging while you use the first one. That way if there is some exciting action happening you can quickly change batteries and get back in

the water.

The 5000 comes with a 32mb memory card which will hold about 25 good quality images but I would recommend buying a larger card such as 128 or 256mb which would hold well over 100 images. That may seem a bit excessive if you have been used to the conventional 36 shots on 35mm film but, in practice, it was not unusual for me to finish an hours dive having taken over 50 shots! Always remember you can sort out the good shots once you get back to the boat or on shore because, once you have gone digital, your “film” costs you absolutely nothing.

That last point leads me to the final difference between



Another available light using manual white balance and the standard lens. I doubt if you could get such colours with conventional film. Digital stills cameras are similar to video in their colour capabilities.

conventional and digital stills and that is that you really need to think of a digital stills as a system which includes a laptop computer to download and save your shots after every dive. If you don't have one you would need to consider purchasing extra memory cards which is a bit excessive. As a long time fan of laptops, I already have one (Apple Mac, of course!) and I consider it as a vital part of the system. Add the advantage of being able to watch DVDs and listen to my music catalogue stored on the hard disk and I have the ideal travelling companion.

The final, vital, piece of equipment in my digital stills outfit has to be the excellent

Pelican laptop computer case which is O ring sealed and waterproof. It keeps the laptop safe and dry and the advantage of such a case was drilled home to me as I tried to wade out to a transfer boat in the dark on an uneven seabed with my laptop in a conventional non-waterproof briefcase. One slip of the feet and the case would have been underwater and the trip would have been a total write-off. Those who were there at the time were amused to hear me lose my rag in a very British sort of a way but the thought of losing a laptop was more than I could contemplate so I consider the Pelican case as an absolute essential.

In terms of image quality,

the 5000 can be used a various resolutions but the ideal one for me was the "Fine" setting which produces images around 1.5mb and these can be used to print good quality photo quality images well in excess of A4 size but not quite A3 and that was more than enough for my purposes. The quality and smoothness of the prints is very pleasing - even just on economic photo quality inkjet paper. I imagine they will look stunning on the more expensive Glossy Photo paper.

The final difference between the 5000 and conventional stills cameras is the shutter delay. This is a necessary evil one has to put up with and is only solved by



The 5000 offers TTL flash metering which works well but, strangely enough, I found myself preferring the manual power settings of the Inon Z220 as I could see the results straightaway and make any adjustments before taking the next shot. What a luxury!

buying the Nikon D1 type SLR digital stills cameras for around £4000 (before you buy a housing!). The reason for the delay is to give the camera time to set the autofocus and exposure settings and it makes fish photography feel like you have become a spearfisherman all over again - trying to anticipate where it will be in about one seconds time. In practice it's actually quite fun having the delay and it seems to put a bit of "sport" back into underwater photography. No doubt, in time, the shutter delay will become instant as these cameras are developed but I am happy to accept the limitations for the

time being.

In conclusion, the only way to appreciate the digital stills "experience" is to try it. On a recent trip I loaned my point and shoot housed Olympus C1 to a fellow underwater photographer who was snorkelling and he produced some excellent results but what really knocked him out was the ability to see the results straight away on a computer screen. The result is that he has been bitten by the digital "revelation" so, be warned, if you want to stick to conventional photography don't, whatever you do, try digital. It will blow your mind.

The Subal CP5 housing for the Nikon Coolpix 5000

As I said at the beginning of this article, I believe the Subal CP5 is a significant contributor to this watershed in underwater photography. There are other housings available, which I have not tried, but from what I have seen from their specifications and pictures of them is that they all, to my knowledge, lack the ability to take advantage of the swivelling LCD screen and this is a major deficiency.

The Subal CP5 weighs just 2.2kg and is machined from a solid block of aluminium. Add the camera at 0.5kg and you



There are no fewer than 23 push button and dial controls which give you total control of the cameras functions. The strap handle on the left positions your hand to get easy access to most of these



The 45 °viewing option is a pleasure to use, espceially for those low angle shots which have improved impact.

The screen is quite small but entirely adequate but I did decide to get some lenses in my mask as my close focus eyesight is not what it used to be!

have a system which can travel with you as hand luggage with weight to spare. That in itself is a major breakthrough.

There are no fewer than 23 push button and dial controls which give you total control of the cameras functions whichever position you have the LCD screen in. The positioning of the camera is extremely precise from a screw-in base tray which slots into two accurate guide posts in the front of the housing. The positioning and rigidity is very important as the camera control buttons and dials are small but the Subal CP5 makes controlling the camera extremely easy and I would go so far as to say that it is easier to operate the camera

underwater than it is on land - and that is something I have never said before.

Underwater the CP5 is neutrally buoyant with the standard lens and flat port and the right hand strap handle positions your hand perfectly for access to the main controls. It is easy to change to another function mode despite having to hold down a button and turn a wheel at the same time and the shutter release button is so sensitive you can feel the camera and get it to a halfway position which sets the focus and exposure before you finally take the picture. This significantly reduces the shutter delay and which is a major advantage.

Subals' wide angle ports for the fisheye and wide angle adaptors weren't available when I tested my housing in the Red Sea so I hastily made up an extension ring to fit their DP64b dome port and this produced some excellent results. I would go so far as to say that the WC-E68 wide angle adaptor produces even sharper results than the standard lens and the FC-E8 fisheye adaptor is similar although I have not had a chance to use Subals' specific ports. By the end of a week long test the WC-E68 became the lens of choice for almost all shots changing only to the FC-E8 for wreck shots and the standard lens for really close up shots.



This low level shot would have been very difficult had it not been for the 45° viewfinder screen. The additional light was from the Z220 flash on manual but don't ask me which power as it has no fewer than 11 (yes eleven) settings!

The most impressive feature of the CP5 is the 45° viewing on the LCD screen. This makes seabed level shots a breeze and the position of the housing in relation to your body is very natural and does not produce any wrist strain which would be the case with the behind the camera viewing. I can't imagine using the LCD screen in any other way than the 45° option. The only exception would be if you want to shoot a lot of verticals - in which case the behind the camera set up would be better.

The CP5 is fitted with a standard flash arm shoe but this could be replaced with an Ultralight base shoe which

would open it up to a much more versatile arm system. As far as I'm concerned the sooner housing manufacturers standardise on Ultralight arms the sooner they can all concentrate on housing design and accept that Ultralight is the best arm system on the market.

I used the CP5 with the Inon Z220 digital strobe and the YS30 but I found the manual controls available on the Z220 to be ideal as I liked to use the 5000/CP5 combo in manual exposure mode because it was so quick and easy to change exposure if the previous shot wasn't quite right. I know it seems weird in this day and age of electronic automation to

prefer using manual but I felt it gave me much more control over the eventual image. The automatic modes work extremely well for both available light and TTL flash so this system will suit almost anyone's requirements.

The build quality and design have Subal's traditional feel providing a housing which is both functional yet warm (a strange word to describe a housing but it's true) and the combination of the camera's capabilities and versatility with the housings ergonomic design make this duo a team to be reckoned with.

The basic camera costs around £850 and the CP5 housing is £1499 so you are

looking at a significant investment. It's certainly a big step up from an Olympus digital point and shoot but it does provide so much more. I can't help you decide whether it's worth jumping into this level of digital photography - all I can say is that I'm hooked and enjoying it very much.

The Subal CP5 housing is available from Ocean Optics but supplies are expected to outstrip demand for a while. The Nikon Coolpix 5000 is available from most good camera stores but I would recommend London Camera Exchange in London's Strand with whom Ocean Optics have a good relationship for advice and prices.

Rather like video cameras when they were developing rapidly, the camera prices will fall as newer models



come to the market but I believe the Coolpix 5000 and CP5 combination is one which will provide the quality of images which will keep me happy for a long time to come.

One thing's for sure. I don't

think underwater stills photography will ever be the same again. Enjoy and have a nice dive.

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Flash Operators

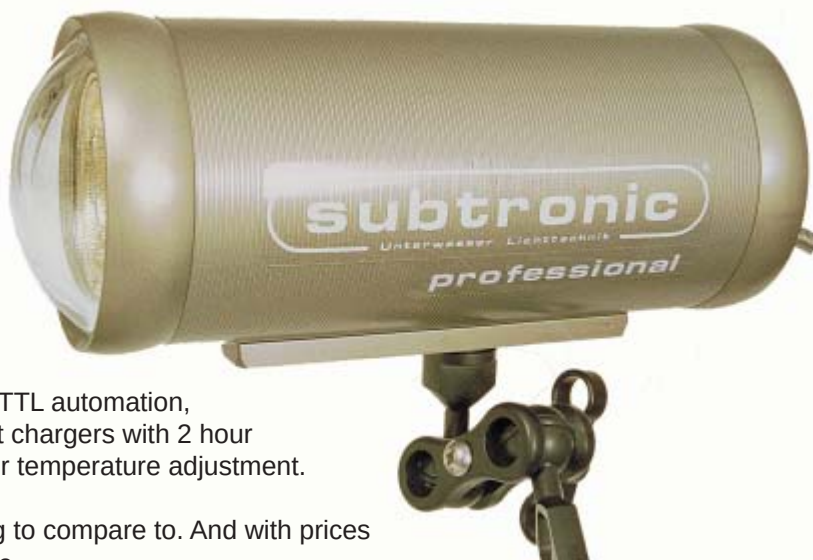
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