

I-Divesite Symbiosis SS-1 and SS-2 Lighting System

by Jussi Hokkanen

i-Divesite Symbiosis SS-2 review For years the underwater flash gun market has been shared by two Japanese companies: Sea & Sea and Inon. If you were buying a “universal” underwater strobe, not tied to any special camera or housing maker, these were the brands available for you as a normal user. (Ikelite, Subtronic, Olympus... I know, I know). For long as I can remember, people have also been asking me if there is one light that can do both stills and video; a unit that would have a powerful constant light and an UW strobe in one package. So far the answer has been negative.

Hong Kong based i-Divesite is now trying to be the third wheel in the market and lo and behold, their first ever UW strobe product is not just a strobe but a lighting system that combines a decent video light with a powerful strobe. The new lights are called the Symbiosis SS-1 and the SS-2. It is not often that in the small world of underwater photography something this novel would pop out from the production line. Interesting products indeed.

When I first heard about the new i-Divesite invention, almost a year ago now, I imagined a unit that would seamlessly combine the two features. Once I saw the first pictures of the actual light units I was slightly disappointed as they were quite far from what I had made-

up in my head. In the end the SS-1 and the SS-2 lights still look like a video light that is bolted on to a strobe unit. – “Not really a handsome combination”, was my first thought. Looks aside, the more important factor should hopefully be the actual features and ease of use. Now as I have played with the units for few weeks I can say that they work reasonably well. There are some issues though.

But first back to basics: What are the differences between the two Symbiosis models? The SS-2 is the more powerful unit with a reported guide number of 32. The cheaper SS-1 version has a guide number of 24. Basically the SS-2 should have the same power as the Sea & Sea YS-D2 and the SS-1 the same power than the Inon Z-240. I dusted off my trusty old Minolta Flash Meter V (a legend of its time!) to find out how true these numbers are. I can safely say that the sums do match. Both the SS-1 and SS-2 delivers the promised output down to a tee in comparison with the competition. For example, both the SS-2 and the YS-D2, from about one and half meter a way, in full blast, give an f reading of 16.5 exactly. Well done!

The second difference between the Symbiosis models is not the power of the bolted on video light unit, as both the SS-1 and 2 have the same 2000 lumens light head,



Symbiosis SS-2 VS Inon Z240



SS-1 and SS-2 side by side rear view

but the rear user interface. The SS-2 comes with a small LCD screen, which displays all kinds of info from your power settings to different modes and battery statuses. With the SS-1 you will need to trust the more old-school dials and ultimately your eyes as the screen is missing. The SS-2 info screen is a neat feature and definitely helps to quickly determine where your switches are pointing at any given time even in dark places.

Both the video side and the strobe side are powered by single large 3400mAh lithium ion battery which sits behind the video light unit. So no faff with AA batteries, but you will need to screw out the battery compartment to charge it and unless you have a spare battery pack the light can't be used while charging. The greatest thing about dedicated powerful lithium ion battery pack is the short flash recycling time. The SS-1 will recycle in a speedy 0.8 secs after a full discharge and the more powerful SS-2 will take slightly longer at 1.6 seconds. With traditionally powered strobes, relying on AA batteries, the recycle times will vary wildly depending of the battery type, quality and remaining energy levels. For example Sea & Sea gives an estimate figure of 1.5 to 3 seconds depending on the battery type for their YS-D2. The Inon Z-240 with its SS-1 equivalent output takes about 1.7 seconds to recycle in average conditions. With fully charged Symbiosis battery pack you can expect about 500 discharges which is a considerably large number in comparison. The real life results of course may/will fluctuate.

The bolted-on video light on top of the flash housing has various different modes depending what you want to achieve. It can be used as a traditional 2000 lumen constant white light source or as a red light source for night diving needs.



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Symbiosis battery compartment

The clever thing about it all is that the video light can also be used together with the strobe gun as a spotting/focusing light. Both the white and the red beam can be switched to a mode where the beam quenches when the strobe fires. This way you will be able to focus conveniently with the beam on but once the strobe fires you will not have any problematic light bleeds in the shot.

The video light head is also interchangeable and i-Divesite has promised that there are going to be upgrades available soon. At least a 4000 lumen light head is on the works and a special “middle body” adapter, which allows the use of the video light head with the battery pack as a stand-alone constant light unit.

Automatic strobe features:

Here's the part where it gets bit geeky. The success of Inon and lately also the Sea & Sea strobes have been down to the fact that they work pretty well in their fully automatic modes or as they call it the S-TTL modes. This Slave-TTL mode works, with almost all present cameras, by measuring the power (length) of the camera's internal flash and mirroring it to achieve good



Symbiosis with diffuser

exposure. Both the Sea & Sea and Inon have taken years to perfect their S-TTL functions (although Sea & Sea sure has struggled at times) and it can be said that they finally work really well. I-Divesite, on the other hand, is practically a newcomer in this field and their strobes come with less sophisticated auto feature. The SS-2 and the SS-1 rely on the much more basic “thyristor-esque” way of measuring the right amount of light during the exposure process. The i-Divesite AUTO mode is similar to the AUTO mode on the Inon Z-240 and the D-2000 strobes. You set your ISO and aperture on your camera and the strobe gun has a small sensor that measures the distance and adjusts the output accordingly. So this works independently of the camera and can result to good exposures as long as the flash sensor is pointing at the right direction.

The SS-1 and 2 AUTO mode is divided into two sections; close-up and wide. In the end this is just an average power adjustment for different distances. Once you have used the learning mode of the strobe

the AUTO mode works reasonably well... however there are limitations. As mentioned earlier the strobe has to be really aimed at the target for the mode to work. Move the head around and the readings go haywire. Another a big problem is the supplied extremely thick flash diffuser. With the diffuser on the light seems under-expose all the time. The strobe gun has no way knowing if it has the diffuser on or off and thus you will have to yank to power to max to get anything out of it. According my light meter the diffuser cuts 1.7 stop out of the light. That is a lot considering that the normal Inon and Sea & Sea diffusers cut about 0.5 stops. Let's hope the company will quickly bring out some thinner diffusers. For now you better shoot without the diffuser. Unfortunately the beam is slightly un-even and sort of a multi-coloured without the diffuser, so you are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

The strobe also comes with a traditional M mode, which most advanced UW photographers will be happy with. Even in the M mode you are better to leave the diffuser out. And before I forget to say: The standard Sea & Sea type sync cable works perfectly with the Symbiosis lights.

As the Symbiosis lighting system is the first successful/usable combo

strobe-constant underwater light it might make the traditional strobe companies think again about their future designs. It is of course early days for the Symbiosis. When I turn my SS-2 test unit on it displays a text: firmware version 1.0.0.0. Does this mean that we might possible get some updates for the existing units? That sounds interesting.

The bottom line is that if you want to buy a powerful strobe and a video light and mount them on your camera, you are looking to spend at least a £500 for the strobe head, £300 for a video light with red mode. Add a dual handle arm system that can cost anywhere between £200 to £450 and you are looking at least a total of 1000 quid. Whereas the SS-1 costs you £499.00 and the SS-2 £580.00 and you only need a single handle arm system. Buying a symbiosis light could almost half the cost of the complete lighting system. And that's where its strength lies today. It's not maybe the most sophisticated unit out there but it's a robust unit and if you don't rely too much of its automatics it's a brilliant, affordable manual strobe and... yes... a video light in one package.

Recommended.

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