

Fantasea Housings Revisited

by Jussi Hokkanen

Some years ago I reviewed a Fantasea housing that was made to fit a hopelessly out of date Nikon bridge camera. There was really nothing wrong with the housing itself but at that time it was just the wrong choice of an overpriced camera. This was compounded by the fact that the Fantasea housing was also at least twice the price of anything similar on the market. Four to five years ago we lived in the “golden age” of affordable high-quality underwater compact cameras. There was so much to choose from that small companies, like Fantasea, were left fighting for the scraps that the big boys leftover.

Today however things have changed. Almost all camera manufacturers have stopped producing their basic digital compact cameras. Some companies, like Fuji, have decided not to produce any more compact cameras at all. The remaining manufacturers have also decided to massively reduce the range of underwater housings they offer. Today there are simply not many compact camera + housing packages to choose from. At this point in time

none of these few remaining cameras are readily available, which further compounds the problem. Why is this?

A Sony factory that produced most of the sensors for a significant number of current compact cameras from Olympus to Canon was shut down due to an earthquake and has led to a global shortage of core camera parts leaving many manufacturers struggling.

Suddenly we find ourselves in a situation where Fantasea has become a major player in the field of underwater photography by being among the last remaining companies to offer a good range of housings for compact cameras (and I’m not comparing them to the likes of Nauticam who offer a decent range at a 1000 quid each but something more affordable).

There is now a nice variety of Fantasea housings available for both the Sony RX and the Canon G series. All these cameras are the pick of the crop of the current large 1” sensor compacts. The company has finally in



my opinion selected the right cameras for their housings.

The most affordable of these cameras is the small Canon G9X camera, which is the kid brother of the G7X / G7XII. The G9X has mostly the same innards as its bigger brothers but comes with slightly smaller lens and a large touch screen.

The next step is the Canon G7XII which is more expensive due to its faster and larger lens but this is does not always mean it is better for underwater photography (more about this later).

Then there is the Sony RX100 MK III, MK IV and the brand new MK V which will all fit into the same Fantasea housing and are somewhat more expensive than the Canons. This especially goes for the later MK IV and the MK V versions, which at the time of writing start about £850.

The Fantasea housings are

actually made by a company called AOI. AOI are a design and production agency who are probably responsible for 50% of all underwater camera products out there, including brands like Olympus, Canon, Fujifilm... etc. They also produce ports and underwater lenses with their own AOI name and are also behind a high quality video light company called RGBLue, whose products I have reviewed here on several occasions.

Generally speaking AOI make good quality products and the Fantasea/AOI housing range is no exception. The housings are designed with divers in mind. They all come with clearly marked buttons, port threads, flash up-down levers, and screen hoods etc. all essential stuff for the underwater photographer.

Fantasea FG9X Housing



The Fantasea FG9X housing for the Canon G9X camera is an interesting choice for an underwater photography as it comes with only a few physical buttons. Most settings, especially ones that are deeper in the menus are supposed to be accessed by poking the touch screen. This has usually meant that the housing for such a camera has very limited access to many important functions.

Luckily this is not the case with the FG9X housing. 98% of the camera functions can be set due to a clever housing design that allows the user to press the right side of the touch screen with a row of small buttons.

The camera's main touch menu can be organised by the photographer so that the really important settings like flash, aperture, shutter speed, ISO, etc. are reachable through the housing. The main menus can also be browsed with the zoom and

ring function levers so only few unimportant settings are not available when underwater.

Furthermore, the physical "record video" button can be programmed to do different things under different modes and unquestionably the most important of them is the one touch custom white balance function, which now makes its return with the G9X.

I have to give full marks to the Fantasea user manuals, which are very thorough and in the FG9X's case explain well the needed initial settings to get the best out of the combo.

The FG9X housing comes with a 67mm port thread that accepts pretty much all 67mm wet wide-angle and macro lenses on the market. The shorter and smaller than average lens of the Canon G9X makes the camera-housing combo one of the most flexible compact camera kits out there at the moment. Be it a fisheye lens, normal wide-angle or a macro... with this housing it is all possible.

All Fantasea compact housings including the G9X come with a surprisingly comfortable hand strap that once attached and adjusted properly will make the housing extremely nice to hold. Be it portrait or landscape orientation the housing stays firmly near your fingers without desperately grasping for it.

It's worth remembering that the

lack of Canon's own housing for the G9X makes the Fantasea housing the cheapest decent offering out there.

Fantasea FG7XII



Although priced the same as the rest of the Fantasea housings, at around £500, the G7XII housing is the largest of the lot. The large and fast lens of the Canon G7X MK II camera ensures the housing port is also oversized. Similar to Canon's own WP-DC55 housing, the large port of the FG7X II, although coming with M67 thread, is bad news when it comes to lens choices.

The traditional wide-angle and fisheye lenses, like the i-Divesite UWL-04 and the Inon UWL-H100 lenses will not work. There is of course the Inon "zoomy" UWL-S100 ZM80 lens that will work but this type of lens is quite a bit more difficult to use underwater and will seriously limit your available aperture.

With the new super large diameter lenses like the Nauticam WWL-1 and the i-Divesite UWL-09 you have a better chance as you will not have to zoom too much to

get a proper view through the lenses. But these lenses are massive and expensive, for example the Nauticam WWL-1 lens now costs over a grand!

On the upside the G7X MK II camera has a traditional user interface with old-school buttons so using the camera is simple underwater. The FG7XII housing comes with a dual flash sync-plate, which has options for bare cable ends or the standard Sea&Sea style cable plugs. A nice touch with all Fantasea housings is the dual O-ring construction, which at least in theory should better keep the water away from sensitive parts. Did I mention also that all Fantasea housings come with a pre-installed moisture alarm that will sound a warning if drops of water gather at the bottom of the housing.

Fantasea FRX100 IV/V



With the Fantasea housing for the Sony RX range all mentioned above is valid except that the company have, for some strange reason, instead of

the standard 67mm chosen a 55mm port thread for the housing. This is extremely frustrating as there are simply no good underwater wide-angle lenses available in this size. The Fantasea offers a 55mm Dyrone lens as an alternative option. Unfortunately I have had rather bad experiences with these lenses and could not really recommend them.

You do get a 55-67 step-up ring with the housing but this will only work properly with close-up lenses, which are more forgiving when it comes to the lens positioning. Smaller diameter wide-angles like the UWL-04 will not work as you will have to zoom too much to get rid of the vignetting. According to my test you can however use the Inon UWL-H100 reasonably well with the step-up as the amount of zooming that's needed stays under the "do not bother" line. But as always with any traditional underwater lens the more you zoom into them the worse the image quality gets. Not ideal.

The good news is that the Fantasea RX100 housing will also work with the latest Sony MKV camera and if you happen to have the earlier MK3 model you only need to add a small washer inside the main jog wheel control lever to make the housing compatible with this model also.

It will be interesting to see what

the future for the Fantasea company hold. The rumour is that there are new housings on the way for mirrorless cameras. The AOI UWL-09 wide-angle lens and the AOI close-up lenses will also be available as re-branded Fantasea lenses. These lenses are all 67mm threaded so let's hope all Fantasea housings in the future will also come with the right size port thread.

I still think that the Fantasea housings are still somewhat overpriced. Sure they are an upgrade when compared to Canon housings, which come without port threads or screen hoods and few other bits and bobs but do these few extras really merit double the price?

I'd be more comfortable if the prices would be around £400 and not the £500. However as many companies are not anymore interested of making underwater housings for their cameras it could well be that the sub £600 underwater camera package is history. There are almost none left anymore. Soon Fantasea might be your only choice.

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