

RETRA Flash - Field Review

by Alex Mustard

The Retra Flash is big news. A brand new strobe and a new manufacturer joining the underwater strobe market are rare events. Most serious shooters already know Retra as the European company behind the widely used LSD (Light Shaping Device - their optical snoot) and other innovative accessories, such as the uTrigger underwater remote release. Yet, however you look at it, building a brand new underwater strobe is a big step up, especially because, given its specs, the strobe is likely to appeal to so many underwater photographers.

The Retra Flash is clearly pitched as a straightforward performance upgrade for photographers currently shooting INON Z240, Sea & Sea D1/D2 type strobes. It is a similar size to both (my INON Z240 weighs 670g, the Retra weighs 722g on my kitchen scales), but has noticeably more welly

(at 100W/s – PB: “they were more powerful and had a faster recycling time”), with a wider spread of warm, soft light. It is well timed too, since many photographers love their INONs in particular, but have often given them years of hard labour and yearn for something new and with a bit more horsepower.

The Retra may have similar proportions, but looks very different, being made from tough and attractive aluminium. It has connectors for both fibre and electronic flash triggering. It will accept any of the INON, Sea & Sea or Nauticam fibre optic cables (offering sTTL, and manual shooting with and without pre-flash) and comes as standard with a Sea & Sea electronic synch socket - the same as INON Z240 and Sea & Sea strobes - although S6, Nikonos 5 pin and Ikelite 5 pin sockets can be ordered instead. And it even takes 4 x AA batteries,

Full disclosure: I have been one of the photographers feeding ideas into this project and I have done the field-testing of the pre-production flashes (in the Red Sea) and also putting production spec strobes through their paces (in Cayman and Cuba). That said, I am not on Retra's payroll and do not benefit in any way from sales. I also farmed the strobes out to photographers (Peter Berndt (PB), Josef Litt (JL) and Nick More (NM)) on my workshops and their thoughts are also included here in bold italics.



The small size of the Retra Flash benefits strobe positioning, when strobes need to be pulled in close to the lens for close focus work.

The controls: the shorter knob (on the left) controls the mode, the longer knob (on the right) the power - both manual power (max 100) and TTL compensation increase the strobe brightness by turning clockwise. Electronic synch (bottom left) and fibre optic triggering (bottom right) are provided.





The bayonet mount on the front enables accessories to be used to alter the quality of light:

- a) the Wide Angle Diffuser (included) is designed for standard and close focus wide angle in blue water and is also good for fish portraits and macro,*
- b) the White Diffuser is for standard and close focus wide angle in green water,*
- c) the Shark Diffuser is designed to warm the light, but not diffuse it too much to help it light more distant subjects, like sharks, schools of fish and large reef scenes,*
- d) the Protection Ring is to protect the front of the strobe when shooting without diffusers, such as for macro or Crossed Strobes lighting,*
- e) the Reduction Ring reduces the angle of the beam, a common technique for reducing backscatter on low visibility dives, the sharp edge to the beam is also useful for Inward Lighting,*
- f) the Light Shaping Device (LSD) an optical snoot.*

meaning upgraders can continue with the same batteries, chargers, cables etc.

Retra's General Manager, Oskar Zupancic, explains its genesis "making the LSD taught us lots about existing light sources and different qualities of light. As underwater photographers we felt we could bring something new to the strobe market with, although it sounds slightly funny, a strobe fully focused on quality of light."

Light is the Retra Flash's trump card. The Retra offers a considerable jump in power over its rivals (JL: *"I had to open the aperture more to get a similar amount of light on the reef with the*

INONs)", but it is the quality of light that I found more exciting, especially with the domed wide angle diffuser (included with the strobe) that the flash tube and reflector have been optimised to work with. The specs say the diffuser warms the light to 4500K and spreads it to cover 130°, underwater this translates to attractive soft, wide light that is both more forgiving to use and more flattering on most subjects (NM: *"I was impressed with the power and quality of light, even shooting into a bright sunball"*). While warm light doesn't just improve skin tones, it also improves the blues of our backgrounds (see my article UWP 42).



The soft warm light from the Retra Flash and Wide Angle Diffuser is ideal for shooting scenic wide angle. Sponges, Grand Cayman. Nikon D5 and Nikonos RS 13mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/200th @ f/18. ISO 320.

Furthermore, the diffuser mounts via a bayonet which has allowed Retra to build a variety of different accessories, so that photographers can shoot with hard or soft light, warm or cool light, or



The soft light from the Retras suits many subjects, producing a subtle, attractive illumination. Dolphins, Egypt. Nikon D5 and Nikonos RS 13mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/250th @ f/13. ISO 500.

even help it reach further for lighting bigger scenes (see the captions for more details). Most photographers will stick with one option per dive (and the standard wide angle diffuser should be your default), but it is easy (without thick gloves) to change them underwater and alter the quality of light to suit the subject and effect you are after. I think we can expect Retra (and perhaps other companies) to release even more options over time.

Retra's other key strength is that

they have reached out for opinions and listened. "We asked several leading underwater photographers what they would like to see in an ideal strobes and their advice was the foundation of the design and specifications," explains Oskar. "And then when we went public with the prototype at the start of the year, we received more feedback from the UW photo community and refined the design further."

The result is that the strobes



Soft light also suits many macro subjects, such as this tiny spinyhead blenny living in a hole in a red sponge, Grand Cayman. Nikon D7200 and Nikon 105mm and FIT +5 dioptre. Subal ND7200 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/320th @ f/13. ISO 100.

are intuitive to use and packed with neat features that really enhance their ergonomics in the field. For example, the two control knobs on the back are different lengths, so that you can distinguish them without looking, turning the longer one to adjust strobe powers. The ready light is different colours depending on mode, giving you instant reassurance you are in the right one, and is positioned to illuminate the dials in the dark. When you turn the strobe on, the remaining

battery power is usefully displayed across 4 LEDs on the front panel. And the strobe has a central aiming or pilot light (**JL: "I do not like the misaligned light on my INONs when using the LSD"**), with different power settings that includes a bright 300 lumen level to aid aiming the LSD in daylight. I've not tried the strobe with the LSD yet.

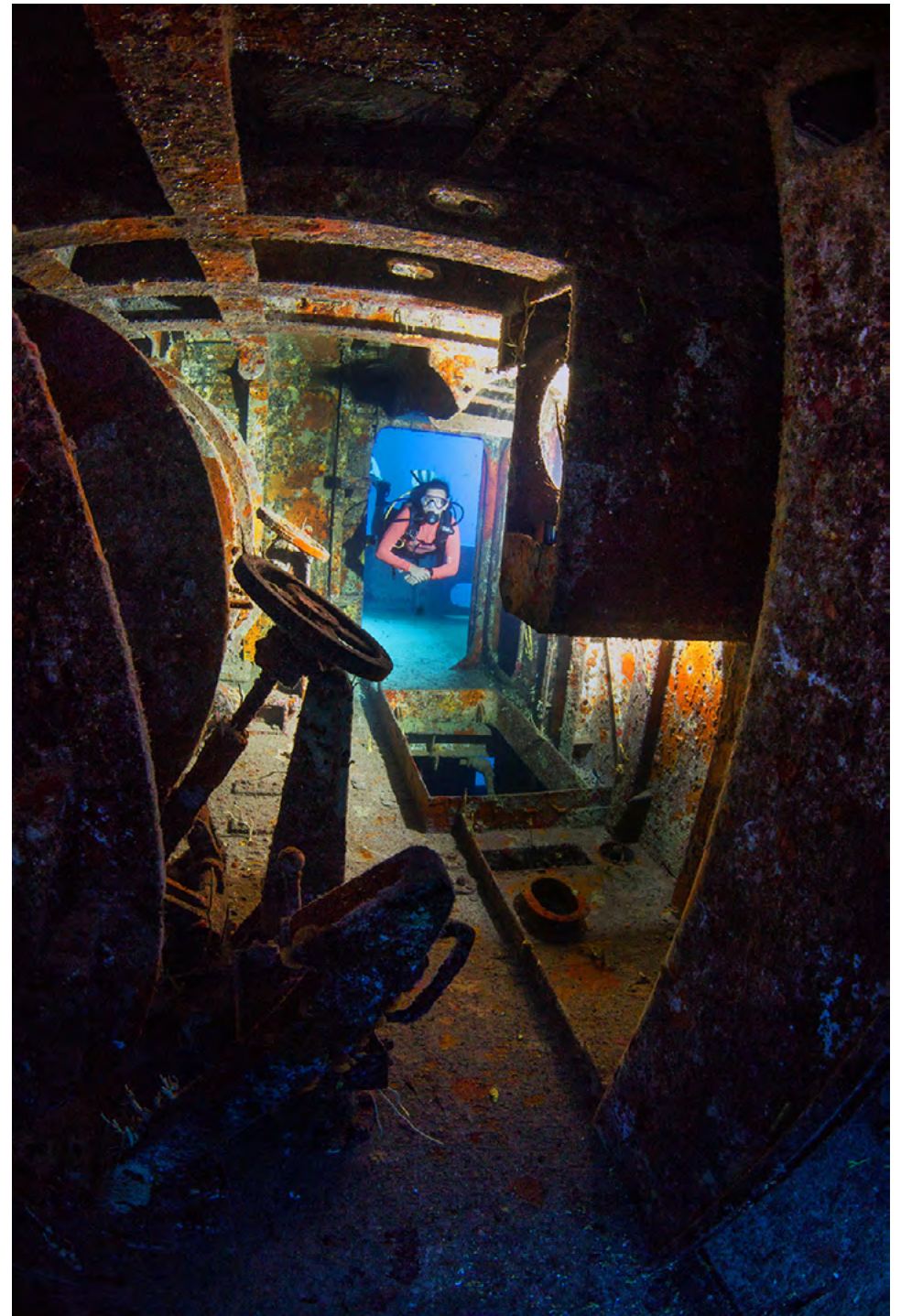
The pilot light button also controls a few hidden features. For example in the ON mode (for

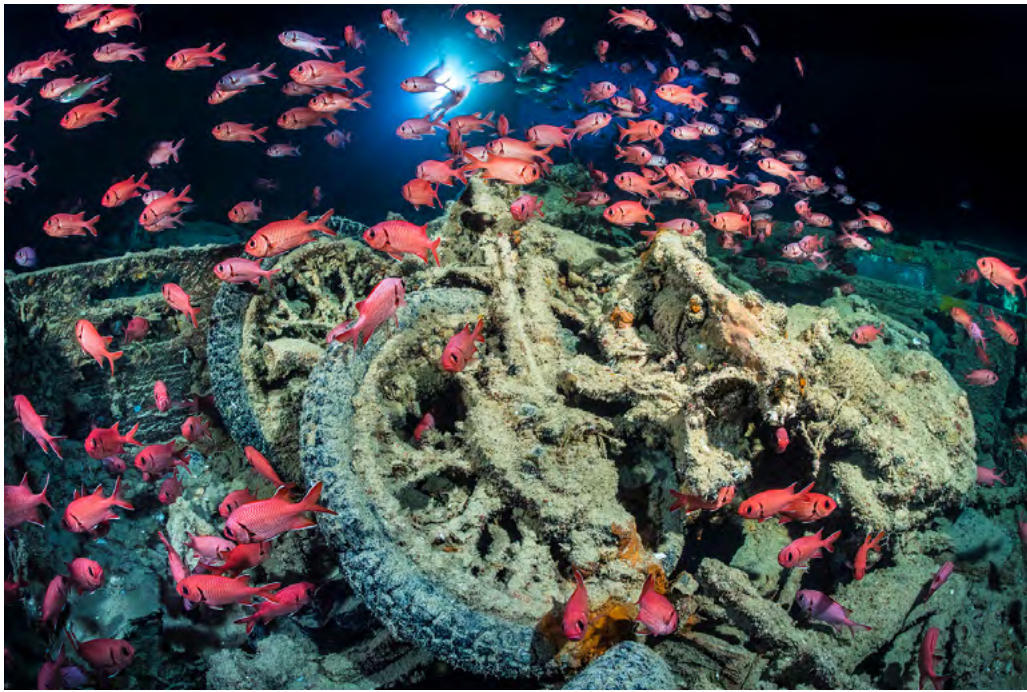


The warm light from the Retra Wide Angle Diffusers produces flattering skin tones. Egypt. Nikon D5 and Nikon 8-15mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/250th @ f/14. ISO 800.

The Retra flash's combination of power, coverage and small size makes it an excellent off camera strobe.

Photo by Greg Clifton, Grand Cayman. Canon 5D Mk3 and Canon 8-15mm. Aquatica housing. 1 x Retra Flash off camera. 1/125th @ f/13. ISO 800.





I used the Protection Rings and no diffusers for this photo to reduce backscatter inside the silty Thistle Gorm. Egypt. Nikon D5 and Nikonos RS 13mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/6th @ f/14. ISO 800.

electronic synch) it can be pressed and held in for four seconds to cancel the strobe ready beep noise. While in SL mode (for fibre optic synch) the same button enables a smart pre-flash mode, that senses the type of pre-flash your camera gives and adapts the strobe to it.

An unusual, although enticing option is the battery pack extender, which bolts very securely in place of the standard battery compartment door and increases the battery capacity from 4xAA to 8xAA, doubling the battery life and halving the recycle

time. I tried this in the Red Sea, but didn't use it in the Caribbean because recycle times was not an issue. For normal reef diving, we rarely shot them at full power and therefore there was no noticeable wait for recycling (**NM: "the recycling times were good shooting at half power", JL: "I used the Retra's on half power, while I had to use the INONS on 11 or full to light a reef scene"**).

Myself and 8 other photographers shot with the strobes with Nikon and Canon SLRs, crop sensor and full frame. The strobes



The Retra flash has plenty of power to illuminate large reef scenes in bright tropical conditions. Egypt. Nikon D5 and Nikonos RS 13mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/200th @ f/14. ISO 500.

were triggering electronically and through fibre (triggered using pop-up flash, LED circuit board and Nauticam's flash trigger) and they worked reliably with all. I didn't let anyone read the instructions – I just told them what mode to use (ON for cables, SL for fibres) and let them figure them out. Which they all did. The Retra's controls are logical and **NM: "easy to use"**.

Any problems? One of the synch sockets on Subal ND5 housing was flooded, yet continued to work with my Seacam strobes. However, it

stopped my camera working reliably with the Retra Flashes and Sea & Sea cables in the Caribbean. This was a housing issue because the Retras worked fine with the same cables and housing in the Red Sea. The strobes also worked perfectly with the same cables on a Subal ND810 housing lent to me by Predrag Vuckovic. **PB commented that the battery compartment was difficult to fit and unscrew. JL found the strobe sensitive to old batteries "I had one battery set that was not top notch and the strobe kept switching**

Sunset splits are very demanding of strobe power and coverage (especially with a circular fisheye), because they must be shot with a closed aperture. Jetty, Egypt. Nikon D5 and Nikon 8-15mm. Subal ND5 housing. 2 x Retra Flashes. 1/250th @ f/22. ISO 800.

off.” This problem disappeared with newer rechargeable AAs. The Frank Zappa quote that is engraved inside the battery compartment confused everyone! Finally, the strobes did not have the TTL circuitry enabled, so I could not test that.

The question I cannot answer in a review like this concerns reliability. Strobes are complicated and the higher the performance the more the electronic design is tested. This is perhaps the main reason why we see so many manufacturers of arms, clamps and dioptres and so few who make underwater strobes! What I can say is that the strobes took the abuse we threw at them. And that Retra have submitted the strobes to a series of tests that massively outstrips any usage they would get in the real world. For example, Oskar told me of one test where they fired “the strobe on repetitive 100% power flashes, which would destroy the lamp or damage the electronics of any strobe out there, due to overheating. We made a series of 1000 full power flashes with just a 2 second interval between them without problem. The aluminium housing helps cool the electronics and the use of a high

quality quartz glass lamp prevents the glass from melting under extremely high temperature.”

In conclusion, Retra have clearly hit their goals of producing a small, yet powerful strobe, that looks great and has a real focus on quality of light. The first thing you notice is the power, but as you look properly at your images you appreciate the quality of light too. The more you shoot them, the more enticing the ability to change your quality of light becomes and this is artistically empowering. All the photographers who tried them felt they clearly outperformed their current strobes (NM: *“I am impressed”*), but whether you should upgrade will depend on whether you need more power, and/or how old your current strobes are. If you’ve just invested it is harder to justify, JL: *“I would not upgrade to them, but I would choose them over my INON Z240s.”*

The Retra Flash is currently available for pre-order from the manufacturer at €699 Euros, which includes worldwide express shipping, wide angle diffuser, neoprene protective cover, 1” mounting ball and 2 Year Warranty from Retra.



Deliveries are expected to start in September 2017. Note that if you live in the EU, like me, you will also have to add 22% sales tax. If you live outside the EU, you may have to pay import duty.



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